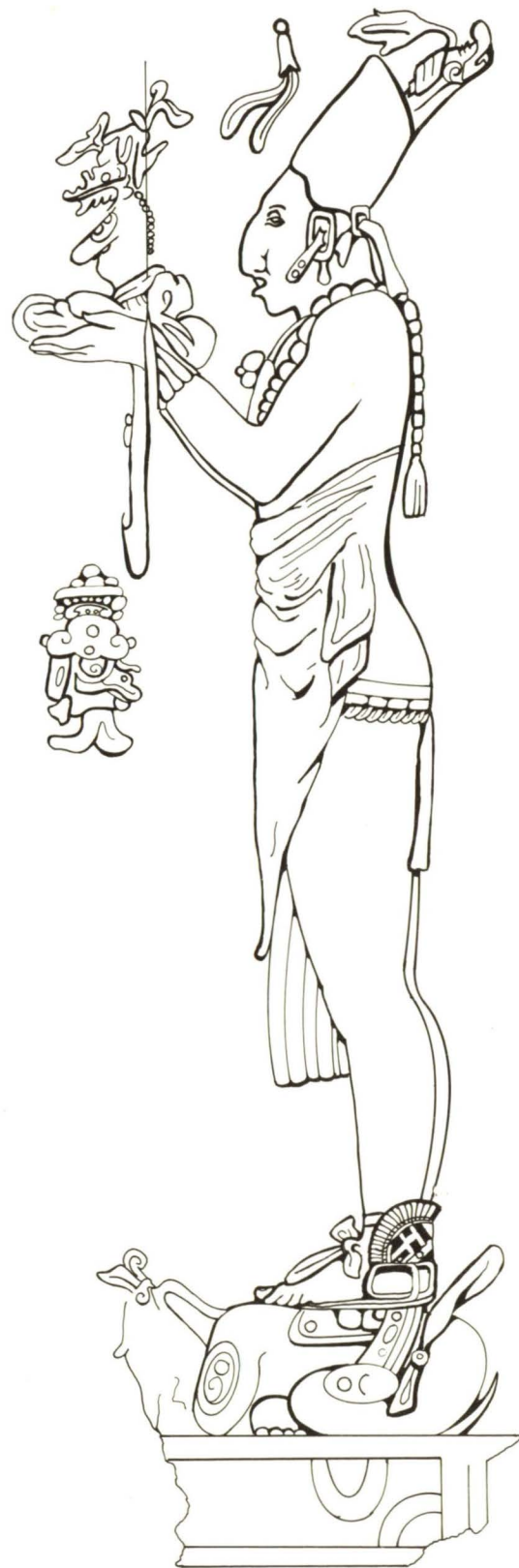
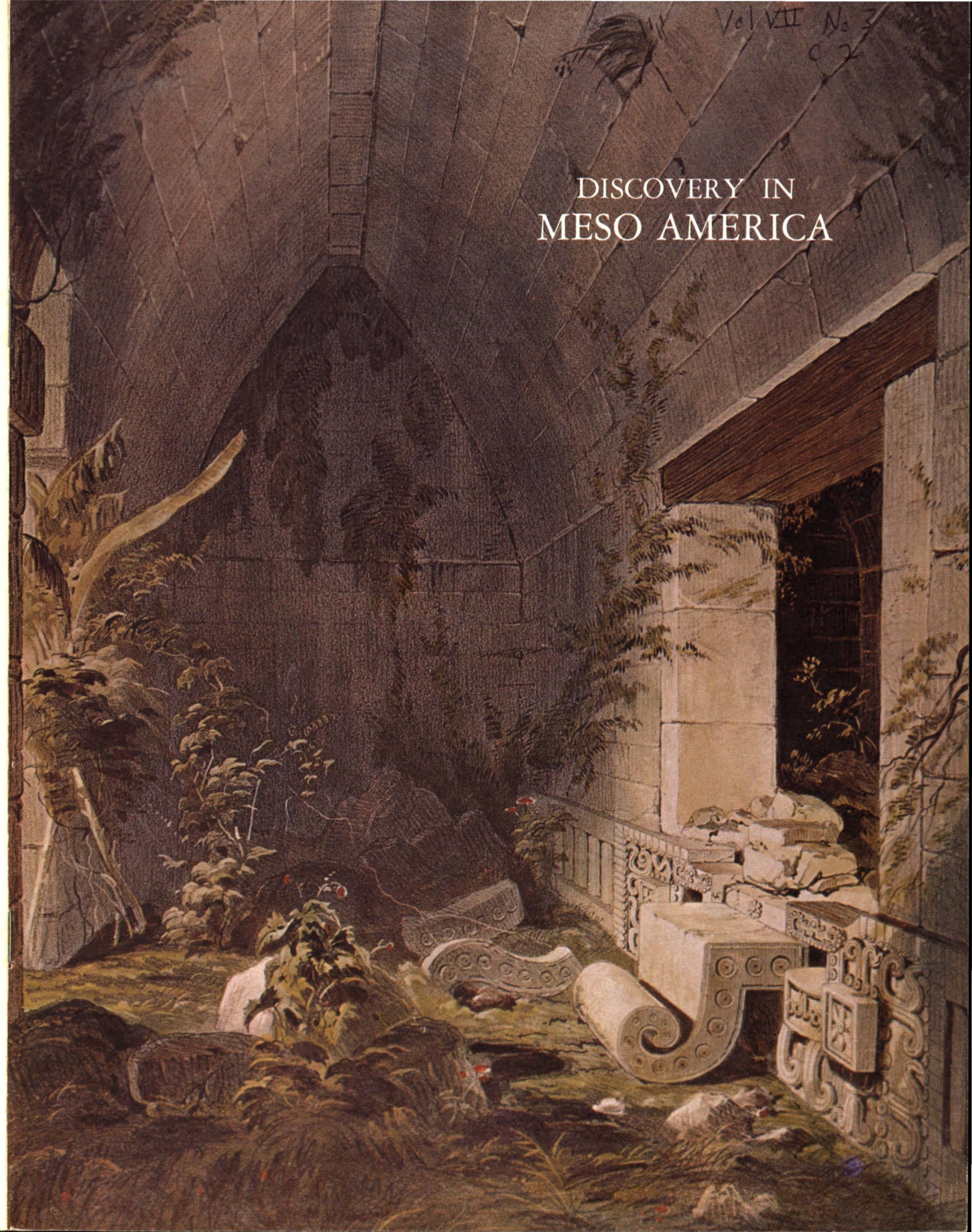




A PUBLICATION OF THE THOMAS GILCREASE INSTITUTE OF
AMERICAN HISTORY AND ART

Vol VII No 3
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DISCOVERY IN MESO AMERICA





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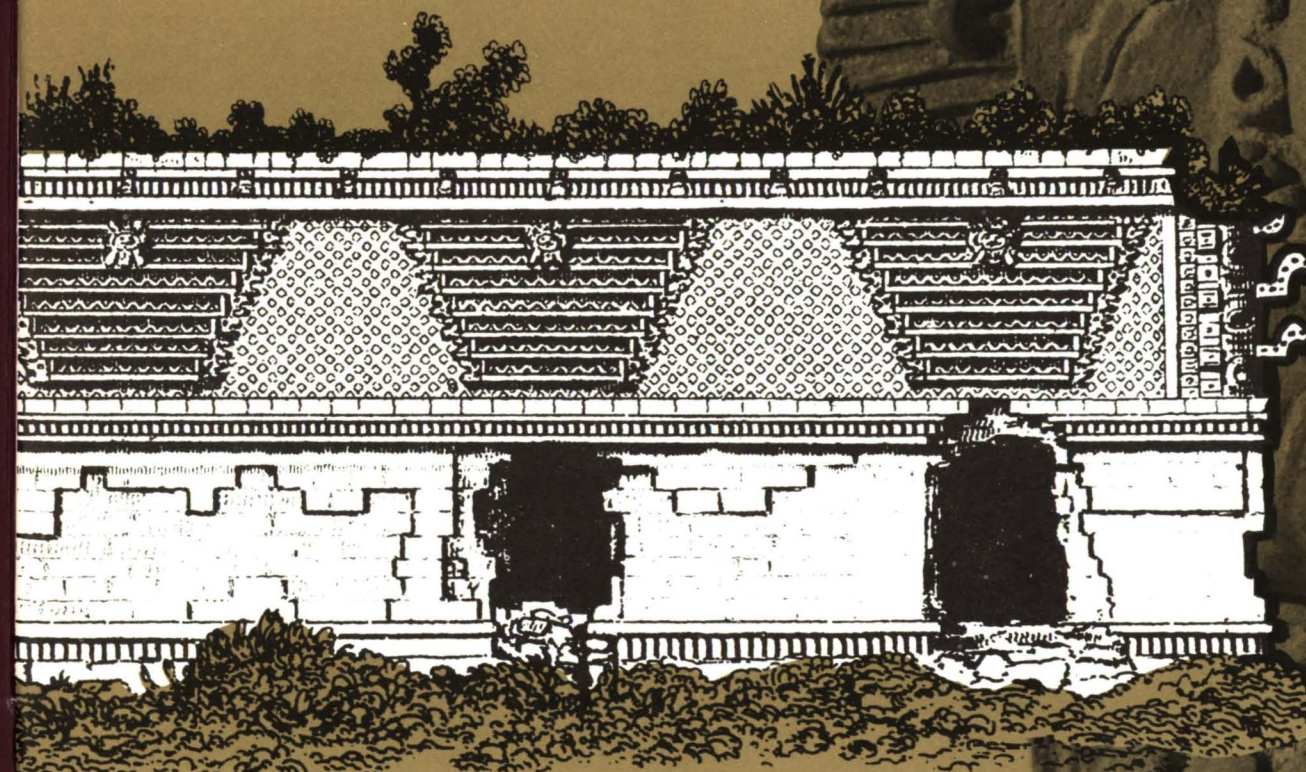
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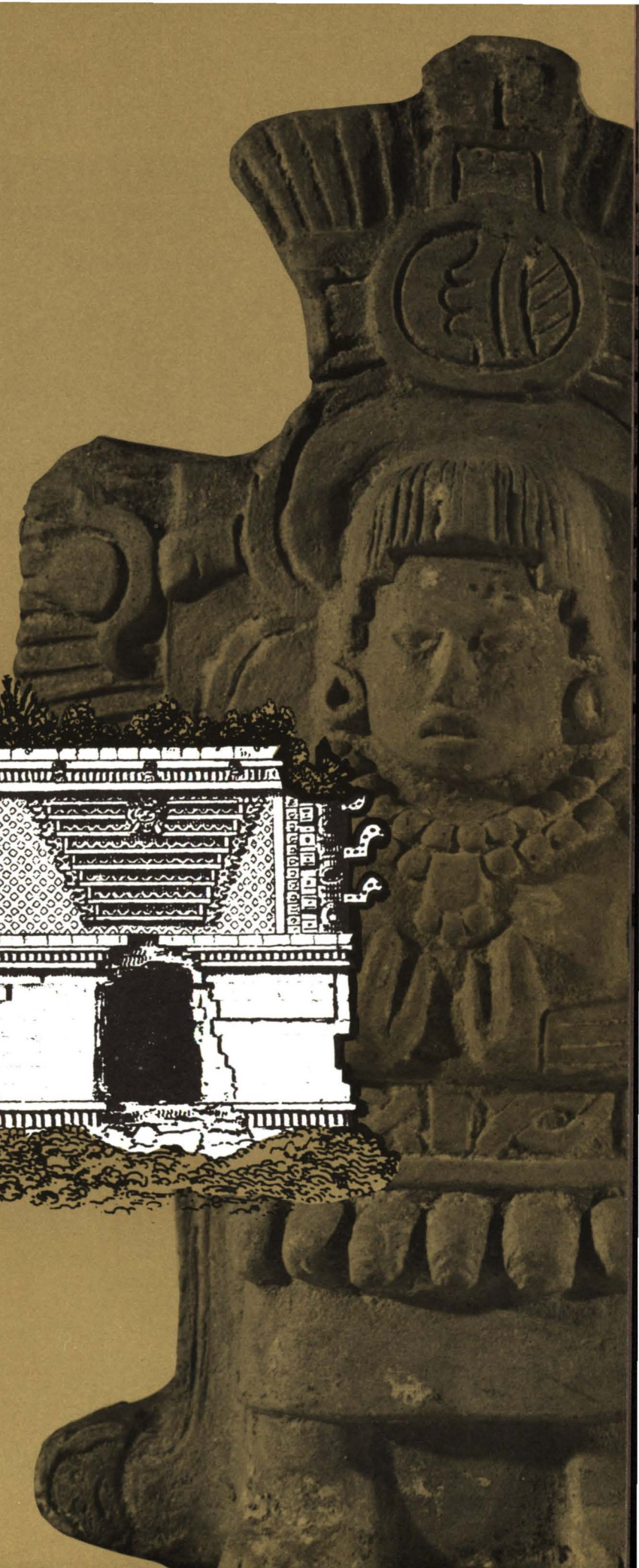
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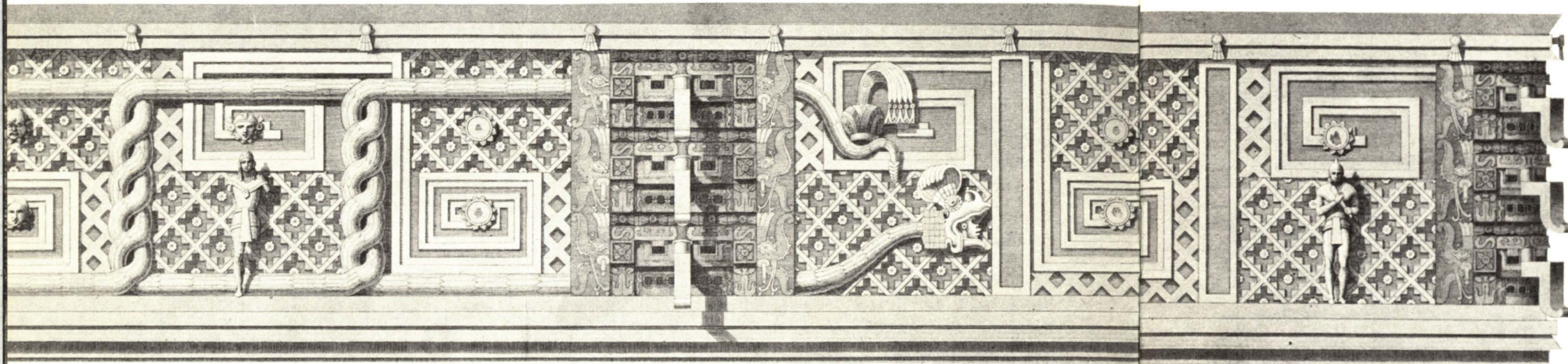
DISCOVERY IN MESO AMERICA

A PROBE INTO THE PAST FOR EVIDENCE PERTAINING TO THE PRE-COLUMBIAN HISTORY OF AMERICA featuring in particular the accounts of the discoveries of John Lloyd Stevens as contained in his *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*.



Written by David Curtis Hunt, the material for this article was compiled by Daniel M. McPike and prepared for publication in *The American Scene* by William Patterson.





The illustration at left is one of many contained in *Voyage Pittoresque et Archeologique dans la Province d'Yucatan*, a report published in Paris in 1838 by Jean Frederick Waldeck, one of the first Europeans to investigate unknown ruins in Central America.

The fascination that invariably attends any discussion relating to the discovery of ancient, lost cities or the probable fate of extinct civilizations is much the same as that which has prompted scientists, philosophers, writers and archaeologists the world over to pursue their respective investigations of the past. Particularly during the 19th century the study of the ancient world's civilizations inspired many scholars to inquire into the likely causes underlying the development and subsequent decline of now-forgotten empires; and perhaps no region encouraged more speculation or became the point of more controversy than that of Central America.

Early pioneers in the field of pre-Columbian research, who, in the 1830's and 40's, first recovered certain of the Mayan shrine-cities from the rain forests of Yucatan, surprised the academic world with their theories and discoveries and pitched headlong the highest levels of 19th century scholarship into an arena of considerable debate. For, in general, the past century was not yet familiar with the present attitude of modern scientific speculation. Methods of archaeological recovery were, for the most part, uncertain, and most serious students of antiquity held to the supposition that at no time in his history had the Indian in America advanced beyond a cultural level amounting to savagery. Few historians of the period paid any attention whatever to existing Spanish accounts surviving from the time of the

Conquest, which might have been referred to for evidence to the contrary; and for many years the extensive earth mounds discovered in the southeastern United States, as well as the mighty step-pyramids of Mexico and Guatemala, were regarded to be the result of undetermined "foreign" influences — perhaps the work of some ancient people who, somehow, had migrated from out of Egypt or Mesopotamia — or at least to be certain evidence that the Indians, themselves, must surely have had contact at some time in their forgotten past with such hypothetical immigrants.

Interest in the origin of the American Indian, himself, brought other issues to bear upon the argument. Certain scripturally-inspired scholars sought to identify the ancestors of the various tribes of Indians with the legendary "Lost Tribes" of Israel, while other theorists, espousing the generally-misunderstood hypothesis of Charles Darwin, proclaimed the existence of Man in the Western Hemisphere as an indication of the evolution of the native American from unknown species of extinct anthropoids. Others saw the Indians as descendants of the original race that occupied the world in the days of Noah, who had managed in some fashion to escape the universal flood that swept away most of their kind — and latter-day disciples of Plato put forth his "Lost Continent of Atlantis" as the true birthplace of America's geniuses of architecture.

A general view of the lost Mayan city of Uxmal is reproduced below. This ancient site was first explored in the late 1830's, and has since been recovered from the jungles which enveloped it.



Archaeological discoveries within the last fifty years have, of course, rendered most of these arguments obsolete. Yet, even today, much remains to be determined with regards to the origins and development of the Meso American civilizations, and the modern researcher must necessarily piece together the fragmentary record of Mankind's earlier occupation of this hemisphere from such fragile and scattered evidences as he is fortunate enough to uncover. The term *Meso America*, itself, being neither a strictly geographic term nor yet an epochal one, is really a label devised by investigators in certain technical fields of historical research to denote, specifically, a *culture-area* — in this instance a very large area formerly occupied by several different groups of Indian people who, though not necessarily sharing the same language or immediate cultural background, nevertheless, in pre-discovery times, had certain other things in common: such as a basic, agricultural economy derived from the cultivation of corn as a staple crop, a similar socio-religious heritage, a similar architectural style or tradition, and a similar or related system of writing and method of recording the passage of time.

That the ancestors of the American Indian came from out of the vastness of Asia seems almost certain today. It is almost as certain, as well, that at the time these first immigrants arrived on this side of the world, they had not progressed beyond the Stone Age in their cultural development; for they seem to have brought with them no surviving, material evidences of any known, previously-advanced cultures, apparently knew nothing of agriculture or the practical use of the wheel, had no beasts of burden other than, possibly, the dog, kept no flocks or herds of domesticated animals, and, in short, were familiar with none of the particular things considered to mark a progressive cultural development in Europe or Asia which occurred long after the period generally referred to as Neolithic. Probably these first "Americans" were simple hunters whose coming at a very early period was doubtless succeeded by other migrations of hunters who eventually wandered farther and farther south until perhaps about the beginning of the year 3000 B.C., as we reckon time today, when a more stable way of life seems to have established itself in the more favorable climate of Central America.



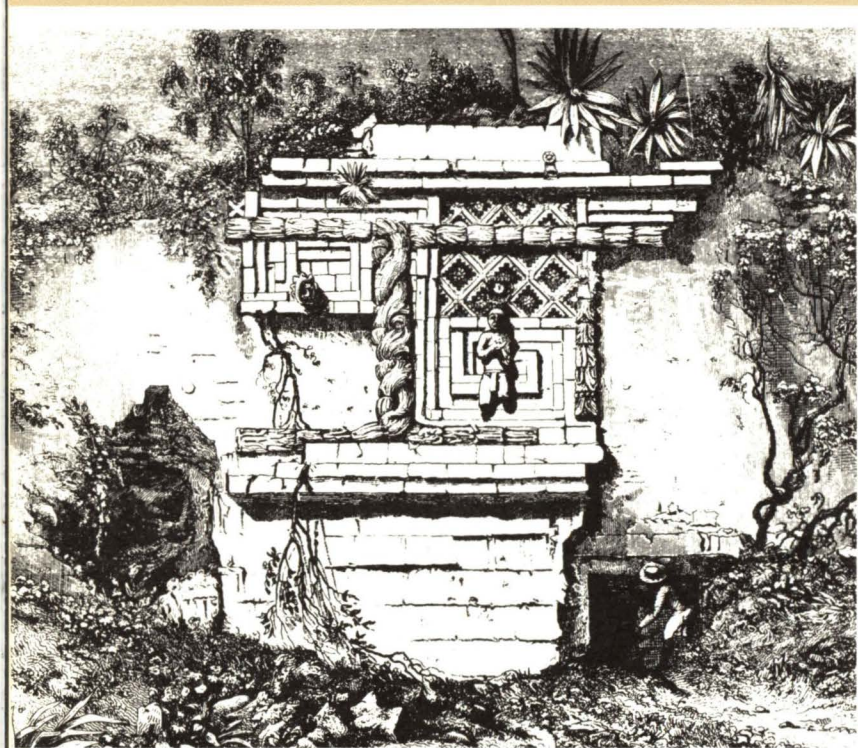
A broken idol found among the ruins of the Indian city of Copan indicates the artistic development of a Central American civilization which flourished over a thousand years ago.

The skill attained in sculpture by the Meso-Americans is evident in the bold reliefs carved upon the sides of this "idol," or stelae. The illustration at left is to be found in Frederick Catherwood's folio depicting **Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America**, published in 1844.



It is believed that the eventual domestication of the corn plant, more properly termed *maize*, together with the raising of beans and squash, provided those wandering tribes who early arrived in the Valley of Mexico with a more dependable food source, and so lessened the need to move continually about in pursuit of game. As a result, life became less migratory and communities grew up around the more sedentary, agricultural activities of the following generations of nomads-turned-farmers. Over the unrecorded centuries this society doubtless developed under the supervision, it is presumed, of a group of nobles or priests, whose accumulated store of astronomical knowledge and subsequent development of a mathematical system and science of engineering influenced the building of the temple-cities and pyramids that yet stand in Guatemala, Honduras and Yucatan, mutely testifying to a lively culture that seems to have reached a peak in its development about a thousand years ago.

No one today knows for certain why this early and unquestionably proud civilization declined, leaving us only tree-shattered terraces and shrub-topped tombs, disintegrating wall paintings and a few more durable designs in gold and silver jewelry and earthenware pottery to give us a notion of its former splendor. Perhaps the vast expenditure of human labor required to support such a monolithic system became too much of a burden on the Meso Americans, as some historians speculate; or it may be that the influence of the priestly astronomers waned and the corresponding, ambitious building programs were subsequently forgotten. Certainly it seems that most of the strides taken in science and the arts by these distant people were intended for the development of things other than practical technology or commerce, and that the entire economy was apparently supported by a surprisingly rude agricultural system, by men who knew nothing of hoes or plows, or any source of power other than man-power — that, in any case, at the time of the Spaniards' entry into the country, most of these ancient sites were already abandoned.



Knowledge of mathematics and engineering enabled the architects of the "classic" Mayan culture to pursue ambitious building programs in the highlands of Yucatan. Among the ruins of the temple-city of Uxmal, pictured here by Frederick Catherwood, the building called **La Casa de las Monjas**, or The House of the Nuns, is one of the best-preserved edifices. The illustration on the opposite page shows a closer view of a portion of this building.

One of Cortez' captains, a soldier named Bernal Diaz del Castillo, has left to posterity his account of the Spaniards' first meeting with the Indians of Yucatan. Landing on the coast of that peninsula in 1519 with an exploring party from Cuba, he says that the natives there "led us to some large houses very well built of masonry, which were the temples of their idols and on the walls were figured the bodies of many great serpents and snakes and other pictures of evil-looking idols. These walls surround a sort of Altar covered with clotted blood. On the other side of the idols were symbols like crosses, all colored, at which we stood wondering, as they were things never seen or heard of before."

There is little doubt at the present time that this society first encountered by the Spaniards was a later one than that of the "Classic" Mayan civilization previously described; and it seems, as well, that the recently-documented Toltec culture and the so-called "New-Empire" of the Itza-Mayas were also relatively late achievements, and that in the Valley of Mexico the Aztecs were but the last of a long line of marauding people to invade an already ancient culture-area, establishing themselves as its tribute-demanding task masters only shortly before the advent of the Spaniards brought about their dramatic downfall.

If the Conquistadores were unaware of the existence of the magnificent ruins in the interior of the country, it may be accounted as no loss to them; for they were animated by other interests, and such deserted sites could have had little place in their fevered vision of fame and fortune. Gold-seekers and empire-builders, they speedily claimed both the land and its inhabitants, and the harsh laws of the Council of the Indies, advancing with a frightful zeal a nationalistically inspired colonial policy, set out to effectually suppress all manifestations of the former native culture.

The Aztecs, together with their subject peoples, all became slaves or servants of Spain, or fled to the sanctuary of the forests where, in time, they reverted to an earlier, primitive existence. And in the years that followed, all recollection of a once-proud heritage faded from among the Indians of Middle America, all memory of the ancient knowledge of mathematics, engineering, astronomy and the arts. And the rain-sprung jungles quickly invaded already-abandoned avenues, palaces, temples and terraces, covering them completely from the questioning view of succeeding generations.



"America was not peopled by any nation of the ancient continent which had made considerable progress in civilization," stated Scotland's eminent scholar and writer, Dr. William Robertson, in his *History of America*, published towards the close of the 18th century. Voicing the consensus of learned men of his day, Robertson confidently asserted that "the inhabitants of the New World were in a state of society so extremely rude as to be unacquainted with those arts which are the first essays of human ingenuity in its advance toward improvement" — going so far as to discount equally the reports of Cortez and his companions, and all others whose writings agree in their references to an Indian civilization existing at the time of the fall of Mexico, by saying that "upon the authority of persons long resident in New Spain, who profess to have visited every part of it . . . there is not, in all the extent of that vast empire, a single monument or vestige of any building more ancient than the Conquest . . ."

That Dr. Robertson was mistaken is a matter of no importance today; and if, in the light of present knowledge, he is to be discredited, perhaps the criticism should be directed towards his confidence rather than his ignorance. For at the time he wrote, the ancient cities of Meso America had lain, hidden and undreamed-of, for some two hundred years or more, and in academic circles, at least, the prehistory of Mexico remained unaccounted for.

But in the late 1820's, an interest in certain "antiquities" in that area began to assert itself, and re-examinations of existing Spanish chronicles gained the attention of certain reputable historians. William Prescott, who first published his *History of the Conquest of Mexico* in 1843, drew heavily from such reports, and England's self-appointed antiquarian, Lord Kingsborough, between 1831 and 1837 published his monumental series of illustrated folios containing detailed studies of American architectural and sculptural remains and a considerable number of Mayan and Aztec hieroglyphic inscriptions. In his efforts to ascertain the evidences and document the probable origins of vanished cultures in Central America, Kingsborough searched out every scrap of information, every relic, every reference pertaining to a previous history among the Indians of New Spain that he could find scattered throughout museums and libraries in Europe. His publishing ventures were followed shortly by those of Count Jean Frederick Waldeck, a roving

German aristocrat who visited Mexico about that same time and later produced a volume of elaborate engravings depicting such mysterious or unexplained monuments as he happened across in his travels.

The memoirs of Bernal Diaz del Castillo, one of the more literate soldiers who accompanied Cortez on his exploits and attended the capture of Tenochtitlan — which he describes as "a very great city built in the water like Venice, governed by a great prince who was King over many provinces and ruled over all the lands of New Spain, a territory which is more than twice as large as Castille" — and other, later writings such as those of Antonio del Rio, a Spanish officer who makes mention late in the 1700's of the existence of extensive ruins in Honduras in one of his official reports, had a profound effect upon the imaginations of less-academic historians. And perhaps no one man was more interested in such references than a successful American lawyer and student of history named John Lloyd Stevens, recently appointed ambassador to Central America.

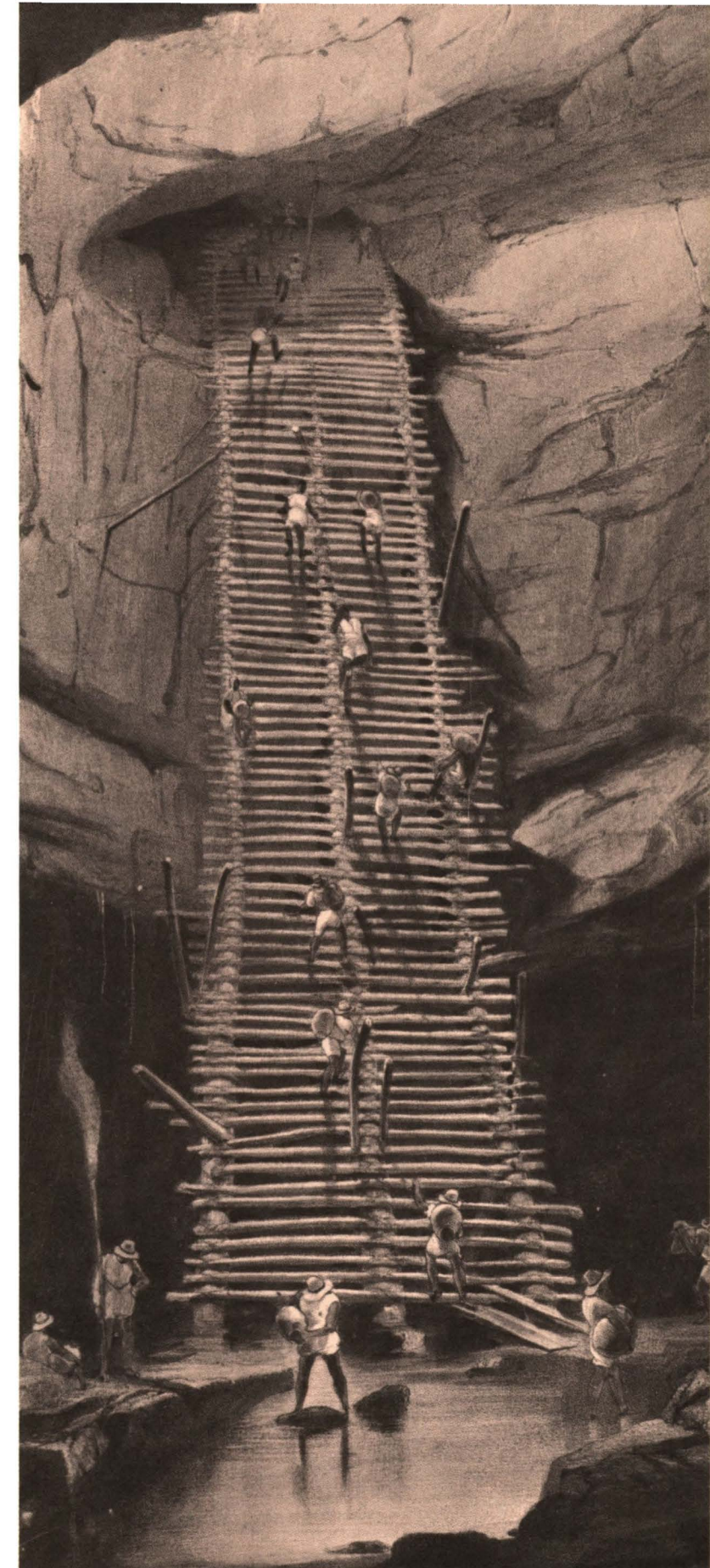
Stevens, who had previously toured many of the ancient sites in Palestine and Egypt, had already begun to search all available accounts for any evidence that so much as hinted at architectural remains in Central America, and was particularly excited by the works of Kingsborough and Waldeck. Seeking out his artist-friend, Frederick Catherwood, who himself had no small reputation in the field of "classical" sculpture and architecture, the energetic ambassador proposed that they both go to Central America to explore the unmapped regions of Guatemala and Honduras in search of possible cities rumored to lie hidden there.

An original two-volume set of Stevens' lengthy *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, first published by Harper and Brothers in 1843, is preserved in the archives of the Thomas Gilcrease Institute, the source of much of the information contained in this brief article. Illustrated with 120 of Catherwood's engravings, this narrative offers the reader a fascinating discourse relating not only to the sensational discoveries of the two explorers, but also provides an extremely interesting, sometimes amusing, account of the miseries and misadventures they unavoidably encountered as they struggled with both the climate and the politics of Central America in their determined efforts to uncover the remains of the lost Mayan cities of Copan and Palenque.

Arriving late in the year of 1839 in British Honduras, Stevens describes the difficult and, at times, hazardous journey over the mountains and the tedious trek into the steaming forests of Guatemala, pausing in his account to review what drove him to undertake such a near-hopeless mission. In a portion of his account devoted to a discussion of the then-current controversy over the origins of the Indians in America, he is amazed at "the ignorance, carelessness and indifference with which the inhabitants of Spanish America view this subject," expostulating further:

"In our own country, wild and wandering ideas in regard to its first peopling have been inspired by the opening of forests, the discovery of tumuli, or mounds, and fortifications extending in ranges from the lakes through the valleys of the Ohio and Mississippi, the finding of mummies in a cave in Kentucky, the discovery on the rock at Dighton of an inscription supposed to be in Phoenician characters, and the unearthing of ruins of walls and a great city in Arkansas and Wisconsin Territory. From such evidence there arose a strong belief that powerful and populous nations had once occupied the country and had passed away, leaving us little knowledge of their histories.

"In Mexico the evidence assumes a still more definite form. The first new light was thrown upon this subject in respect to Mexico by the great Humboldt, who visited that country at a time when, by the jealous policy of the government, it was almost as much closed against strangers as China is now. No man could have better deserved such fortune. Although at that time the monuments of the country were not a leading object of research, Humboldt collected from various sources information and drawings, particularly of Mitla, or the Vale of the Dead; of Xochicalco, the Hill of Flowers, a mountain hewed down and terraced; and of the great pyramid or Temple of Cholula which he, himself, visited. His own eloquent account is within the reach of the reader. Unfortunately, of the great cities beyond the Vale of Mexico—cities buried in forests, ruined, desolate, and without a name—Humboldt never heard; or, if he did, he never visited them. It was only lately that accounts of their existence reached Europe and our own country, accounts which, however vague and unsatisfactory, had roused both our curiosity and our skepticism — Mr. Catherwood and I arrived at Copan with the hope rather than the expectation of finding wonders."

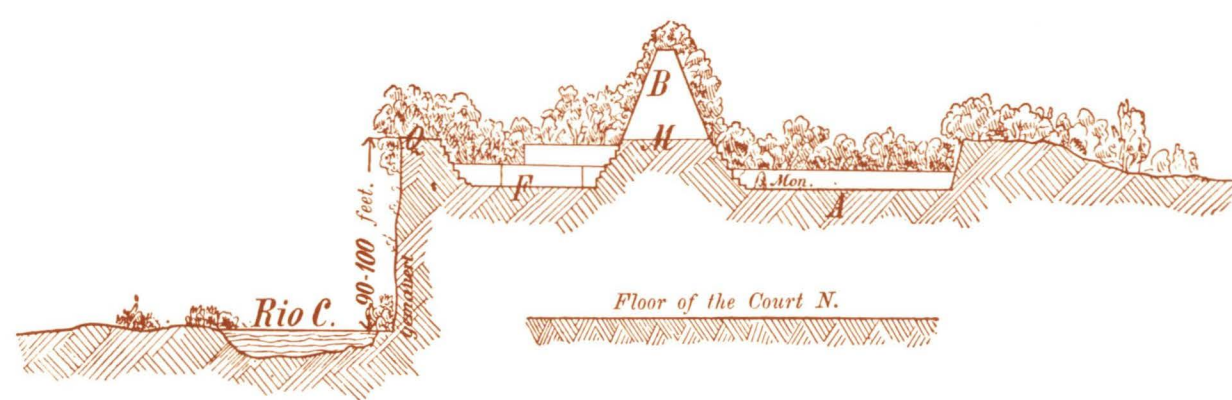


Ladder leading down into an ancient Mayan well at Bolonchen, as shown in Catherwood's *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America*.



This interior view of the gateway at Labna is described by Catherwood in the text accompanying his folio of engravings as "one of the most pleasing architectural designs to be met with among the ruined edifices in Yucatan."

The design at the top right hand corner of this page is taken from a stone floor marker found in a Mayan temple, now included in the Gilcrease Institute's collection of Meso-American artifacts.



The 19th century village of Comatan was located very near a much more ancient ruin, rumors of which had sent the two intrepid adventurers on their uncertain quest. And following their weary arrival at this isolated town and a definitely hostile reception at the hands of its provincial inhabitants — which did not exclude a night spent in the local jail, locked up on suspicion of representing either revolutionist or governmental interests — Stevens and Catherwood at last managed to persuade the dingy mayor of the wretched place to allow them to search out and explore the ancient city said to stand somewhere in the area. The mayor, perhaps as much to get rid of the strangers as to oblige them, agreed to their request, providing them additionally with two reluctant native guides to lead them to their destination; and, hacking a trail through the vigorous tropical undergrowth, they came at last to a broad, rapidly flowing stream, across which, the guides pointed out to them, stood the formidable bulk of long, low vegetation-infested wall of stone, reaching down to the water's edge.

The excitement felt by the explorers at this point might be well imagined, and the narrative, taken from Steven's published account, continues:

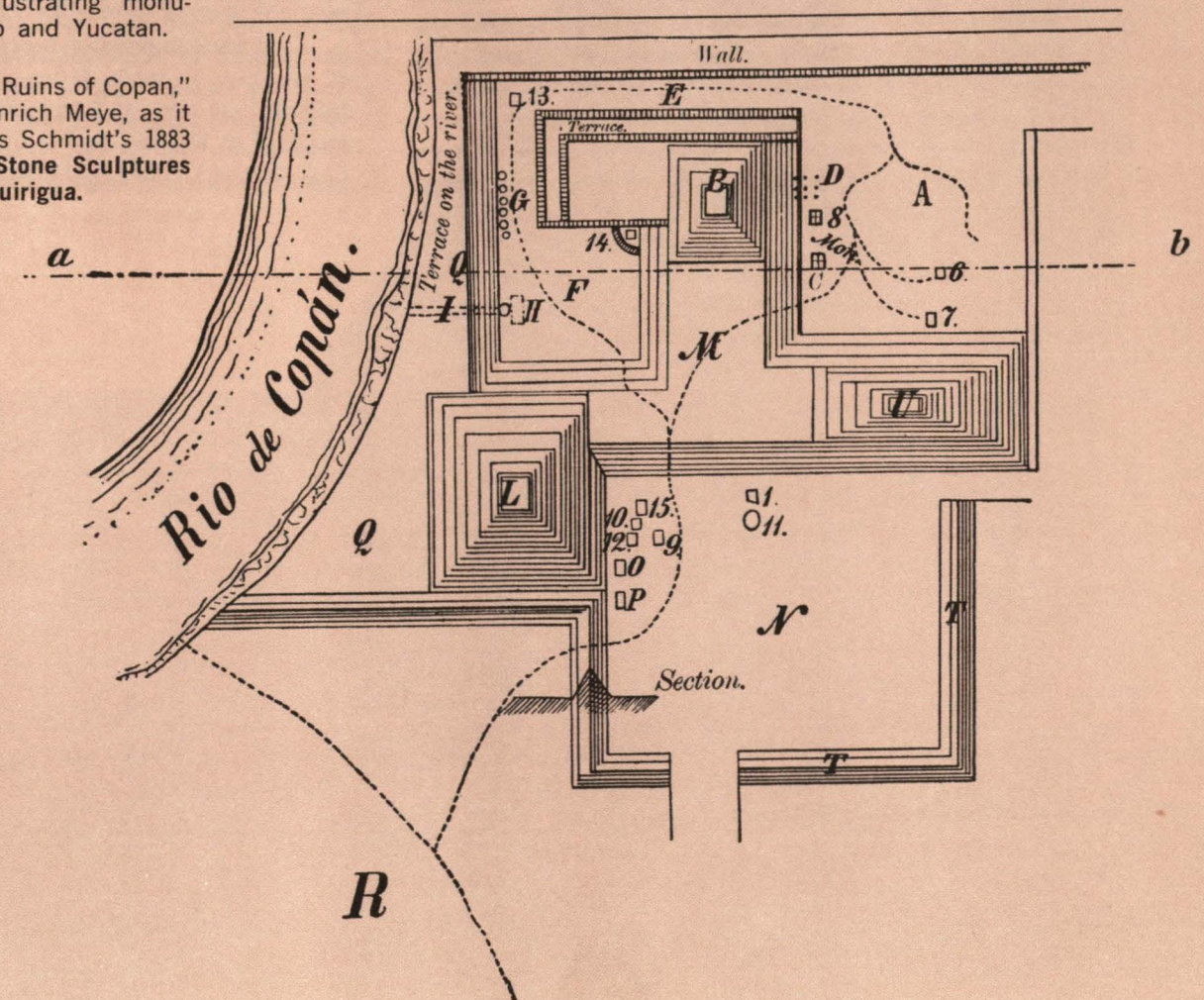
"As we gazed on the wall of the city on the opposite side of the river, the account of the city's conquest which the Spanish historians have given us, seemed to us most meagre and unsatisfactory. It did not appear to us that the massive stone structures before us could have belonged to a city the entrenchment of which could have been broken down by the charge of a single horseman. Since at this place the river was not fordable, we returned to our mules, mounted, and rode to another part of the bank, a short distance above. Here the stream was wide, and in some places deep, rapid, and with a broken and stony bottom. Forging it, we rode along the bank by a footpath encumbered with undergrowth, which Jose opened by cutting away the branches. At the foot of the wall which we had seen from the opposite bank we again dismounted and tied our mules.

"The wall was of cut stone, well laid, and in a good state of preservation. We ascended by large stone steps, only some of which were well preserved, and reached a terrace, the form of which it was impossible to make out because of the density of the forest in which it was enveloped. Following a path which our guide cleared for us with his machete, we passed a large fragment of stone elaborately sculptured and half buried in the earth, and came to the angle of a structure with steps on the sides, which in so far as the trees allowed us to make them out, resembled the sides of a pyramid in form and appearance. Diverging from the base of the structure, and working our way through the thick woods, we came upon a square stone column, about fourteen feet high and three feet on each side, sculptured on all four of the sides from the base to the top, in very bold relief. On the front side was carved the figure of a man (evidently a portrait) curiously and richly dressed, whose face was solemn, stern and well fitted to excite terror. The design on the opposite side was unlike anything we had ever seen before; the remaining two sides were covered with hieroglyphics. About three feet in front of the column was a large block of stone, also sculptured with figures and emblematical devices. From our guide we learned that the square column was an 'idol' and the block of stone an 'altar' (although modern archaeological terms refer to such 'idols' as 'stelae'). The sight of this unexpected monument put at rest once and forever all uncertainty in our minds as to the character of the American antiquities, and gave us the assurance that the objects we were in search of were not only interesting as the remains of an unknown people, but were works of art as well, proving, like newly discovered historical records, that the people who once occupied the American continents were not savages. With an interest perhaps stronger than we had ever felt in wandering among the ruins of Egypt, we followed our guide, who, sometimes missing his way, with a constant and vigorous use of his machete, conducted us through the thick forest,

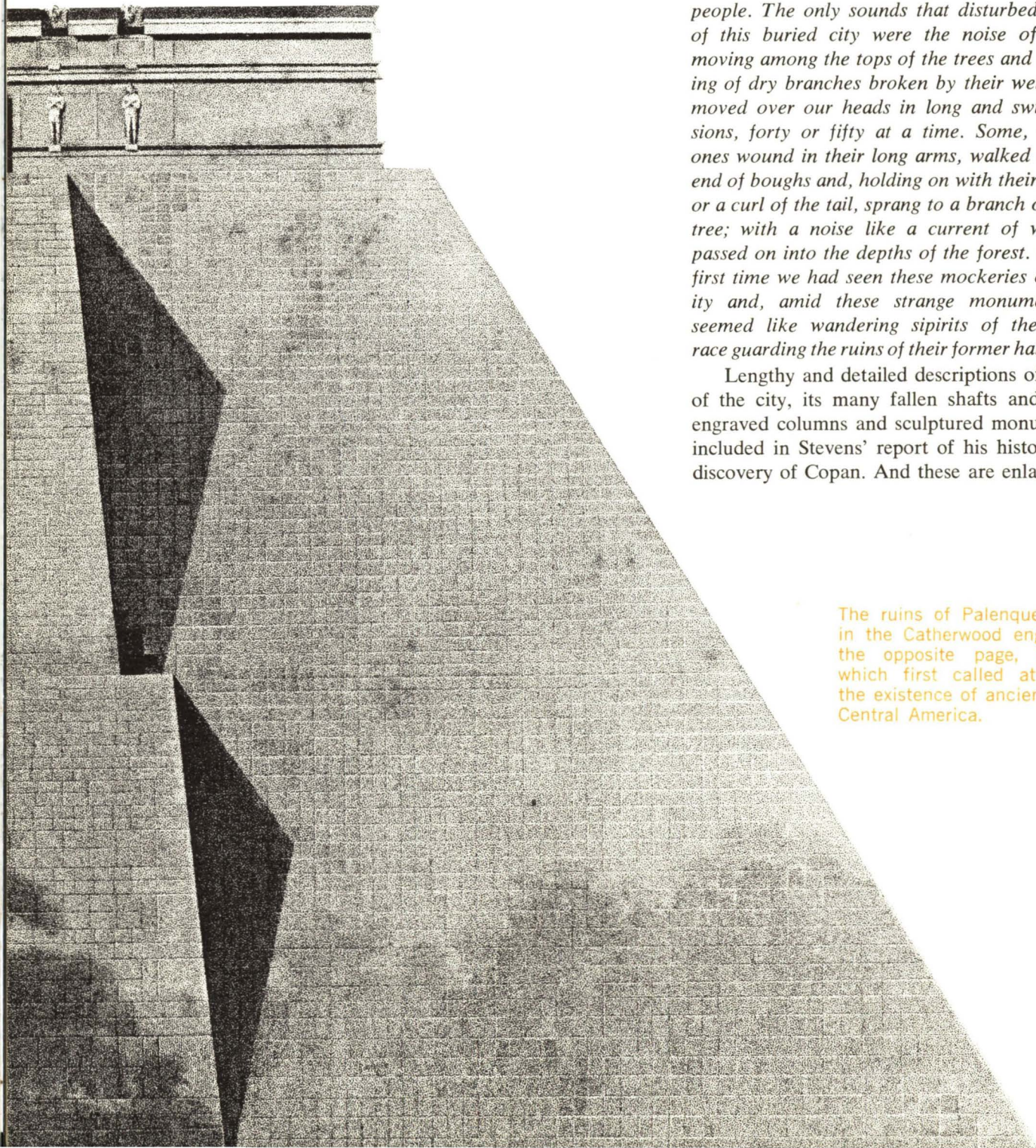


John Lloyd Steven's descriptions of the ruins of Copan are supplemented by the drawings of Catherwood, as shown above in an engraving taken from the artist's folio illustrating monuments in Mexico and Yucatan.

The "Plan of the Ruins of Copan," below, is by Heinrich Meye, as it appears in Julius Schmidt's 1883 edition of *The Stone Sculptures of Copan and Quirigua*.



This elevation of a Meso-American temple, an illustration found in Waldeck's folio, is of interest to those who would compare it with similar structures built by the ancient Egyptians.



among half-buried fragments, to fourteen more monuments of the same character and appearance, some with more elegant designs and some in workmanship equal to the finest monuments of the Egyptians. One, we found, had been displaced from its pedestal by enormous roots; another, locked in the close embrace of branches of trees, was almost lifted out of the earth; and still another had been hurled to the ground and bound down by huge vines and creepers. One with its altar before it stood in a grove of trees which grew around it, seemingly to shade and shroud it as a sacred thing; in the solemn stillness of the woods, it seemed a divinity, mourning over a fallen people. The only sounds that disturbed the quiet of this buried city were the noise of monkeys moving among the tops of the trees and the cracking of dry branches broken by their weight. They moved over our heads in long and swift processions, forty or fifty at a time. Some, with little ones wound in their long arms, walked out to the end of boughs and, holding on with their hind feet, or a curl of the tail, sprang to a branch of the next tree; with a noise like a current of wind, they passed on into the depths of the forest. It was the first time we had seen these mockeries of humanity and, amid these strange monuments, they seemed like wandering spirits of the departed race guarding the ruins of their former habitations."

Lengthy and detailed descriptions of the ruins of the city, its many fallen shafts and markers, engraved columns and sculptured monuments are included in Stevens' report of his history-making discovery of Copan. And these are enlarged upon

The ruins of Palenque, pictured in the Catherwood engraving on the opposite page, are those which first called attention to the existence of ancient cities in Central America.

and clearly supported by the faithful drawings of Catherwood, who spent long and tedious hours laboring to capture the truthful appearance, the exact dimensions and accurate proportions of these remarkable works of art and architecture. Beset with many difficulties, not the least of which was the almost impossible task of penetrating the dense jungle growth to find and laboriously, patiently recover broken fragments from the tangle of tropical thicket, Stevens makes only brief mention of the interruptions caused by the frequent, torrential downpourings of rain common to that region, of the torments of scorpions, ticks, fleas and mosquitoes, and of the difficult relationship that persisted between them and the natives, whom they nevertheless hired and successfully managed to direct.

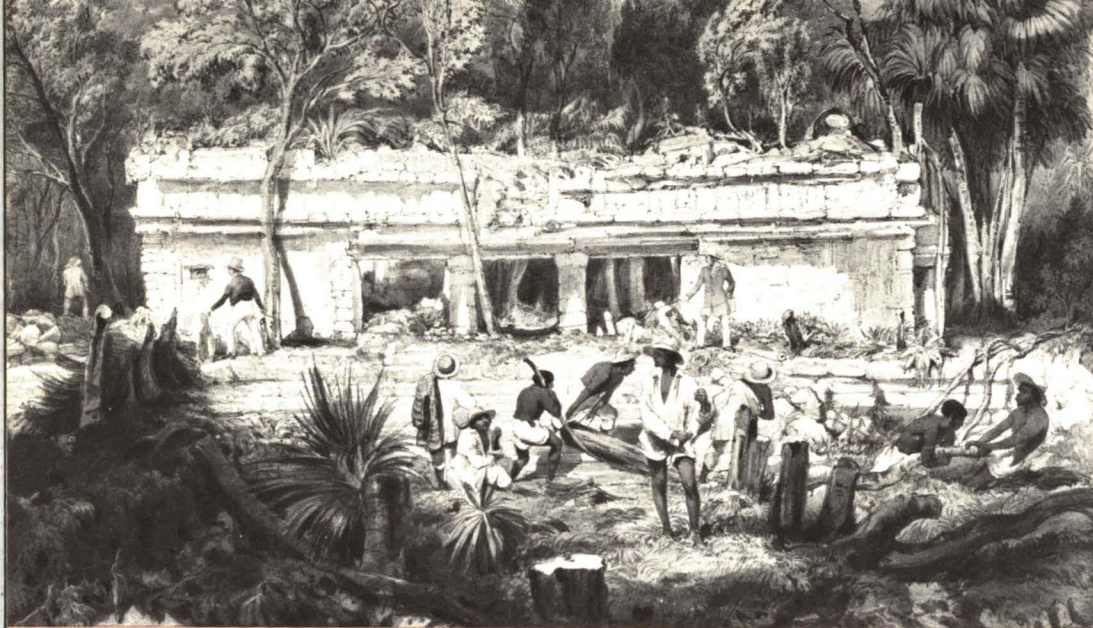
In speculating upon the age, the history or probable fate of the city, however, Stevens could only depend upon his imagination to supply him with possible answers; for the more revealing science of archaeological excavation as a means of uncovering evidence of the past had yet to be developed, and even later to be applied to any of the ruins in Central America. But the mystery perplexes him, nonetheless, as he writes:

"We sat down on the very edge of the wall and strove in vain to penetrate the mystery by which we were surrounded. Who were the people that built this city? In the ruined cities of Egypt, even the long-lost Petra, the stranger knows the story of the people whose vestiges he finds around him. America, say historians, was peopled by savages; but savages never reared these structures savages

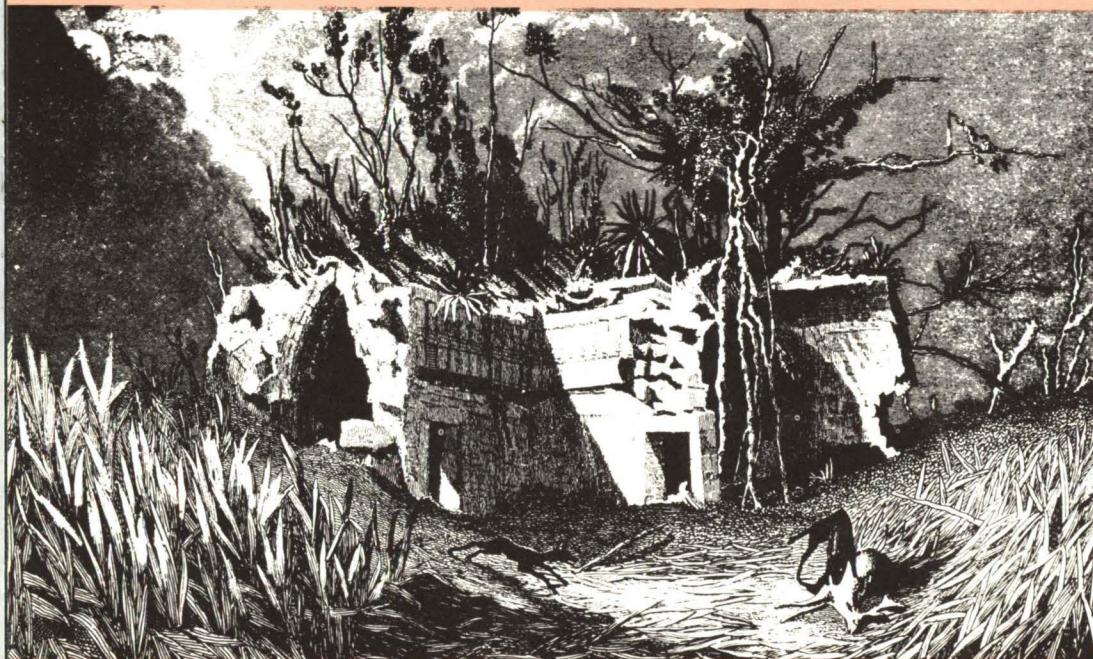
never carved these stones. When we asked the Indians who had made them, their dull answer was 'Quien sabe?' (Who knows?). There were no associations connected with this place, none of those stirring recollections which hallow Rome, Athens, and 'The World's great mistress on the Egyptian plains'. But architecture, sculpture and painting, all the arts which embellish life, had flourished in this overgrown forest; orators, warriors, and statesmen, beauty, ambition and glory had lived and passed away, and none knew that such things had been, or could tell of their past existence. Books, the records of knowledge, are silent on this theme. . . .

"In regards to the age of this desolate city I shall not at present offer any conjecture. Some idea might perhaps be formed from the accumulations of earth and gigantic trees growing on the top of the ruined structures, but it would be uncertain and unsatisfactory. Nor shall I at this moment offer any conjecture in regard to the people who built it; or to the time when or the means by which it was depopulated to become a desolation and ruin; or as to whether it fell by the sword or famine, or pestilence. The trees which shroud it may have sprung from the blood of its slaughtered inhabitants; they may have perished howling with hunger; or pestilence, like the cholera, may have piled the streets with the dead and driven forever the feeble remnants from their homes. Of such dire calamities to other cities we have authentic accounts, in eras both prior and subsequent to the discovery of the country by the Spaniards.





The illustration at left is from an original Catherwood sketch in the Gilcrease collection and depicts **The Castle** at Tuloom, or Tulum, another of the cities explored by John Lloyd Stevens and the artist.



The engraving featured here is found in Volume II of Steven's **Incidents of Travel in Yucatan** and shows a portion of the ruins of the Mayan city of Xampon, in central Yucatan.

"One thing I believe: Its history is graven on its monuments . . ."

And so he continued to believe, all his life, insisting, at the conclusion of his investigations, that the ruins he had brought to light were those of a great, indigenous civilization and not the work of any wanderers from any Old World cultures. He spent considerable time in subsequent comparisons of the appearances and uses of the monuments of Egypt with those of Meso America, and was one of the first to encourage a thorough examination of Spanish chronicles dating from the period of the Conquest.

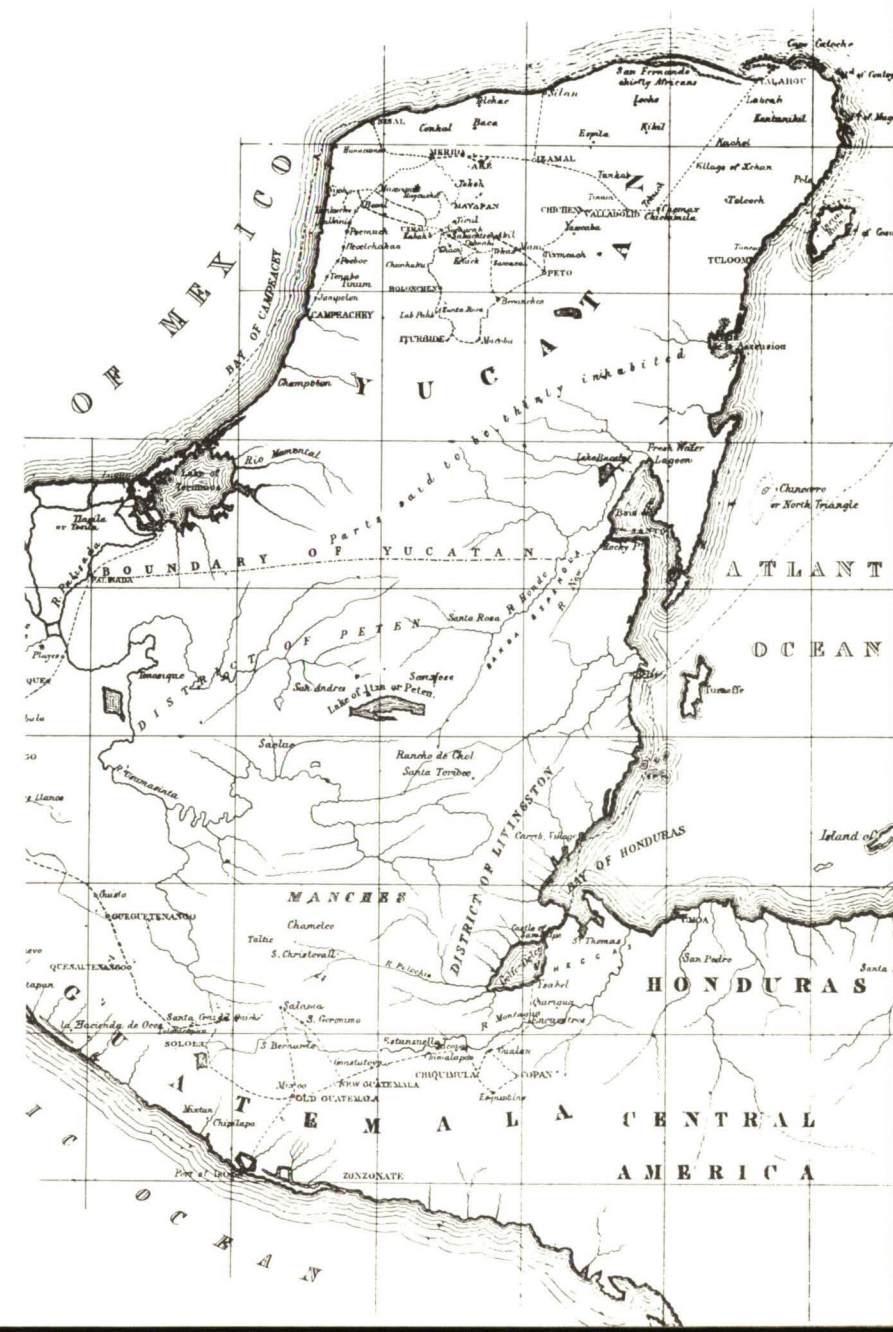
"Throughout the country," he maintained, "there are convents rich in manuscripts and documents written by the early fathers, Caciques and Indians, who very soon acquired knowledge of Spanish and the art of writing. These have never been examined with the slightest reference to this subject; and I cannot help thinking that some precious memorial is now mouldering in the library of a neighboring convent which could determine the history of some of the ruined cities; moreover, I cannot help believing that the tablets of hieroglyphics will yet be read . . ."

It is a source of aggravation to modern researchers in the field of Meso American history that so much of the existing culture of the Indians of this region was scattered, and in most cases lost beyond recall, as a result of the Spanish Conquest in the 16th century. Indeed, it is difficult to forgive the Spaniards of that period for their acts of careless destruction, or to excuse the outrages perpetrated against a conquered people, so vividly described in such accounts as those compiled by Father Bartholome de Las Casas in his *Destruction of the Indians*, published as early as 1552.

Certainly the story of the Conquest of Mexico has remained in the annals of American history as something quite distinct and apart from all other accounts of European discovery and settlement in this hemisphere. For unlike the first settlers in New England and Virginia, the Spaniards did not find in Central America a near-empty wilderness inhabited by only a scattering of aboriginal tribes, but instead fell upon a considerably well-organized and self-conscious civilization, ruled by a gold-spangled Indian prince named Montezuma, whose wealth is now legend, the latest — and last — of a royal line of tribute-rich rulers of a warlike people who had entered and taken possession of that region before even Spain, in the Old World, had entered the ranks of modern European powers in the last days of the 15th century. The Spanish entry into Yucatan seems nothing less, to modern view, than an unprovoked act of aggression, and the capture of the splendid Aztec capitol of Tenochtitlan the invasion and bloody destruction of a mighty empire, when contrasted with the more subtle, less dramatic assaults of the Puritans and other settlers of the North Atlantic seaboard, who only gradually harassed, deceived, dispossessed and eventually — but as effectively — destroyed the native peoples inhabiting their respective regions of settlement. But the primary purpose of historical investigation is not necessarily furthered by such distracting or irrelevant criticisms as we may be prone to pass upon a people and a time so different in many respects from our own. Today's student of the past must pursue his research dispassionately, with purposeful, fact-finding intent, if he hopes to realize an accurate understanding of it.

It is fortunate that despite the widespread material destruction of the native civilization that accompanied the Conquest of Central America, many relics escaped immediate attention or otherwise managed to survive to the present century —

and that, in addition, there were among the ranks of the conquerors certain *literate* men, who, observing the events that transpired during the brutal and amazing period, recorded something of the culture of the Indians before it disappeared forever in the general devastation of war and post-war occupation. For without such fortuitous remains and without the reports of such contemporary observers or the few who managed to retain something of the legends and traditions of the vanquished peoples, that brief and bloody epic would be difficult, indeed, to read, and much of the material facts since uncovered would be, in some cases, impossible to recognize or decipher.





The ruins of the latter-day city of Chichen Itza, pictured here, tower along both sides of the Camino Real near the modern city of Valladolid. Because this road is much traveled these ruins are more generally known to people in the area than any others in Yucatan. Catherwood presents the Teocallis, or House of God, in this engraving.

The lengthy records compiled by Bishop Diego de Landa are especially valuable to present-day scholars researching the pre-Conquest history of the Indians of Central America. Sent to the New World to root out the tenacious cultural traditions of the Mayas, Landa succeeded in confiscating and destroying a considerable library of the Indians' written records. But he subsequently repented so sorry a course of action and expended much effort in later years recovering what he had caused to be lost, painstakingly collecting and recording all that he could of the native legends and history from descriptions and accounts given him by surviving members of once-noble Indian families in the area. Thus today he stands as the first source of reference with regards to the very traditions he earlier sought to erase, and his manuscripts constitute one of the few written sources which modern researchers have been able to corroborate successfully with more recent archaeological findings.

Archaeological excavation has contributed its own wealth of otherwise unobtainable information with respect to the pre-history of Mexico and Yucatan, and historical research at the present time must call upon the combined efforts of archivists, excavators and scholars in several scientific and academic fields to reconstruct a reasonably accurate picture of America's scattered past. The archaeologist of today may need to be familiar with aesthetics, the history of art, literature and perhaps the legends of antiquity, as well as thorough in his methods in following his own particular line of investigation, returning from his diggings to devote himself to studies and comparisons and the relating of new-found specimens to previously obtained materials, fully realizing that merely to uncover an object is not necessarily to recognize what it is — that an inspection of it is not the same as an intelligent examination of it. Furthermore, his material must be carefully validated or documented at the time and in the exact spot where it is found, if it is to be relied upon to provide trustworthy information at a later date; and a scientific "dig" requires the constant attendance and supervision of a competent archaeologist at the site of exploration to keep track of the levels of soil stratification, preserve the correct material or artifacts and keep careful notes of all progress at the various stages of search and discovery.

Archaeological excavation has not always been so careful a method of research, however, and during the 19th century the digging into



The Mayan pottery piece and the effigy figure pictured here are representative of the Gilcrease Institute's outstanding Meso-American collection, a part of one of the largest collections of pre-Columbian Indian artifacts to be found anywhere in the world at the present time.



ancient mounds was more of a treasure hunt than a scientifically-conducted probe, which often scattered as much as it recovered. As a result, much of what was then unearthed and carried away from the ancient ruins in Egypt, Assyria, Italy, Mexico and South America to supply the demands of avid and affluent collectors — and therefore much that is presently included in a great many museum collections throughout the world — is deemed by present standards to be essentially worthless, at least insofar as being considered a reliable record or useful as documentary evidence; and the modern historian may therefore bemoan the past century's acts of vandalism equally with those that attended the century of the Spanish Conquest, and regret as well the considerable amount of material hastily removed from historic sites, the value of which is forever destroyed as a result of the careless practices of the past.

The search goes on, however, in Central America and elsewhere — the search for knowledge of the past. And often more precious than all the gold in all the tombs ever uncovered are such fragments of pottery or crude utensils that may be found in the subsoil deposits of preceding centuries, that upon being interpreted, may supply a missing word or two in the carefully reconstructed account of Man's progress on this earth.

From what distant quarry the ancient Meso-Americans cut their building stones, with what tools carved their blocks, by what methods constructed their temples, and to what ends they raised their stacked and terraced, towering monuments and memorials, remains a matter of speculation and wonder — and even in this present age of remarkable achievements, a source of continuing amazement.

And the remaining decades of the 20th century yet hopefully await future disclosures of the past.

