

*Mayan
Architectural
Styles in Campeche*

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▲ Calakmul, Structure I.

The architecture of Mesoamerica is the cultural manifestation that has lasted the longest and is a reflection of the cosmological conceptions and the social, political and economic organization of those who created it.

Different Mayan groups built majestic structures throughout the large geographical area they inhabited.¹ The topography was varied: they settled on high mountains, in forests or in small natural highlands, on islands, riverbanks, lagoons or at the seashore.² This, together with climate diversity, which influenced the kind of vegetation and fauna that flourished, conditioned urban planning, although sometimes the inhabitants transformed their surroundings.

The historic development of the Mesoamerican groups has been divided into different periods according to the passage of time and geography.³ In all of them, the Mayan arts distinguished themselves for their manufacture and aesthetic qualities. In architecture, we can observe characteristics in construction shared by the Mayan groups that allow us to classify them as a cultural unit. Nevertheless, in different places and chronological stages, architectural changes came about that led specialists to divide the area into stylistic regions.

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Photos by Elsie Montiel.

Photo previous page: Structure II, Calakmul.

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▲ Calakmul, Structure I.

SOME ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTERISTICS

Most great Mayan cities displayed different kinds of construction according to function: monumental buildings, acropolises, temples, palaces, basements, defensive walls, plazas, ballgame courts and a complex network of elevated avenues or *sakbeob* that communicated the architectural groups inside each city and the different settlements with each other. They used several kinds of vaulted roofs in rooms and tombs.

Just like in many other Mesoamerican settlements, in most cases, Mayan monumental buildings display different stages of construction: that is, after the first part was built, another was placed on top of it and another on top of that. This is why the majority of the buildings we see today are actually only the last stage of construction, very often from the late classical or post-classical periods, while the previous stages are hidden.

The Mayans used products and raw materials from their local ecosystems. Thus, constructions were built with blocks of limestone joined by lime-

based mortar. Both interior and exterior walls and floors were covered with stucco made from the same limestone-like rock mixed with sand, giving them a smooth, whitish surface. They also used the stucco to make architectural sculpture and reliefs and as surfaces for painting murals.

All styles and historical stages of architecture are closely related to the visual arts. The exteriors of the buildings were painted, usually red with pictures, although most of the murals that have been preserved are found in tombs and inside rooms. Architectural sculpture, as well as stucco sculpture, reliefs, stone mosaics and murals, were linked to the architectural spaces in such a way as to create a visual language evoking power, the cosmos and the gods. They were great, harmonious scenes with a variety of forms, volumes and colors. Also, in wide open spaces like plazas, they erected stelas and free-standing, multi-colored sculptures.

A city's lay-out was linked to the stars and the culture's view of the universe. Some of the main buildings face a specific way so they can mark the solstices,

equinoxes and other cosmic events.

This was a highly stratified society. The members of the dynasties in power emphasized the legitimacy of their lineage through monuments and architecture itself, since the phases of construction were associated with the ruling classes' rise to power. In addition, the sovereigns were buried in these monumental edifices, generally accompanied by sumptuous offerings. Commoners, it should be noted, lived on the outskirts of the urban area in houses made of non-durable materials, like a frame of reeds packed with mud and lime, on a low, oval stone platform with palm or guano leaf roofs.

Although Mayan building have been classified into several architectural styles,⁴ I will briefly refer to those seen in some representative archaeological sites in the state of Campeche: in this first article, I will touch on the Petén style, while in a later article, I will examine the Chenes and Puuc styles.

THE PETÉN STYLE

The word “*petén*” comes from the Mayan word for island. Thus, Guatemala's lake Petén Itzá got its name, as did the small islands dotted in it, the largest of which is today called Flores Island. For this reason, certain architecture of constructions in this region, the central lowlands, is called the Petén style.

In this area the towns grew considerably from



▲ Calakmul, Structure II.

Characteristic of the late pre-classical period was the complex made up of three temples, a large one at the center, flanked by two smaller ones, all built on top of the edifice.



Model of Structure II, Calakmul.



▲ Calakmul, Structure IV.

Calakmul is one of the Mayan cities with the largest number of stelae: until now 120 have been found.



▲ Calakmul, Structure VIII.



▲ Calakmul, stela.

the mid-pre-classical period on: in the North, El Mirador, Nakbé, Tikal and Uaxactún, in Guatemala, and Calakmul, Becán, and Edzná in southern Campeche.

Toward the end of the mid-pre-classical period and during the late pre-classical period, monumental architecture with a definite style began to be built. The structures are enormous pyramid-like basements, with superimposed bodies and taluds divided by streets; their corners are rounded and turned in; and one of the main elements is the molding known as *delantal*. The wide front stairways lead to a temple on the top with high, slightly inclined facades, usually with thick walls and narrow rooms.

Buildings of exceptional size were built

in this period like Calakmul's Structure II, which was 60 meters high. Also characteristic of this stage was the complex made up of three temples, a large one at the center, flanked by two smaller ones, all built on the edifice's uppermost body, like Calakmul's Structure E-III.

Another distinctive element is the great multi-colored stucco masks with traces of animal and plant representations, placed on the sides of the central stairways. In most cases they represent deities, among them the god of the sun. These masks can be found at sites like Calakmul, El Tigre and Edzná in Campeche.

Clearly, religion had already been consolidated in these early years and the monumental buildings were considered sacred spaces like the mountain or *witz*, the place of origin and entrance to the under-

Becán is surrounded by a pit that served to channel and drain off surface water.



▲ Becán, Structure IX.



▲ Becán, Structure I.

world. The powerful metropolises had a centralized government that legitimized their political power and controlled the population's ideology through imposing buildings, architectural sculptures and reliefs.

CALAKMUL

Beginning in the late pre-classical period, Calakmul, in southern Campeche, became a political, economic and religious power.

Structures I and II are extraordinary buildings rising out of the jungle. Archaeological work on Structure II has revealed important information about the historic process of the Petén region. Stratigraphic soundings and archaeological excavations inside

the building have uncovered a long architectural sequence ranging from the middle pre-classical period to the late classical. In Sub-structure II c 1 (dating



▲ Becán, Structure IV.

In Becán, a substructure was uncovered with a multicolored relief representing a figure with symbols of the so-called monster of the earth.



▲ Becán, figures.

from between 405 and 250 B.C.), a temple topped by a frieze including a modeled, multicolored relief was found. The temple's interior boasts a barrel vault until now unique in Mesoamerican architecture.

Other structures in Calakmul, distributed around patios and plazas, are called palaces, two-story buildings with long passageways that may have been inhabited by the elites. The I-shaped ball-game court is on the North Plaza. Between A.D. 400 and 600, some structures were remodeled and later, some

buildings acquired Río Bec style traits.

Calakmul is one of the Mayan cities with the largest number of stelas: until now 120 have been found. On them are depicted the rulers performing different rituals and texts written in glyphs usually narrating the figure's name, the date he took the throne and his victories over other cities in war. For that reason, the sovereign's clothing singles him out as the highest warrior with royal insignia and figures of gods and his forbears. The city's emblem glyph is



▲ Becán, moat.



▲ Becán, relief depicting the monster of the earth.



▲ Balamkú, entrance to the Southern Group.

Balamkú complex is made up of three architectural groups in the Petén and other later styles with certain Río Bec traits.

also depicted to identify it or the dynasty.

BECÁN

Becán is another monumental city a few meters from what is now the Escárcega-Chetumal highway. The central nucleus is surrounded by a magnificent piece of engineering: a pit built during the late pre-classical period served to channel and drain off surface water. This gives the place its name since Becán means “ravine formed by water.”

The site is made up of large buildings and

plazas distributed throughout the central area; the monumental buildings are mostly from the late classical period, but some show evidence of being built in several stages.

Buildings IX and X are examples of the early part of the period. Observations indicate that at the end of the pre-classical, the basement of Building IX had masks like those of the Petén tradition, which were covered over when the structure was transformed in the following period

In Structure X, a substructure was uncovered with a multicolored relief representing a figure with symbols of the so-called monster of the earth and serpents with open maws.



▲ Balamkú, Structure I.



▲ Balamkú, Basement I-A.



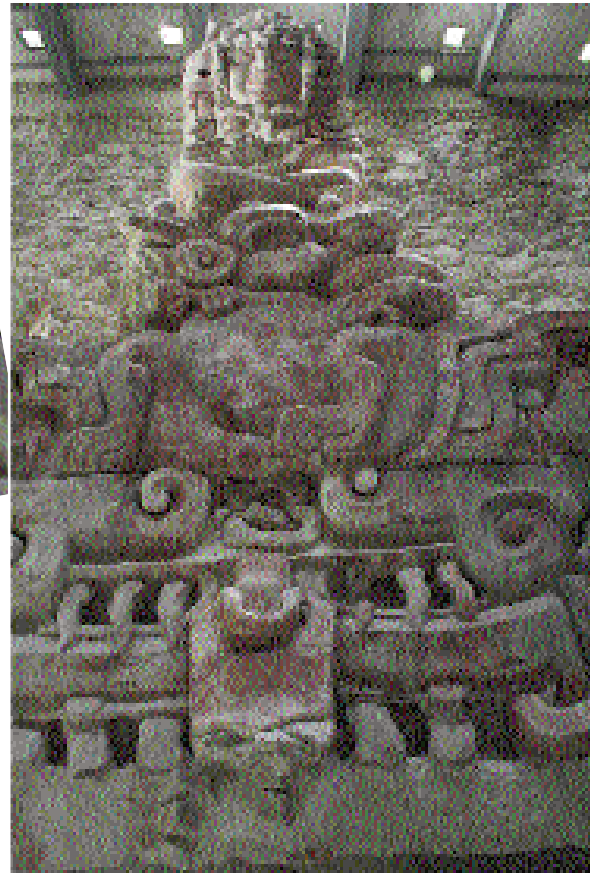
▲ Balamkú, possible jaguar, detail of Basement I-A frieze.

BALAMKÚ

The name Balamkú means “temple of the jaguar.” This complex is made up of three architectural groups in the Petén and other, later, styles with certain Río Bec traits. The Southern Group is of particular interest: inside Basement I-A, a substructure was discovered that was a building with three entrances. In the 16.8-meter-by- 4.1-meter frieze, four human front-view and seated, cross-legged figures were modeled on top of animal-like figures. The latter were placed on masks representing the mountain, the place of origin. This relief is undoubtedly iconographically very rich. The figures were also multi-colored, although very little evidence remains of them today.

NOTES

- ¹ The cultural area inhabited by Mayan groups covers what are today the states of Campeche, Yucatán, Quintana Roo, the eastern part of Tabasco and Chiapas, as well as Belize, Guatemala and western Honduras and El Salvador.
- ² Mayan territory has traditionally been divided into the Southern Highlands (southern Guatemala), the Central Lowlands (southern Campeche, Mexico, northern Guatemala and western Belize), the Northern Lowlands (the central and northern part of the Yucatán Peninsula), the Highlands (of Chiapas and Guatemala) and the Pacific Coast.
- ³ Like the other Mesoamerican cultures, the periods are divided into the early pre-classical period (1400-800 B.C.); mid-pre-classical period (800-400 B.C.); late pre-classical (400 B.C.-A.D. 250); early classical (A.D. 250-600); late classical



▲ Balamkú, frieze, one of the four human figures.

(A.D. 600-900/1000); early post-classical (A.D. 1000-1250); and late post-classical (A.D. 1250-1519).

- ⁴ The styles are the Petén style (northern Guatemala, western Belize and the extreme south of the Mexican states of Campeche and Quintana Roo), the Motagua (southwestern Honduras), the Usumacinta (the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico and of Guatemala), the Palenque style (Chiapas), the Río Bec, Chenes and Puuc styles (northern Yucatán Peninsula), that of northern Yucatán, and that of the Gulf Coast of Quintana Roo and Belize.

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