

# A MAYA EXPERIENCE

By Terrance John Brown, AIA

## AN OVERVIEW

By the 4th century A.D. the Roman Empire had fallen, the deadly grip of the plague had spread across the Mediterranean from Africa. Cities were wiped out and agriculture was in shambles leaving dying populations all across the continent.

Across the ocean, a highly advanced civilization was beginning to flower. A group of people called the Maya began to carve into stone monuments their earliest known records of accomplishments. Knowledge of writing by a small portion of its population set the Maya apart from all other cultures of the Americas.

The temple complexes and gleaming white monumental plazas began with humble origins. George F. Andrews in *Maya Cities* says that "the conscious arrangement of these dwellings around an open space as an expression of social order is a fundamental first step, leading toward the more formalized configurations to come later." He goes on to say that "the paved plaza is neither forest nor farmstead - the very act of its removal from fortuitous nature makes it unique and self-conscious, a fitting response to the need for self-determination which characterizes civilized man throughout the world."

From these beginnings, tropical city complexes with spacious plazas, great reservoirs and towering temples covered with painted stucco were constructed. The jungle was an environment rich in agriculture which sustained large populations.

By the time the Spaniards first landed on the beaches of Central America, most of the Maya temples and stone cities were abandoned receding into the jungle. No one knows why the Maya left these civic centers. In an article written by Manuela Hoelterhoff, Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, curators of an exhibition entitled *The Blood of Kings*, the destabilizing effects of poor agricultural habits and constant warfare are linked to the collapse. Schele and Miller contend that the May did not venture forth in battle for reasons we consider normal - to vanquish other peoples and build a vast empire. The lords waged war on one another to take prisoners for religious ceremonies. I tend to agree that human sacrifice played a major role in the breakdown of the society.

Voluminous studies have been made of the architecture and people of the Roman, Greek and Egyptian civilization, but little has been written about the Maya. It wasn't until 1840 that attention was focused on crumbling ruins in Mexican and Guatemalan jungles by an American explorer, John Lloyd Stephens, and an English architect named Frederick Catherwood. Because of Stephens' books and Catherwood's sketches, the world caught its first glimpse of an American civilization that in numerous ways equaled that of Rome or Greece.

## The Journal December 5, 1980

I spent all day walking around the magnificent ruins of Copan, mesmerized by the delicate, yet majestic stelae and pyramids. Hundreds and hundreds of stone steps acted to enclose the plaza as we would now do with walls. It reminds me of a football field with stone bleachers. I wanted to see everything. I sketched and sketched and marveled at one section of stone stairs leading up the side of a hill. Each tread had hieroglyphics carved into it like a giant billboard climbing up a mountain.



### KAN-XUL

#### PROFILE OF A RULER SITTING ON SLAVE.

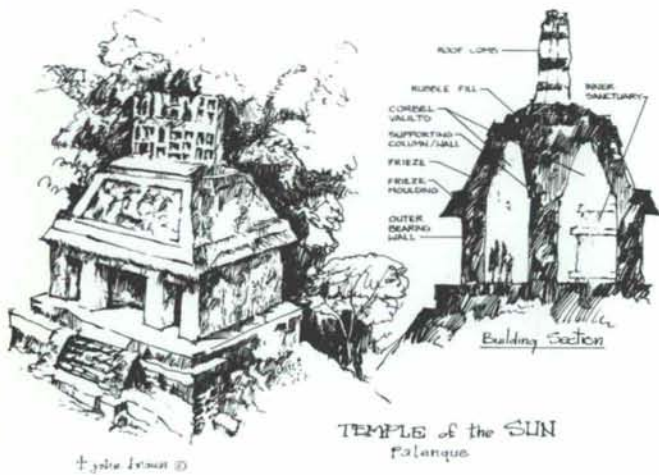
Kan-Xul, the ruler of Palenque, assumed power on June 1, 702. This bas-relief carving depicts Kan-Xul with jade jewelry, sitting on two bound captives.



### TURTLE ALTAR

Zoomorphic sculpture has been found at many ancient Maya sites and probably served as commemorative monuments similar to stelae.





TEMPLE of the SUN  
Palenque

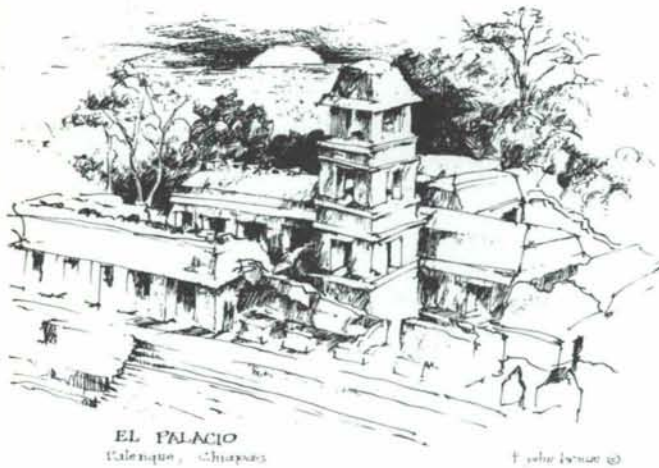
**TEMPLE OF THE SUN (Building Section)**

*This graceful building with a high roofcomb is heavily ornamented in stucco decoration.*



**STELAE A**

*Dated A.D. 731 depicts a high ranking aristocrat decorated with jade and brightly colored feathers of exotic birds. His face is one of the most sensuous carvings produced by Maya sculptors of the Classic Period.*



EL PALACIO  
Palenque, Chiapas

**EL PALACIO - PALENQUE**

*El Palacio covers an area about the size of a city block. Its four-story tower is unique in Maya architecture and offers a compelling vantage point for Palenque's rulers. The winter solstice was probably studied as the sun "set into the Temple of the Inscriptions".*

The 12 foot high stelae, depicting elegantly dressed rulers, are so detailed with carving they beautifully define sculpture in the round. The face on Stelae A is especially sensitively carved. I was amused by the Turtle Altar that was carved of stone with long claws and a toothy grin, appearing ready to spring. On the stairs of the temple is the carving of a snake crawling out of Ik God's mouth. These are intriguing examples of the strange and awesome style of Maya sculpture.

Copan is literally strewn with great art, overwhelming in its magnitude.

**January 4, 1981**

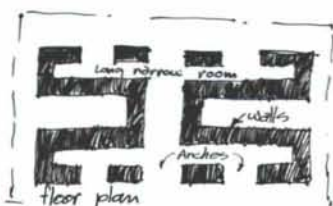
It was 1971 when I first saw the jungle-covered ruins of Palenque. I was on my way to explore South America then. Now I'm back for a closer look.

The Maya were known to study our planets over long periods of time and accurately measured the length of a year. Many of the observations could have been made from the tower in El Palacio.

Relief carvings in limestone slabs such as that of the ruler Pacal sitting on bound captives are exquisite in design and craftsmanship and were used as wall decorations on the exterior and interior of these temples.

In 1949, a Mexican archeologist named Alberto Ruz discovered a stairway under the floor of the Temple of Inscriptions. After excavation deep below the pyramid crown, he found a sealed crypt with a five ton stone lid intricately carved. In this stone coffin was a Maya chief heavily bejeweled with jade. This discovery was notable in that it was the first Maya temple to be used as a burial chamber much as the Egyptians had done.





**MAYA CORBELED ARCH**  
Copan, Honduras

t. john brown ©

### MAYA CORBELED ARCH

The improved technology of the corbeled arch set off a flurry of building activity and became the standard method of forming temple ceiling vaults.

The Maya were experts in picking majestic sites for their buildings. Palenque sits tucked against a tropical forest a thousand feet above the plain of Teuantepec and adapts gently to the contours of the mountainside. Most of the temples were built up against the mountains and therefore were not symmetrical pyramids. The architects found that by leaning stone walls in as they go up, forming corbels at the top, greatly increased the floor space in these buildings. The Temple of the Sun is a good example of this style.

### January 16

I'm camped beside the ruins of Chicanna where there are several small rundown buildings with the exception of the facade of one of them. The side of this building was covered with a giant monster head with its jaws wide open around the doorway. Another small building along a jungle path is high enough to allow a view over the tops of the trees from its upper doorway. The corners of this building have geometric faces of Chac (rain-God) with his big nose, stacked one upon each other.

### February 12

Today I explored Chitzen Itza. What a tremendous center of Late Classic life. Everything about it is impressive; the scale of the pyramids, ball court, reviewing stands, the sculpture and the large expanse of the court yards. The bas-relief wall panels depict eagles eating human hearts, and the whole base of a building is encrusted with carvings of thousands of human skulls. The stairway up the great pyramid called El Castillo is treacherous. Even with the thick chain handhold running the length of the entire steps, one could easily tumble all the way to the bottom. El Castillo has 91 steps up each of its four sides which number 364. Counting the top platform, the steps equal the total number of days in a year.



**CHENES-STYLE RAIN MONSTER MASK**  
Chicanna, Campeche

t. john brown ©

### CHENES STYLE RAIN MONSTER MASK

This elaborate entrance is typical of Chenes and Rio Bec architecture. The door resembles a dragon mouth with heavily stuccoed mask forms surrounding it.




**TEMPLE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS**  
Palenque

t. john brown ©

### TEMPLE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS - PALENQUE

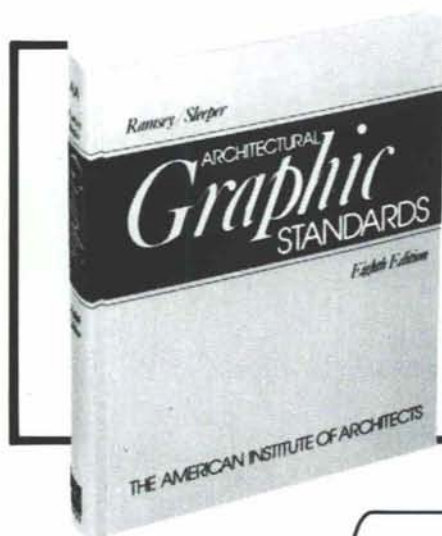
Eighty feet below the Temple of the Inscriptions is the tomb of Lord Shield Pacal, ruler of Palenque. The lid of the sarcophagus weighs five tons and is intricately carved in bas-relief depicting the dying Pacal in the jaws of an underworld monster.

Continued on page 23 



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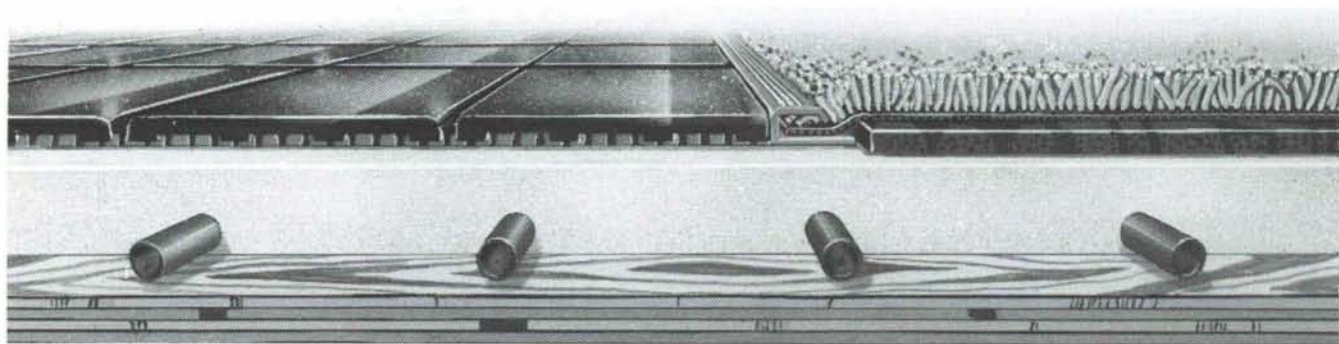
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