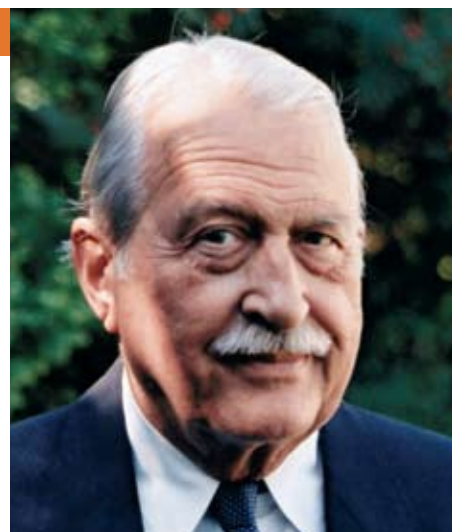


Dr. Hoeter

Visit to the Second Mayan Empire



Our 1952 trip to Mexico [*The Scrivener*, Vol. 17, #2, www.notaries.bc.ca/scrivener] was a wedding gift from Kristine's parents.

In 1953, I was able to finance our trip to the Yucatan myself, having found a job with CBC radio's *Kanada Ruft Deutschland*.

Kristine had become interested in the Mayan Empire of the Yucatan, notably the ruins of Uxmal—pronounced “oosh-mahl.” Although politically the Yucatan peninsula belongs to Mexico, culturally it is more a part of Guatemala. Mexico is the inheritor of the Aztec civilization. The Yucatan and Guatemala have a common heritage: The Mayan culture and language.

The history of Mexico and Guatemala remain two of the most exciting scenes in the drama of history. Central America—Mesoamerica—was the principal spot where the people of the New World met and mingled. Maize corn was taming the nomadic tribes of America. It anchored civilization in the New World, just as wheat and barley secured it in the Old.

We discussed the Aztecs of Mexico in the previous issue. Today, we will talk about the Maya. They first appeared in Mesoamerica

centuries before Christ and reached two separate peaks of importance: The Old Empire in Guatemala, 400 to 800 CE¹, and the New Empire in the Yucatan, 800 to 1400.

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The Yucatec Mayan culture was confusingly intertwined with that of the Toltecs². Their main god Quetzalcoatl was known to the Yucatec Maya as Kukulcan. Many Toltecs, after the destruction of their capital of Tollan (or Tula) around 1180 by the Aztecs, came to the Maya as architects and artisans. The Toltecs were a tribe of the Nahuan linguistic family, as were the Aztecs.

- 1 *Some oversensitive historians, to please non-Christians, replace AD (Anno Domini or Year of Our Lord) with CE (Common Era). Similarly, BC (Before Christ) becomes BCE (Before Common Era).*
- 2 *The Toltecs are a mysterious people whose origin and nature continue to be debated in archaeology today. See Dr. Hoeter's article on Mexico City for more information: The Scrivener, Vol. 17, #2, www.notaries.bc.ca/scrivener.*

The Aztecs, Toltecs, and Maya all built up their cities with huge pyramids—temples to their gods—and administrative buildings. The Maya of the Yucatan, like most pre-Conquest Mesoamericans, were patient to the point of stoicism. Life was cheap in Central America; temple dedications and other ceremonies were accompanied by massive human sacrifices—sometimes numbering in the thousands—to their gods,

Hernan Cortez

In 1518, Diego Velazquez, the Spanish governor of Cuba, appointed his private secretary Hernan Cortez to explore the unknown lands to the west. In February 1519, Cortez sailed for the Yucatan, landing at Merida on Good Friday. From there, he marched into what is now Mexico.



Mesoamerica, with prominent Yucatan



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The beautiful beach of the hamlet of Sisal

Within a year, he conquered the great empires of the Aztecs and Yucatec Maya, but his story ended in anticlimax. Suffering from increasing trouble with rival administrators, Cortez retired to Andalucía with little more than his memories. There, in 1547, he died in obscurity.

But back to the Yucatec Maya. Beginning in the 6th century, they built their new empire around the cities of Chichen-Itza and Uxmal. By this time the Old Empire in Guatemala had been abandoned, ravaged by crop failure and drought brought on by the water needs of a burgeoning population of over 700,000 people fascinated with personal hygiene. The Yucatec Mayan story is noted in the celebrated ruins of Chichen-Itza and Uxmal.



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The beheading stone at the Ballcourt. The losers lost their heads.

We arrived in Merida, the sisal³ capital of the Yucatan, and slept under mosquito nets in the room-and-board converted mansion of a former millionaire. He had made his money in the sisal business, which was effectively destroyed by the introduction of nylon into the rope industry. Later, we rented a car and drove the 50 kilometres from Merida to the village of Sisal, now a sleepy seaport town but once a principal port during the *henequen*³ boom.

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Originally, the export of sisal went through Campeche but the powerful sisal lobby wanted a closer port, so in the early 19th century, the port of Sisal was founded. Later on, export of sisal went to Progreso and the port of Sisal lent its name to the agave fibre. In 1953, Sisal was a small fishing village with a beautiful beach. We visited the old Castle of Sisal and the town's lighthouse.

3 Yucatan sisal or henequen (Latin: agave sisalana) yields a stiff fibre from its 2 metre-tall leaves. It was most popular with the shipping industry for its strength, durability, and resistance to deterioration in salt water. The Yucatan was not the origin of the sisal industry, which probably began in the Chiapas region. The sisal plant has a 7-to-10 year lifetime and produces around 200 to 250 commercially viable leaves. Today, the biggest world producer of sisal is Brazil, which produces 150,000 tonnes per year. China is second, with 40,000 tonnes, while Tanzania and Kenya tie at third with 22,000 tonnes per year.

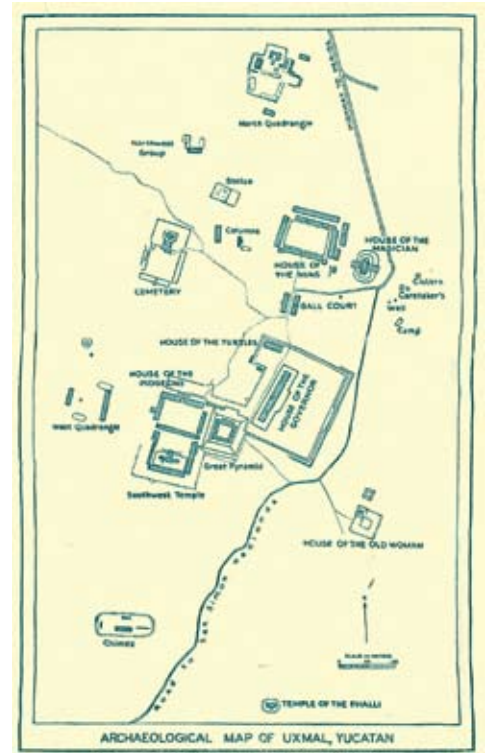
When we visited the Yucatan, the sisal industry was practically ruined; Brazil and Kenya were producing cheaper and (some said) better sisal fibre. All three had been hit hard by the introduction of nylon. Additionally, sisal farming in the Yucatan had caused great environmental degradation because the plantations replaced native forests. In recent years, sisal has been used to replace asbestos in wall tiling.

At the port of Sisal, we had lunch at the Hacienda Uxmal, the local "grand hotel." Actually neither a hotel nor particularly grand, it nevertheless boasted an excellent connoisseur cuisine. We courageously tried *chimichangas*—oil-fried stuffed burritos⁴. Although chimichangas originated in northern Mexico (southern Arizona—Senora, which once belonged to Mexico), the "chimi" has achieved cult status throughout the country. Excellent food.

After lunch, we drove to Uxmal. This pre-Columbian city, which according to Mayan stories was founded in roughly 500, is now (1986) a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The most dominant architecture there was the Nunnery Quadrangle, an administrative building nicknamed by Spanish conquistadors because it reminded them of a European convent.

Another impressive building was the House of Magicians; I climbed the 982 steps to the observatory atop

4 Nobody knows where the word burrito originated. Literally, it means "little donkey" in Spanish. It possibly derives from the food's resemblance to the folded packs usually carried by pack donkeys.



Map of Uxmal



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The Feathered God Kukulcan

this structure, arriving completely exhausted—unsurprising, given the moist temperature of almost 45° C. Other buildings in Uxmal included the House of Turtles—a temple, and the Ballcourt⁵.

The Maya are probably the best known of the classical civilizations of Mesoamerica. In 1953, at least 4 million residents of Central America could claim Mayan ancestry. The Maya developed astronomy, a calendrical system, and hieroglyphic writing.

Bishop Landa

Unfortunately for posterity, a bigoted cleric, Bishop Diego de Landa of Merida, collected scores of Mayan “books” and burned them in a literary *auto-da-fe*. The 16th-century “purge” was intended to rid New World Christianity of pagan influences and reinforce strict Roman Catholic dogma.

His book-burning, however, did not accomplish its purpose; the Maya continued to worship their old gods. Diego de Landa burned not only religious writings but also works of native medicine, history, and astrology.

⁵ *The Maya played a kind of ball game using stone balls. It was related to various religious ceremonies and the losers were usually sacrificed to the gods.*

Many cruelties were involved. Mayan priests were hounded out of their communities, imprisoned, and tortured. Diego de Landa’s repression ruined even the culture of oral tradition.

The Maya developed astronomy, a calendrical system, and hieroglyphic writing.

According to Sydney Clarke, three Mayan books escaped the Bishop’s bonfire. They consist of symbolic characters and deal with astronomy and the Mayan calendar, closely related to the Aztec calendar⁶. One, a marvellous treasure called the *Dresden Codex*, is over 1000 years old. Another, the *Peresianus Codex*, is kept in Paris. It is, however, of inferior quality to the *Dresden Codex*. The third book, held in Spain, is the *Madrid Codex*. The *Dresden Codex* has recently been partially translated with the aid of computers.

The League of Mayapan

The Maya of the New Empire enjoyed some sort of league of City States, similar to the system that existed in ancient Greece. The Mayan cities of the Yucatan—dozens of them—were populous. They competed for raw materials and markets. We learned they acted as good neighbours. Some modern Mexicans indeed insist that the League of Mayapan was a predecessor to the United Nations.

Chichen-Itza was the city of the Sacred Wells, named after three large wells or *Cenotes*, as the Spaniards called them. Up to 25 metres deep, the wells were believed to be the home of gods, to whom human sacrifices were frequently made.

The Yucatan was and still is, like the rest of Mexico, a mining country where minerals—especially silver—have met its material needs. In the Epoca Prehispanica, the pre-Hispanic period, the Mayan culture did not know the wheel. The reason for this was

⁶ *See Dr. Hoeter’s article on Mexico City.*

they did not have draft animals. The Maya were, however, efficient builders of roads that united areas of intense traffic and helped communication with the neighbouring kingdoms of Tacuma and Coyaohuacan.

We were reminded of the *Tamemes*—men who transported everything on their backs. Because of the great distances, the roads that connected the Yucatec Mayan towns were the result of growing need.

To the Aztecs, fierce warriors from central Mexico, the inhabitants of the Yucatan were looked down upon as *chihimecas*—barbarians. In truth, the Yucatan was inhabited by many tribes other than the Maya, but they were the rulers.

Bernal Diaz del Castillo, one of the Conquistadors, allegedly stated the towns of the Yucatan were beyond comparison. The Mayan cities of the Yucatan received goods and merchandise necessary for survival not only from their own production but also from trade with neighbouring towns. ▲

Dr. Hoeter was Secretary of The Society of Notaries Public of BC from 1969 to 1986.

To assist Dr. Hoeter with this article, UBC History student **David Leggett** conducted related research at the University library.

Sources

Diary notes of the author

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Chichen-Itza

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