

CHAPTER IV

The island civilisation to the south-east of Ichpaatun—Signs of cannibalism—A peculiar god of their own, wearing a base-ball mask—People in a very low cultural state, lived almost exclusively on sea food—Toltec ruins to south of Ichpaatun, with curious figurines of men and animals, and painted stucco wall representing the conquest of this region by Toltec troops—Indian church—Life led by bush Indians when undisturbed—Curious habit amongst the Maya, for nearly 2,000 years, of deserting their old settlements, with their splendid temples and palaces, to settle in new localities, without apparent reason—A Toltec serpent column re-used as a Maya stucco-covered stela—Did the Maya, of as little as a century ago, still erect stelæ and understand the glyphs; and was the belief of Stephens in a still flourishing Maya city justified?—An opportunity of seeing possibly the last stela ever erected by the Maya—Only intensive exploration around Ichpaatun can elucidate the mystery of the various civilisations converging at this point.

SOME thirty-five miles to the south-east of Ichpaatun is the large island of San Pedro, belonging to the colony of British Honduras. Here I excavated a number of mounds belonging to the Cay, or Island civilisation, which in many respects differed materially from any of those known on the mainland.

The mounds were for the most part kitchen middens, composed of enormous numbers of conch, cockle, whelk and oyster shells, turtle carapaces, crab and crayfish shells, and vast quantities of the bones of such fish as inhabit the surrounding waters.

Amongst these were numerous potsherds, all of the coarse, red and grey, domestic varieties, broken flint spear-heads in great numbers, with a few broken obsidian knives, and greenstone celts, many stone and pottery net sinkers, and a few broken hand corn mills of Esquipulas stone.

There were also found the bones of a few small mammals,

including the gibbon and armadillo, but none of deer or wild hog, such as are usually found at most Maya sites on the mainland.

Perhaps the most curious and significant find of all was the right half of a human lower jaw-bone. This was discovered amongst a quantity of fish-bones, and the fragments of a clay saucer, near the centre of one of the kitchen middens, and was contained in a little nest, surrounded by conch shells, which had been thrown in on top of the human fragment and fish-bones.

The construction of these kitchen middens was extremely interesting, for one could distinguish, not only from day to day, but almost load by load, the various baskets of rubbish which had been thrown upon them by the housewives from the neighbouring huts.

I am afraid we must accept this fragment of human jaw as strong presumptive evidence of cannibalism, for several burial-mounds were excavated, in which the bones were undisturbed, the skeletons lying upon their backs, with their few poor possessions scattered around them, and food offerings in pottery receptacles provided for their journey to the next world, indicating the usual method of burial amongst these people.

A second mound was excavated, which had been built over the ruins of a small stone chamber. Nothing was found within it, but beneath the centre was discovered a round saucer for burning incense, with a long handle, and a curious figurine in clay, whose face was covered by a peculiar grilled arrangement, more resembling a base-ball mask than anything else, which was studded with rosettes. These articles were both painted red and blue, and no doubt had some religious significance; probably the figurine represented the god of these fisherfolk, though he bears no resemblance to any Maya god with whose characteristics I am acquainted.

It is, however, possible that the grill-like arrangement in front of the face may represent the Maya serpent's head,

so frequently recurring in their art, in the act of swallowing a human being. If so, it is so highly conventionalised in this instance as to be only recognisable by the eye of faith.

The people of this island civilisation, it would appear then, lived almost exclusively on products of the sea; they hardly ever visited the mainland to hunt, as the absence of bones of the larger mammals proves conclusively, and they, at least occasionally, practised cannibalism, though whether only on captured enemies, or amongst themselves in times of famine, and whether merely for ceremonial reasons (as was the case amongst the Aztecs and later Maya), it is impossible to say.

They possessed at least one specific deity of their own, and they probably lived on the cays along the coast of Yucatan and British Honduras, from the conquest of Chichen, towards the end of the twelfth century A.D., up to a couple of hundred years ago.

Culturally these people must have been very low in the scale, for the conches which constituted their principal article of diet could be picked up by the hundred thousand anywhere along the coast. Their pottery was of the crudest, as were their implements and ornaments, and they built no stone houses or temples, with the exception of the one already referred to.

Indeed the cay affords but little opportunity for cultural development, for it consists merely of a broad fringe of sand around the coasts, with barren swamps in the centre, amongst which are large salt-water lagoons, interspersed with a few patches of higher land, where the mounds are usually situated, and where no doubt the inhabitants were able to raise a very limited quantity of maize.

Some twelve miles almost due south of Ichpaatun, within the colony of British Honduras, exists a great aggregation of mounds of all sizes, many of which I have already excavated.

Some of them are burial-mounds, some are platforms

for the support of houses, one is a great look-out pyramid, at the base of which is a circumvallate earthwork, into which the people of the settlement could retire when the approach of enemies had been observed from the summit of the pyramid.

Several of the burial-mounds contained, in cysts, excavated in the earth beneath the centre of the mound, large clay urns, in which were found great numbers of rather crude little pottery figurines of men, and animals, usually painted red and blue. These included tigers, turtles, snakes, alligators, and various mythological dragon-like creatures.

The figurines of men showed them occupied in their usual avocations; some were carrying macapals on their backs, others were wielding fans, others were eating; warriors with extended spears, their shields held in front of them, were crouching on one knee, awaiting the attack of an enemy, and priests, sitting on stools, were performing ceremonial self-mutilation on their genital organs, with great flint knives.

But the most interesting mound in the whole group was built over a small ruined temple, with walls beautifully painted in such a way that the rain was excluded from the painted surface, upon which the colours were almost as bright and fresh as upon the day it was deserted. The painting represented a number of bound prisoners, each with a Maya glyph by his side, all of which were Ahau signs with numerical coefficients.

The figures themselves were unquestionably of Toltec origin, as many Toltec signs, unknown to the Maya, were present. The whole probably represented the Toltec conquest of this region, Maya hieroglyphics being used to designate the events which had occurred during each of the twenty Tuns, or years, of a certain Katun, or twenty-year period; unfortunately, however, as the numerical coefficient of the Katun, or twenty-year period, was not given, it is extremely difficult to tie the events recorded

accurately into Maya chronology, but that the temple was erected somewhere between the middle of the thirteenth and the middle of the fifteenth century, there can be no reasonable doubt.

Still farther south from Ichpaatun we came across the extensive group of mounds, with a single small stone building, known as Indian Church, on the New River lagoon, in the colony of British Honduras.

The mounds were of all sizes, varying from 4 or 5, to 50 or 60 ft. in height, and were very crude affairs—truncated pyramids for the most part, composed of blocks of unhewn stone and earth. Nearly all were burial-mounds, and from the condition of the bones, and the character of the funerary objects, it was obvious that they belonged to the last degenerate phase of the Maya civilisation, many of them going back little more than a century, or a century and a half, when bush Indians, who never had any contact with civilisation, still lived in their villages, shut in within the dense impenetrable forest of this remote part of the colony, very much the same sort of lives their ancestors lived one thousand years before.

They cultivated their small plantations, on which they raised corn, beans, tobacco and cotton, hunting the bush for game and wild honey, and the streams and lagoons for fish and fresh-water turtle, never coming in contact with the logwood and mahogany cutters, the only trespassers on the fringe of their domains, and retiring ever deeper and deeper into the fastnesses of the forest, as year by year, civilisation, rum, and the missionary, encroached more and more upon their privacy; until at the present day not a single one of their villages remains in this part of the colony, where, as is indicated by the vast number of mounds covering the region, a very considerable population must have once existed.

This is borne out by Father Fuensalida and other Catholic priests, who made the journey from Merida in Yucatan to Tipu, the last outpost of the Spaniards, a large Indian

village on the banks of the Mopan river, in British Honduras, now occupied only by a few mahogany-cutters.

They travelled by way of the New River early in the seventeenth century, meeting with the most exciting and surprising adventures, not to mention quite a number of miracles on the journey.

The Fathers describe numbers of villages, giving their names, all along the route, and they also mention the curious habit of the Maya, as prevalent amongst them 2,000 years ago as it is to-day, of deserting their villages and settlements, apparently quite capriciously, leaving behind their invested capital in temples, palaces, monoliths, etc., and settling in some quite new locality, perhaps many miles away.

It was indeed not improbably this extraordinary, and to them, apparently irresistible impulse, which led to the desertion of the Maya Old Empire and the foundation of the New Empire, in what appears to us to be a far less favourable environment.

By far the most interesting structure in this ancient settlement was the little building which had given it the name of Indian Church. The walls and part of the roof were still in an excellent state of preservation, and the entries were surmounted by true arches, which placed its erection, without the slightest doubt, in post-Columbian times, for the true arch was not known to the Maya architects, a fact constituting one of the main reasons for the instability of their buildings.

I came across this structure quite by accident; a very old resident of Corozal, who in his younger days had traversed the bush in all directions, asked me if I had ever visited Indian Church. I said "No."

"Well," he replied, "you certainly ought to see it, for, though it is nearly fifty years since I was there, I can remember the big tombstone in the bush by the side of the church, all covered with curious devices, painted in different colours."

This was quite enough for me, and I started out for the place as soon as opportunity offered.

He was right about the "tombstone," but alas! it was no longer white, and no longer covered with curious figures. It was a solid slab of stone, standing some 5 ft. out of the ground, rather well sculptured to represent a gigantic snake's head. It was, in fact, the head of one of those serpent columns, used by the Toltecs to form the door-posts of their temples, which had been later re-used in this situation as a stela. The temple to which it had belonged had entirely disappeared, and its stones had possibly been used by the later inhabitants in the construction of their "Indian Church."

I at once proceeded very carefully to dig up the stone, when what was my astonishment to find that the lower foot or so of it, which had been buried in the ground, and so better preserved than the upper part, had been covered originally with three layers of white stucco, superimposed the one over the other, and that upon each of these layers were distinct traces of painted devices in various colours!

My friend's account had undoubtedly been true, only what he took for a tombstone had been nothing more nor less than one of those stucco-covered stela, sometimes used by the Maya to record the passage of 5-, 10-, 15- or 20-year periods, instead of the usual sculptured stela.

In my mind there is little doubt but that, hardly more than a century ago, there existed in this part of British Honduras Indians who were still not only able to read the glyphs as used in the New Empire, but were actually able to erect dated time-markers, and that my friend saw probably the very last of these, and had an opportunity which will never again occur to anyone on earth, of possibly finding an exact correlation between the Maya and Christian calendars, by a Maya priest who was conversant with both.

After all, there is nothing so very improbable in this idea, for we know that in Peten, only a few miles away, up to the time of the Spanish Conquest, at the very end of the

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seventeenth century, the glyphs were well understood, and sacred books in Maya characters still existed.

This part of British Honduras was peopled by refugees from Peten Itza, after its conquest, endeavouring to escape from the Spanish rule, in the early part of the eighteenth century. Here in the fastnesses of the bush they lived undisturbed by either Spanish or British, till the middle of the nineteenth century, when the War of the Castes brought a number of Yucatecan refugees in to escape the Indian massacres. It is therefore quite conceivable that, up to the early part of the nineteenth century, they still retained the ancient lore, which their priests must have brought in with them after the conquest of Peten.

The American explorer, John Stephens, who, visiting the country nearly a hundred years ago, heard and credited rumours to the effect that there still existed, in the depths of the bush, a Maya city, where the old religion was practised, and the ancient customs adhered to, may not have been entirely mistaken in his belief, for we find here an actual return to the old Maya religion, a previously existing Toltec temple having been torn down and utilised to build the Indian Church, furnished with true arches, the secret of which the Maya architects had no doubt by that time learnt from the conquerors, while the horizontal head of one of the serpent columns was covered with stucco, and re-used as a Maya stela. Truly an extraordinary combination!

We see, then, grouped around Ichpaatun, which is almost certainly an Old Empire Maya settlement, dating from A.D. 333 : (1) To the north-east, the Tulum, or East Coast civilisation, dating from A.D. 1250 to the Conquest, which appears to come to an abrupt end at this point.

(2) To the west, an extensive Old Empire Maya cemetery, at present undateable, belonging to no city as yet discovered.

(3) To the south, a well-developed Toltec colony, occupying a comparatively small islet amongst the

surrounding Maya tribes, and probably dating between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries A.D.

(4) Further south, a very late settlement of Itzas from Peten, possibly the last site on earth where a commemorative stela was erected.

(5) To the east, a crude and degenerate late Maya civilisation of fisherfolk, which lasted possibly up to the early part of the eighteenth century.

In the present state of our knowledge, comment on the remarkable diversity of cultures centring at this point is useless; nothing but intensive work in exploring the forest in the neighbourhood, and excavation in the innumerable groups of mounds scattered through it, can be expected to throw any light on the problem.