



Cobá

A City amidst Lagoons

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Surrounded by four lagoons that gave it its name, Cobá is nestled majestically amidst the vast jungle that has sheltered it for centuries. It is the most important archaeological site in the northwestern Yucatán Peninsula, comparable only with Chichén Itzá, its archenemy. It covers more than 70 square kilometers and was connected to its sub-

ject satellite cities by a network of 45 white roads (*sacbeob*, in Mayan), including the longest known road in Mayan territories, joining Cobá to the site of Yaxuná.

Cobá is one of the few Mayan cities that preserves its original name, made up of the words *kob* (“murky”) and *há* (“water”), that joined to make the word *Kob’a’*, meaning “place of murky water”, alluding to its surrounding lakes. The eleventh-century Mayas called it Kinchil Kobá, and it is believed that while the name of the city was *Kob’a’a*, it was actually the capital of a great kingdom named *Ek’kab* (“black land”), which at its peak would have ruled over a great part of what is today northern Quintana Roo.

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COBÁ IN ARCHAEOLOGY

The earliest references to Cobá can be found in the chronicles of Stephens and Catherwood's journey to the Yucatán Peninsula. When they visited the town of Chemax north-east of Cobá, the travelers gained access to the notes of a priest who mentioned the site. However, they could not visit it and merely mentioned the information in their book. Years later, during the terrible Caste War that made the region impenetrable, a few explorers ventured to go there. The first, Juan Peón Contreras, made a brief visit in 1882; in 1891, the German Teobert Maler penned the first archaeological description and took the first photograph of the Nohoch Mul, the site's highest building. In 1926, the English military physician Thomas Gann, who visited numerous Mayan sites, came and walked part of the *sacbé* road to Yaxuná. There he met Sylvanus Morley and the Carnegie Institution team working in Chichén Itzá, and managed to interest them in studying the site. As a result, in 1932, Eric Thompson, Harry Pollock and Jean Charlot published a wide-ranging work on Cobá, including a very complete map of its structures.



Vaulted passageway in Structure 4 of Cobá Group.

In 1972, the National Institute of Anthropology and History began systematically exploring the site under the direction of Carlos Navarrete, who came across a hamlet of Yucatecan Mayan peasants who were still holding ceremonies at the foot of the stelas and praying to the spirits of the hills. The arrival of the first visitors transformed the life of this small community, whose inhabitants gradually abandoned agriculture and bee-keeping and became tourist service providers. Later, Alejandro Martínez and particularly María José Con exhaustively explored and restored some of the main buildings. However, the size and volume of Cobá is such that it would take many years of work to understand the city's history and development.

DOWN THROUGH TIME

Cobá is one of Quintana Roo's sites with the longest pre-Hispanic occupation, dating from the late pre-classical period (200 B.C. to A.D. 100), when the low platforms that were later covered by buildings began to be constructed. Its strategic location at the center of the Yucatán Peninsula was decisive for its population growth and by A.D.100, the first



The Church, the Cobá Group's largest temple.

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great construction projects were underway. After that, Cobá developed into one of the most powerful cities in the northern part of the peninsula.

Between A.D. 200 and A.D. 600, Cobá came to dominate vast reaches of territory. Its strength could be seen in its control over large expanses of agricultural land and the region's commercial routes, including ports like Xelhá. It seems probable that Cobá established high-level alliances with other great kingdoms like Tikal, Dzibanché and Calakmul. Its links may have reached all the way to far-off Teotihuacan, judging by certain architectural elements linking it with the Mexican highlands.

Starting in A.D. 600, the rise of the Puuc cities and the emergence of Chichén Itzá in the regional socio-political scene sparked changes in Cobá's relationship with other cities, leading it to reorganize its domains.¹ This was a moment of splendor for the city: until today, 34 stelas have been found that were raised between A.D. 613 and A.D. 780, narrating key moments in the lives of the members of the governing class. Although very eroded, they have a recurring style: they show the richly attired ruler in profile, looking to his right and holding a ceremonial rod, while two subjugated captives serve as his pedestal. The times of glory were

not eternal, however: around A.D. 900 or A.D. 1000, the city began a long conflict with Chichén Itzá, which would result in the loss of some of its most important enclaves and, in the end, final defeat.

The city lost a great part of its political power, but maintained its symbolic importance, recovering certain status when Chichén Itzá fell between A.D. 1200 and A.D. 1500. This is when different buildings were erected in the East Coast style, and when they relocated their old stelas in places specifically established for worshipping their ancestors. However, by that time, the region's economic and political dynamic center had moved to the coast, leaving Cobá as a less important city. Its best times were past; by the time the European conquistadors arrived, Cobá was already practically uninhabited.

A VISIT TO THE SITE

The visit begins on the west side in the parking lot managed by the local Mayan inhabitants. That is where the



One of the Ball Game captives, half naked with his hands tied.

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The Group D Ball Game Court, decorated with representations of captives.

main buildings of the Cobá Group are: 53 structures that, according to María José Con, are the city's oldest. It is dominated by a basement known as The Church, given that until very recently, it was the community's place of worship. The building dates from the early classical period (A.D. 200-600), showing evidence of architectural details typical of the Petén style, characteristic of that period. The complex includes several palaces that evidence the wealth the city acquired. A little to the west is the Ball Game Court with representations of captives on its walls, and, to the south, a basement whose stairway is adorned with representations of human skulls and several references to the *kan* "yellow" glyph, the color of the southern reaches and of beautiful things.

Visitors can rent bicycles from the local community to continue down a wide path to Group D, made up of structures from different eras, outstanding among which is the Paintings Unit. It is called that because its main building, a basement from the late classical period (approximately A.D. 600-900) topped with a temple, contains fragments of post-

classical murals, with glyphs and other elements associated with agriculture and rain.

Nearby is another Ball Game Court, decorated with panels depicting bound, kneeling captives and a beautiful stone slab with writing from the late classical period, part of which has been deciphered: it deals with historical events related to the ruling Ko-b'a-a dynasty, including kings like the Steaming Tapir and the Steaming Jaguar, who bore the title of *kalo'mte'*, given to the great lords of the Mayan kingdoms.

Visitors walking along this route cross a raised, elongated place, the *sacbé* 1, the longest road in the entire Mayan region. It communicates the city with Yaxuná in Yucatán, a settlement that may have been a Cobá enclave in the enemy territory of Chichén Itzá. All along this road, small settlements have been found that most probably were peasant houses dependent on the city.

Further along there is an odd building called Xaibé, which in Mayan means "crossroads", because four of Cobá's *sacbé*s meet there. It dates from the early classical period



Stela 20, dated A.D. November 30, 730.



The Xaibé building where four *sacbé*s meet.



Nohoch Mul, one of the tallest buildings in the Mayan area, is 42 meters high.



The post-classical temple atop the Nohoch Mul.

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(A.D. 200-600) and has an oval base and no temple on top; it may have been built to commemorate something, although its real function is not known for certain.

Walking further, the visitor comes to the Nohoch Mul (The Great Mound), with a huge 42-meter-high basement dominating a plaza and other minor buildings. The largest part of this basement was built in the early classical period. By the late classical period, rooms had been added on both sides of the stairway, and in post-classical times, a temple similar to the ones in Tulum was built on top, which preserves fragments of descending gods and a mural. From here there is a wonderful view of the jungle and the lagoons.

This is where Structure 10 is, a residential platform that holds Stela 20 at the center of the stairway, intentionally broken to create a niche, later a common practice in the buildings of Cobá. The monument registers the date November 30, 780, the latest date of the entire site, which may correspond to the beginning of the decline in building activity and the partial abandonment of the city. A little further back on the path is the intersection that leads by a broad pre-Hispanic *sacbé* to the Macanxoc Unit, a group of buildings used for ceremonial purposes, where stelas and altars related to this great kingdom's dynastic history were placed.



Descending god in a niche of the temple on top of Nohoch Mul, with remnants of multicolored paint.

Returning by the main path you can enjoy the lush vegetation and get glimpses of birds and small animals. With a little luck, you might see a deer, a *tlacuache* or a wild boar, species that might not survive very long, since the inhabitants of Cobá, blinded by the illusion of progress and fanciful expectations of prosperity, have turned to the sale of land demanded by increasingly predatory tourism. Hopefully, the old Mayan gods will once more speak to their children so they can again live in harmony with nature. Their grandchildren will thank them for it. **MM**

NOTES

¹ The Puuc region is located in the west of what is today the state of Yucatán. The word "*puuc*" means "hill" in Mayan, after a small mountain range that stretches from the town of Maxcanú to the border of what is today Campeche state. More than 100 Mayan cities are located in this area with a common architectural style, among the most important of which are Uxmal, Cava, Sayil, Labná and Oxkintok.