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MAYAPAN

THE LAST STRONGHOLD OF A CIVILIZATION

By Tatiana Proskouriakoff

LONG-FORGOTTEN TEMPLES hidden in uninhabited forests, richly furnished tombs and intricately planned palaces are the subjects an archaeologist likes best to present to the public, though his own attention is often engaged in nothing more spectacular than a humble household dump or some obscure graveyard. Antique splendor has not lost its charm but we have come to realize that if there is any process or pattern in the course of human history, it is not to be found in the baffling kaleidoscope of dramatic events but in the slowly changing lives of ordinary people and in the solid stem of economic and social traditions which supports all the evanescent accomplishments of civilization.

In the Western Hemisphere, before its discovery by Europeans, the most splendid flower of culture was the Maya civilization. Its intellectual concepts were boldly imaginative; its artistic expression was lavish, sensitive and true. In two recent issues of *ARCHAEOLOGY* (6 [1953], 3-11, 82-86) HEINRICH BERLIN and ALBERTO RUZ LHUILLIER describe finds that make the names of Tikal and Palenque ring with romance like the names of Angkor Wat and Persepolis. These are the highlights of archaeological work in the Maya area. In the meantime, KIDDER and SHOOK of the Carnegie Institution of Washington have been digging obscurely in early refuse pits to explore the roots of this develop-

ment, and more recently the Institution has initiated a project to study its final decline and has turned its full attention to the ragged remnants of civilization remaining in Yucatan in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The site chosen for excavation is Mayapan, "the banner of the Maya," lying roughly twenty-five miles south of the modern city of Merida. Few tourists visit here, for the road is abominable and takes three hours to traverse by car, with heavy wear on tires and tempers. There is little to compensate a traveler for his discomforts. No ornamented temples rise above the thorny, tick-infested bush, and such art and workmanship as can be seen are hardly worth a passing glance. Mayapan represents a tragic cultural decline. We see here how a society recovering from conquest by foreigners tried to assimilate new forms imposed upon it and struggled vainly to maintain a measure of integrity only to break up, finally, into a number of small, impoverished, impotent states.

When the city of Merida was founded by Spaniards in 1542, Mayapan had already been abandoned and in ruin for almost a century. Only a few family-proud persons still remembered and could point out sites within the city where their ancestors had formerly lived. Bits of the story of its final downfall survived in

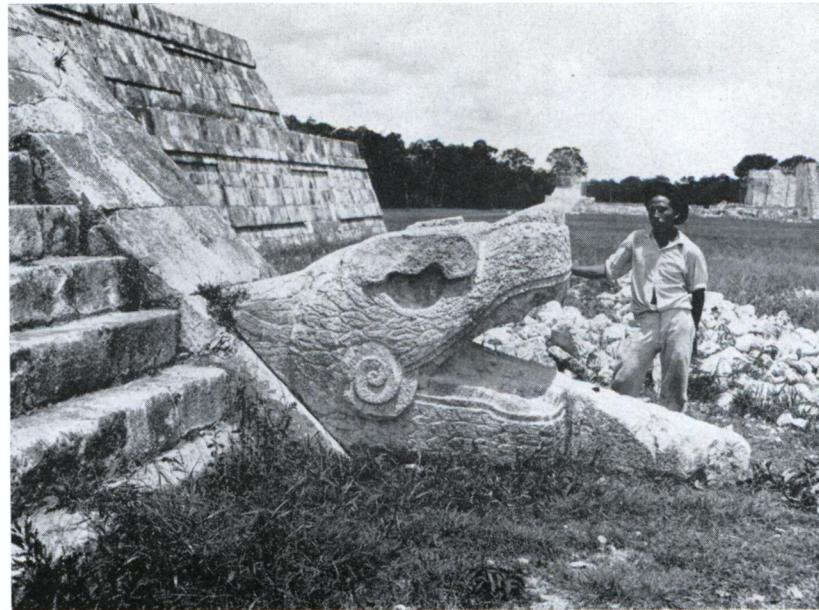
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- THE WORK AT MAYAPAN is part of a larger program undertaken by the Department of Archaeology of the Carnegie Institution of Washington in 1950 under the direction of Dr. H. E. D. Pollock, to study the last five centuries of Maya history before the coming of the Spaniards. Intensive excavation at Mayapan is supplemented by survey work in other areas. One of the expedition's aims is to find out if aboriginal history, used jointly with archaeology, can throw light on the mysterious disappearance of Maya civilization. Miss Proskouriakoff, a member of the expedition, holds a B.S. degree in Architecture from Pennsylvania State College. In 1936 and 1937 she took part in the University of Pennsylvania's expedition to Piedras Negras, Guatemala, and in 1939 became a member of the Carnegie Institution of Washington. Miss Proskouriakoff's restoration drawings of classical Maya sites have appeared as *An Album of Maya Architecture* (1946). She is also the author of *A Study of Classic Maya Sculpture* (1950).



The Temple of Kukulcan at Chichen Itza [above], and the corresponding temple at Mayapan [below]. The two are almost identical in plan but use very different masonry. Debris at the base of the Mayapan pyramid hides minor constructions.



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native histories. Mayapan had once been the capital of all the northern provinces of Yucatan. Its last ruler, known only as the Cocom, had been an overbearing man who had hired Mexican soldiers to subdue his enemies and was accused of selling his own subjects as slaves. It was not only his virtue, however, but also his power that was open to challenge, for Mayapan was ostensibly a "joint government," with the autonomous rulers of various principalities residing in the capital. It is easy to see how the exercise of extraordinary power could be regarded as a usurpation. In a violent internal revolt, the Cocom was killed, and those who could command a sufficient following returned to their provinces to engage in intermittent war with one another. The capital was left deserted.

Mayapan's "joint government" must have been a radical innovation in Maya history. Doubtless there had been former alliances and subjugations, but this was something new and in the nature of a true confederation. Although we are told that it lasted two hundred and sixty years, one need not be a cynic to question how this precarious structure of power could have survived so long, especially in view of its ultimate failure. It was, nevertheless, an inspired political scheme, and credit for it goes to a foreigner, a Mexican named Kukulcan or Quetzalcoatl, after the Toltec god whose symbol was a feathered serpent. Arriving in the country at a time of unrest, he unified it, doubtless by force of superior

arms, established a capital at Mayapan, organized its federated government and peacefully departed to his native Mexico. The Maya said he was a wise and just man, though later, under the pressure of Christian reproaches, they blamed him for introducing idolatry into the country. We gather that the earlier religion of the Maya was on a higher spiritual plane. Strangely enough, of all the data of Maya history, this seemingly most questionable item is clearly confirmed by archaeological remains.

Another notable personality in the history of Mayapan is Hunac Ceel, also known as Cauch. He was at first a subordinate of one of the rulers but by a number of spectacular intrigues and military campaigns he rose to a position of high eminence and won himself a reputation for extraordinary treachery. It may have been his activities that upset the balance of power and placed the Cocom family in a position of supremacy. At that time, the governor of Chichen Itza, an important member city of the confederation, was one Chac Xib Chac. The romantic indiscretions of this man gave Hunac Ceel an opportunity to involve him in the abduction of the bride of a neighboring ruler, and then to betray him by organizing, in reprisal, an attack upon Chichen Itza. This seems to have been a crucial event, but we do not know when it happened or what it implied. Some students believe it was about A.D. 1200. Others are inclined to place it much later. The circumstantial ac-



A serpent head [opposite page] at the base of the Temple of Kukulcan, Chichen Itza and the remains of a similar head [left] at Mayapan. The latter, modeled in stucco, is completely destroyed.

counts of Hunac Ceel's career in chronicles that are cryptic in the extreme on other matters, and the fact that he is linked with a ruler of Mayapan and mentioned in connection with its "joint government," makes it somewhat more probable that his conquest of Chichen Itza took place only shortly before the conspiracy against the Cocom and was one of the incidents that led up to the destruction of the capital.

Historical uncertainty runs through all the Maya records, but to the archaeologist the errors of history are not of paramount importance for he writes his account and poses his problems in a somewhat different light. He cannot hope to identify the bones of Hunac Ceel or to recover his name in inscriptions. The struggle for power of which Hunac Ceel was the protagonist he regards as only one of the minor facets of a process of disorganization that was transforming the lives of numberless unknown persons, ruler and priest, laborer, artist, and farmer alike. The archaeological problem is to define events in this process by the character of the remains and to establish their chronology, so that we can tell whether the disorganization was gradual or sudden, whether it was precipitated by foreign conquest or had its own internal causes, whether Maya elements of culture were disappearing before ideas flowing in from Mexico or if native traditions, temporarily suppressed by conquest, reasserted their influence in the end.

Here we have two cities that we believe ruled Yuca-

tan in two successive epochs. Chichen Itza, the earlier, is a splendid ruin and well known to every visitor to Yucatan. Many of its buildings were painted with historical murals and decorated with bas-reliefs. From these we know that its rulers came from highland Mexico, probably from the ancient city of Tula, the capital of the Toltec. They wore the regalia of the Toltec, had military orders represented by the jaguar and the eagle, and sacrificed men to the feathered serpent. When they first came to Chichen Itza it was apparently a thriving Maya city and their conquest of it did not completely disrupt its life. Older temples continued in use in spite of the introduction of a new religion. Bas-relief portraits of priests show them in their ancient regalia, probably performing many of their former functions. In art and in architecture the Toltec learned much from the Maya and, although the style of their buildings was new, they adapted and even improved local techniques of construction.

AT MAYAPAN we have a different story. Here too are evidences of an earlier occupation but not a single building of the original city was left standing. All were demolished and their stones used to construct new temples and houses. Since the stones of the old city were of fine grain and beautifully cut we can spot them at once in a masonry wall. Very likely, when Mayapan was made the capital its older buildings were no longer in

use and were in such a state of disrepair that they were fit only for material for new constructions. Perhaps the original city had lucklessly offered resistance to the invading Toltec and had been destroyed by them years before.

The new Mayapan, the capital, is a strange mixture of Maya and Toltec traditions with new elements added that give it a character of its own. Its principal temple was built on the traditional Toltec plan but was executed in a totally different manner from the so-called "Castillo" or temple of Kukulcan at Chichen Itza. The latter stands by itself on a broad open plaza artificially raised above the irregularities of the terrain. Its terraces are faced with finely cut stone arranged to form decorative panels. The temple on top has a masonry roof of typical Maya construction in which overhanging slopes from opposite walls almost meet to form a vault closed at the top with narrow capstones. Part of the original vault is still standing today. The jambs of the doorways and the wooden lintels are carved with representations of Toltec gods, priests and warriors. In the main doorway are thick columns representing the feathered serpent and huge serpent heads of stone are at the base of the principal stairway.

Perhaps it is not quite fair to contrast a picture of the Chichen Itza "Castillo," which has been partly restored by the Government of Mexico, with a picture of the recently cleared temple at Mayapan. The latter, stuccoed and painted, may have been very impressive in its day but it is precisely its appalling state of ruin which is so significant. The Mayapan temple is the younger of the two, but virtually nothing is now left of its walls. Its perishable roof probably fell after a few years of neglect, and its wall stones have tumbled down the slopes of the pyramid. When the stucco disappeared from the faces of the terraces, all the defects of their rude uneven construction were laid bare. At the foot of the main stairway a small heap of lime and stone is all that is left of a serpent head. It is as if the people of Mayapan took no pride in craftsmanship and had lost all sense of enduring quality, of permanence and of integrity. They built only what would serve the purpose, impress the populace and, above all, save unnecessary costs.

Other equally shoddy constructions cluster around the base of the pyramid, masking its lack of symmetry. Colonnaded halls are built on outcropping rock around it, forming irregular courts. At Chichen Itza the colon-



Serpent columns at Chichen Itza [above], and at Mayapan [right]. A sharp decline in artistry characterizes remains of the later city.

nade was a device by which the Maya vault, of necessity narrow in span, could nevertheless be used to roof a wide and spacious room. Large halls may have been needed as "bachelors' houses" for the training of young nobles in the arts of war and the practices of religion. At Mayapan the halls were flat-roofed with wooden beams covered by mortar, but stone columns still proved useful to save the labor of cutting large timbers and to

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keep an open and airy façade. The columns are formed of smaller, less regular drums than at Chichen Itza and are heavily plastered. They have no capitals but some are adorned with stucco sculpture of human figures in high relief. Masonry benches are set along the rear walls and are interrupted in the center by shrines for the worship of idols.

Tiny shrines are found everywhere in Mayapan, in temples and in colonnades and in houses, as well as standing alone on small platforms. They do not occur in any number at Chichen Itza or in earlier Maya cities, and attest a new form of worship—that very idolatry with which Kukulcan was charged. Fragments of idols in the form of large pottery figures, painted and elaborately adorned with ornaments, are found in great numbers. They are usually attached to large censers and probably represent gods—not the former great gods approachable only by priestly ritual, but private gods to whom offerings of copal incense had to be made and who looked after the welfare of their worshipers. Each vocation now probably had its own gods: the merchants worshiped a god of travelers; the bee-keepers, a god of bees; the farmers, gods of corn and rain. Some may have worshiped personal gods made in the effigy of an eminent ancestor. It is said that when a noble died his ashes were kept in such an effigy by his descendants. There were also idols of stone but these more likely belonged to temples. The real essence of the change in religious practice suggested by effigy censers is that gods no longer required professional intercession, that they

could be approached directly and that devotion had become a personal affair.

The religious solidarity of Maya communities was formerly expressed in imposing religious structures and monuments depicting priestly ritual. The burial of a high priest at Palenque expresses well the honor afforded his office. There were no such elaborate tombs at Mayapan. There were large temples and the greater gods still demanded sacrifice, perhaps even more sacrifice than before, but no longer did they command wealth or undivided devotion. Deep pits through the substructures of temples are filled to the brim with skeletons and disarticulated bones, but seldom is there even a modest offering. The bones are doubtless those of sacrificial victims, killed so that the power of some declining god should be reasserted dramatically—and cheaply.

The gods were cruel but their increase in number had dissipated the community forces formerly centered around them. If Mayapan had solidarity, it was the precarious solidarity of political rather than religious structure and its energies were directed, as are the energies of many nations today, to preserving that structure intact. The effort saved on artistry and doubtless also the money saved on tomb furnishings went into newly introduced military defenses.

Mayapan was a fortified city. It was completely surrounded by a wall of rough stone eight or nine feet thick at the base and narrowed by an interior ledge to about five feet at the top. The construction at most is



Masonry wall at Mayapan. The square stone which appears at the lower left was salvaged from ruins of an older city.



Broken pieces of pottery idols bespeak a new religion introduced by Kukulcan, when Mayapan was made the capital.

only six and a half feet high, but it might have carried a stockade for greater protection. Seven large gates, probably roofed to accommodate guards, and five minor openings lead into the city. Today the protective efficiency of such a wall seems ludicrous. One cynical observer remarked that it was better adapted for keeping citizens in than for keeping an army out. We must remember, however, that the Maya were not proficient in the art of war and permanent fortification of any sort previously was unheard of. Thus the wall seemed a formidable construction and they called Mayapan "the fortress."

The necessity to keep residence within the wall may account for the crowded, chaotic plan of the city. We do not know what other Maya cities were like, for their residential districts have never been mapped. Often it is assumed that Maya cities were primarily ceremonial centers in a preponderantly rural community and that their permanent population was negligible. Some people object to calling them cities at all. Certainly houses were formerly more widely spaced, but we are beginning to

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feel that the neglect by archaeologists of house-mound areas, and their preoccupation with temples and tombs, has left us missing very vital information about the character of the settlements. When a map of the entire city area of Mayapan was published by the Carnegie Institution, it came as a surprise to many archaeologists that within the wall, which encompasses a little over four square kilometers, there were over four thousand small structures. The principal civic center takes up hardly a hundredth part of the area. There are several smaller clusters of ceremonial or civic buildings, usually placed around one of the numerous cenotes or sink-holes that provided Mayapan with water. All the remaining available space is taken up solidly with household units built on every small rise in the ground and surrounded by low walls defining the properties. Here and there we see long level lanes outlined by walls but, for the most part, the irregular low areas between household units were the only streets. One wonders how anyone located an address or even found his way home after visiting in another part of the city!

The houses are modest in size and are usually grouped three or four together. Unlike the native houses of today, they are rectangular in plan. Most of them have two rooms, with masonry benches in the front room and sometimes a small shrine in back. Under the benches burials are often found and even small tombs, sometimes empty, as if built in anticipation of burials that did not take place. The shallow soil of Yucatan offers few places suitable for burial ground, and interment within their houses was customary for all but the nobility.

Everywhere on the surface of Mayapan we find metates and manos used for grinding corn. Some are of imported volcanic stone but the majority are of native limestone. Many, when broken, were re-used as wall stones. Flint tools are also abundant and thin obsidian flakes used as knives and razors occur in great numbers, though material for them must have been brought from distant regions. Gold and copper, jade and shell were luxury items. The list of imperishable articles is probably very much the same as for older sites, with the possible exception of metals, formerly very rare, and tiny flint and obsidian points which may indicate the introduction of the use of the arrow. We do not expect

to find great technological innovations at Mayapan, though no one can say in advance what a careful study of artifacts may reveal.

Pottery of course is given major attention because there is so much of it. But pottery of Mayapan, like everything else, has little artistic merit. The common ware is not very different from the wares made in some villages of Yucatan today. Decorated and fine pieces are rare. The number of figure censers greatly increases in the upper layers of deposits and they are very abundant on the surface, but elaborate as they are, they are stereotyped and crude in artistic conception.

In all visible aspects Maya culture has lost scope and vitality. It no longer asserted its view of the world in noble forms and with confident purpose. Possibly, however, this process of dissolution was germinating some seeds of new developments. Private religious rites may have been leading to more humane and universal concepts, the political experiment of joint government could have been followed by more successful attempts at unification, and the destruction of an obsolete hierarchy may have opened the way for a more flexible social organization. But whether by chance or as a result of prolonged conflicts, Maya history after the fall of



Entrance of a shaft running down through a temple substructure. It was filled with earth and with the bones of sacrificial victims.

Mayapan is a sad history of plague and famines which brought their culture to a nadir just when the Spaniards made ready for their conquest. Christian doctrine and colonial rule from then on blocked cultural advance in any new direction, and those Maya forms that survive today are incongruous fossils with little relation to modern life. No one now remembers Mayapan the fortress, and the descendants of its rulers are understandably puzzled that we should choose to dig in its meaningless piles of stone when far finer ruins are scattered all over the land.



A gate in the city wall of Mayapan. The man is leaning against a pillar that supported the roof.