

**Statement by the German Mesoamericanist community
regarding the BILD- treasure hunt in Guatemala
- 7 March 2011 -**

Since March 2nd, the German boulevard newspaper BILD has been undertaking an expedition in Guatemala to search for an ancient Maya treasure of "sunken gold plates". Headed by Joachim Rittstiege, a former school teacher from the town of Borgstedt in Germany, the objective of this expedition is to find a supposedly sunken Maya city and its extensive gold treasures in Lake Izabal, Guatemala.

The activities of the BILD-treasure hunters are scandalous and lack any scientific basis. While the expedition may be just aimed at creating a profitable story, the media coverage in Germany and Guatemala jeopardises years of good cooperation between research institutions of both countries – at the same time damaging the reputation of Germany abroad.

The consequences of the treasure hunt are extremely problematic: The hunt for lost gold will put ancient Maya archaeological remains in danger of being exposed to even more looting. It creates a precedent which may animate internationally operating looters and dealers as well as the local population to search for such treasures. In the past, similar rumours have led to looting of a large number of archaeological sites in the Maya area, which caused the destruction of goods of great cultural value. Archaeologists have done intensive educational work to raise local awareness for archaeological remains and explain that ancient Maya sites do not bear treasures of gold and that foreign archaeologists are not stealing goods and riches from the Guatemalan people by bringing finds out of the country illegally.

With respect to the background of the expedition, we would like to point out that Joachim Rittstiege is a self-proclaimed Maya scholar whose statements and methods violate the basic principles of scientific research. Related to the Atlantis myth, his ideas show traits of racism and nationalism and are based on the esoteric notion of a superior nordic-germanic original race that spread over the entire world. It is rather distressing that one of the big over-regional newspapers in Germany is giving these absurd ideas a voice.

Thorough investigations have been carried out at Lake Izabal and in its vicinity in the past decades. There are neither archaeological remains nor written sources from the prehispanic or colonial times that would indicate the existence of an unknown Maya city named "Atlán", which is a mere invention. Moreover, gold processing techniques in ancient Maya culture did not include the production of incised plates, as described by Rittstiege.

The expedition team allegedly draws these ideas from the Dresden Codex, without taking the past one hundred years of systematic research on the document into account. Numerous publications prove that the hieroglyphic texts in the codex contain religious and calendaric information. "Treasure maps", as claimed by Rittstiege, are not included in this Maya document – nor in any other. Instead of serious and substantial research results, Rittstiege's absurd ideas are sold as a "scientific breakthrough".

From our point of view, it is furthermore highly deplorable how Rittstiege and the BILD-expedition team have dealt with Guatemala's state institute for cultural heritage (IDAEH). The BILD-search for the "Maya gold" harms the work and reputation of German researchers and the Federal Republic of Germany not only in Guatemala, but also in other countries whose media cover the treasure hunt.

We therefore demand that Joachim Rittstieg and BILD immediately end their fraudulent expedition, which will have unforeseeable consequences in the future.

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