

YUCATAN AT THE TIME OF ITS DISCOVERY.

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How did Yucatan appear at the time of its discovery in 1506? This question, in the light of the confused and meagre details given by the conquerors themselves, might seem to be a hopeless problem; and yet it is not so, for other means of knowledge are available.

There are those who assert that from a single fossil bone they can reconstruct the perfect animal, and for us who have such abundant material dug from the ground, taken from edifices still standing, out of chambers still habitable, it should not be impossible to present many truths of the ancient past of this strange land.

Along the low-lying coast of Yucatan are found watch-towers, small structures covering terraced mounds; from these and similar structures placed inland, tidings of importance, the forays of the savage Caribs, omens of the sea, etc., could be swiftly sped toward the great inland settlements.

Some of the groups of ruins have a circumference of over four miles. A sight of one of these settlements in the height of its life and prosperity, would have been amply sufficient to dispel the belief that its builders were ordinary communal Indians.

A temple with its front a mass of intricate carving placed high upon a terraced mound, overlooked the entire collection of dwellings. Along each front of this high mound, extended the undulating body of a huge serpent carved out of blocks of stone. High upon the platform of the temple rested the tail, while the gigantic head with jaws wide open

and forked tongue extended, lay menacingly upon the level plain at the base of the mound.

At one side an immense terrace supported a massive structure over three hundred feet long, of many turns and angles. It was a gigantic mosaic of marble and limestone. The rooms were narrow and windowless, but the entire front was covered with richly carved stone-work, over which was placed a thin coat of hard stucco, glistening white and shining like silver. The flat roof was covered with the same material, and from the eaves projected gargoyles of grotesque type.

Beyond this massive building were others of similar character, but of less magnitude, while away in the distance in the steaming mist of the plain, could be seen the mud-built, palm-thatched huts of the lower classes, the tillers of the soil, the artisans and quarrymen, those who existed that the others might live.

From the distant hillsides could be heard the incessant tapping of the heavy, wooden mallets, as the workers in the quarries with their keen, hard chisels of nephrite, fashioned the new-hewn stone.

Macadamized roads, raised two or more feet above the general level and surfaced with hard, smooth cement, went from palace terrace to temple, while others led away until lost in the distance, presumably to other populous groups.

Upon all the distant hilltops gleamed white stone structures, while the steep slopes were converted into series of terraces like the famed hanging gardens of Babylon.

Beyond these were the great cornfields, amply sufficient to support these people, who, although living in a region possibly the actual birthplace of the Indian corn, did not, apparently, possess a single kind of useful domestic animal to profit by the precious grain.

Those who lived and dwelt within these cities were a people not tall but well built and robust; their color, unlike that of the Indian race in general, was of a rich brown.

The chief, when dressed for public ceremonial or war, was a vision to behold. A *penanche* or frontlet encircled his forehead; above it waved plumes, while from beneath it on each side, the long, black hair fell until nearly touching his shoulders. Perforating the lobes of his ears were huge round ear ornaments, generally of the precious green jade-stone. His arms were bare, save for armlets and bracelets. A richly worked *uit* or loin-cloth protected his loins, while his legs were covered with leggings of quilted cotton, elaborately worked and colored, fastened in front by a series of rosette-like ornaments. Two thonged sandals protected his feet while the mace of authority, the *acatl* or dart-sling, and the terrible two-handed serrated sword of obsidian or flint, were his weapons. His large, round shield was painted with his heraldic devices.

His followers, those he led to battle, were dressed according to their rank or station. The rank and file when about to engage in battle, wore nothing but their loin-cloth, and sometimes a turban-like head covering. Their weapons were the dart-sling, the lance, the serrated sword of flint or obsidian, and the heavy, round, throwing stone.

Each shield carried painted upon it the device of the chief under whom its owner served. The battle pennons were similarly painted. (See Plate 3.)¹

¹ Plate 3 shows the warriors in the act of battle.

Clad in war costumes consisting of a short upper garment, probably the quilted shirt of cotton armor, reaching just below the *uit* or loin-cloth, the warriors poise their lances and darts in the very act of launching them at the foe.

Each round shield, carried warily upon the left arm, bears upon its surface certain devices.

The shield arm also carries a sheaf of lances, while slung from his shoulder depends an ornamented sheath probably containing the *acatl* and darts that accompany it.

The peculiar turban-like head-dresses, probably like the shirts made of quilted cotton, are surmounted by plumes, colored like the shields with the color-token of their chiefs.

Thick-soled sandals protect their feet, while the tying-thongs of deer-hide or fibre-cord are very prominent.

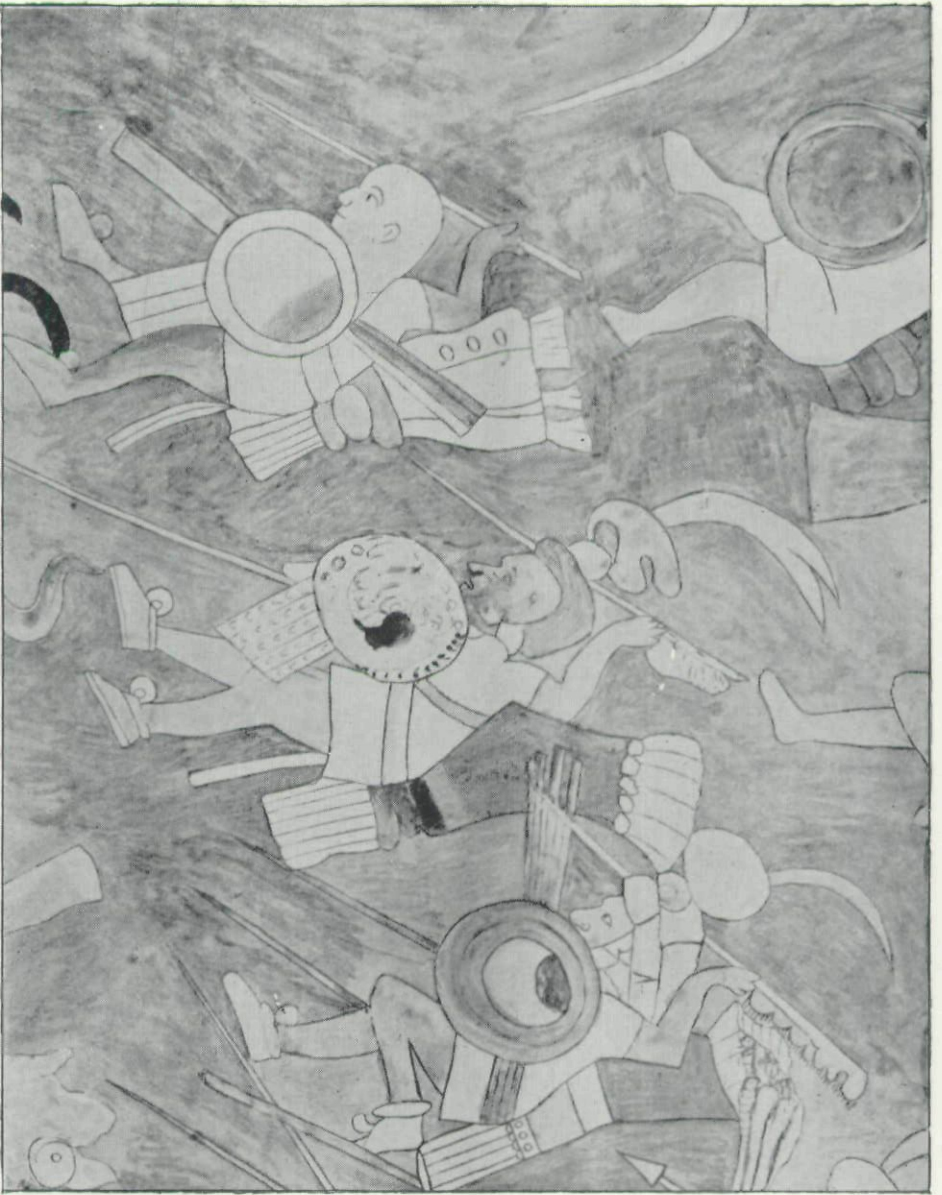


Plate 3.

INDIAN WARRIORS IN BATTLE ARRAY.

(Mural paintings in the ruins of Chichen-Itza, Yucatan.)

Commerce was carried on principally by the means of barter. In exchange for salt, cotton-cloth, dried fish and resins, they obtained from the highlands of Mexico nephrite stone, mineral paints and the *obsidian* or volcanic-glass, with which they made keen knives or sharp lance-heads. From Guatemala came the precious jade-stone, *quetzel*, plumes and cocoa. Metal played but little part in their economy.

No deposits of any useful metal were known to exist in the land, and the quantity obtainable by barter was insignificant. Black silver, probably meteoric iron, known to the Chiapanese, was but slightly known in Yucatan, and even copper was extremely rare.

Nature-worship, the cults of the Sacred Serpent and the Sun, was their theology, but human sacrifice was rarely if ever made. For this reason, unlike the Aztecs, having no rites requiring living human victims for sacrifice, they fought to kill, as later the foreign invaders learned to their cost and sorrow.

No people of the new-found world fought harder for their liberty, against the mailed invader, but they fought in vain. The olden, happier days when the rulers of the whole land were united and strong had passed. Under domestic jealousy and petty power, city after city was destroyed or deserted.

It was the old story, so old that the world was new when it was first told, and the earth will be gray and cold with age before it will be told for the last time. When the foreign invader came, he found a house divided against itself and ready to fall. The light of the Snake and the Sun paled and vanished before that of the Cross and the Sword.

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