

# CHICHEN ITZA, THE HOLY CITY OF THE ITZAS

## By SYLVANUS G. MORLEY

**L**ONG before the discovery of America there flourished in southern Mexico, Guatemala, and parts of Honduras a great civilization, which has been called the Maya. It may be said at the outset without exaggeration that this civilization had reached a height equalled by no other people of the western hemisphere prior to the coming of the white man. In architecture in sculpture, and in printing the Mayas excelled. Their priests were astronomers of no mean ability, having observed and recorded without the aid of instruments of precision such as are known to us the lengths of the Solar and Venus years, and probably the lengths of the Mercury and Mars years. In addition to this they had developed a calendar system and perfected a chronology which in some of its characteristics was superior to our own.

The ancient glory of this people had long since departed when Hernando Cortez first came in contact with them on the coast of Yucatan in 1519. Their star had set. Their greatest cities had been abandoned and lay in ruins, and their country was prostrated by the quarrels of a score or more of petty independent chieftains, each of whom was waging war on the other. Even the memory of the older cities, of their culture, such as Palenque, Copan and Quiniqua, for example, seems to have passed from the mind of men, their former existence forgotten. Famine, pestilence and internecine strife are all said to have been contributory causes to the decay and eclipse which overtook this brilliant aboriginal civilization several centuries before the Spanish first set foot in the new world.

Probably the largest, and certainly the most magnificent, of the ruined cities which the Spanish conquerors found on their arrival in Yucatan was Chichen Itza, around which even in its desolation there still cluster a thousand traditions of former sanctity and splendor. The name Chichen Itza is Maya, and means Chimmouth, Chen-wells and Itza, the name of the Maya tribe, who lived in the neighborhood of the place. "The Mouth of the Wells of the Itzas" therefore is the meaning of the name; nor could a more appropriate one have been applied to the place by any people. The whole peninsula of Yucatan is a vast limestone formation with little or no surface water. One may travel for miles and never cross river or brook, or even chance upon a modest spring. Indeed, in the northern part, where most of the great ruined cities are located, water is fully 70 feet below the surface of the ground. The modern inhabitants overcome this difficulty by means of wells and windmills, which afford the only source of water supply during the dry season (December to June) excepting what little rain water may have been caught during the rainy months and stored in cisterns.

But of wells and windmills the ancient Mayas knew nothing, and, generally speaking, had it not been for the great natural reservoirs which nature had scattered here and there over the country Yucatan never could have been colonized. These great natural wells, or, as the Mayas call them, cenotes, are found all over Yucatan. They are usually about 150 feet in diameter, or sometimes more, and about 70 feet in depth to the level of the water. Geologists say that these cenotes are places where the limestone crust, which everywhere covers the surface of Yucatan, has become weakened by the washing of subterranean waters and has collapsed of its own weight, forming great sink holes or natural wells on a large scale. And now it is clear why the ancient inhabitants of Chichen Itza so named their city. In the course of their wanderings, the general trend of which was northward, the Itzas, entering Yucatan from the south, finally reached the two cenotes, around which Chichen Itza later was built, but which then was probably nothing but wilderness. Here the striking contrast afforded by such an abundance of water in a country so generally parched could not fail to have attracted their attention. The place must have seemed to the thirsty wanderers a God-given site for the location of their new home. By right of discovery they claimed the place, and to the city which grew up around the cenotes they gave the name of Chichen Itza, "The Mouth of the Wells of the Itzas."

The two cenotes at Chichen Itza have been known by the Mayas from time immemorial as the Cenote Grande and the Cenote Sacra, or the large Cenote and the Sacra Cenote, respectively. The first of these only in former times was used for the water supply of the city, the Sacra Cenote being reserved for religious use exclusively. It is the latter, however, and the religious observances held in connection with it, which gave the city its holy character. From far and near all over Yucatan, and probably even from points more distant, pilgrimages were made to the Sacra Cenote. It seems to have been the most holy shrine of the Maya people, comparable only in importance to the Mohammedan Mecca and the Christian Jerusalem. In time of drought offerings of all kinds were thrown into it—treasures, and in cases of extremity even living human sacrifices.

Chichen Itza today is somewhat changed in appearance from the time when pilgrims came from far and near to appease with human sacrifice the wrath of offended deities. Now the city lies buried in a thick jungle, which has steadily won its way into the very heart of the holy place. Colonnades have been overthrown and pyramids covered with trees to their summits; courts have been lost in a tangle of thorn and creepers; and palaces stripped of their sculptured embellishment. Desolation has spread everywhere in the wake of the encroaching vegetation.



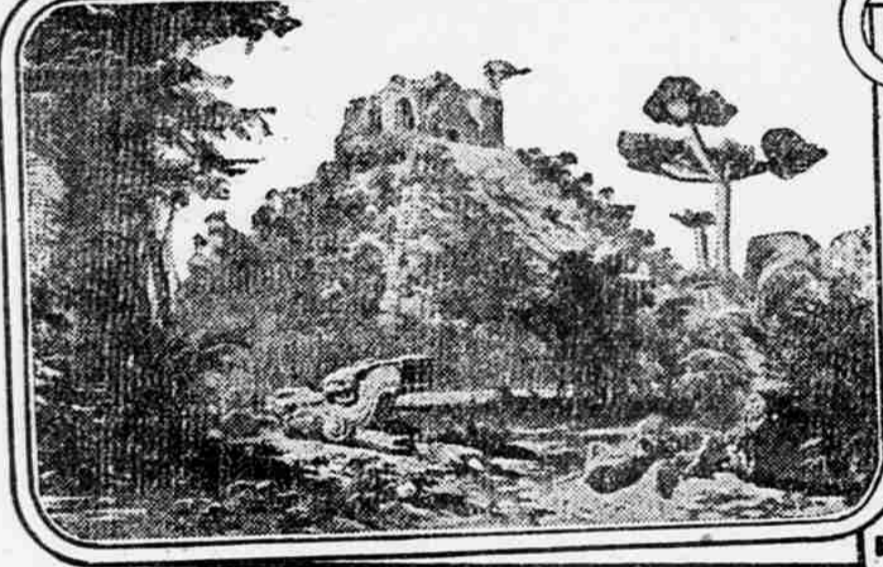
END VIEW OF THE MONJAS OR MONASTERY



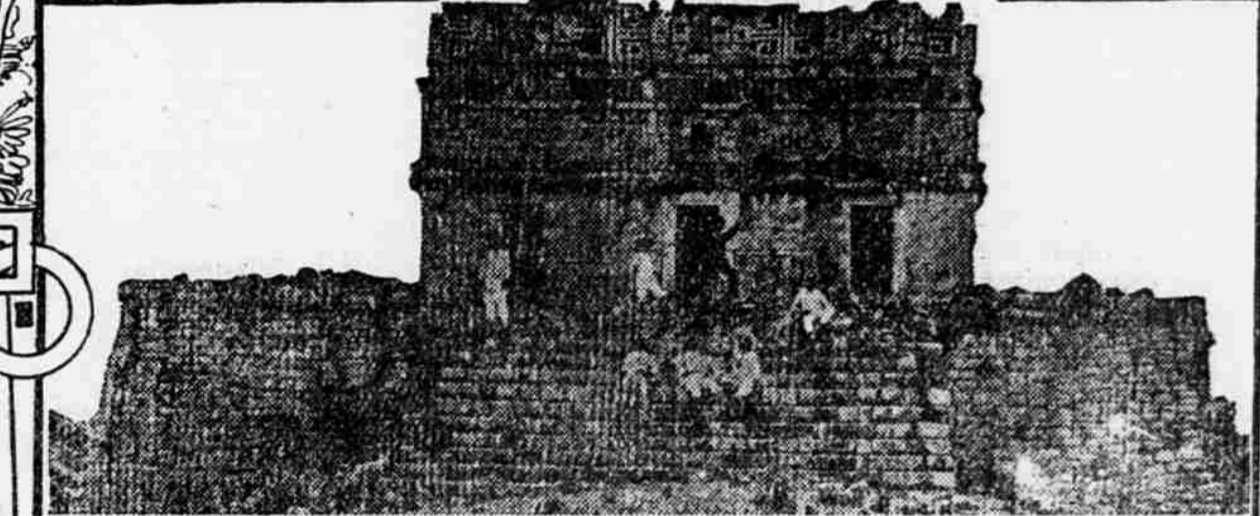
BUILDING CALLED THE IGLESIA, OR CHURCH



VIEW OF TEMPLE CALLED CHICHANCHOB



THE CASTILLO OR CASTLE



PANORAMA OF THE RUINS OF CHICHEN ITZA

To visit the ancient city now, one jolts for 15 long and weary miles in a two-wheeled covered cart drawn by three mules over the roughest kind of a highway imaginable. This present inconvenience fortunately is not to be one of long standing. A new and straight road is about to be built and an automobile service to the ruins probably established, which will shorten the present length of the trip from four hours to about half an hour. Now, however, this ride from Citas, the nearest railroad point, seems interminable. The road, so called by courtesy only, winds through the impenetrable bush, which everywhere in the natural state covers northern Yucatan. Through this the creaking cart finds a dubious way mile after mile until every muscle in one's body groans an agonized protest. Finally, when it seems that the limit of physical endurance has been reached, the cart suddenly lurches around a sharp turn in the road and as if by magic the lofty Castillo flashes into view, towering high above the plain and the rest of the city in its lonely magnificence.

This imposing structure, the highest in Yucatan, rises 78 feet above the plain. The pyramid on which the temple stands is 195 feet long on each side at the base and covers about an acre of ground. The Castillo would seem to have been the center of the ancient city, and probably its chief sanctuary. To the north lies the Sacred Cenote and the causeway, just mentioned, leading to it. On the east is a vast group of buildings, colonnades, courts and pyramids. "The City of a Thousand Columns," as some one has picturesquely described it. Due west is the group of structures known as the Ball Court. To the south for half a mile or more, scattered through the jungle, are pyramids, courts, temples and palaces. The central location of the Castillo with reference to all of these, as well as its great size and commanding height, argue strongly that it was the chief sanctuary of the Holy City.

Another interesting group of structures at Chichen Itza, perhaps slightly less sacred in character than the Castillo, is the so-called "Ball Court," mentioned above as lying just west of the Castillo. This group is composed of two parallel masses of solid masonry, each 272 feet long, 27 feet high and 18 feet wide, placed 119 feet apart from each other. These two great walls, for such they really are, form a court nearly 300 feet long by 119 feet wide. High on the side of each at the middle point from end to end there is attached a stone ring four feet in diameter with a hole through it. These rings are fastened to their respective walls by tenons of stone, and are so placed that the surface of each is perpendicular to the vertical face of the wall. The arrangement is very similar to the baskets in our modern game of basket ball, except that at Chichen Itza the "baskets" have their openings perpendicular to the ground, while in our game the openings in the baskets are parallel with the ground. To make a basket at the Chichen Itza court a somewhat horizontal throw, as in baseball, was necessary, while nowadays it is a toss that wins the goal.

At the open ends of the court formed by these two walls stand temples, which in effect inclose the area, definitely marking its boundaries. On top of the east wall, at its southern end, there is a beautiful temple, which affords a commanding view of the entire court. This has been called "The House of the Tigers," because of a frieze of stalking tigers, which is sculptured in alto-relievo around the

outside of the building. This temple contains also on the walls of an interior room, an elaborate mural painting representing an attack by some enemy upon a city, perhaps Chichen Itza itself, and its defense by the inhabitants. Some of the poses taken by the combatants in the conflict are extremely realistic; such as in the throwing of javelins, the swinging of war clubs, and the like. This bit of mural decoration in The House of the Tigers at Chichen Itza probably marks the high-water mark of aboriginal painting in the Western Hemisphere; at least it is superior to everything else that has survived.

The identification of these two great walls and the temples associated with them, as a ball court, rests on firm historic foundation. When the Spanish first came to Mexico they found the natives playing a game of ball, which was of sufficient importance to have a special court or ground set apart for its exclusive use. Several of the early Spanish writers have described the game in some detail, and all agree as to its having played an important part in the life of the people. One chronicler has it that the object of the game was to strike the ball so that it would pass through the opening in the stone ring above mentioned as an important feature of the Chichen Itza court. He adds that the feat was one of considerable dexterity, since the ball could not be hit with the hands, but that the hips or other parts of the body had to be used instead. This rule of the game very materially increased the difficulty in making a "Maya basket;" so much so, in fact, we are told, that the lucky player making this winning stroke had forfeit to him as a reward for his skill all the clothing and ornaments of the spectators. At such times, the chronicler concludes, the spectators were wont to scatter in all directions without loss of time, hoping thus to escape paying the penalty, but that the friends of the lucky player immediately gave chase and endeavored to exact the full forfeit.

Although the name Ball Court has been given to this group of temples at Chichen Itza, it should not be supposed on that account, that this great court was built primarily for sport. Such an explanation of its fundamental purpose is incompatible with any conception which the American aborigine ever seems to have entertained. To the Itza people the chief function of their Ball Court was doubtless a religious one. Games played there, if not actually held in connection with religious festivals, were at least sufficiently religious in their meaning as to completely overshadow the element of sport as we understand the term. That a game was played in which competition and skill entered in cannot be doubted in the face of contemporaneous evidence, and to this extent perhaps the Mexican Ball Courts were athletic fields; but it must not be forgotten for a moment that its true significance was religious, and that the games which were played there probably were held only in connection with religious festivals. It is not improbable, however, that the Aztecs were breaking away from the religious feature of sport at the time of the Spanish Conquest, but that "The Holy Men of the Itzas," as the people of Chichen Itza are sometimes called in the early manuscripts, had taken any such a radical step is little short of inconceivable, so religious in character was the whole Maya civilization.

To the east of the Castillo lie a great group of courts, pyramids and colonnades, "The City of a Thousand Columns," already mentioned.

Here desolation is widespread. It seems as though an earthquake must have shaken the Itza capital at some time. Row after row of columns have been overturned and now lie prostrate within a foot of their original positions. Perhaps a capital or a drum here and there is broken, but for the most part the stones lie just where they fell. In its entirety this section of the city must have presented an imposing appearance, being literally a forest of columns surrounding and connecting the various courts. As to the use of these great colonnades, tradition and history are equally silent. Some think that they were the law courts of the ancient city, where justice was administered and punishment meted out. Others say that they were the market places, where the produce of the surrounding country was bought and sold. This latter explanation has one strong recommendation in its favor in that the descendants of the builders of the ancient city of Yucatan, the present Maya Indians, still hold their markets under the portals surrounding the plazas in the towns and villages throughout the country today.

South of the Cenote Grande there are a number of well-preserved structures, most of them presenting beautifully sculptured facades. To these fanciful names have been given, which probably have little or nothing to do with the original uses of the buildings. One large structure, for example, has been called "The Akabtzib." The name is Maya and means "The House of the Dark Writing." This building was so called, because of the fact that over one of its interior doorways there is a lintel inscribed with hieroglyphs. This lintel is so placed that the hieroglyphs can only be seen by artificial light, hence the name, "The House of the Dark Writing." Nearby is a round tower, with but one exception the only structure of its kind in the Maya area. This is called "The Caracol." Caracol is the Spanish word for snail, and since the interior circular corridor and spiral stairway of this structure bear some remote resemblance to the convolutions of a snail shell, the name was applied to the building. The Manjós (Spanish for monastery) is perhaps the most beautiful building at Chichen Itza. It is composite, showing three different periods of construction.

The above are only a few of the many structures at Chichen Itza. But in all directions for several miles the brush is strewn with ruins. Crumbling walls and jungle-ridden courts are to be encountered on every side; disintegration so far advanced that these once splendid palaces and temples are now but little more than shapeless mounds of fallen masonry. The total area covered by ruins which may be assigned to this center of primitive population has been estimated by some as high as ten square miles. That larger Maya cities yet remain to be discovered now seem highly improbable so thoroughly has the general exploration of the area been done. Consequently we may affirm with but little hesitation that "The Holy City of the Itzas" was the largest and most important of the Maya civilization and probably of aboriginal America as well.

### THE SIGH FOR LEISURE.

Lives there the man who has not sighed for leisure? And lives there the man who in his more sober moments, has not been honestly glad that he must work? Human nature, which sweetens under toil, sours in leisure. And it is by no means sure that the fall from innocence which first brought work into the world "and all our woe" was not bringing salvation disguised as labor. Faithfulness will dignify and beautify even drudgery; no matter what the work is, provided it is honest, if it is done well it commands our instinctive respect. Besides if we did not all have to work so hard to keep alive the jalls would have standing room only

**Thackeray's Kindness of Heart.**  
Thackeray was the gentlest satirist that ever lived. As editor of the Cornhill he could hardly bring himself to reject a MS. for fear of hurting his would-be contributors. The story of his actually paying for contributions that he never printed, in order to conceal the fact that he had rejected them, may be true or false. We do not remember exactly how the evidence points. But even if it be a story, such stories are not told of men made of the stern stuff of the Thackeray commonly misknown.

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