

EXPLORATIONS IN YUCATAN.

BY EDWARD H. THOMPSON.

At the time of the appointment of Mr. Edward H. Thompson as United States Consul at Merida, the hope was confidently entertained that he would be able to explore and bring to light some of the many ruins which still lie hidden in the interior of Yucatan. Notwithstanding the limited time which Mr. Thompson has held this position,—a time hardly sufficient for him to familiarize himself with the language and customs of a people and country new to him,—this hope has been already realized.

In the interesting article by Mr. Thompson, which was read at the last meeting of the Society, upon the general subject of archæological research in Yucatan, he expressed the hope that he would be able before many months to submit the results of an exploration of the ruins of Labna. Since that time Mr. Thompson has been enabled to carry out the purpose thus expressed, and a valuable account of this expedition, in the form of a diary, has recently been received.

In reading the story of this exploration we can but be astonished as much by the great number of the ruins of Yucatan as by their vastness, and by the elaborateness of sculptured work lavished upon them. In few parts of the world are clearer indications given by ancient remains of a dense population, and of the power of priests and rulers to concentrate the energies of a nation upon great public works. Mr. Thompson's especial object in his expedition was to attempt the reproduction, on a much larger scale than had before been tried, of the façade of one of the buildings in some one of the ruined cities. By the use of paper moulds from which could be made casts in plaster of sections of a building he hoped to be able to place before us in plaster casts the entire front of the structure as it stands to-day with a fidelity to nature which could be attained in no other manner. Great perseverance and much ingenuity in the face of unforeseen obstacles were necessary to carry out such a design, and even had his idea failed of completion he would have won great credit for himself. It is pleasant, however, to be able to say that his object has been very successfully accomplished, and we may hope before long to see its visible evidence.

His skill as a photographer has also been effectively shown in the twenty illustrative photographs which were forwarded to the Society with Mr. Thompson's article. These views, taken during the progress of his work, show a high degree of artistic ability, the more creditable

for being taken under such disadvantageous circumstances. They show also, better than any description can do, how the luxuriance of tropical vegetation must have delayed him at every step.

The diary which Mr. Thompson has sent was written hastily during the progress of the work, and covers thirty-five foolscap pages. While much of this space is given up to a detailed statement of each day's work it yet describes truly and vigorously the difficulties which lay in his way and the successful carrying out of his purpose.

The following abstract of the diary has been prepared by Mr. Reuben Colton, and is by him communicated to the Society :—

THE region of my explorations is not in itself of sufficient importance for a special visit, as it contains now only shapeless mounds and fragments of hewn stones, but it is one of those places always interesting to pass through, and I have never yet found a ruin or fragment of a ruin from which I could not glean something new and interesting. At Tabi, my last point of contact with civilization, I found that Señor Antonio Fajardo had, with his accustomed energy and kindness, carried out all my wishes in a most effective manner. Men, horses, pack-mules and the stores previously forwarded were in readiness.

Upon my arrival at Labna some of the men were at once employed making ladders to be used in the coming work, while others cleared a suitable spot for the encampment, unpacked the animals, and began to hunt up the ramon trees, from whose succulent leaves and twigs the horses and mules of this region get their chief sustenance. With a native to help carry my measuring line and apparatus I began the examination of one of the best preserved of the edifices. Most of the chambers are unconnected. There are, however, several double chambers, one of which is generally placed at the extreme end of, and at right angles to, the other; the two forming a **T** more or less perfect in shape. I have found within each apartment of these double chambers two curious recesses or secret chambers. These recesses are entered by a small square opening raised about five feet from the floor. This entrance appeared at first sight to indicate that one of the stones

from the wall had fallen out, and I have no doubt that by means of such an artful device these entrances were filled and their existence was thus kept secret. Through so small an opening I had great difficulty in forcing an entrance. By dint of much pushing from behind I managed to get my body into and through the narrow passage, and found myself in a miniature chamber. At the end of this was an entrance to a second chamber placed at right angles to the first. Thus was formed a double chamber, the counterpart in miniature of the larger one. These miniature apartments (they were scarcely large enough to hold one person) were in an absolutely perfect state of preservation. The beautifully smooth hard finish of walls and arched ceiling showed no signs of the wear of time, and I doubt if there exists in Yucatan a more perfect example of Maya mason work than these secret chambers at Labna. I must confess to much disappointment upon finding them to be entirely empty.

The façade of which I am about to take the mould was not only elaborately sculptured and symmetrically finished but upon it a story is told. This fact is none the less patent because we cannot as yet decipher it. The huge serpent symbol with its inscriptions placed directly over the principal apartments of the edifice, the curiously costumed statues carved in stone, and the wide stretched dragon's jaws grasping a human head, I do not believe were combined with a view to artistical effect alone but were intended to convey some definite page of human history, or some narrative of a nature important to those times.

In the chambers of the upper terrace I find painted upon the apex of the arched ceiling some almost illegible characters. They are of a deep sea-green color but so mutilated by the destruction of the cement upon which they are painted that decipherment is impossible. These are the only traces of mural paintings that I have been able to

discover, and I regret very much their almost complete destruction.

I find myself very much perplexed over the origin of the sculptured figures upon the facade of which I am making the moulds. On one hand, certain circumstances seem to favor the idea that it is a symbol of the serpent god modified by custom and the lapse of ages until at last a simple combination of head and curving tail served to symbolize the great winged serpent. On the other hand, there are reasons for believing that these figures were intended as symbols of some pachyderm, a mammoth, elephant, or tapir. The tapir, *danta*, was certainly known to the race that built these ruins, as he still inhabits the water-courses of Yucatan and Guatemala. Between the above mentioned symbolical figure and the so-called elephant's trunk adornment, many intermediary forms exist: it is not hard to discover that they are only variations from the original figure.

During Mr. Thompson's stay at Labna he made an examination of one of the underground reservoirs similar to those at Chichen-Itza which Stephens has described. He gives the following account of his experiences:

After determining by sundry experiments that the mephitic gas had not accumulated within, I looped a rope around my waist and with candles in hand and my machete between my teeth in readiness for the sudden appearance of python or cascade, serpents which delight to frequent such cavities, I was slowly lowered until my feet touched a solid floor covered with debris. I found myself in a subterranean chamber similar in appearance and in form to the chambers of the ruins, differing only in the entire absence of the cavities that in the upper chambers once held wooden cross-beams, and lacking also the extra thick coating of the cement that overlaid the courses of square stones. After having thoroughly but vainly searched the rubbish deposited upon the floor for any object that might have been left

there by those who were once its owners, I gave the signal and was laboriously drawn up to the surface and daylight once more. The reservoir is in such a state of preservation that all injury caused by time could be easily and quickly repaired.

I find in these edifices proofs conclusive to my mind that they are not the finished product of one architectural mind, but that the different portions were built at periods of time widely separated. In following out their plans the builders of one period seem to have had but little regard for those who preceded them, and when the two plans conflicted the later builders did not hesitate to convert a portion of a richly ornamented figure into an unimportant wall or else to bury it altogether beneath cement and other material. That the periods of construction were widely separated seems to me proved by the fact that various portions of plinths and ornaments which I found imbedded in the masonry were weather-worn in a marked degree. More than this, I do not believe the building was fully completed when for some unknown cause the inhabitants were presumably forced to abandon their labors and perhaps in fact to lay down their lives in its defence. From the form of that portion of the building which is completed, and the appearance of the adjoining terraces, I am of the opinion that the intention was to continue the edifice as a facing to the terraced mound until by its junction with the portion now standing a finished edifice would result bearing in its outline a close resemblance to the *taa*.

The most interesting part of Mr. Thompson's narrative is that in which he describes his visit to a collection of ruins hitherto unmentioned.

I have found the ruined city of Chun Cat ζ in. After long and tedious labor cutting our way through forest and jungle we found ourselves among ruins which have never before been seen by white men, or if seen no record was made of the visit. In naming these ruins I have followed

the idea of my native guide, and have chosen to designate them by the term Chun Cat 𠄎in; a free translation being "By the trunk of the great Cat 𠄎in tree."

The ruins are about a league's distance from Labna, in a north-east direction. The country around seemed to be covered with mounds, confused heaps of carved stones and pillars, evidence of long continued and populous occupation. The building of which I have taken photographs and measurements, is, however, in a comparatively good state of preservation, and a description of its general appearance may be of interest. The façade faces north-west and has a length of ninety-two feet. The edifice was built upon the platform of a low double-terraced mound, the dimensions of which I should judge to have been when perfect one hundred and thirty feet long by forty-five wide. The building has now four apartments and appearances indicate the former existence of a fifth. The first of these rooms has a length of nineteen feet, a width of nine feet seven inches, and a height from floor to apex of arched ceiling of fifteen feet. The next two rooms closely resemble the first. The fourth being formed by a retaining wall has the appearance of a vertical bi-section of an arched chamber, placed at right angles to the adjoining chamber. This building differs from many in having its rear wall ornamented less elaborately than the front, the pilastered ornaments being arranged very simply but in a manner very pleasing to the eye.

Directly in the rear and almost touching this building rises a terraced mound densely overgrown and covered with débris. Time did not allow me to seek for the edifice which I believe must have once surmounted it, but from the outcroppings of stone I am inclined to believe that this was once a natural elevation formed by artificial means into a terraced mound.

I never left a collection of ruins with more reluctance than I did those of Chun Cat 𠄎in. Appearances warranted

me in believing that this was once a place of some magnitude, and that within the savanna around me or close to the base of the surrounding hills I should find other buildings belonging to this group, of greater importance than the one I photographed upon this visit. A due regard for the interests of the object for which the expedition was undertaken compelled me to return to Labna in order to hasten my work. Besides, this toiling through a league or more of dense and thorn-covered growth had nearly deprived me of all clothing save my tigerskin leggings. My deerskin shoes had given out under the effect of sharp stones and sharper spines and my feet were bleeding in many places. For these reasons I had to content myself with being able simply to record the discovery of these ruins and the beginning of my work there. I hope to return this same season, if possible, and finish the exploration and investigation of a region which I am convinced contains so much of interest and value to the archæologist and scholar.

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