

TEMPLES
IN
YUCATAN

A
Camera Chronicle
of
Chichén Itzá

by
Laura Gilpin

TO
MY GOOD FRIEND
BRENDA PUTNAM

WHO TAUGHT ME
TO UNDERSTAND
SCULPTURE AND
FORM

PREFACE

This series of photographs was commenced in 1932 when it was my good fortune to join a group of students visiting Chichén Itzá,* in Yucatan, México. Since then I have hoped each year to return, and at last in February of 1946 that hope was realized. I found many changes. The Great Ball Court, which on my first visit was undergoing the process of excavation and restoration by the Government of México, had been completed; the Dance Platform had been uncovered and repaired, and the work on the Mercado had been finished.

This little volume is in no sense scientific, and makes no pretense of contributing to the ever growing stock of knowledge of the Maya.** It is rather a tribute to two groups of people. First, to the Maya themselves in the hope that these pictures may convey, in some measure, the grandeur of their buildings with their beauty of proportion, spacing, and ornamentation. Second, to the group of scientists of two nations who have so painstakingly restored and reconstructed these wonderful temples. Perhaps, too, the book may serve as an introduction to the profound books written by the many scientists who have devoted their lives to the research of the knowledge and accomplishments of a great people.

This series of photographs includes the most important temples and buildings which have so far been restored. I

* Chee-CHEN Eet-ZAH.

** MYah.

have chosen, I hope, those aspects which best interpret this ancient city to those who have already seen it, and to present to others some idea of its beauty and interest. The short text will, I hope, prove an adequate accompaniment to the pictures. My information has been gathered from the volumes in the bibliography and from the scientists whom it is my good fortune to know.

Dr. Sylvanus G. Morley, of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, D. C., eminent authority on the Maya, has most generously checked the text to the pictures, for which I am deeply grateful. My gratitude also includes Colonel and Mrs. F. Martin Brown of the Fountain Valley School of Colorado who first took me to Chichén Itzá and whose interest has been of great help in the final completion of this little book; to Mr. Fernando Barbachano of the Mayaland Lodge who was most helpful and courteous to me during both of my visits; to the Museo Nacional Antropología e Historia de México for the privilege of photographing the Turquoise Plaques which are enshrined in the Museum.

Laura Gilpin.

November, 1946.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout southern México and northern Central America the ruins of many astonishing temples have been found, relics which reveal the once great civilization of the Maya. Of all the many Indian tribes of the Western Hemisphere, the Maya, perhaps, reached the highest cultural level, leaving behind magnificent temples of unique and remarkable design. Thanks to the skill of the modern archaeologist, some of these ruins have been repaired and reconstructed. One such group is the city of Chichén Itzá in Central Yucatan, México, which has now become easy of access through the development of the inter-American airways.

Yucatan must be reached either by sea or by air, for dense and swampy jungles still guard the southern approaches to the peninsula. Today, one may either fly or sail from New Orleans, Havana, or Vera Cruz, - the nearest points of departure for Mayaland. The peninsula, comprising today the states of Yucatan, Campeche, and the territory of Quintana Roo, is the great hook of land projecting northward into the Gulf of México directly south of the mouth of the Mississippi River. It is a limestone shelf, only about thirty feet above sea level, flat as a table top, with the exception of a small range of hills in the southern part. Strangely enough there is no surface water on the peninsula, but below the limestone, or flowing through it, are numerous underground streams. Occasionally, because of

weak places in the limestone, breaks in (the shelf have occurred) forming natural wells which are fed with fresh water by the underground currents. In ancient times the Indians built their cities near such natural wells since these were the only source of water.

Much of Yucatan is covered with a dense bush or growth of trees of many varieties, and an almost impenetrable underbrush. The climate is semi-arid, for during the several months of the dry season the sub-tropical sun scorches relentlessly while during the rainy months all growth flourishes anew. To clear land for growing their slender crops of Indian corn, which is the principal food crop of the Maya, both ancient and modern, the natives burn off large areas at the end of the dry season. The only other extensive crop is sisal, or henequen, which is the major export of the country. Sisal resembles a large century plant with tall straight leaves from which rope and binder twine are made. It is native to Yucatan and in recent years has been transplanted successfully to other regions. In addition to the large sisal plantations in the north, the other main source of income for the people of Yucatan is chicle, which grows in the forests to the south. Chicle - chewing-gum - is made from the juice extracted from the sapodilla tree.

Mérida, the capital, is a beautiful old world Spanish city of some 125,000 people, with shady plazas and charming streets lined with houses painted in pale pastel colors and

covered with gorgeous blossoming vines. The population of Mérida is largely of mixed Spanish and Indian descent while throughout the peninsula there is still a large number of Maya Indians.

While there are numerous ruined cities of ancient Maya glory such as Uxmal, * Kabá, * Labná, * Cobá, * Tulum, * and others, Chichén Itzá has been the first to be restored and rebuilt in a large degree. It is situated in the north central part of Yucatan near a group of natural wells. ^{**} Cenotes they are called in Spanish, but the Maya word Chichén means the mouth of the wells. The name Itzá is probably that of the tribe which founded this ancient city.

The work of the archaeologists is an enormous task, sometimes filled with dramatic incidents, more often consisting of months of meticulous and laborious work. Every stone must be catalogued, and carefully described; its exact location numbered, its exact location measured for its relative position, and relative position observed and noted. ~~must be carefully catalogued and described.~~ Walls must be supported, excavations most painstakingly made, noting every particle of the debris. In the instance of two temples at Chichén Itzá, it was discovered when the work was partially completed, that earlier structures lay buried within. It was necessary to insert steel girders to support the upper temples, in order to examine ^{+ real work} the buried ones, before resuming the work on the larger outer buildings. Sometimes exciting 'finds' are

* OOSHmahl, KahBAH, LabNAH, KoBAH, TooLOOM.

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made, and these rare occasions must warm the hearts of the scientists, spurring them on to renewed effort.

The great co-operative undertaking of the Museo Nacional Antropología e Historia de México, and of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, D. C. ably executed by skilled staffs of experts in many fields, can only be appreciated fully when one visits the restored temples and compares them with other fallen buildings as yet untouched by modern hands. Through such effort and study great knowledge of the Maya is being gathered and preserved for the benefit of all students of art and history.

MAYA HISTORY

The origin of the Maya is not definitely known. That they sprang from some migratory Indians who came to the Western Hemisphere thousands of years ago, crossing Behring Strait from Siberia, seems certain. According to the most recent findings of the archaeological world these migrations began perhaps as much as 30,000 years ago. The ^win^higrants spread gradually over the whole of North America and eventually worked their way south into Central and South America. It is certain that there were nomad groups who, living by hunting, fishing, and the chance natural products of the country, settled in certain areas, particularly those of warmer climate where they found richer and

more abundant foods sufficient for their daily needs. They must have learned gradually to cultivate selected native plants, and in time developed Indian corn, or maize, which became the ~~major~~ basic dietary food of the Americas. Such an important development made possible the establishment of community life and with this change came time for increased development and the acquisition of further knowledge.

The Maya must have sprung from such a group living in southern Mexico and part of Guatemala. How many centuries it took to develop this particular strain has not been determined, but we do know that by the beginning of the Christian Era the Maya not only existed as tribal groups, but had attained remarkable knowledge of astronomy, mathematics, and the art of building. They were the only people of the new world ever to develop an original written language: their hieroglyphic form of writing, which is taking our scientists many years to decipher.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the Maya was their calendar, calculated on a scale of amazing proportions, and perfected nearly two thousand years ago. They left dated monuments - stelae - sculptured chronicles of history, of which the earliest bear dates beginning with the fourth century.

They were builders of great cities which flourished, declined, and all but disappeared during the early centuries of our time. Their first great city was Uaxactun,* built in the northern part of central Guatemala, and in subsequent

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years they spread east and southeast into British Honduras and Honduras, west into the Mexican States of Chiapas and Tabasco, and north into Campeche and Yucatan. The reasons for Maya migrations to new areas may be conjectured. It was possibly due primarily to the increased growth of small bush in their old corn fields which presented such strong competition to the growing corn that it could not survive, as the Maya had no agricultural implements with which to cultivate their crops. Another possibility is that soil erosion depleted the thin top soil making it necessary to move to new areas.

For convenience of study our scientists have divided Maya history into two epochs - the Old Empire and the New. The earliest date which has yet been discovered was carved on a small jadeite plaque called the ^{6th} Layden Plate which was found near Puerto Barrios, Guatemala. According to the correlation of Maya and Christian chronologies most generally accepted, this date corresponds with our year A. D. 320. That the Maya had already achieved a high degree of civilization at this early time is evident when one realizes the conception and execution of the monuments and their position in relation to the temples and plazas of Uaxactun, the earliest of the Maya cities. A study of the ground plan of the city reveals that the temples, stae and plazas were built with a knowledge of the equinoxes and solstices. These may be observed by sighting the corners of the temples from a fixed point, thus

making the plazas serve as astronomical observatories. The last carved date at Uaxactun is A. D. 889 and it is known that new cities were being built both before and after this date. The Old Empire cities of these southern areas are characterized by definite architectural forms and the extensive use of stucco in façade decoration.

Toward the end of the Old Empire some Maya groups migrated into Yucatan, founding a number of large cities in the northern part of the peninsula, of which Chichén Itzá grew to be perhaps the most important. Here it is our good fortune to find both Old and New Empire styles in close association and the evolution of new forms in building and decoration are easily traced.

At the time of the Spanish Conquest in 1527-1546, there were in existence countless written books of Maya history, religious beliefs, astronomy and customs; books written in Maya hieroglyphs on a tough paper made from tree bark. Much of the history of this ancient race was destroyed in 1560 by Bishop Diego de Landa, who, incensed by the Maya religion, ordered all the books to be burned. Three books, or codices, escaped this calamitous conflagration and are now carefully preserved in the Museums of Paris, Dresden and Madrid, and much knowledge of Maya mathematics has been gained through deciphering their contents. Some ancient history of Yucatan has also come to us through native chronicles known as the

Books of Chilam Balam (the books of the Jaguar Soothsayers) which were written by Maya Indians but in the characters of Spanish script after they had learned that language. These books contain fragments of history, family records, deeds, etc. and have been of great use to historians since their discovery in the nineteenth century. Here, too, is recorded much about the ruling families of the country and their conflicts. For many years the Itz'á were the religious leaders, they were called the 'Itz'á Holy Men'. The Xiu,^{*} founders of Uxmal and great rivals of the Itz'á, later became rulers of all northern Yucatan.

Chichén Itz'á was occupied and abandoned at least twice during its history. It was probably founded by the Itz'á in A. D. 495, the first occupation lasting for two hundred years. Portions of the city, known as Old Chichén Itz'á, were built during this period, then for some unknown reason it was suddenly abandoned in A. D. 692. The Itz'á moved southwestward founding their new capital at Chakanputun on the west coast of the peninsula just south of the modern city of Campeche. Here the tribe ruled for nearly 250 years, abandoning the city in A. D. 928.⁴ The books of Chilam Balam tell of the Itz'á wandering forty years in the wilderness before their return to Chichén Itz'á.

Sometime during the tenth century a leader from central México was brought to Chichén Itz'á and eventually became its

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ruler. His name was Kukulcán and he was a Toltec prince. Legend tells us that he was offered as a sacrifice to the rain god, being hurled into the Well of Sacrifice, and later rescued. According to this legend anyone who, so sacrificed at dawn, survived the sixty foot drop into the dark waters of the mysterious well still remained alive at mid-day, he was rescued and given a position of high rank, the Maya believing that the rain god had thus expressed his pleasure in sparing the victim. Whether or not any credence should be placed in this tale, it is a fact that Kukulcán became ruler of Chichén Itzá toward the close of the tenth century. His symbol, the feathered serpent, ornaments the buildings of the second occupation of the city. Kukulcán made peace with the Xiu, who had founded Uxmal shortly before his arrival in Yucatan. This remarkable ruler, before his return to México, formed a pact or alliance with the cities of Uxmal and Mayapan which was known as the League of Mayapan, ^{This} ^{ad} establishing a peaceful union among the Maya tribes ^{and} ^{ad} which was to last for the next two hundred years.

Then internal strife smote Mayaland. More ^{***} Méxicans arrived from the Point Xicalanco ^{who} region of Tabasco, and ~~these~~ ^{newcomers} were responsible in some degree for dissension among the three rulers of the League of Mayapan. In 1441, a century before the founding of Mérida, the city of Mayapan was destroyed, and a short ^{by thereafter} time later the Itzá abandoned Chichén Itzá for the last time.

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So we come to the important year of 1502 when an incident occurred to Bartolome Colon, brother of Christopher Columbus. It happened on the last voyage of discovery by the gallant little fleet in its search for the pathway to India. Bartolome, captain of one of the ships, encountered a dugout canoe somewhere off the coast of southern Yucatan. Columbus' chronicler tells us that the canoe was eight feet wide, was manned by a crew of twenty-five Indians, rowing a Maya merchant to some unknown destination. The canoe carried a cargo of woven cotton cloth, flint knives, copper ornaments, and the food stuffs of the country whence it came. The Maya merchant, amazed at the great ship with sails, came aboard to hold what conversation he could with Bartolome, telling of a great land to the west called Malam, or Yucatan. Had Columbus and Bartolome followed this Maya, they might have been able to take back to Spain the knowledge of an extraordinary civilization.

Nine years later a small group of shipwrecked survivors were the first Europeans actually to set foot on the soil of Yucatan. All but two of these were killed by the group of Maya into whose hands they fell, but these two, escaping to a more friendly tribe, survived until the coming of Hernán Cortes in 1519. One of them, Heronimo Aguilar, because ^{his} knowledge of the Maya tongue, proved to be of great help to Cortes in the conquest of México.

The story of the Spanish Conquest of Yucatan is an astonishing

tale and is most graphically told by Mr. Frans Blom in his book 'The Conquest of Yucatan'. Space does not permit in this small volume for more than the merest outline. The names of Cordova, Grijalva, and Montejo follow in quick succession and lastly that of Cortés. In the first attempted landings, each of these expeditions met with great opposition, which forced the Spaniards to continue to sail west, and south, following the coast of the peninsula. Finally successful landings were made at the mouth of the Tabasco river. Here a handful of armed Spanish soldiers skillfully using not only their metal weapons, but the thirteen horses which they had brought, defeated a great army of Maya warriors. Fear must have been a potent factor in the defeat of the Indians, for they had never before encountered gun-fire, nor had they ever seen a horse. When thirteen armored horsemen attacked from the rear while the guns belched forth from the front line, panic gripped the Indians and they fled, leaving the victorious Conquistadores in possession of their beach-head. This was the first firm foothold secured on the North American Continent by European invaders.

With this all too brief outline of Maya history, it is the purpose of this small ^{work} volume to bring you, in pictorial form, what little now remains of the Maya Sacred City of Chichén Itzá.