



***Aztlander Recommended Book:* Bill and Anne Frej**

Unforgotten: Ancient Cities from Distant Past

A visual and historic journey through 130 ancient cities across 25 countries, highlighting their unique stories and enduring legacies. With 200 striking duotone photographs, Bill Frej captures the spirit and beauty of these cities, some well-known and others seldom seen.

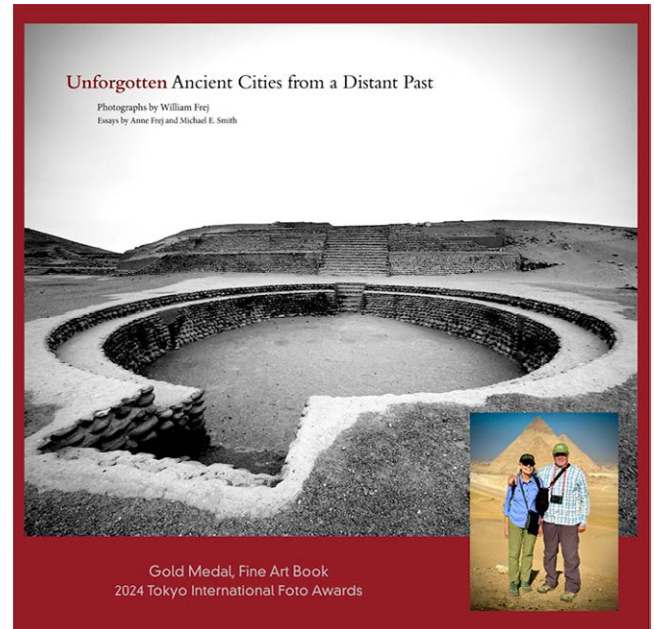
Imagine walking among and learning about 130 ancient cities in 25 countries across the world: from the Mediterranean to the Middle East, from Asia to the Americas. Some are world heritage sites, accessible to tens of thousands of visitors each year, and some are remote and seldom seen. But each ancient city from the distant past conveys a special place in the history of human civilization, and each presents its own story and sense of place.



Taos Pueblo, New Mexico, 2014.

In *Unforgotten: Ancient Cities from a Distant Past*, William Frej presents 200 duotone photographs of these ancient cities that are simply unforgettable, capturing as they do their allure, their beauty, their spirit and resonating sense of space. Anne Frej, in her elegant introduction, sets the table for the personal journey that awaits every reader – a journey into deep history and magical architecture and geographical splendor that speaks to us today. And Michael E. Smith, a noted scholar and author, writes about the lessons to be learned from these ancient cities, including his insights into the various urban traditions behind the building of the cities and why their histories remain poignant.

As readers explore the ruins and remnants of these amazing ancient cities,



**by Photographer Bill Frej,
Introduction by Anne Frej,
Essay by Michael E. Smith**

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Editor's note: I can't believe the price of the hardcover Unforgotten is only \$55. I have a copy! Order your own copy [HERE](#)



Hovenweep, Utah, 2022.

a sense of awe and wonder is ever-present. Yet so is the knowledge that human civilization and

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life on Earth, no matter how grand, is tenuous and fragile. Even as these places reached their apogee and influence in the distant past, there are reasons why these places were abandoned and replaced. So let your curiosity wander as you turn each page, for you will see in words and pictures why they should not be forgotten.

Hats off to the creators!

William Frej has been photographing Indigenous people for more than forty years while living in Indonesia, Poland, Kazakhstan, and Afghanistan, as a career diplomat with the United States Agency for International Development and traveling in other remote, mountainous regions of Asia. His book of black-and-white photographs, *Maya Ruins Revisited: In the Footsteps of Teobert Maler* (2020), has won fourteen awards. His second book, *Seasons of Ceremonies: Rites and Rituals in Guatemala and Mexico* (2021), has won eight awards including four “photography book of the year” awards. *Travels Across the Roof of the World: A Himalayan Memoir* (2022) features color photographs by William Frej and text by Anne Frej.

Anne Frej is an urban planner who has focused on feasibility studies and design concepts for real estate projects in the United States, Indonesia, Central Europe, and Central Asia. At the Urban Land Institute in Washington, D.C., she directed



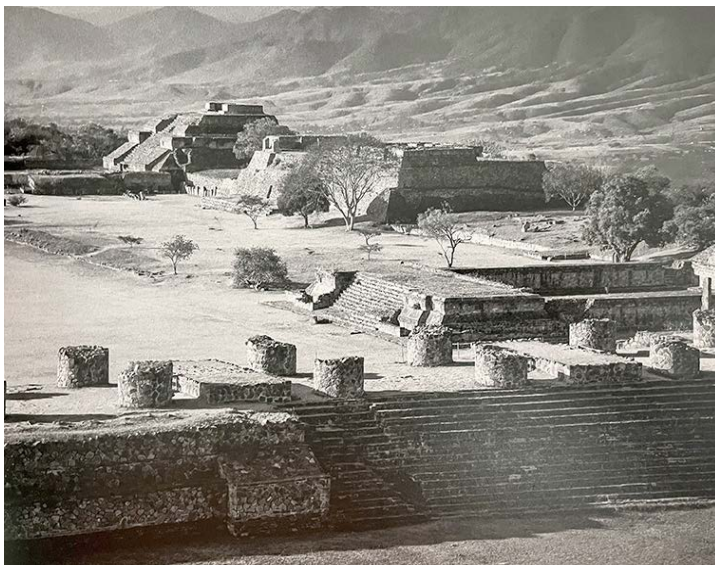
Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, 2019.



Guachimontones, Mexico 2019.

books on real estate development, and at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, she served as a cultural resources planner.

Dr. Michael E. Smith is Professor of Archaeology in the School of Human Evolution & Social Change at Arizona State University (ASU) and affiliated faculty at ASU’s School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning. He has two major research themes: (1) Archaeological research: Smith is currently Director of the ASU Teotihuacan Research Laboratory in Mexico. He has excavated at numerous Aztec provincial sites in Mexico, addressing provincial life, economics, inequality, and urbanism. (2) Comparative urbanism: Smith participates in several innovative transdisciplinary research projects on topics of comparative urbanism, neighborhoods, and urban sustainability.



Monte Alban, Mexico, 2019.

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Smith is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He has published eleven books and more than 100 articles on his research. His book, *At Home With the Aztecs: An Archaeologist Uncovers Their Daily Life* (Routledge, 2016), won the Best Popular Book award from the Society for American Archaeology. His most recent book is *Urban Life in the Distant Past: The Prehistory of Energized Crowding* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Excerpt from the Introduction by Anne Frej

The ruins of ancient cities found throughout the world stand as testaments to the rise and fall of great civilizations. Many of these places reached their apogee in the distant past, but they continue to fascinate and puzzle us. How did people living thousands of years ago create such long-lasting architecture without the use of machinery and, in some case, without metal instruments, the wheel, or even beasts of burden? The skill and imagination it took to create these monumental places is almost unfathomable. Beyond the stunning architecture of individual buildings there is also evidence of sophisticated urban design – beautifully proportioned plazas, colonnaded walkways, extensive road systems, and complex relationships between the built environment and the surrounding landscape, cardinal directions, and even the heavens



Teotihuacan, Mexico, 2020.



El Tajín, Mexico, 2023.

and the underworld.

Unforgotten is a personal look at ancient cities around the world. Some of the places depicted in these pages, such as Chichen Itza in Mexico or Luxor in Egypt, are easily visited. Others, such as Río Azul in the northeast corner of Guatemala or Lo Manthang in the former Kingdom of Mustang in Nepal, take more effort to reach. But all of these ancient cities and sites have a unique character that has evolved over many years.

At the quiet spots still hidden in the jungle, it is easy to contemplate the natural forces that have slowly taken over once lively neighborhoods. After a rainy season, as you push your way through branches and vines, you can almost hear the vegetation creeping up



El Tajín, Mexico, 2023.

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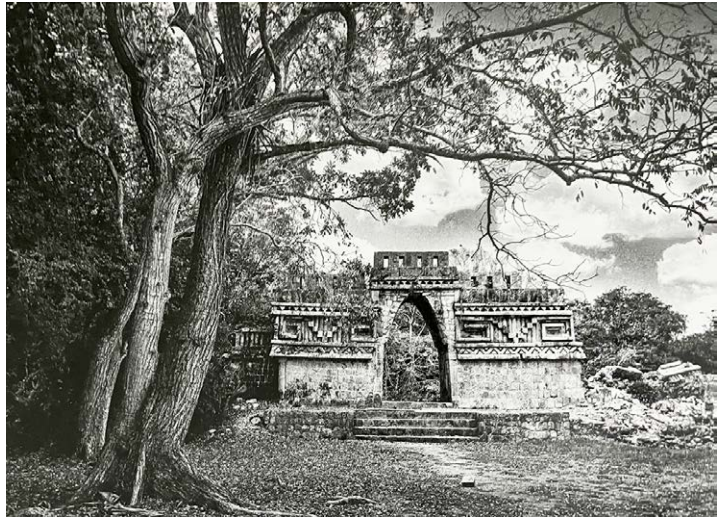
and around the ruined structures. Our interest in ancient cities stems from several sources.

Over the decades, Bill and I have visited many locations on all continents except Antarctica that are now ruins of once mighty kingdoms. Always, Bill had his camera in hand, and the result has been five books of fine-art photography, including this one. How did two people who grew up in small towns get so interested in cities? It's a good question. Fundamental to our respective and joint sojourns is a profound curiosity about place. In my case, a childhood spent in a beautiful but waning Midwestern city was firsthand experience in a place that had once been a thriving entrepôt of trade and commerce on the edge of the Interior West but now felt less consequential. Even as a child I felt nostalgic when my dad would tell us stories of how crowded and lively those streets had been when he was a boy forty years before.

Another impetus for our interest in ancient cities is our academic and professional experiences in city planning. Bill began his career as an architect and, after several years working with transitional neighborhoods in Chicago, received a masters degree in city and regional planning at the University of California, Berkeley. He then focused on housing and community development at the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation (now known as NeighborWorks America) and in his early years at the U.S. Agency



Chichen Itza, Mexico, 2017.



Labna, Mexico, 20024.

for International Development (USAID). I received a masters degree in urban planning at George Washington University and then worked as a city planner and real estate consultant in both the U.S. and in countries where we lived overseas: Indonesia, Poland, Kazakhstan, and Afghanistan.

I think of a large, beautifully proportioned one-story residential structure at Río Bec in the south of Mexico or a lovely second-story rooftop terrace at La Blanca, near Tikal in Guatemala. As you walk through Nakum, Guatemala, the small plazas surrounded by residential buildings are so intimate in scale that you can almost hear children playing there. Nearby, a scattering of



Nakum, Guatemala, 2022.

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broken pottery sherds on the ground gives a clue that this was a kitchen area where someone prepared food and cooked over a fire. Greater details and more nuanced information about the homes and neighborhoods of the non-elite members of those societies has been revealed by recent technological advances such as LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging). This laser technology, which can detect former building sites through dense vegetation, shows that many ancient cities had much larger populations than once thought.

The urban planning and design concepts guiding the construction of many ancient cities is much more complex than we imagine. In addition to the usual considerations of defining zones for living versus commercial and administrative activities, providing spaces for public gatherings or ceremonial events, and including walkways for access and so forth, there were many more subtle factors guiding early city planning. In recent years, more attention has been paid to the alignment and positioning of buildings and spaces in cities from a distant past. In some cases, structures have been found to align with cardinal directions and nearby natural features, such as mountains and rivers, or with astrological events, such as the position of the sun at certain times like the twice-yearly equinox and the summer and winter solstices or even with the appearance of planets and constellations. These



Calakmul, Mexico, 2022.



Kiuic, Mexico, 2019.



Sayil, Mexico, 2024.

markers of time throughout the year may have provided useful information relative to the agricultural calendar and to ritual events for the people who lived there. As we walk through monumental stone plazas or climb the steep steps of pyramids and temples as modern-day tourists, we should consider that many of these locations were once sacred and accessible only to kings and the most important members of society. In some cases, entire cities may have been sacred representations of religious cosmologies.

Looking beyond the aesthetics of ancient places is instructive and can yield useful information for understanding and dealing with contemporary urban issues. As Michael E. Smith notes in his essay, early cities offer important

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lessons for us today. He believes that there are lessons about heritage, about ancient kings, about early urbanism, and about resilience and sustainability. Smith argues that four approaches are thus necessary for knowledge from ancient cities to help us adapt to our environmental issues today: We need to understand the fundamental similarities between ancient and modern cities, identify potentially fruitful topics for comparison, conduct rigorous syntheses and comparisons of cases, and work with people outside of archaeology and history to evaluate the comparisons. He notes: "We should not forget these ruins. They offer a rich empirical record of past success and failures that can be a sources of continuing insights today."

The photographs in this book are arranged by three regions, moving west to east from the Mediterranean and Middle East to Asia and the Americas. The visual journey begins in Volubilis, Morrocco, an outpost of the Roman Empire, and continues through Italy and Greece to the Middle East including Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq. Ancient cities throughout the diverse countries of Asia are depicted – from the steppes of Central Asia, across India and through Southeast Asia to Vietnam. The Americas region covers the Southwest USA, through Mesoamerica, to Peru in South America.

Ruins of significant ancient cities are also found throughout the Americas, from the



Altun Ha, Belize, 2018.



Caracol, Belize, 2018.

Southwest region of the USA through Mesoamerica to South America. Along the north coast of Peru are some of the oldest cities in the world that you have probably never heard of. The site of Caral is believed to date back 5,000 years, putting it at roughly in the same timeframe as construction of the pyramids in Egypt and making it possibly the oldest center of civilization in the Americas. Caral is an expansive site that clearly shows evidence of highly developed planning and design with large stepped pyramids with monumental staircases, residential areas, and sunken circular plazas. Caral's early history was confirmed by radiocarbon dating of reed baskets, found in foundations during their excavation in the 1990s. Interestingly, these



Caral, Peru, 2024.

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reed baskets filled with rocks and known as *shicras*, are believed to provide structural support, possibly helping mitigate the impacts of earthquakes on the buildings. Bandurria dates from roughly the same period and has many of the same features as Caral, including large, sunken circular plazas that likely served ritual functions.

North of Caral and Bandurria, in the dry coastal region of Peru known as the Northern Desert, are remnants of the Moche (ca. 100–700 CE) and Chimú (900–1470 CE) cultures that can be visited today. The urban center of the vast Chimú region was Chan Chan. Even now, a thousand years later, the city is remarkable for its scale – it is considered the largest adobe city in the world. The site consists of ten walled compounds, which are divided into multiple-use spaces and storage areas, some with beautiful, lattice-like walls and lovely bas-reliefs. When the Chimú were conquered by the Inka around 1470 CE, a new type of urban settlement was introduced in the North Coast. Inka cities such as Cuzco and Ollantaytombo featured large central plazas with roads radiating outward.

Machu Picchu, built by the Inka, is probably the first place that you think of in relation to ancient cities in Peru or even all of South America. But as our friend, Arturo Rojas, explained, if his country's early history was a movie, Machu Picchu would be the last five minutes! This complex of stone structures was built as a royal palace retreat for the Inka Emperor Pachacuti (1438–1472 CE) and then abandoned a century later. Situated high on a saddle between two mountains and encircled with rows of more mountains all around, the setting of Machu Picchu is a big part of what makes it so spectacular. When Bill visited Machu Picchu in 1976, it was much more overgrown than today and many sections had not yet been excavated, renovated, or rebuilt. When we visited forty-five years later, the site was green from recent rains, and the stone structures seemed to glow in the sunlight.

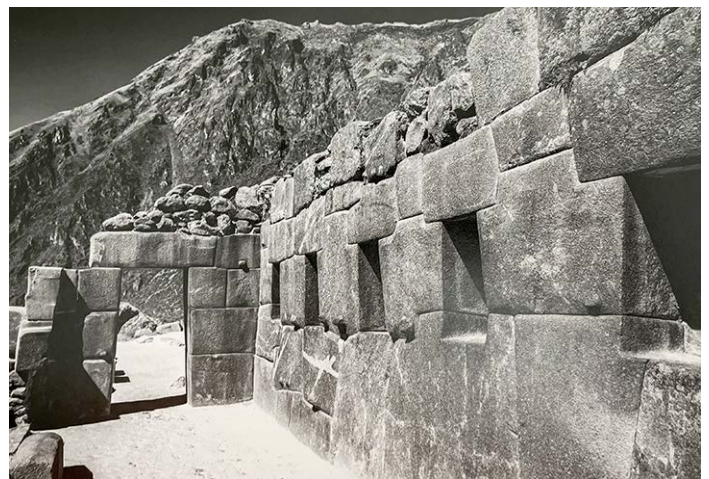
Mesoamerica, the historic geographic and cultural region that includes much of Mexico and



Bandurria, Peru, 2024.



Chan Chan, Peru, 2024.



Ollantaytombo, Peru, 2024.

Guatemala, Belize, and parts of Honduras and El Salvador, has a rich history of ancient cultures and cities. The Olmec culture, which was centered on the Gulf Coast of Mexico, is one of

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the oldest, dating to around 1200 BCE. These days, there are few remnants of Olmec cities to visit, but the La Venta Park in Villahermosa, Mexico, has a collection of the famous colossal stone heads and other Olmec objects moved from the actual site of La Venta, which was damaged by oil exploration and the creation of a refinery there during the 1950s.



Huaca Pucllana, Peru, 2024.



Moray Pebru, Peru, 1976.

The Olmec period lasted from approximately 1200 BCE, or earlier, to about 400 BCE. The culture was eventually overtaken by others who used and further developed many of the hallmarks of Olmec civilization. In Mexico's Valley of Oaxaca, Monte Alban grew after 500 BCE to be one of the earliest



Machu Picchu, Peru, 1976.



Machu Picchu, Peru, 2024.

cities in Mesoamerica. It served as an important center for the Zapotec civilization until the eighth century CE. At the same time that Monte Alban was prospering, urban centers began to develop in the Valley of Mexico. One of the most important of these was Teotihuacan, located just northeast of today's Mexico City. Teotihuacan grew rapidly for several hundred years, starting in 100 CE, and it grew to a metropolis of 100,000 people by 500 CE.

In the Maya world to the south, often referred to as the Maya Lowlands, concentrations of populations with large public buildings began forming during the Middle Preclassic Period (1000–250 BCE). One of the earliest was El Mirador, located in northern Guatemala

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near the border of Mexico, which flourished from the sixth century BCE to the first century CE. It lay hidden in the dense jungle for nearly 2,000 years until it gained attention in the 1960s. Even today, there are no roads to El Mirador, and you must either hike or ride a mule in and out for five days, or take a helicopter to the site, which we did. As you fly in, the view is dense jungle with only the top of La Danta, one of the world's largest pyramids in terms of volume, sticking out above the treetops.

Not far away from El Mirador in the Southern Lowlands are other important Maya cities from a later time period. Tikal is the best known and most visited, for good reason. It had monumental architecture by 300 BCE, but reached its height around 700 CE. As the seat of a powerful kingdom, Tikal included monumental temples, palaces, and residential areas for the elite. It also housed thousands of people in less substantial structures that are no longer extant.

Scattered throughout the Southwest region of the USA are thousands of sites where ancient people lived. The earliest dwellings for the Ancestral Pueblo people (formerly known as Anasazi) were covered pithouses. Around 1200 CE, the Ancestral Pueblo people began to aggregate into villages and build above-ground masonry structures. These small settlements eventually grew into towns, and large, multi-story adobe and stone structures were built to house hundreds and sometimes thousands of people. Integrated into this urban fabric were public spaces and impressive structures for religious gatherings and ceremonies. Kivas, the round or keyhole-shaped, subterranean ceremonial spaces, grew in scale and importance and were often built in a central plaza. They remain of vital importance to contemporary Pueblo people living in New Mexico and Arizona.

We hope that the photographs in this book provide insights into places around the world that preceded our modern cities. Some, like Athens or Rome, are still-thriving urban centers, while others are ruins. Whatever the condition today, we remember the people who lived there at one time – not only the rulers or elite who amassed great power and wealth – but those who built these places, worked there, raised families, and contributed to cultures that can still teach us lessons today. We may not fully



El Mirador, Guatemala, 2019.



Tikal, Guatemala, 2019.



Mesa Verde, Colorado, 2021.

understand their inspirations and incentives for creating these places, but we can marvel at what they achieved. Certainly, ancient cities are not forgotten but remain as captivating reminders of life in the distant past. ■