



COPAN, THE MOTHER CITY OF THE MAYAS

By SYLVANUS G. MORELY

THE ruins of Copan are situated in the valley of the Copan river in the western part of the Republic of Honduras only a few miles from the boundary of Guatemala. Mountains, the foothills of the Cordillera, reaching an altitude of some 2,500 feet, surround it on every side, their lower slopes overgrown with a well-nigh impenetrable thicket of low trees and bushes, and their summits sparsely covered with pine. The valley at this point is about a mile and a half wide, and it is upon this rich river plain that the ancient Maya metropolis was built. The river here flows east and west, now skirting the northern foothills, and again having crossed the plain, rushing along the base of the southern slopes, a modest stream, swollen in the dry season, but a raging, swollen torrent frequently overflowing its banks after the rains have set in. This pleasant valley surrounded on all side by



FACE OF STEP IN THE TEMPLE



A WELL-PRESERVED STELA



RESTORATION OF DOORWAY TO INNER CHAMBER OF GREAT TEMPLE



WEST SIDE OF DOORWAY LEADING TO THE INNER CHAMBER

mountains of considerable height, supplied with an abundance of never-falling streams, and renowned for its fertility, offers a striking contrast to the parched and waterless plains of northern Yucatan, which form the general environment of northern Maya sites. With the former the water supply was never a question of moment, but with the latter its satisfactory solution in a few places only, absolutely determined the distribution of the aboriginal population. And yet, unlike as these two regions are, the Maya civilization, which overspread both of them, was of sufficient homogeneity, as we shall see, to follow in each one such the same lines of cultural development. At the very beginning of our study of Copan we find ourselves confronted with a grave difficulty, namely, the entire absence of aboriginal traditions concerning the place, which consequently renders a reconstruction of the historical background impossible. In Yucatan we were able to piece together some what of the early history of the principal cities, such as Chichen Itza, and Uxmal, from the account of native as well as Spanish writers, many of whom derived their information from those well acquainted with the former history of the country. And while this information is often quite fragmentary, nevertheless it sheds a very considerable light on the pre-Columbian history of these two northern sites, and in a measure, at least, dispels that darkness and obscurity which so completely enshrouds almost all the other great centers of the Maya culture.

Concerning the former history of Copan, however, we know absolutely nothing, excepting the tradition of very doubtful value given below. In 1567, or thereabout, Diego Garcia de Palencia, an official of the Audiencia of Guatemala, visited these ruins and later described them in a letter to Philip II, the then king of Spain. In this communication, after a description of the different buildings, he says he endeavored to ascertain who the former inhabitants of the city were.

"I endeavored with all possible care to ascertain from the Indians, through the traditions derived from the ancients, what people lived here, or what they knew or had heard from their ancestors concerning them. But they had no books relating to their antiquities, nor do I believe that in all this district there is more than one, which I possess. They say that in ancient times there came from Yucatan a great lord, who built these edifices, but that at the end of some years he returned to his native country, leaving them entirely deserted."

Unfortunately, the reliability of this tradition is disproved by too many different lines of evidence to permit our accepting it. In the first place, the structures of Copan are far too numerous and massive to have been built within the span of a single life; and its elaborately sculptured monuments are far too intricate to have been carved in one generation with the tools available. Had that "Great lord from Yucatan" lived twice the allotted three score years and ten, his life, even then, could

not have embraced one-fourth of the period of building activity at Copan.

Again, as we shall see, the hieroglyphic inscriptions at Copan indicate that it was far older than any of the Yucatan sites, and that it probably has of the great northern cities. Still another reason for doubting that Copan was colonized from Yucatan arises when we examine the historical data bearing on each. All the early writers, native as well as Spanish, with the exception of Palencia, above quoted, pass over the great southern metropolis in absolute silence; but when they come to describe Yucatan nearly all of them mention the two largest of the ancient cities there, Chichen Itza and Uxmal, and in some instances even give brief outlines of their history.

The striking absence of tradition relating to such an extensive site as Copan can only indicate one thing—that its fall and subsequent desolation had outlived the memory of man even at the time of the Spanish Conquest in 1530; and a generation later, when Palencia visited the place, it had been forgotten so long that he was unable to find out anything about its former history except the very dubious tradition given above.

The ruins are more easily reached today from Guatemala than from Honduras, in which latter Republic they are located. One leaves the Guatemala Northern railroad at Zacapa, and either by horseback or cart, journeys eastward for two days, stopping overnight at Jacatan. The actual distance traveled cannot be more than 35 or 40 miles at the outside, but the road is so rough and winds through country so mountainous that it takes two days to reach the ruins after leaving the railroad. The modern village of Copan, where one can secure accommodations of a sort, is about three-quarters of a mile from the main group of ruins. It is built over a part of the site of the ancient city, and has two beautifully sculptured altars standing in the plaza under a large tree. Several other sculptural monuments are to be found in various pigsties and chicken yards throughout the village, and there is another group of two or three, a short distance to the northwest in the "campo santo," or burying ground.

Taking the path leading to the east from the village, a fifteen-minute walk brings one to the entrance on the west side of the Great Plaza, the largest and doubtless the most important court in the city. This imposing area,

some 300 feet long by 250 wide, is surrounded on three sides by a terrace 10 to 15 feet high. The interior sides of this are stepped so that standing in the center of the plaza the effect is that of a sunken court surrounded on all sides but one, with tiers of stone seats or benches. The southern or open side is occupied by a small pyramid about 20 feet high, which, standing midway between the ends of the terrace, appears to inclose the area. This pyramid, because of its central position with reference to the Great Plaza, must have been a much more important structure than its size would now seem to indicate. Standing on its summit and looking northward, a great open-air auditorium lies at one's feet. Tier upon tier of stone benches rising around its sides, and five great monumental statues, posted like gigantic sentinels guarding its sacred precincts.

This mound, so conspicuously located on the open side of the Great Plaza, attracted the attention of the English traveler and archaeologist, Mr. A. P. Maudslay, who visited Copan in 1855, spending several months there in photographing and making molds of the sculptures and in studying the ruins. He cleared its sides and excavated it. The summit, he says, is very small, and shows no signs of any building ever having stood there. Digging through the floor he sank a shaft into the interior of the pyramid and found at a depth of six feet from the top an earthen pot which contained several jade beads, a few pearls, a jade spindle wheel, perforated disk, and some roughly carved pieces of pearl shell. The bottom of the pot was covered with some finely ground cinnamon and several ounces of quick silver. Fragments of human bones were taken during the course of these excavations and, finally, at a depth of nine feet below the level of the plain, a skeleton of a jaguar was uncovered.

The use of this pyramid without a building of any kind surmounting it must forever remain a mystery. Perhaps here in full view of the assembled inhabitants of the ancient city were practiced the bloody rites of human sacrifice; or perhaps the decrees of rulers or the omens from above were handed down. Who can say now? One thing alone seems reasonably certain: the close proximity and commanding relation of this pyramid to such a vast open-air auditorium as the Great Plaza indicates that it formerly played some very important part in the life of Copan.

The most interesting feature of the Great Plaza, however, is not this pyramid, but the great sculptured monuments, which are scattered here and there around the inclosure. Of these, five are now standing and three lie prostrate. They average not far from 12 feet in height and are about 3 1/2 feet in breadth. The general treatment of them all is much the same. The side facing the plaza is uniformly sculptured with the likeness of a human being sometimes of one sex and sometimes of the other, carved in very high relief, which, in places, amounts to sculpture in the round. The clothing and head-dresses of these figures are exceedingly ornate.



SEATED FIGURE (PARTIALLY RESTORED) IN CENTER OF STAIRWAY

The sides and backs of these monuments are usually covered with hieroglyphics, though this latter is not a constant feature. Near each one of them, usually just in front, there is a smaller block of stone, sometimes round and sometimes square. These, because of their close connection with the larger monuments, have been called altars, and it is not unlikely that they may have served some such purpose. They are elaborately sculptured with grotesque figures and in some cases with hieroglyphics also. Leaving the Great Plaza and its interesting monuments behind, and proceeding southward about 100 yards, we enter a narrow court 290 feet in length by 135 feet in width. This inclosure has been named "The Court of the Hieroglyphic Stairway," because of its most remarkable feature—an imposing flight of stairs ascending the pyramid at its southern end. This stairway, including the elaborately sculptured balustrades on each side, measures 33 feet in width. Its steps, which average a foot in height, have their vertical faces covered with hieroglyphics.

This monumental stairway, rising steeply for 90 feet, its steps and balustrades elaborately sculptured, and full-size human figures occupying its center at regular intervals clear to the summit, must have presented in former times a striking appearance and offered an effect but little short of stupendous.

Ascending the steep slope which forms the southeastern side of the court of the Hieroglyphic Stairway, we find ourselves on the summit of a broad terrace overlooking the Eastern Court. This inclosure, though somewhat small (about 125 feet square), originally must have been one of the most beautiful parts of the city, judging from the elaborate sculptures now strewn in its great profusion. On its south side rises the highest pyramid at Copan, the summit 112 feet above the level of the river. Across the greater part of the western side extends a broad, rather low stairway, flanked by two life-sized rampant jaguars sculptured in high relief. This flight of steps leads to a broad terrace overlooking another court. The remaining sides of the Eastern Court are occupied by high terraces, which support a number of ruined structures. One of these on the northern terrace was excavated by Mr. Maudslay, who found there a beautiful interior doorway nine feet wide, over which there is an elaborate frieze supported at its ends by crouching human figures of heroic size, the whole being carved in high relief almost amounting to sculpture in the round.

The structures on the eastern and remaining terrace have for the most part disappeared, their destruction having been due to a change in the course of the Copan river, which now washes the exterior base of this terrace. This cutting away of the great substructure of the main group of buildings by the river is one of the most interesting and at the same time deplorable features at Copan, since ultimately, if not checked, it can mean nothing more nor less than the total destruction of the city.

But this wholesale demolition is not being accomplished without its accompanying lesson in archaeology. This great vertical wall, cut by the river all along the eastern side of the main group, is the largest cross-section of an archaeological site in the world. Here, like an open book, one may read the successive periods of the city's growth. At different levels from the hollows upward throughout the rubble hearing of the substructure there are horizontal strata of cut paving stones. These are the pavements of different plazas, dating from successive epochs of the city's history, and they clearly demonstrate that the growth of Copan has been gradual. As time passed and the population increased, newer and larger structures and plazas were built to meet the needs of the growing city. These constructions, as we see from the cross-section of the substructure, were built directly above the older ones. When it became necessary to build a new plaza its rubble foundations were laid on the paving of the old plaza which it was to replace, and thus the highest of the substructure slowly increased. A careful study of the floors of these successive plazas would doubtless teach much as to the different epochs of the city's occupancy, and might even reveal important facts relative to its history.

Before closing this description, it may not be out of place to explain here our reasons for having called Copan "The Mother City of the Mayas." Briefly stated, it is because of the greater antiquity of its hieroglyphic inscriptions as compared with those of every other Maya city now known. This greater age of Copan is indicated, not only by the actual dates recorded in its earliest inscriptions, but also by a cruder technique in their execution. Later, in the best period of the southern Maya civilization, sculpture is found to be in very high relief or even in the round, and is characterized by a great profusion and elaboration of detail. Nothing of this, however, appears in the earliest monuments at Copan, where the relief is so low that it amounts to little more than incised lines, the sculptor apparently not feeling sure enough of his technique to attempt anything more ambitious.

Aside from this question of technique, however, the dates themselves recorded on these more crudely sculptured monuments are much earlier than those on the more elaborate ones. The earliest historic date at Copan preceded the earliest historic dates of all the other great Maya cities by intervals ranging from 20 to 300 years, or, expressed in terms of Maya chronology, from one to fifteen katuns, the Maya "katun" being approximately equal to 20 of our own years. For these two reasons, then, the more primitive character of its earliest monuments and the actual priority of its earliest dates, we have called Copan "The Mother City of the Mayas."

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Fred Vosen, fishing in the Lee reservoir, heard on shore a noise that he at first supposed was made by a muskrat, but on investigation it proved to be a big carp.

"He watched the fish for some minutes, and says that along the shore strawberries hung over the water a distance of from four to ten inches from the surface, and he was surprised to see the big fish bobbing its

Cats to Be Taxed in Munich

Though the taxation of cats has been discussed for some time in Berlin, the drastic step has been averted. Munich, however, has decided to put the threat into operation and a charge of five marks per cat per annum is to be made in the Bavarian capital. It is not, in the first place, as a source of revenue that the tax is to be imposed, for ostensibly the purposes sought are the public health and the protection

Cats to Be Taxed in Munich

of singing birds. Whatever the cause puss is to be the object of the tax collectors' energies and must henceforth wear the badge of authority or fall into the ruthless hands of the cat catchers, a corps to be formed to enforce the new decree at its inception.

There are men who sound like pure gold, and then there are others who make a noise like brass.

Cats to Be Taxed in Munich

Hepe.

"When I come home tonight," said Tommy's father, after Tommy had, while in a temper, upset the milk on the clean tablecloth, "I shall punish you."

"Gee," said Tommy along about noon, "I hope they'll give dad a raise to-day."

"Why do you want him to get a raise?" the boy's mother asked.

"He always seems to be so kind and careful for about a week after he gets a raise."

