

## **The Yucatán Expeditions of Alfred Maudslay and Teoberto Maler (1880s–1900s)**

### **Introduction**

The exploration and rediscovery of the ancient Mayan civilization during the late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a pivotal point in Latin American archaeology. Two key figures who contributed significantly to the understanding of Mayan history and culture were Alfred Maudslay and Teoberto Maler. Their expeditions throughout the Yucatán Peninsula and Central America uncovered a wealth of knowledge about Mayan ruins, inscriptions, and architecture, laying the foundation for future archaeological work in the region. Through meticulous documentation, photography, and fieldwork, Maudslay and Maler preserved important aspects of Mayan civilization, enabling scholars in the 20th century to decipher Mayan hieroglyphics and expand on the cultural and scientific significance of these ancient sites.

The Mayan civilization, renowned for its astronomical, architectural, and mathematical achievements, flourished in what is now Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. The collapse of Mayan cities in the Postclassic period left much of their culture hidden and forgotten until European explorers ventured into these areas' centuries later. Alfred Maudslay, a British diplomat turned archaeologist, and Teoberto Maler, a German-born photographer and explorer, are two of the most influential figures in this rediscovery. Their expeditions not only unearthed architectural wonders but also captured detailed records of inscriptions that later proved crucial to deciphering the Mayan writing system.

This essay will explore the expeditions of Maudslay and Maler, their contributions to the field of Mayan archaeology, and how their work fits into the broader history of scientific discovery in Latin America. Drawing upon sources such as *Science in Latin America: A History* by Juan José Saldaña and *The Scientific Attitude* by Lee McIntyre, we will examine the scientific methodologies and attitudes that drove these explorers and contextualize their work within the larger framework of 19th-century scientific exploration.

## **Historical Context**

### **The Rediscovery of Mayan Civilization**

During the 19th century, as European imperial powers expanded their influence across the globe, there was a growing fascination with ancient civilizations. In Latin America, the rich and complex cultures of the pre-Columbian era were of particular interest, particularly the Inca, Aztec, and Mayan civilizations. The Mayan civilization, which reached its height during the Classical period (250–900 AD), was known for its sophisticated writing system, astronomical knowledge, and grand architectural structures, such as pyramids and palaces. However, by the time European explorers arrived in the Americas, many of the great Mayan cities had been abandoned for centuries, leaving behind only ruins hidden in the dense jungles of the Yucatán Peninsula and Central America.

European knowledge of the Maya was limited, and much of it was based on the accounts of Spanish conquistadors, who often focused on the more visible and active Aztec Empire in central Mexico. It wasn't until the mid-19th century that systematic expeditions to Mayan sites began to reveal the depth of this civilization's achievements. Early explorers such as John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood paved the way for a deeper understanding of Mayan culture through their documentation of ruins in the Yucatán.

### **State of Mayan Studies in the Late 19th Century**

By the time Alfred Maudslay and Teoberto Maler began their work in the late 1800s, Mayan studies were still in their infancy. The understanding of Mayan hieroglyphics was rudimentary, and much of what was known about the Maya was based on speculation or secondhand accounts from early Spanish chroniclers. Archaeology as a scientific discipline was also still developing, and explorers like Maudslay and Maler were among the first to apply more rigorous documentation methods to the study of ancient ruins.

In *Science in Latin America: A History*, Juan José Saldaña explains how scientific expeditions during this period were often driven by a desire to collect and classify knowledge about the natural world, as well as ancient cultures. These expeditions were part of a broader trend of European scientific exploration, which sought to map, document, and analyze the non-European world. Maudslay and Maler's expeditions fit squarely within this framework, as they sought not only to uncover and document Mayan ruins but also to bring this knowledge back to Europe for further study.

### Map of the Yucatán Peninsula and Key Mayan Ruins Explored by Maudslay and Maler



### Alfred Maudslay's Expedition

#### Background

Alfred Percival Maudslay was born into a prominent British family in 1850. Initially trained as a diplomat, Maudslay's interests shifted towards archaeology after he was posted to Central America in the 1880s. During this time, he became fascinated by the ruins of the ancient Maya, and he eventually left the diplomatic service to dedicate himself fully to archaeological

exploration. Maudslay's expeditions to Mayan sites spanned the 1880s and 1890s, and he is widely credited with laying the foundation for modern Mayan archaeology.

### **Maudslay's Expeditions and Methods**

Maudslay's expeditions took him to some of the most significant Mayan ruins, including Copán, Quiriguá, Chichen Itza, and Palenque. His approach to archaeology was methodical and precise, relying heavily on the tools of modern technology, including photography and plaster casts, to document the intricate carvings and inscriptions found at these sites. Maudslay was among the first to realize the importance of preserving detailed records of these inscriptions, many of which were being eroded by the elements.

- **Photography:** Maudslay used early photographic equipment to capture detailed images of Mayan ruins, providing a visual record that could be studied by scholars in Europe.
- **Plaster Casts:** In addition to photography, Maudslay made plaster casts of many inscriptions, allowing for precise replicas to be made for further study.
- **Drawings:** Maudslay's expeditions also included artists who created detailed drawings of architectural structures and carvings, providing another layer of documentation.

### **Major Discoveries**

Maudslay's work at Copán, one of the largest and most important Mayan cities, was particularly significant. He documented the Hieroglyphic Stairway, a massive structure covered in Mayan glyphs, which would later prove crucial to understanding the Mayan writing system. Maudslay also conducted important work at Quiriguá, where he documented some of the largest Mayan stelae (stone monuments), as well as at Chichen Itza, where he studied the Temple of the Warriors and the Temple of the Jaguars.

### **Photograph of Copán's Hieroglyphic Stairway, Taken by Alfred Maudslay**



### **Significance of His Work**

Maudslay's meticulous documentation of Mayan inscriptions and architecture provided a crucial foundation for future generations of archaeologists. In *The Scientific Attitude*, Lee McIntyre emphasizes the importance of thorough documentation and empirical evidence in scientific inquiry, traits that Maudslay exemplified in his work. His use of photography, plaster casts, and detailed drawings allowed scholars to study Mayan inscriptions long after his expeditions were completed, leading to significant breakthroughs in the decipherment of Mayan glyphs in the 20th century.

## **Teoberto Maler's Expeditions**

### **Background**

Teoberto Maler, born in Rome in 1842, was another key figure in the rediscovery of Mayan civilization. Unlike Maudslay, who came from a diplomatic background, Maler was a soldier before turning to photography and exploration. Maler spent much of his career exploring remote Mayan ruins, often working alone in difficult and dangerous conditions. His work was less well known during his lifetime, but in the decades following his death, it became clear that Maler had made significant contributions to the study of Mayan archaeology.

### **Maler's Expeditions and Methods**

Maler's expeditions focused on some of the more remote and less explored Mayan sites, such as Yaxchilan, Uxmal, and Kabah. Like Maudslay, Maler used photography extensively to document the ruins he encountered, but he also took detailed notes and made sketches of architectural features and inscriptions.

- **Photography:** Maler's photographs of Mayan ruins are some of the most detailed and extensive from the period. He often worked alone in difficult terrain, carrying his photographic equipment through dense jungle.
- **Sketches and Notes:** Maler was known for his meticulous attention to detail, and his notes and sketches provide valuable insights into the condition of Mayan ruins during the late 19th century.

### **Major Discoveries**

One of Maler's most important contributions was his documentation of the ruins at Yaxchilan, a remote Mayan city on the banks of the Usumacinta River. Maler was the first to systematically document the many stelae and lintels at Yaxchilan, which feature some of the most detailed carvings in the Mayan world. His photographs and notes from Yaxchilan are still used by archaeologists today as a primary source of information about the site.

## Teoberto Maler's Photographs of Yaxchilan's Stelae



### Significance of His Work

Maler's work, like Maudslay's, was instrumental in preserving knowledge of Mayan architecture and inscriptions. His focus on remote and lesser-known sites helped to expand the understanding of the geographical extent and cultural diversity of the Mayan civilization. In *Science in Latin America: A History*, Juan José Saldaña notes that Maler's work was particularly important in preserving information about sites that have since been lost or damaged due to environmental factors or looting.

## Comparative Analysis of Maudslay and Maler

### Similarities in Their Work

Both Maudslay and Maler shared a common goal of documenting and preserving Mayan ruins for future study. Their use of photography, sketches, and detailed notes set a new standard for archaeological documentation in Latin America. Both men also contributed to the preservation of Mayan inscriptions, which would prove essential for the eventual decipherment of the Mayan writing system.

### Differences in Approach

While Maudslay worked as part of a larger network of European scholars and institutions, Maler often worked alone in the field. Maudslay's expeditions were more well-funded and supported by the British Museum, while Maler struggled with limited resources and often had to rely on his own ingenuity to complete his work. Despite these differences, both men made significant contributions to the field of Mayan archaeology.

### Comparative Table of Maudslay and Maler's Major Expeditions and Contributions

Aspect	Alfred Maudslay	Teoberto Maler
Background and Motivation	British diplomat turned archaeologist, inspired by Mayan civilization	Former soldier and self-taught photographer with a passion for Mayan culture
Funding and Resources	Well-funded expeditions, supported by institutions like the British Museum	Limited funding, often worked alone with few resources
Major Sites Explored	Copán, Quiriguá, Chichen Itza, Palenque	Yaxchilan, Uxmal, Kabah
Key Documentation Methods	Photography, plaster casts, detailed drawings	Photography, sketches, meticulous field notes
Significant Discoveries	Detailed records of Mayan inscriptions, documented Hieroglyphic Stairway at Copán	Systematic documentation of remote sites, particularly Yaxchilan's stelae and lintels
Impact on Mayan Studies	Foundation for modern Mayan archaeology, key contributor to inscription preservation	Expanded knowledge of remote sites, preserved data on sites vulnerable to decay

### Impact of Their Findings on Modern Archaeology

The work of Maudslay and Maler laid the groundwork for the systematic study of Mayan civilization. Their meticulous documentation methods allowed future scholars to build on their



discoveries and contributed to the eventual decipherment of Mayan hieroglyphics. Today, their photographs, drawings, and plaster casts remain valuable resources for archaeologists studying Mayan culture.

## **Conclusion**

Alfred Maudslay and Teoberto Maler were pioneers in the field of Mayan archaeology, and their expeditions to the Yucatán Peninsula and Central America uncovered some of the most important ruins of the ancient Mayan civilization. Through their meticulous documentation methods, they preserved a wealth of knowledge about Mayan architecture and inscriptions, laying the foundation for future breakthroughs in the field. Their work, which was driven by a scientific attitude of careful observation and empirical evidence, remains a cornerstone of Mayan studies today.

By exploring their contributions through the lens of *Science in Latin America: A History* and *The Scientific Attitude*, we can appreciate not only the importance of their discoveries but also the broader context of scientific exploration in Latin America during the 19th century. Maudslay and Maler's work exemplifies the power of careful documentation and preservation in advancing our understanding of the past, and their legacy continues to shape the field of archaeology today.

## Works Cited

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