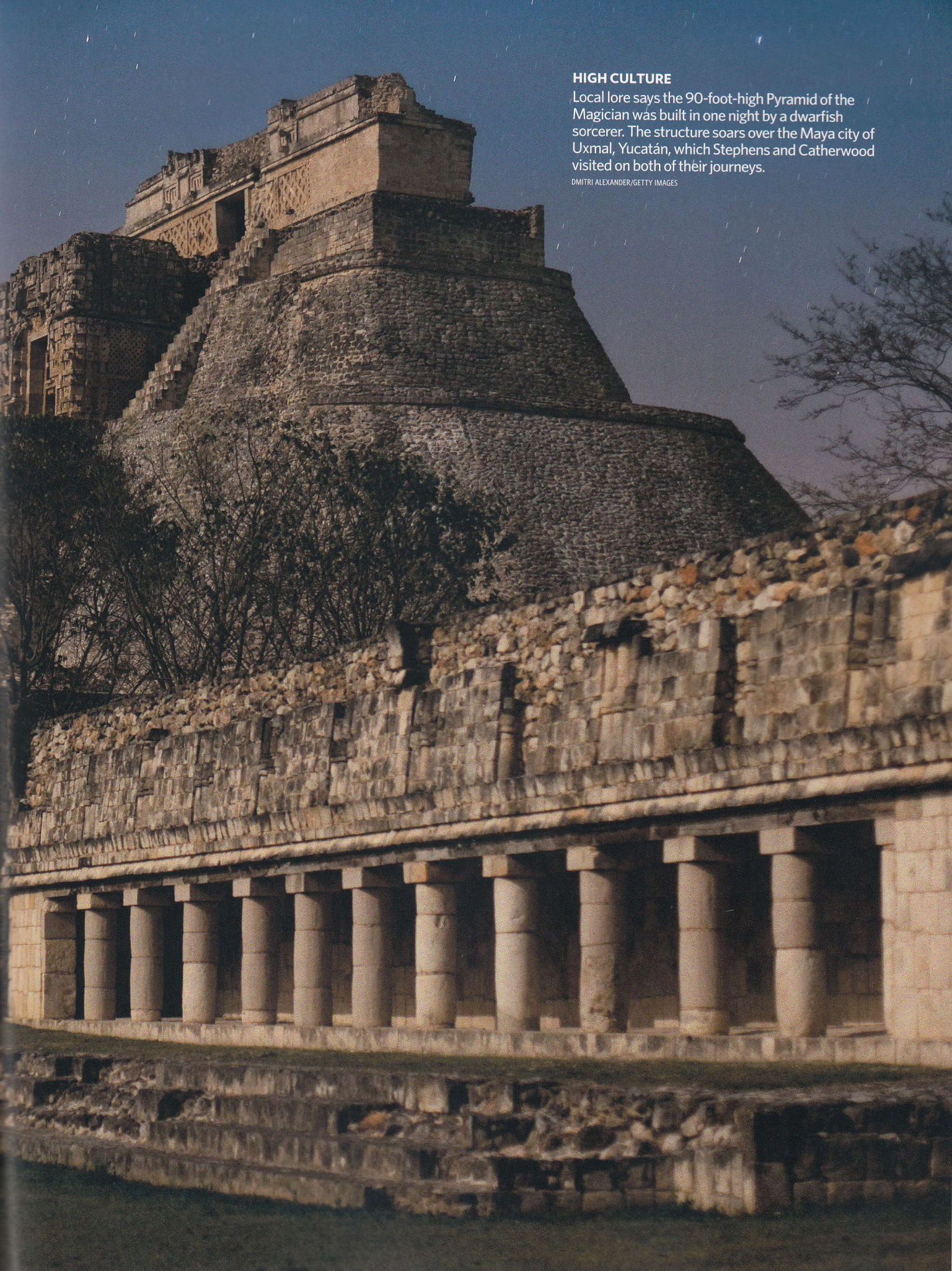


# THE MAYA REVEALED

In the 1840s two archaeologists introduced the grandeur of the Maya to the world. Through compelling words and captivating pictures, John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood exposed the complexity and beauty of the ancients.

ISABEL BUENO



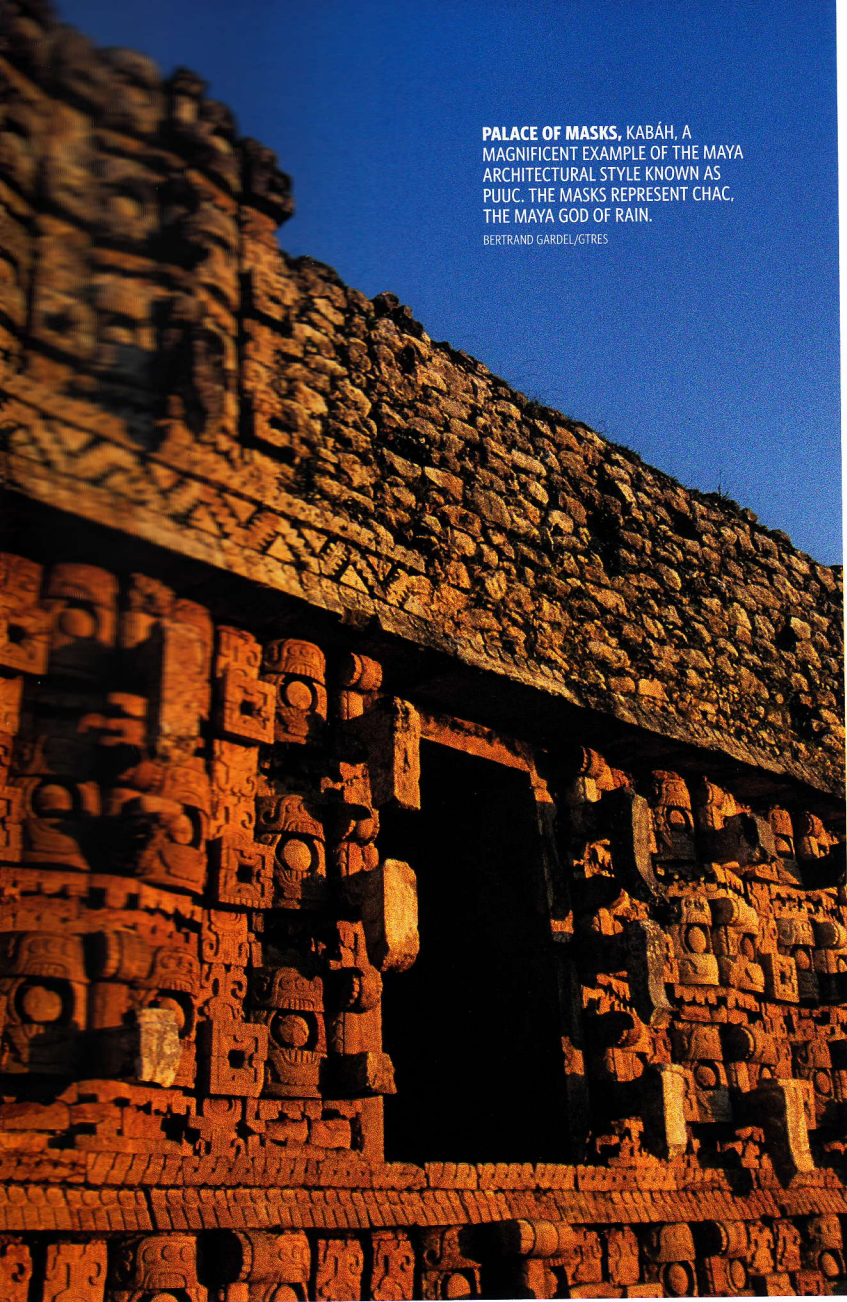
## HIGH CULTURE

Local lore says the 90-foot-high Pyramid of the Magician was built in one night by a dwarfish sorcerer. The structure soars over the Maya city of Uxmal, Yucatán, which Stephens and Catherwood visited on both of their journeys.

DMITRI ALEXANDER/GETTY IMAGES

**PALACE OF MASKS, KABÁH, A MAGNIFICENT EXAMPLE OF THE MAYA ARCHITECTURAL STYLE KNOWN AS PUUC. THE MASKS REPRESENT CHAC, THE MAYA GOD OF RAIN.**

BERTRAND GARDEL/CTRES



to strip the vegetation from the site's structures.

The great stone bas-reliefs of Palenque's main courtyard were immortalized in Catherwood's meticulous drawings. He also made engravings of the Temple of the Foliated Cross, the Temple of the Sun, and the Temple of the Inscriptions. It was in the latter a century later that the tomb of Pacal the Great, Lord of Palenque, would be located, whose reign coincided with the city's seventh-century golden age. Stephens documented common features between this and the other Maya sites he had seen, and argued that many of the reliefs they had found bore what he believed to be complex hieroglyphics forming part of a narrative. Stephens's hieroglyphs theory was based only on intuition at that stage, as breakthroughs in deciphering Maya writing did not come until the late 20th century.

Not all of Stephens's methods would be considered so praiseworthy by today's standards. He tried, for instance, to buy Palenque outright. Mexican law, however, did not permit a foreigner to own land unless he was married to a Mexican—a step Stephens was not prepared to take. His grandiose ambition had been to transfer the monuments of Palenque, and other sites, stone by stone, and re-create them in New York in a museum dedicated to Maya culture. He no doubt considered his aims honorable, but such an act would today be unthinkable.

After almost two months of work, the two men struck camp, setting off for the Gulf of Mexico, determined to explore the ancient city of Uxmal, whose magnificent Pyramid of the Magician is regarded as one of the jewels of the Puuc style of Classic Maya architecture. By the time they arrived there, on June 24, 1840, Catherwood was gravely ill with malaria, and soon after, they returned to New York so that he could recover.

### Adventurers and Authors

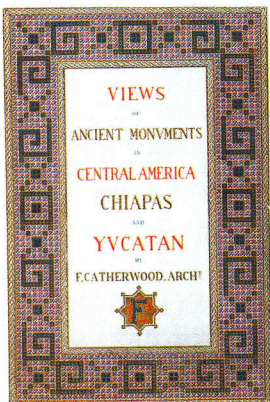
Despite its hardships and its conclusion in illness, this first trip was deemed a great success. In New York Stephens put all his notes in order and published a new book, entitled *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatán*, which would also prove to be another publishing hit. In it, detailed archaeological accounts rub

Having visited Quiriguá, another Maya site nearby, and seen its important collection of stelae, the explorers set off for Palenque. On the way, they noted the stunning beauty of the landscape of Guatemala, and finally reached the border of the Mexican state of Chiapas.

There, they discovered that General Santa Anna, president of Mexico, had ordered that nobody visit the city. Ignoring the prohibition, the pair continued their arduous journey and finally reached their goal. Soaked after crossing the water course that divided the settlement, and eaten alive by mosquitoes, they first saw the ruins poking out above the canopy of trees. Despite the prohibition to enter, they set up camp, installing themselves inside one of the buildings known as the Palace. One of their first tasks was

**COVER OF FREDERICK CATHERWOOD'S 1844 BOOK CONTAINING 25 COLOR LITHOGRAPHS OF THE KEY MAYA SITES HE VISITED WITH STEPHENS BETWEEN 1839 AND 1842**

AKG/ALBUM



shoulders with descriptions of a country torn apart by war and instability, with tales of bandits roaming the country. Amid the turmoil and discomfort, Stephens found time to sketch the people he met, and revels in quirky, colorful details, such as detailing the clutter of a priest's room, encumbered with: "a cruet of mustard and another of oil . . . cups, plates, a sauce-boat, a large lump of sugar, skulls, bones, books, cheese, and manuscripts."

Once Catherwood had recovered, the pair planned for another journey to Yucatán. Despite his air of a flamboyant adventurer, Stephens was a meticulous organizer, and prepared for the second trip in minute detail. Leaving in October 1841, they were accompanied by the naturalist Samuel Cabot, who wanted to study the local fauna. Among other sites, the team explored the cities of Kabáh, Chichén Itzá, and Labná, and revisited sites from their earlier visit, including Uxmal. A second book, entitled *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán*, containing 120 engravings by Catherwood, was published in two volumes in New York in 1843. A year later, Catherwood published a stand-alone work containing a selection of his color lithographs of the sites.

The two men never traveled together again. Stephens joined the board of the Ocean Steam Navigation Company, and in 1850 he was offered a chance to participate in the construction of the Panama railway. Although he died in 1852 in New York, a romantic legend emerged that he had met his end in Panama in the shade of a ceiba tree, sacred to the Maya. In 1947 Maya hieroglyphs were added to his gravestone, recognizing his contribution to the study of Maya civilization.

Frederick Catherwood died under tragic circumstances in September 1854, when the paddle steamer on which he was traveling was wrecked, and he perished alongside some 350 others. The death of the man whose artwork had immortalized the rediscovered Maya cities passed almost unnoticed by public opinion of the time. ■

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**A CASTLE ON THE COAST**  
 THE PYRAMID, OR CASTILLO, OF THE MAYA CITY OF TULUM LOOMS OVER THE RUGGED YUCATÁN COAST. STEPHENS AND CATHERWOOD VISITED THE RUINS DURING THEIR SECOND JOURNEY IN 1841-42.

KAY MAERITZ/AGE FOTOSTOCK



OBVERSE OF A MONUMENTAL  
STELA AT COPÁN, FREDERICK  
CATHERWOOD, NEWBERRY  
LIBRARY, CHICAGO  
UGA/ALBAM





## WITHIN A HIDDEN WORLD

Frederick Catherwood's engravings added visual richness and detail to the two books that Stephens published on their expeditions. In 1844 Catherwood selected 25 color lithographs for publication in his own book, *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatán*, some of which are reproduced here.

### A LOST LANGUAGE

Slashing their way through the jungle with machetes, Stephens and Catherwood arrived in Copán in 1839. Located in modern-day Honduras, the settlement thrived in the Classic period of Maya civilization—A.D. 250 to 900—and may have had a population of around 20,000 at its peak in the eighth century. On arrival, the two men found the ruins blanketed in lush vegetation. The pair's attention was soon attracted to a profusion of fallen "idols," stelae adorned with exquisite carvings. Stephens realized some of the signs were hieroglyphs, a system that would remain undecipherable until the 20th century. "We considered that the people who reared [the stelae] had published a record of themselves, through which we might, one day, hold conference with a perished race, and unveil the mystery that hung over the city."



**A FRAGMENT OF SCULPTURE FROM COPÁN.**  
F. CATHERWOOD, NEWBERRY LIBRARY, CHICAGO  
JUGALBUM



PANORAMA OF PALENQUE  
F. CATHERWOOD, NEWBERRY  
LIBRARY, CHICAGO

UIG/ALBUM

**NIGHTS IN A PALACE**

## Palenque

During their 1840 survey of Palenque, which flourished between A.D. 600 and 900, Catherwood produced this general view of the site, located in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. Inspired by methods he had seen used on ancient structures in Greece, Catherwood attempted to make plaster molds of carvings and architectural features at the site. This practice, however, offended local people, who feared—with good reason—that they would not be the beneficiaries of any commercial

gain from the exhibition and sale of their heritage. The few molds Catherwood made were taken away from him. He and Stephens set up base in the Palace (lower left), where they slung up their hammocks and prepared to sleep in “a building raised before Europeans knew of the existence of this continent.” Stephens saw key elements of Palenque’s style in the Palace: “[built] of stone with a mortar of lime and sand, and the whole front covered with stucco and painted.”





SPLendor AND SCORPIONS

# Uxmal

Stephens saw Uxmal for the first time in 1840 and would revisit the site during his and Catherwood's second journey in 1841 to 1842. He considered its ruins "living memorials, more worthy than ever of investigation and study, and as I then thought . . . perhaps the only existing vestiges that could transmit to posterity the image of an American city." Dominating the local area in the late ninth century, Uxmal is now regarded as the most perfect example of Maya Puuc style, named for the Puuc region in this part of Yucatán, and characterized by lavish stone mosaics. Stephens noted in his account that when he and Catherwood set up camp amid the ruins, the workers disapproved: "The Indians looked upon our entering these places as senseless and foolhardy, and, besides imaginary dangers, they talked of snakes, scorpions, and hornets, the last of which, from the experience we had had of them in different parts of the ruins, were really objects of fear; for a swarm of them coming upon a man in such a place, would almost murder him before he could be hauled out."

THE NUNNERY QUADRANGLE,  
UXMAL. F. CATHERWOOD,  
NEWBERRY LIBRARY, CHICAGO  
100/ALBUM





RESCUED FROM OBSCURITY

## Kabáh

In January 1842, having begun their second trip to the region the October before, Stephens and Catherwood began visiting a chain of Maya sites strongly marked by the Puuc style. Although there was some knowledge of Uxmal and Chichén Itzá among American scholars, the site of Kabáh, which flourished in the ninth century and was abandoned in the 10th, was almost undocumented. Despite its being linked to Uxmal by a causeway—*sacbé* in Mayan—Stephens had difficulty locating the site, and is credited with being the first to provide a detailed survey, including of the surprising apartment interiors: "Here we were presented with a scene entirely new . . . [one apartment] consists of two parallel chambers . . . communicating by a door in the center. The inner room is raised . . . higher than the front, and the ascent is by two stone steps carved out of a single block of stone, the lower one being in the form of a scroll. The sides of the steps are ornamented with sculpture, as is also the wall under the doorway. The whole design is graceful and pretty, and, as a mere matter of taste, the effect is extremely good. Here, on the first day of our arrival, we spread out our provisions, and ate to the memory of the former tenant!"

A SCROLL-SHAPED STEP AT  
KABÁH. F. CATHERWOOD,  
NEWBERRY LIBRARY, CHICAGO

UIG/ALBUM



THE GRACE OF AN ARCH

## Labná

Continuing along the chain of Puuc-style sites, Stephens and Catherwood visited Labná, a spot so secluded that even many local people did not know of its existence. Stephens noted his admiration for these “decaying, but still proud memorials of a mysterious people.” Flourishing between the seventh and 10th centuries, Labná is noted for its gateway constructed using a corbeled arch. Echoing the wall of masks at nearby Kabáh, the arch bears representations of Chac, the Maya god of rain—an important deity in a region lacking streams and rivers. Stephens hailed the arch for its “beauty of proportions . . . The effect of the whole combination was curious and striking, and, familiar as we were with ruins, the first view, with the great wall towering in front, created an impression that is not easily described.” It took the workers three days to strip back the vegetation, allowing Catherwood to draw the arch in all its splendor.



THE CORBELED ARCH OF  
LABNÁ. F. CATHERWOOD,  
NEWBERRY LIBRARY, CHICAGO.

UIC/ALBUM



**THE CASTILLO, THE STEP PYRAMID**  
OF KUKULKAN AT CHICHÉN  
ITZÁ, WITH ONE OF ITS TWO  
STONE SNAKE HEADS IN THE  
FOREGROUND. F. CATHERWOOD.  
NEWBERRY LIBRARY, CHICAGO  
AKG/ALBUM



COLOSSAL CALENDAR

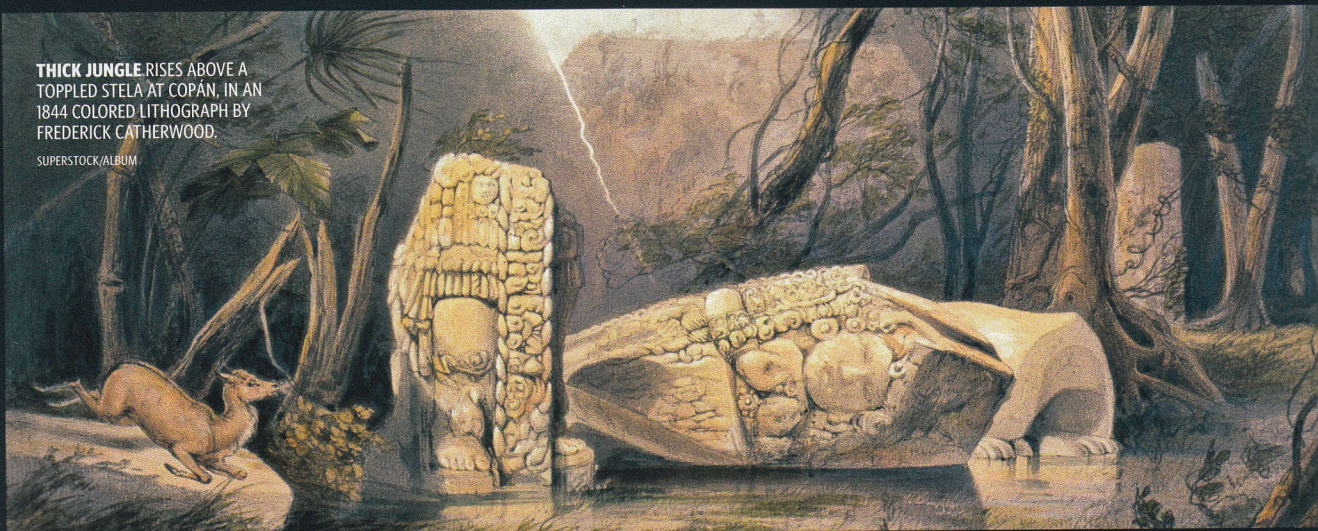
## Chichén Itzá

On March 15, 1842, Stephens and Catherwood knew they were approaching the ruins of Chichén Itzá, when the 100-foot-high step pyramid of Kukulcan—known locally as El Castillo, the castle—rose over the plain. *Chichén* means “mouth of wells,” a reference to a nearby cenote, a sacred source of water in a region lacking rivers. The city was founded by the Maya in the 500s and was believed to have been overrun in the 10th century by the Itzá, a Mayan-speaking tribe, who probably built the pyramid. As elsewhere in Yucatán, Stephens and Catherwood were overwhelmed by the sense of fallen magnificence: “The buildings were large, and some were in good preservation; in general, the façades were not so elaborately ornamented as some we had seen, seemed of an old date, and the sculpture was ruder,

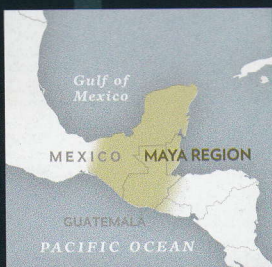
but the interior apartments contained decorations and devices that were new to us, and powerfully interesting.” He and Catherwood noted with wonder a feature that would later be connected with the scientific function of the pyramid: “On the ground at the foot of the staircase . . . are two colossal serpents’ heads, ten feet in length, with mouths wide open and tongues protruding . . . No doubt they were emblematic of some religious belief and . . . must have excited feelings of solemn awe.” Stephens’s own sense of awe would have been compounded had he known the pyramid was an astronomical instrument: Each of its 365 steps represent a day in the year, and at sunset on the spring and autumn equinoxes, a shadow snake—the manifestation of Kukulcan, the Maya snake deity—slithers down the sides to join with the real stone heads at the base.

**THICK JUNGLE** RISES ABOVE A TOPPLED STELA AT COPAN, IN AN 1844 COLORED LITHOGRAPH BY FREDERICK CATHERWOOD.

SUPERSTOCK/ALBUM



# BENEATH THE JUNGLE



Alongside fever and war, another major obstacle complicated Stephens and Catherwood's unveiling of Maya cities in the 1840s: thick jungle growth enveloping many of the sites. Where the American and Briton only had 19th-century methods—machetes—to uncover the magnificence of a unified Maya culture, a group of researchers sponsored by National Geographic are now using revolutionary 21st-century

technology to reveal that grand scope of Maya sites in Central America. They have found that these cities were more interconnected and heavily populated than anyone had imagined. Spearheaded by Guatemala's PACUNAM Foundation, the project centers on the biosphere reserve in the Petén area of Guatemala, a densely forested area near the city of Tikal. The group of researchers and National Geographic Explorers have used lidar ("light detection and ranging") to survey 800 square miles of the reserve and digitally peer beneath the canopy

of vegetation to reveal the structures underneath without breaking a branch. A breathtaking, intricate world has been revealed—pyramids, highways, terracing, irrigation systems, and quarries. Researchers have revised estimates of its peak population from five million to as many as 15 million, all living in an interconnected community rather than isolated sites dotted around the rain forest. The lidar surveys, like Stephens and Catherwood before them, have revealed a grander, more sophisticated understanding of the Maya world and its people.



**THE NAKED EYE** ONLY SEES A DENSE TANGLE OF VEGETATION IN THE IMAGE ON THE LEFT, WHILE THE LIDAR IMAGE ON THE RIGHT REVEALS THE ANCIENT MAYA PYRAMID UNDERNEATH.





**DENSE FOREST** (above) engulfs the Maya city of Tikal in Guatemala and gives an idea of the obstacles faced by traditional, ground-based exploration. The same image passed through lidar technology (below) reveals an extensive, hidden network of structures linking the city together.

ALL PICTURES: WILD BLUE MEDIA

