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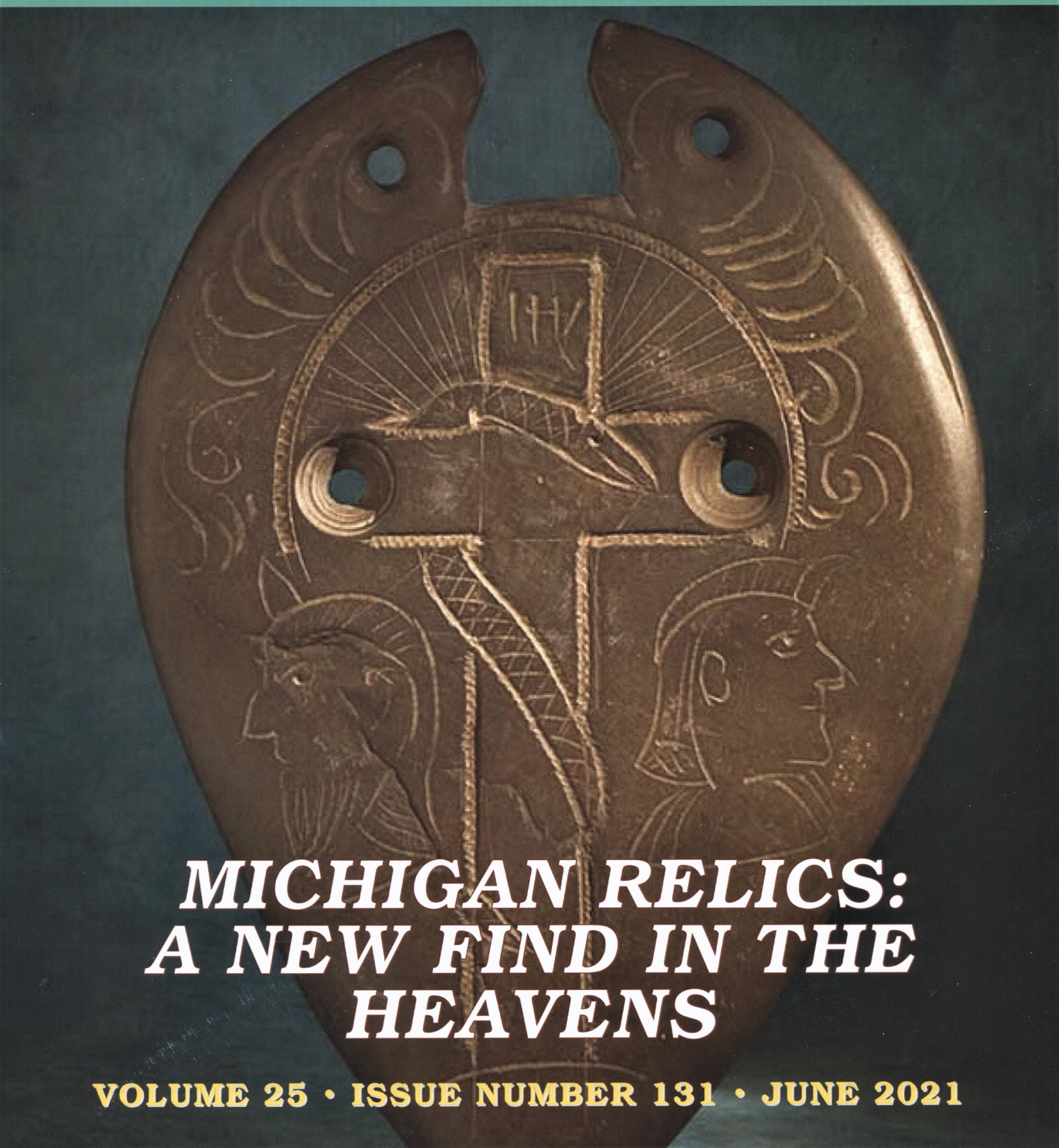
ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE AMERICAS BEFORE COLUMBUS



MICHIGAN RELICS: A NEW FIND IN THE HEAVENS

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Chichén Itzá's Hidden Worlds

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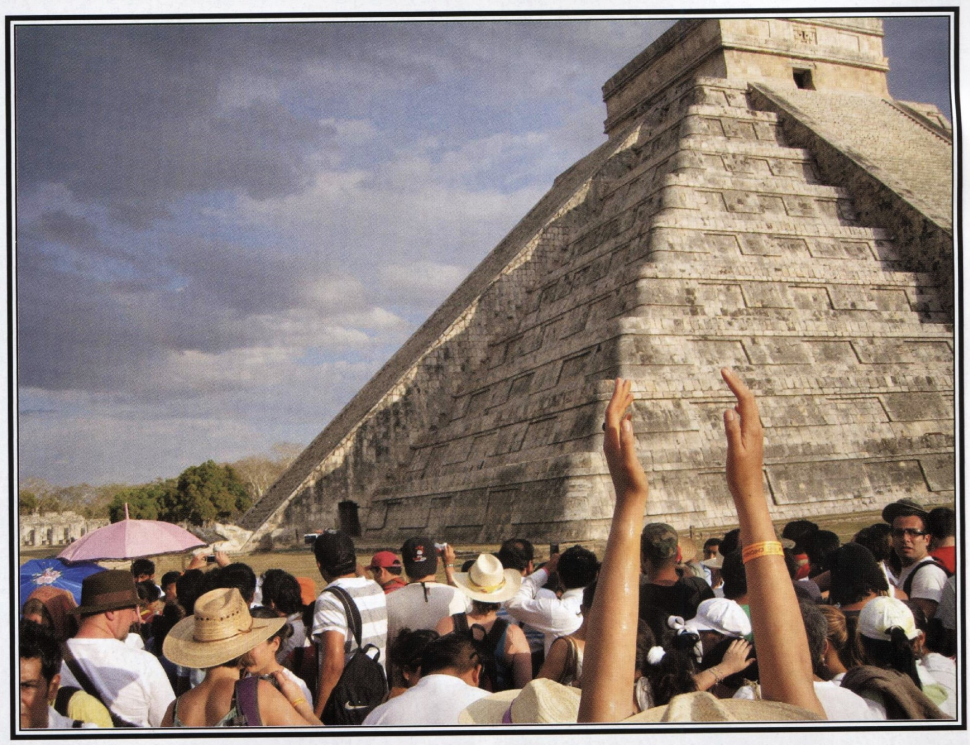
What we hope to see is not always what we expect, a remark often true for remains of ancient cities or human settlements, when new discoveries shed unexpected light on old finds, leaving question marks in their wake. So, let us have a look at Chichén Itzá, the pre-Columbian Maya city in Mexico's Yucatán peninsula, a place visited in 2019 by 2.9 million tourists (INAH, 2020). Every year crowds, mostly from afar, fill the Grand Plaza. The biggest draws are the spring and autumn equinoxes, when the light of the afternoon sun plays with the angles of the Kukulkán pyramid, called El Castillo in Spanish. At that time, the crenelated corners of the pyramid cast shadow on the northeast face of the main stairway balustrade, giving a visual impression of the mythic feathered serpent Quetzalcoatl, slowly slithering toward its carved stone head at the bottom of the stairs.

The serpent is a powerful allegorical figure in Mesoamerican mythology, for the animal's ability to cast aside its skin is understood as shedding its past to live another life. At Chichén Itzá the serpent is called Kukulkán in Maya-Yucatec, a name that underlines its filiation with Quetzalcoatl, the Toltec god of the fifth sun. The name, Quetzalcoatl, translates as "quetzal feathered serpent" in the Nahuatl language of central Mexico; it is used in many other Mesoamerican cultures. In *On the Trail of Quetzalcoatl/Kukulkán*, J.W. Folan notes that "the emergence of Kukulkán/Quetzalcoatl as an important Mesoamerican deity, has deep roots in the feathered serpent iconography found at Teotihuacán" (200BC-700AD). (Folan et al., 2016). It is, however, rooted further in time with the Olmecs, 1600 to 400BC. Before Kukulkán's arrival, the Maya god of rain, lightning, and storms was Cha'ak "the longest continuously worshipped god associated with abundance and fertility in ancient Mesoamerica" (Miller & Taube, 1993).

To find out how this remarkable city came to prominence, and why it became such a key player in the Yucatán, a brief look at its history is necessary. Chichén Itzá's history spans from the Maya early to mid-Classic (600-900AD), to the late part of the Postclassic period (900-1300AD). Its historical record, however, is clouded because of inconsistent descriptions and dates. Help may be found with early Spanish chroniclers and the nine Chilam Balam books, written by the Mayans in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, associated with the towns of Chumayel, Ixil and Tizimin, among others. The Chilam Balams are a collection of myths, divination and rituals among other topics. Chilam means together prophet and priest, while Balam stands for jaguar. At its height (900-1050AD), Chichén Itzá eclipsed Dzibilchaltún as the major socio-economic and political center of the Maya lowlands, drawing pilgrims from Mesoamerica and beyond to its sacred well.



Kukulkan's Passion – ©wikimedia.org

From early times, the Mayans and other people of the lowlands traded with cities on the central plateau of Mexico, exchanging commodities and beliefs, a common occurrence in long distance trade. Toltec groups migrated sporadically to the Yucatán throughout the Late Classic (600-900CE) to the Terminal and early part of the Postclassic (900-1100CE). Their migration to both the west and east coasts of the peninsula intensified in the early tenth century. With increased cultural diffusion, the goal of the Toltecs and their allies shifted from trade to military and political control. Together with the Maya-Chontal, historians call Putún, the Toltecs landed at Polè on the Yucatán's east coast. From that location, they united their forces at Cobá then headed to Yaxuná, on Yucatan's longest raised causeway, sixty-two miles away to Yaxuná that is thirteen miles from Chichén; from there, Toltecs and Putúns conquered Chichén Itzá between the end of the Terminal Classic and early part of the Postclassic.

The Toltecs brought their practice of human sacrifice on a scale previously unknown by the Maya. Their military expansion aimed at dominating the land and people, as well as control the important salt traffic and maritime routes around the peninsula. Their main port on Isla Cerito, on the Yucatán's north coast, gave them and their allies command of coastal trade routes, all the way south to today's Gulf of Honduras. While the Toltecs spread

Kukulcán and the Temple of Venus

their political control, including that of their god Tlaloc, worship of the Maya god Cha'ak and local deities remained mostly unchanged in the country, while Kukulkán ruled in large towns and cities.

The Shadow and the Equinox

For the ancient Maya, the pyramid was representative of the quincunx pattern carved on stelas and painted on ceramics, emblematic of the fourfold partitioning of the world (a figure akin to a 5-dice). The Toltecs brought their own god Tlaloc, with similar mythological attributes as those of the Maya god Cha'ak. For both gods, the pyramid embodies the mountain (witz), conceived as a living entity, for the rain clouds that gather at its top, and the water in its caves. The mountain top is the mythological focus of the quincunx, a concept central to the allegorical representation of sacred landscapes in ancient cultures.

Furthermore, the pyramid was believed to have its inverted counterpart underneath the-over-the-ground structure, as a mirror of the mythic Underworld below the human plane, comparable to caves found in the heart of mountains. The interface between the bases of the actual and reflected pyramids is where all life-forms lived. This inverse and simultaneous awareness of the world is grounded in the correlation of primeval belief of a vegetal world that sprouts from bellow the ground, where its roots grow down into the earth, while it reaches above ground for rain and the sun. For ancient cultures, this observation was the undeniable proof of nature's eternal perpetuation of life through its endless cycles of birth and rebirth.

Kukulkán is not cardinally oriented, although mythologically it is believed to be at the center of time and space. The pyramid's footprint, however, is aligned on a northwest-southeast axis toward the rising sun at the summer equinox, and its setting point at the winter equinox, making it a monumental sun dial for the solar year. Each of the temple-pyramid's fifty-two panels seen in the nine terraced steps are reminders of Xibalba's nine levels to reach the Underworld. Above all, Kukulkán is an instrument dedicated to the deities of nature and their role in its alternances such as night-day and life-death. The temple doorway, at the top of the pyramid, opens to the northeast, where the sun rises. The four stairways, one on each side ascending the pyramid, have ninety-one steps equal to 364 steps that, with the temple at the top, total the 365 days of the solar year, the haab' in Yucatec. It is on its northeast stairway's balustrade that the triangular shadows are seen at sunset on spring and autumn equinoxes.

The Great Plaza, Kukulkán and the Primordial Sea

The Great Plaza surrounding Kukulkán) on four sides was completed during the "New Chichén" phase (950-1000AD). It is the sacred space representative of the "primordial sea of creation" from which, according to Maya beliefs, all life sprung at the beginning of time. Its north side, on which Kukulkán is located, was also the area where significant rituals and ceremonies took place. It faces the Platform of Venus, close to that of the Temple of the Jaguar and Eagle Warriors, behind which is the massive skull rack, or tzompantli in Nahuatl. It is 164 feet long by forty feet wide and may follow in size the biggest in Technochtitlán (Nahuatl for Mexico). On the skull rack was a scaffold of wood poles built over

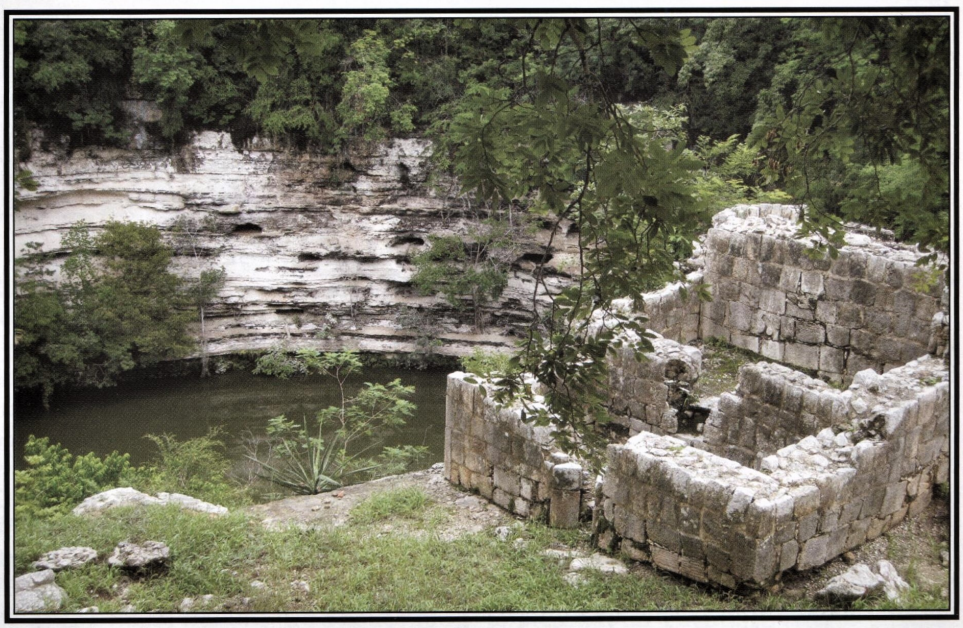
The World

the stone structure, on which hundreds of skulls of war captives and sacrificial victims were displayed.

On the east side of the Great Plaza is the impressive Temple of the Warriors and the no less important ballcourt, the largest in the Americas – 551 feet long by 230 feet wide, with twenty-six feet walls. Midway on each wall, set about fifteen feet up are circular stone markers engraved with entwined serpents, symbol of the eternal return. The theocratic city inner sanctum was surrounded by a seven-foot wall with guarded entrances. From the Platform of Venus, the ceremonial sacbe.1, "white road" or raised causeway is 980 feet long and thirty feet wide and leads to the Sacred Well of Sacrifices. Most buildings are oriented seventeen degrees off true north, while Kukulkán is twenty-three degrees off.

There are over 80 raised causeways of various lengths and widths connecting major and minor structures as well as nearby homesteads. William Folan points out that there were also "an unknown number of celestial avenues (cuxaan zumoob), meaning blood-filled ropes or cords that connected particular deities, in addition to underground roads (zacahboobs). These metaphorical ties between centers were reflections of the high degree of sociocultural and spiritual integration between centers in Mesoamerica, that spanned the Post Classic period" (Folan et al., 2016).

Chichén Itzá's Great Plaza



The Sacred Well

Beyond its position as the dominant socio-economic and political power of its time in northeastern Yucatán, Chichén Itzá was foremost a powerful place of worship. Two key spiritual portals leading to the "Otherworld" in the ancient city, are linked to the temple-pyramid, one natural, the other man-made. The first portal is a huge cenote or sink hole, called Chenkú in Yucatec, referred to as Sacred Well or "Great Well of the Itzá" (Piña Chan, 1980). Northern Yucatán is a limestone plain with no rivers or streams, cratered with natural sink holes, their water exposed when the ground collapses, as in the case of the Sacred Well. Its waters were not used for domestic purposes, but for rituals and, to this day, the Sacred Well draws Maya people year-round. It is reached by the elevated causeway (sacbe.1) from the Platform of Venus, located between the pyramid and the Sacred Well, and is considered a portal to the deities of Xibalba, the "place of awe" the "Otherworld." Furthermore, it traditionally is the abode of Cha'ak, the powerful Maya god of rain, lightning, and thunder, where the Mexican intruder Tlaloc will also dwell. The Sacred Well is oval-shaped (164 feet by 200 feet). From its rim, the drop is seventy-nine feet to the surface while its depth is sixty-five feet; there is a bed of mud about twenty feet thick at the bottom.

In one of the rooms of the temazcal, or steam bath in the Nahuatl language, built on the southern rim of the well, sacrificial victims and other gifts were purified before being offered to the gods. Among the donations were precious jade, gold, fine ceramics and lives as remains found at the bottom of the well testify. More than half were younger than twenty years old, and fourteen were younger than twelve years old (Tozzer, 1957:212-213). More remains may be buried in the bed of mud at the bottom of the well. Offerings in the cenote are noteworthy for their origins, particularly those made of gold and mix gold-copper metals (tumbaga), which were not made by the Mayans, but imported from lower Central America by the Toltec overlords. Atonement gifts were in accordance with the ur-

gency of the time and demands of the deities, for Mesoamerican gods required sacrifice of human beings as a fair exchange for creating them. The record shows that human sacrifices related to faith, were of both genders and of any age. In time of collective crisis, such as a persistent drought, a community would sacrifice its best and most cherished, not the sickly or the maimed. Sacrificial victims had to be able, in their prime, and the younger the better, for the gods would not accept anything less.

The archaeological record reveals that the bones of sacrificial victims show incisions and other severe injuries, that were done before or immediately after slaying. Post immolation rituals included ceremonial easting of human flesh for magical purposes. During the 1961 and 1967-1968 archaeological seasons, the remains of upward to 80 people were found, a significant number were in their early teens. That number, however, does not reflect the Toltec inclination for sacrifice, witness the tzompantli and its scaffold with hundreds of skulls. Furthermore, suicide by hanging was common, but drowning in deep water was often preferred in the expectation of joining the Toltec god of rain and storms in the Tlalocán, the god watery paradise.

The socio-economic organization of ancient Maya communities at the time revolved around agriculture. The Yucatán's latitude is twenty degrees north of the equator, with two seasons which meant two harvests. Hence the Maya's religious rituals, which adhere to a close partnership with nature. The gods and deities from above and below the human plane were believed to drive nature's endless regeneration, together with the sun, the moon, and the rain, masters of the vegetal world. The main staple was maize (corn-Zea mays subsp.) which played a key role in Maya beliefs and rituals, as it is enshrined in the Maya-K'iche' sixteenth century sacred book, the Popol Vuh or Book of Counsel. The book describes the creation of the universe by the gods who, after failing four times, succeeded in modeling humankind out of maize dough (Tedlock, 1985). That is why from ancient times and up to this day, the Mayans have a deep reverence to maize, not only as their daily sustenance but their as very substance, their soul.

The Serpent and the Equinox

The second key spiritual portal leading to the "Otherworld" is the Toltec style I-shaped Great Ballcourt, located on the west side of the Great Plaza. It is man-made but no less powerful a spiritual portal than the Sacred Well. The parallel platforms flanking the playing area are each 312 feet long. The slanted base and wall of these walls are twenty-six feet high. Centered in each of the walls are stone rings carved with intertwined serpents, symbols of the eternal return. Four temples are associated with the ballcourt, the Upper and Lower Temples of the Jaguars and the North and South Temples. For the ancient Mayas and other Mesoamerican cultures, ritual games played in ball courts were believed to open a portal to the "Otherworld." This portal, however, would only open during ritual games destined to end in sacrifice. The talented artist Rutledge in 1985, depicted the scene from the Maya Book of Counsel, the Popol Vuh, when the Hero Twins, Hunapù and Xbalanqué fought the deities of Xibalba at the ball game in the mythic Underworld.

Their skills, clout, and deceit in the "world of fright" won their freedom and that of their father Hun Hunapú, reborn as Hun Nal Ye, the powerful maize god. The ballgame in the Underworld explicitly describes life taking place on two planes. For Xibalba's deities, the fateful game could not be played unless an ongoing contest took place above ground. It is only when the games were simultaneous that the interplay between the participants in the two worlds would open the portal to the mythical realm of the ancestors and guardian deities of each team. In his artwork, Terry Rutledge depicts the allegorical event in Xibalba, a dream place where the field of opposites is shrouded in another reality (Artwork, T. W. Rutledge, September 1987).

There are thirteen ballcourts of various size at Chichén Itzá. The Great Ballcourt, however, is the largest and the site of prominent ceremonies and contests. In ancient Maya culture ritual games underlined the need to keep peace and balance between the living and the gods. Most "mind-made" gods and deities are named to identify with the prominent celestial masters of the agrarian universe, revolving around the sun and moon cycles. The attributes of those "mind-made" gods and deities, however, were reflections of those of humans, such as betrayal or anger, attuned with the vagaries of nature. Love and forgiveness were not expected from the gods, whose benevolence had to be paid for with human blood and tears. Secular games did not involve sacrifice and often took place with the same intensity as our games today, complete

The Great Ballcourt

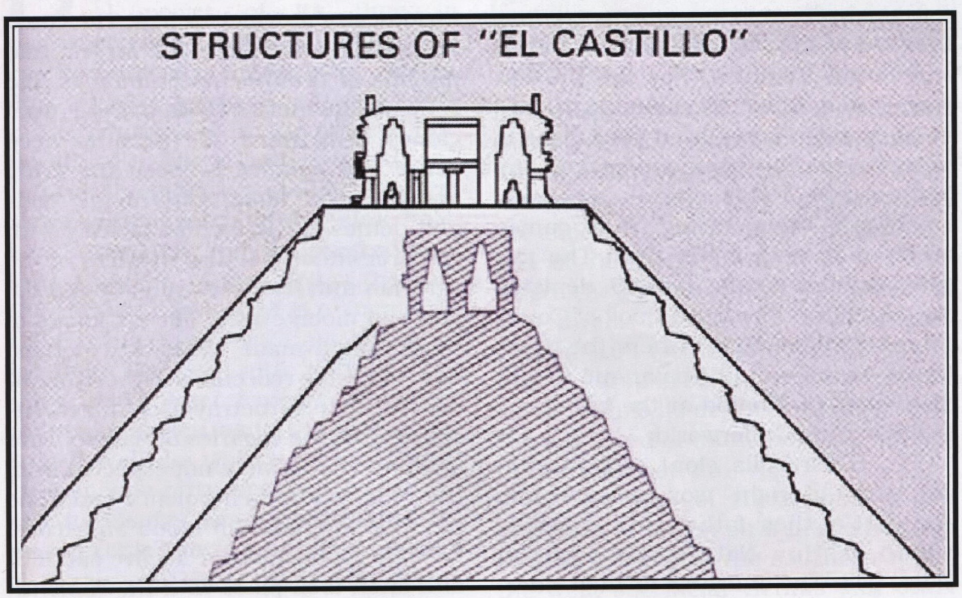
Ball Game in the Underworld

with heated betting on teams and players. Ritual games, and secular games as well, were essential socio-political means to keep in check latent antagonism between factions of the same polity, as well as between polities.

The Pyramid Within and Balamkú's Cave Below

Building larger structures over smaller ones was a common practice in Maya and other ancient Mesoamerican cultures. The reason was that any man-made structure was the product of culture, believed to be saturated with the ancestral powers of those who ordered its construction, together with that of their master stone and wood carvers. The structure, therefore, could not be destroyed by the culture that built it, nor its carved stones or wood voluntarily discarded. Leaving them to decay was the only proper way to return the material to nature. Culturally important monuments were instead encased within bigger structures dedicated to ancestors and the gods. That is the case of the pyramid within Kukulkán (El Castillo), discovered by archaeologists in the mid-1930s that was covered by the new and bigger pyramid. The smaller temple within has a single stairway that also faces northeast. Its sixty-one steps reach the temple at its top, with two parallel galleries. There is a triple molding on its façade and a frieze showing a parade of jaguars and two intertwined serpents over its main door. Was the serpent shadow also seen on the original structure at spring and autumn equinoxes? Unlikely.

The smaller temple within has a single stairway that also faces northeast; its sixty-one steps reach the temple at its top, with two parallel galleries. In the antechamber of the inner temple was found a red jaguar made of polished limestone that may have served as a throne for the High Priest. The jaguar is painted with red hematite (iron oxide), the teeth are made of flint, fine jade discs are inlaid to represent the jaguar's eyes and applied on its body for the animal spots. On the seat were found offerings of turquoise disks. Architectural similarities between the two pyramids indicate that the one within is also of Toltec origin, possibly built 700-750AD.



The Two Kukulkans

In 1958, a cenote was found sixty-five feet below Kukulkán's base. The pyramid sits on a thick limestone layer twenty-five to thirty feet thick above the sink hole's dome. The discovery, with that of a man-made corridor below the cenote, was sealed off from the outside world, probably for lack of resources to further its exploration at the time. The cenote and the cave system were "rediscovered" during the ongoing research project that extends below the complex and beyond, including the Xtoloc sinkhole. The cenote below the pyramid is at the center of the Toltec mythic world, its axis mundi. Sink holes, and bodies of water in caves were regarded as gateways to another side of reality, for water was understood, from the beginning of time, to be the single most important substance for the survival of all life forms. Below the pyramid's sinkhole, a cave was also found in 1958, that was partially ex-