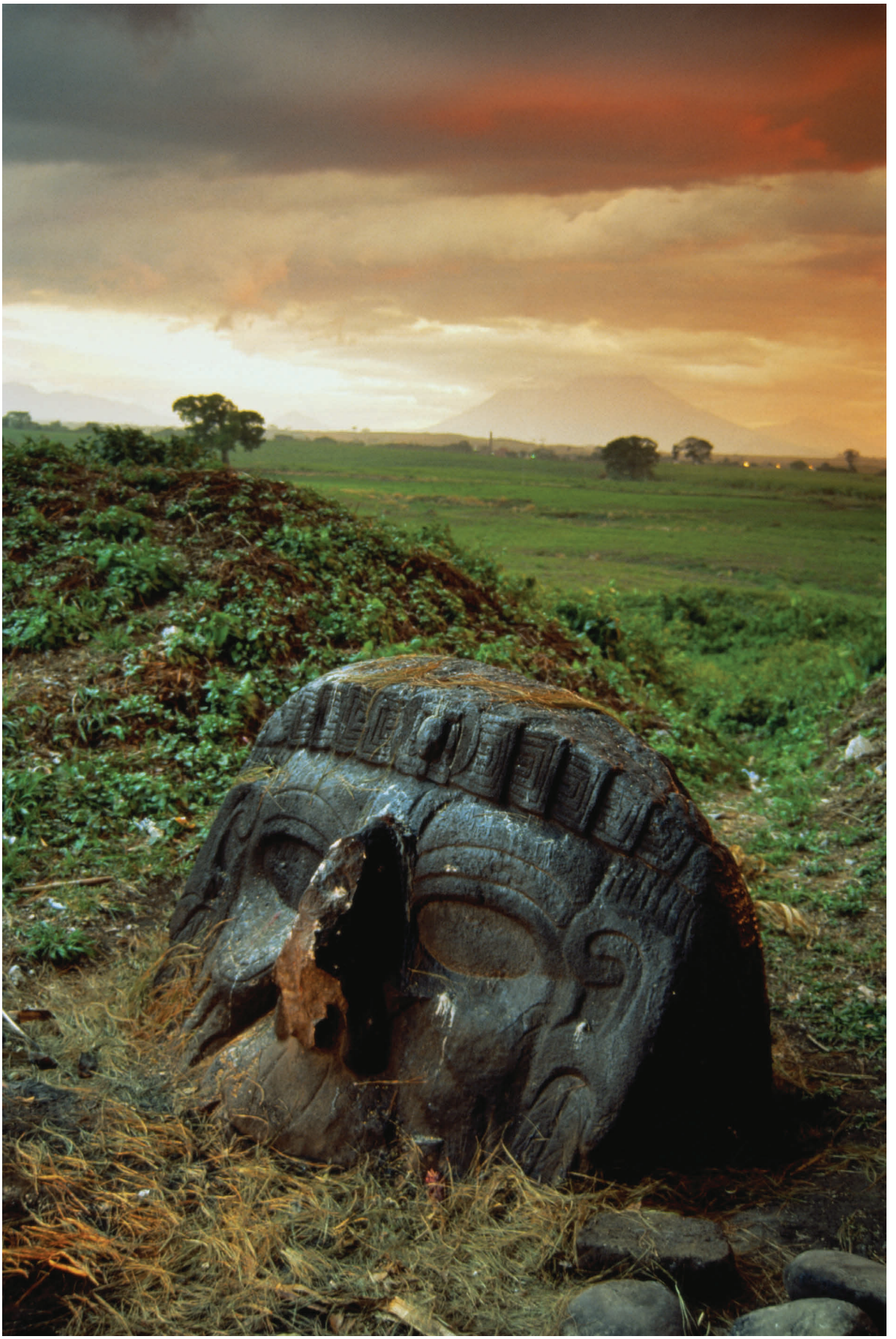

DAVID HISER/GETTY

Maya ruins are big business – a fact not lost on the Honduran tourist industry

Land of make-believe

Is there anything wrong with a tropical paradise making money from an invented past? **Michael Bawaya** investigates

THE collection of more than 150 bowls, plates and jars turned up in a closet at the University of South Florida in 2003. It had been gathering dust since 1990, when a family from Honduras had donated them to the anthropology department.

Since the boxes were labelled "Maya", Christian Wells, an archaeologist at the university who had worked on a number of Maya sites in Central America, decided to take a look. What he saw took him by surprise.

The ceramics were known to have originated from Roatán, an island off the north coast of Honduras long associated with the Maya. But they were not Maya. They were, in fact, the handiwork of one of Honduras's other indigenous peoples, the Pech.

Wells had worked in Honduras on and off for 17 years and knew the lay of the land. He contacted the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History in Tegucigalpa to tell them about his find. And so his adventure in Roatán began.

The largest of Honduras's Bay Islands, Roatán is a strip of tropical paradise in the Caribbean Sea. Its modern history began in 1502 when Christopher Columbus visited and claimed it for Spain, starting a long and oppressive colonial occupation that wiped out the native people within 150 years. But what preceded Columbus isn't well known.

"The history of Roatán is very poorly documented," says Darío Euraque, a professor of Latin American history at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, who grew up in Honduras. "Most of the little published materials are written by amateur storytellers devoid of scholarly referencing."

One of the most influential accounts was written by Fernando Columbus, Christopher's 13-year-old son, who accompanied him on the voyage. He reported seeing a gigantic canoe laden with goods typical of the Maya people of the nearby Yucatán peninsula. Fernando's account was subsequently retold and embellished by other historians. And so the idea that the inhabitants of Roatán were connected to the Maya took hold.

Tourist trap

The connection has proved enduring and very useful. In recent years one of its most enthusiastic proponents has been the Institute of Anthropology and History. The institute was set up in 1952 as a serious research organisation, but in the 1970s its mission changed. The military government, seeking hard currency, decided to create a tourist industry. Honduras had plenty of sun, sea and sand, but the government also decided to invest in "culture tourism". It set up a new Ministry of Tourism and roped in the institute to help out. Their main task was to construct a historical national identity that would serve tourism's needs. And that meant only one thing: cashing in on the Maya.

The Maya civilisation was one of the most sophisticated cultures of the pre-Hispanic Americas. Noted for its art, architecture, mathematics and writing, it dominated what is now southern Mexico, Guatemala and Belize for the best part of 3000 years, until the Spanish arrived in the 16th century.

As ancient civilisations go, the Maya is one of the most bankable – a fact not lost on the Ministry of Tourism. It began aggressively promoting the country's Maya past, most notably Copán, a ruined city in the far west of the country, close to its border with Guatemala. Now a World Heritage site, Copán was the centre of a Maya kingdom for about 400 years until it was abandoned around AD 900. At its peak in the 8th century about 30,000 people lived under Copán's rule.

It is a spectacular site, but hardly representative of Honduras's past. Copán was an outpost; most of modern Honduras was never Maya territory and the Maya impact on the country's history is very limited.

Nonetheless, successive governments have pursued what Euraque has dubbed "the Mayanisation of Honduras", often with an eye on the tourist trade. Rosemary Joyce, an archaeologist at the University of California, Berkeley, who has worked in Honduras for over 35 years, says that the government "confuses the mission of the institute with the mission of the Ministry of Tourism, and so decides what archaeology and history is important based on tourism potential".

The Mayanisation project can trace its roots to the 1930s as an ideological crusade of the nationalist dictator General Tiburcio Carias Andino. His goal was to unite the ethnically diverse and often unstable country under ›