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RUINS OF POLOL AND OTHER ARCHAEOLOGICAL
DISCOVERIES IN THE DEPARTMENT
OF PETEN, GUATEMALA

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With nine plates and four text-figures

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The 1933 Biological Expedition of the Carnegie Institution and the University of Michigan to the Maya region established its field headquarters in the village of La Libertad in the western portion of the savanna country of the Department of Peten, Guatemala (fig. 1). Archaeological discoveries were made in that region during the course of the botanical explorations and several new sites were located.

CHAKANTUN

Seven kilometers south of La Libertad evidences of former habitations were encountered in the open country on March 29, 1933. Exploration revealed numerous low mounds, terraces, stone paved plazas and courts extending over an area more than 3 kilometers long (Plate 1*a*). The remains consist chiefly of stone foundations and floors of round and rectangular structures. The majority of the structures were doubtless of the thatch, pole and stucco type similar to those found in the Maya area today. The site lies south of the aviation field in the San Francisco, Santa Teresa and Chicha Sabanas (fig 2). In the preliminary survey, no stelae were encountered, nor is it probable that such will be found here, since this site is probably to be referred to the New Maya Empire.

The mounds and stone remains lying in the open savanna suggest the name Chakantun for the site. In Maya, *chakan* means savanna, and *tun* means stone.



Fig. 1—Map of Yucatan Peninsula. Approximate locations of the recently discovered ruins and route of the Expedition from Belize, British Honduras, to La Libertad, central Peten, Guatemala, are shown.

Chakantun apparently belongs to a late occupation of that region; it may have been contemporary with Tayasal, thus dating from the epoch between 1450 A. D. and 1697 A. D. There are ceramic remains in every mound which will indicate the period to which it belongs. It is evident that Chakantun was an important center in late New Empire times, similar to the present though probably smaller village of La Libertad. The fertile land surrounding it supported a large population.

Throughout the western portion of the savanna country of central Peten, scattered remains of habitations similar to those in Chakantun were discovered (Plate 1*b*). In many places there are evidences of only two or three structures, but in others as many as a score of old foundations were found, indicating settlements of several families. Apparently the entire savanna region was densely populated by agriculturists, many of whom may perhaps have lived on the land during the planting, growing and harvesting seasons and in the cities during the remaining months of each year. This system still persists in Peten. Excavations in these ruins would reveal their relationship with Tayasal, Chakantun, or other sites of the same general period.

POLOL

A large ruin was discovered in the high forest near the settlement of Polol on April 26. This site is located at the edge of the savanna country about 7 kilometers west-southwest of La Libertad (fig. 2). Four times during the following weeks the writer visited Polol and the site was explored with the aid of Don Pancho, an old Indian from Coban who had made his *milpa* around the ruins for fifteen years.

The center of the city is a plaza bounded on the south by a great terraced pyramid, Structure E, which dominates the site (fig. 3). At the base the pyramid measures 96 meters east and west and 118 meters north and south. On the steep incline, the total height is approximately 51 meters from the forest level to the highest point. On top of the pyramid there are remains of temples and a sunken court covering an area 31 meters by 30 meters. On the west side of the pyramid about 12 meters above the forest floor there is a cave in which I found a chamber; the entrance had been sealed with stones and mud, but later opened. No remains of any kind were found in the room. The cave appears to be of recent origin and its occupation postdates the occupation of the city. At least the basal portion of the pyramid is a natural knoll, for the cave is formed by a break in a solid limestone stratum.

To the west of the central plaza there is a large mound, Structure A, which measures approximately 66 meters in length, 15 meters in width and 6 meters in height. To the south of the plaza are two small mounds, Structures B and C; each measures about 12 meters square. Leading from these two

structures there are remains of what appear to have been two walls, each approximately 150 meters in length, forming a main entrance to the central plaza. Both Nakum and Ixkun have similar approaches. Structure D measures 33 meters in length with a maximum width of 18 meters. The central section of the mound to the east of the plaza, Structure F, measures 18 meters square and I estimate it to be about 10 meters high. In the plan of the ruins (fig. 3), the positions and relative sizes of the other principal mounds are shown.

According to compass, the structures were all aligned approximately fifteen degrees east of north. No standing buildings were discovered in the site. Additional mounds were found as far away as 1 kilometer from the central plaza, so the ruins extend over an area at least 1 kilometer square. There are said to be mounds and a sculptured stela 4 kilometers from Polol which may belong to the same city.

Throughout the ruins, well-cut quarried stones are in evidence everywhere. On Structure A and on top of Structure E, the pyramid, there are some of considerable size which may have served as lintels.

Fifteen stelae were discovered in the central plaza (fig. 3), of which six, Stelae 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, are sculptured. Except the plain stela, A3, all the monuments had fallen, the majority being largely buried under humus.

Stela 1, located on the east side of Structure B, is broken off at the base, split lengthwise into two pieces and fallen face upward. The face is sculptured in high relief, but very badly weatherworn. On the left side of the stela there is an Initial Series with the date 9.18.0.0.0¹ (Plate 2a). The back of the stela appears to be plain, and the right side is so badly flaked and weatherworn that no sculpture is recognizable. This monument measures 1.52 meters wide, 41 centimeters thick, and it originally stood about 2.5 meters high.

Stela A1 is plain and broken into many pieces with a tree growing through its center. At the base it is 1.83 meters wide, and it originally stood about 2.5 meters high. Stela A1 is very similar in shape to Stela 1, both being broad at the base, tapering gradually toward the top and abruptly reaching a point.

Stela 2 is sculptured in low relief on its face (Plate 2c and d) and sides, each of which has a column of five glyphs, that on the right side being shown in (Plate 2b). The back is also inscribed with glyphs. This monument has fallen and broken into many pieces. It is rectangular in shape with

¹The writer wishes to express his thanks to Dr. Sylvanus G. Morley for the decipherment of the dates on the Polol stelae.

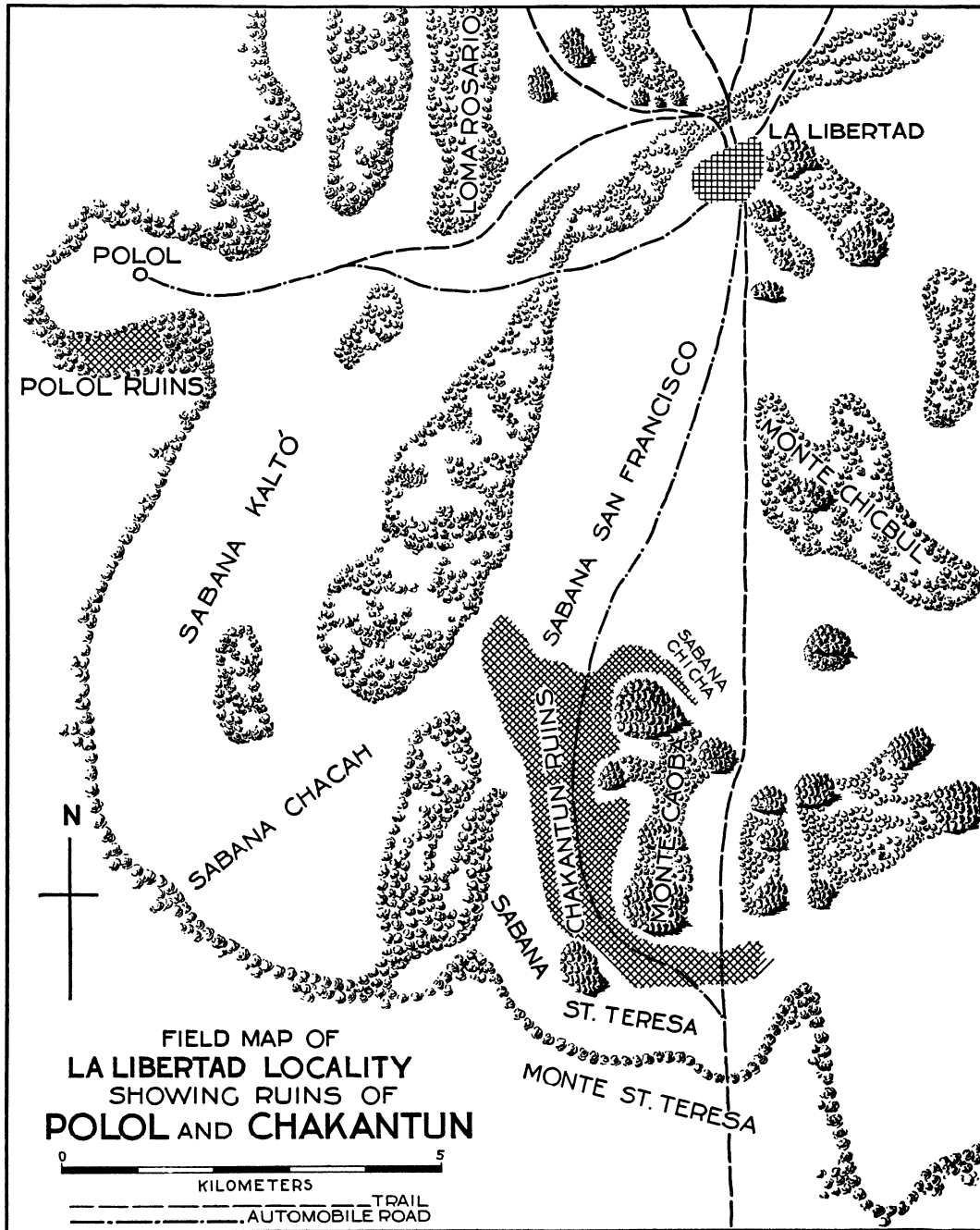


Fig. 2—Map of La Libertad region.

rounded top; it is 1 meter wide, 43 centimeters thick and, although it originally stood approximately 2.5 meters high, I fitted together only about 1.5 meters of this length. It is located 17.5 meters from the north end of Structure A and is a superb example of Maya sculpture.

Stela A2 is plain and shattered, lying 6 meters east of Stela 2. Stela A2 is 1.19 meters wide, 38 centimeters thick and, as it now lies, 1.68 meters long.

Stela A3 is a plain leaning block of limestone with the front and sides smooth. The back is rough and rounded, similar to the squared building stones used by the Maya in facing their structures, so it is possible that this stone is not a stela. However, its size, shape and position are such that it may well have served as a monument, so I am designating it thus. It measures 86 centimeters wide, 43 centimeters thick and 1.32 meters high, and is located 28 meters from the north end of Structure A.

Stela A4 is a plain rectangular stone, smooth on all surfaces, slightly smaller than Stela A3, and is located 13 meters from the south end of Structure A. It has fallen sideways. A large rounded stone which lies beside it is either an altar or a portion of another stela.

Stelae 3, 4, 5, 6, A5, A6 and A7 are located in front (south) of Structure C. Stela A5 is mostly buried; its three exposed sides are plain. As it lies, it measures 1.32 meters in width and 2 meters in length.

Stela 3 is small, badly broken, weatherworn and half-buried. There is evidence, however, that it had been sculptured.

Stela A6 is a plain monolith measuring 94 centimeters in width and 1.73 meters in length.

Stela 4 has broken off near the base and fallen backward. It has a giant sculptured figure on its face in high relief and glyphs in double rows on the two sides forming an Initial and Supplementary Series (Plates 3 and 4*a*, *b* and *c*). The date on the left (west) side is interpreted as 9.17.7.?.4. (it may be 9.19.7.?.4). The back of the standing base of the stela has three glyphs recording a Calendar Round date 3 Ben 1 Yaxkin (Plate 3*a*) and another undeciphered inscription composed of six glyphs. When the fallen portion is turned, other inscriptions will doubtless be found. Stela 4 is one of the widest monuments ever found in the Maya area; it measures 2.26 meters in width, 84 centimeters in thickness, and originally it must have stood about 3.67 meters high, above the ground level.

Stela A7 is plain, broken off at the base and measures 1.08 meters in width with an original height of approximately 3 meters.

Stela 5 is a small sculptured monument, 78 centimeters wide, 48 centimeters thick with a height of about 1.25 meters. It is broken into three large pieces. On the face of the stela there is a

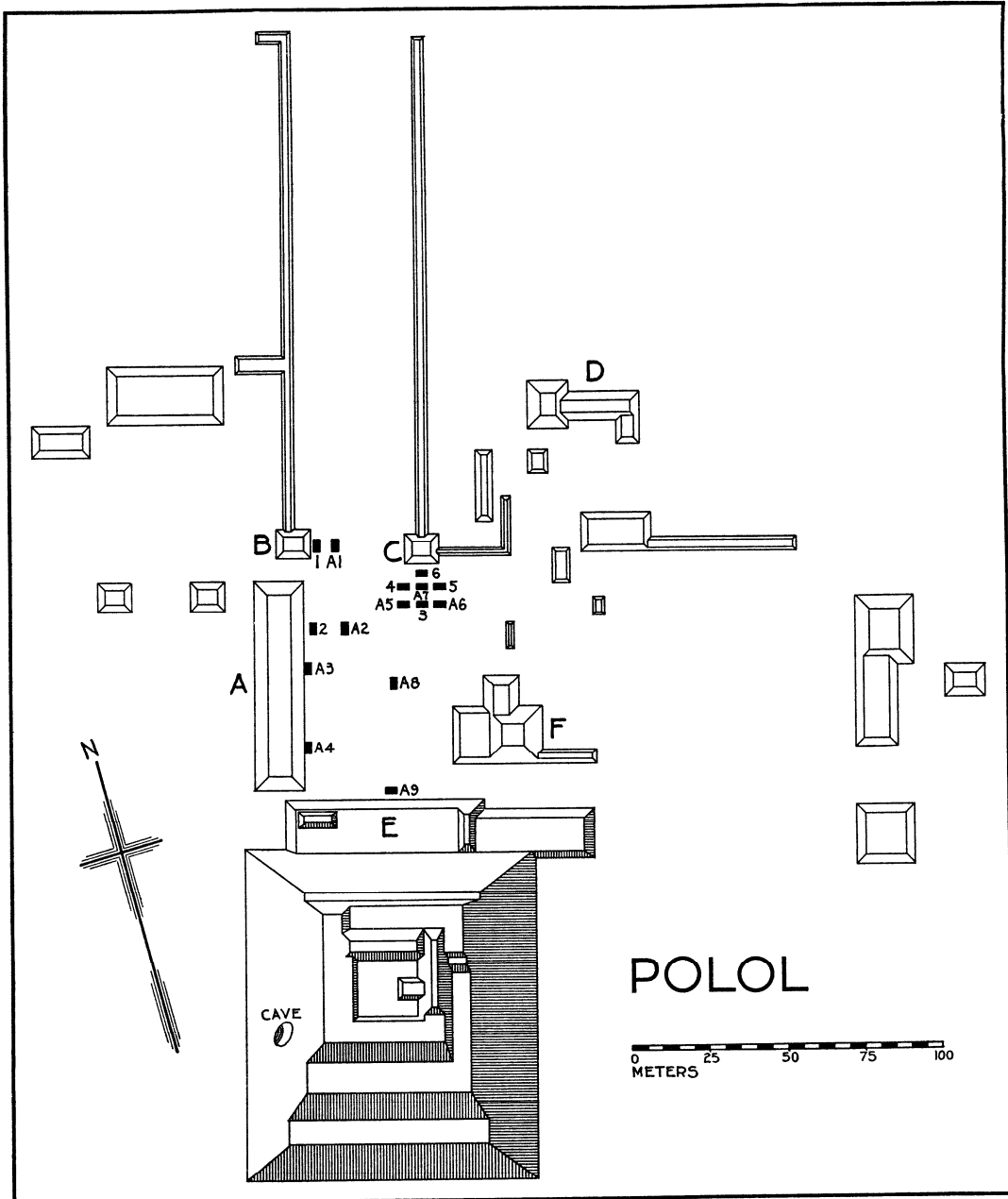


Fig. 3—Plan of the ruins of Polol.

bas-relief, and on one side are two columns of glyphs (Plate 4*d*). The back and other side are so badly flaked and weatherworn that no sculpture was recognizable.

A small sculptured stone, apparently the top of a stela, has been designated as Stela 6. It measures 66 centimeters in width, 28 centimeters in height and 25 centimeters in thickness. The remainder of this monument will possibly be found buried between Structure C and Stela A7.

Stela A8, a plain stone 1.42 meters wide and 3 meters long, is broken into three large pieces. It was discovered by Don Pancho when he was planting corn. His pointed stick hit stone for half a meter, so he removed the humus and found the buried stela.

A large plain stone at the foot of the pyramid, Structure E, is apparently the base of another buried stela. This stone which is designated as Stela A9 measures 1.22 meters in width and 46 centimeters in thickness.

The locality, bush and savanna where the ruin is located are known as Polol, the name of an *aguada* (surface waterhole) near the settlement. The *aguada* derives its name from the aquatic sedges (species of the genus *Scirpus*), called *polol* by the Maya. These sedges no longer grow here, but they are said to have been common formerly. The *aguada* undoubtedly served as one of the chief sources of water for the city. It seems proper therefore that the newly discovered ruin should be known as Polol, a name distinct from that of any other of the Maya cities.

Polol is a city of the Old Maya Empire, perhaps ranking with Itsimte as a cultural and ceremonial center of the people who occupied central Peten. The single surely deciphered date, 9.18.0.0.0 on Stela 1 indicates that the site was roughly contemporaneous with the nearby Itsimte discovered by the Austrian explorer, Teobert Maler, 30 years ago.

LAGUNA PERDIDA AND NOHAKA

Additional unexplored Maya ruins are said locally to exist in central Peten. One of the most promising of these is located on the northwest side of Laguna Perdida (fig. 1). Mr. O. A. Taintor¹ who discovered the site describes it as a ruin with pyramids, numerous mounds, and at least two giant fallen stelae, which he once encountered when hunting. It is also reported that a beautiful carved stone was removed from a location near the present chicle station at Laguna Perdida more than a decade ago.

¹ Mr. O. A. Taintor of La Libertad has lived in central Peten for 28 years and during this time he has worked extensively in the bush in mahogany and chicle operations, so he is an authority on the region. He was manager of the Chicle Development Company operations at El Paso de Caballo, Peten, for 54 years. The expedition made its headquarters with Mr. Taintor at La Libertad and much of the success of the season was due to his splendid cooperation.

In recording the archaeological sites encountered in southern Campeche,¹ the writer failed to mention a somewhat extensive ruin which lies in the vicinity of the chicle station known as Nohakal, on the road between Tuxpeña and Juarez. The approximate location of the site is shown in the map (fig. 1).

PICTOGRAPH AT TAYASAL

Indians taking stone from Tayasal to burn for lime had removed the humus from a small area of the second terrace on the north side of the peninsula. This exposed a plastered surface on which a curious whorl was discovered. Mr. Ruben Alvarado of Flores and the writer removed more of the humus covering and found that the whorl was part of a large pictograph (Plate 5).

The area we cleared measures approximately 2.5 by 4 meters; this is evidently only a portion of the pictograph which appears to have covered a large section of the face of the terrace. The area exposed was both photographed and sketched.

DISCOVERIES AT TOPOXTE

During a two-day delay at the village of Yaxha on our outward trip, explorations were made among Maler's ruins of Topoxte (fig. 1).² Going west from the village, these ruins lie on the first large island near the end of the lake.

Dr. L. C. Stuart, herpetologist of the expedition, and the writer explored this site with the aid of native guides. The structures shown by Maler on the sketch plan as well as the nine small stelae, A1 to A9 inclusive, were located (fig. 4). Only three of the stelae remain standing; the others are broken and so scattered that it is difficult to determine their original positions (Plate 7). Fragments of stela-like stones are numerous so there may have been more than the nine small monoliths indicated by Maler.

The main temple stands today exactly as it was found in 1904 (Structure C, fig. 4, and Plate 6). In exploring it the writer found that the main entrance was once formed by two round columns which were apparently removed in later reconstructions. The bases of these columns, however, remain *in situ*, surrounded by square columns of a later date. In measuring the main temple it was also discovered that the present temple had been superimposed on one of an earlier period. On the south

¹ Cyrus Longworth Lundell, *Archeological discoveries in the Maya Area*, Proc. Amer. Philos. Soc., Philadelphia, vol. 72, No. 3, 1933.

² Teobert Maler, *Explorations in the Department of Peten, Guatemala and Adjacent Regions*, Mem. Peabody Mus. Amer. Archaeol. and Ethno., vol. 4, No. 2, 55-60. Harvard Univ., Cambridge, Mass., 1908.

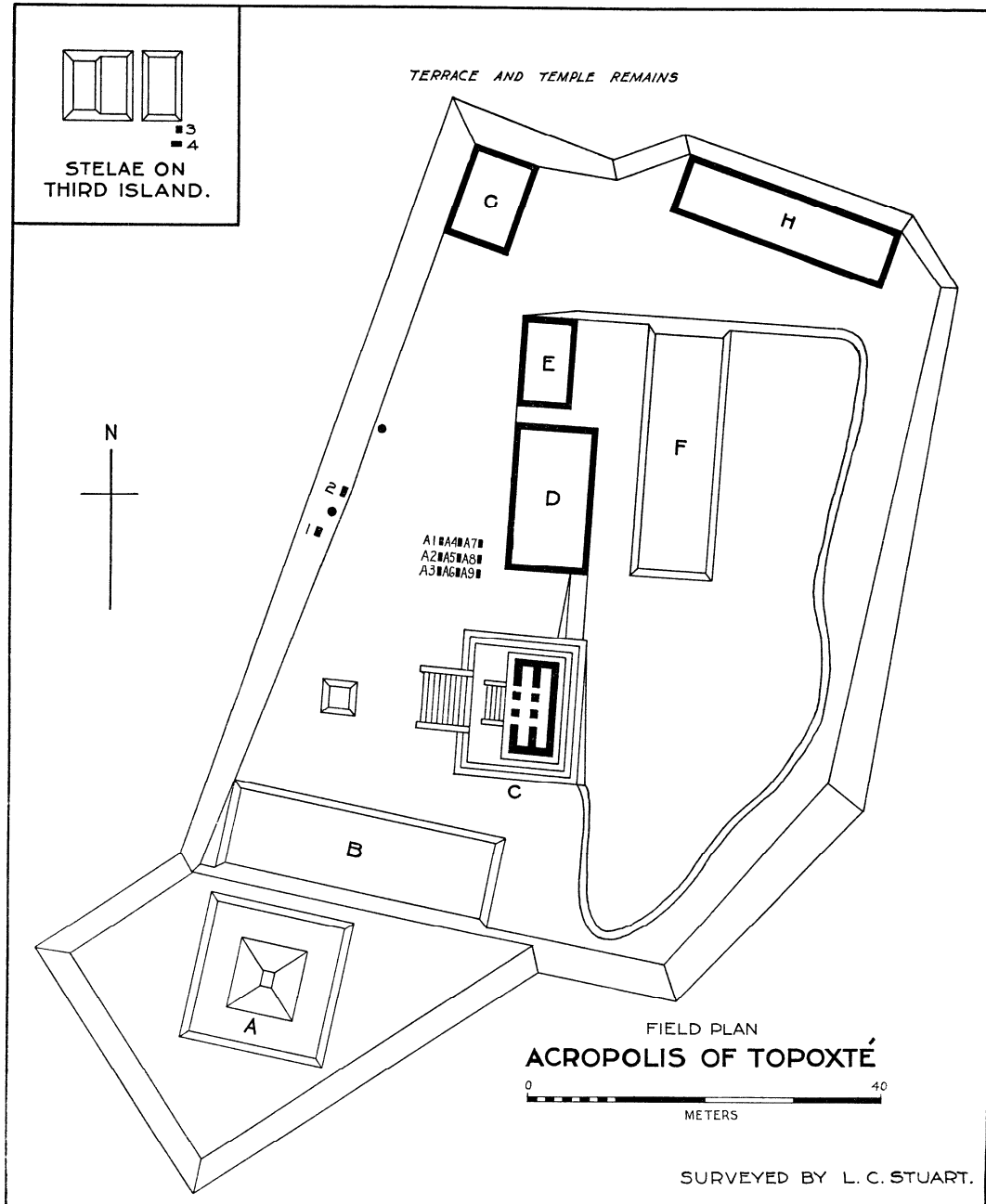


Fig.4—Sketch maps of the Acropolis at the ruins of Topoxte. Structures A, C, D, E, G and H are partly standing; B and F are low flat mounds. Insert at top shows position of the two sculptured monuments on the third island.

side of the third terrace there are sealed window-like openings, apparently belonging to a still earlier temple. It appears that the present temple is built on top of at least two older structures, each of which was filled with rubble. The sealed window-like openings in the third terrace may be discerned in the photograph (Plate 6b). In the later additions to the substructure and in the construction of the superimposed temple, small and roughly cut facing stones were employed as compared with the large squared blocks used in the older structures. Plaster, as usual, covered the entire edifice.

The nine plain stelae, A1 to A9 inclusive, found by Maler (fig. 4 and Plate 7) probably belong to the period of the later temple. In examining these stelae I discovered that they were originally probably faced with stucco bas-reliefs, for in spite of the weatherworn condition of the small monoliths there are fragmentary remains of stucco showing evidence that would seem to justify such a conclusion. The small monoliths (Plate 7b) are pitted with holes which were made to hold the stucco facing to the stone.

The small altars referred to by Maler all appear to be drums or sections from the round columns of the temple. It is probable that alterations were made to the temple, and that the round columns were removed and their sections reused as altars. The altars each have a small hole in the center into which a stone ball was possibly inserted to lock them together at the time when they served as sections of columns; in fact such a stone ball was found in clearing away the vegetation.

While exploring the western incline of the Acropolis on top of which the main structures are located, the writer noticed a rounded stone protruding several inches. In digging away the rubble, a stela was discovered which is sculptured on its face and plain on the two sides (fig. 4 and Plate 8a). The stela, badly weatherworn and chipped, has been broken off at the middle and only the upper half was located. I have designated it as Stela 1. Not more than 3 meters north of this monument, there is a large round plain altar lying on its edge between two trees.

Further exploration on the steep incline revealed another rounded stone projecting and, digging with a machete, I discovered another sculptured stela. It lies on its back parallel to the axis of the Acropolis, slightly above and north of the aforementioned altar (fig. 4). It is large and unbroken with three groups of glyphs and the figure of a warrior on the sculptured face (Plate 8b and c); the sides are plain. This monolith, designated as Stela 2, was buried under some 60 centimeters of rubble and large stones.

Apparently these two sculptured stelae and the plain altar were discarded, thrown over the side of the Acropolis, and buried at the time when the other small stelae were erected. Stelae 1 and 2

may date from the period of the oldest buried temple, and the decipherment of the glyphs on Stela 2 which is of the style of the late Old Empire will be very interesting.

A large plain altar made of stucco was found on top near the western edge of the Acropolis (position shown in fig. 4).

Two other large adjacent islands west of the first island were explored, and on each extensive ruins were found, but no standing structures were encountered. Near the center of the third island the writer discovered two additional small sculptured monuments, Stelae 3 and 4 (fig. 4). The monolith which I have designated as Stela 3 is standing (Plate 9*a*). It has basreliefs and inscriptions on the front and back with the two sides showing evidences of sculpture. The second monolith, designated as Stela 4, is sculptured on its face. Its sides and back are so worn by the elements that it is difficult to ascertain whether or not they were sculptured.

A plan of the ruins on the Acropolis of the first island was made by Dr. Stuart (fig. 4). I photographed the main temple and the stelae after we had spent a full day clearing away the vegetation so that sufficient light could penetrate to the ground.

COPPER AX AND POTTERY FRAGMENT

In the village of Yaxha the writer saw a small hand-forged copper ax (Plate 9*c*) which had been found by a *milpero* near the Yaxha ruins. If this tool dates from the time of the Old Empire period, it is a find of greatest importance, no metal ever having been previously reported from a definite Old Empire site in the southern Maya area.

At El Cayo, British Honduras a fragment of a vase was obtained which had been found by a hunter while digging for an agouti in the side of a hill south of Benque Viejo. The design on this potsherd (Plate 9*b*) is similar to a portion of a stamped decoration on a vase in the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania.¹ Evidently several vases had been made with the same motif.

SUMMARY

1. Two new sites were discovered: Polol, a city of the Old Maya Empire, 7 kilometers west-southwest of the village of La Libertad in the high bush at the edge of the savanna country; and, Chakantun, apparently a site dating from the Tayasal Period, lying 8 kilometers south of the same village in the open savanna. Additional small scattered ruins were found throughout the western portion

¹ *Maya Pottery*, Part I, Plate IV, Univ. Mus., Univ. Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1925.

of the savanna country of central Peten. Information was received concerning the location of another early site on the northwest shore of Laguna Perdida.

2. Nineteen new stelae were discovered; 15 in Polol of which 6 are sculptured, and 4 in Topoxte, all sculptured.

3. Two Initial Series were found at Polol; these, deciphered by Dr. Morley, bear the dates 9.18.0.0.0. (Stela 1) and 9.17.5.?.4 (Stela 4).

4. A pictograph, similar to the one found by Guthe at Flores in 1921, was located on the north terrace at Tayasal.

5. Topoxte was explored, and a plan was made of the ruins on the Acropolis.



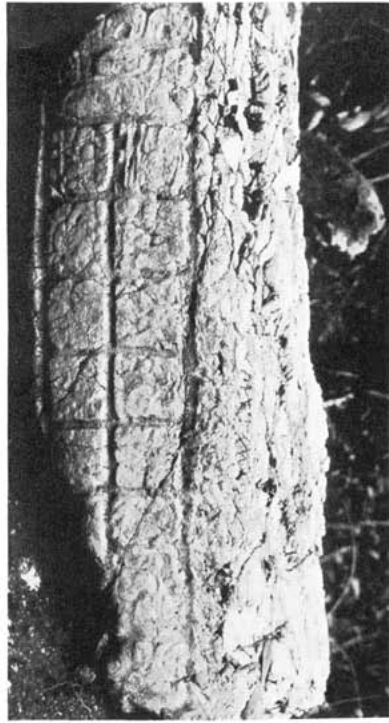
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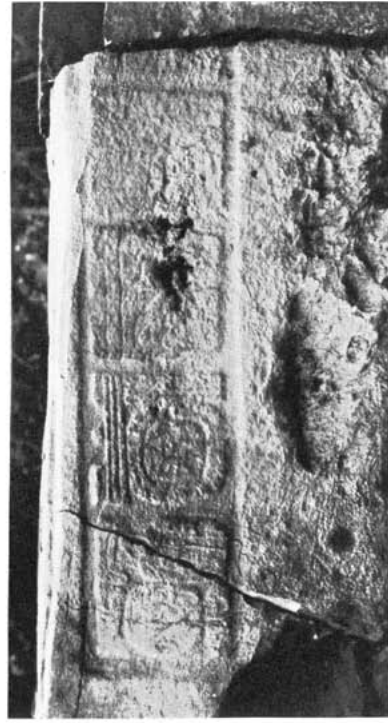
b

RUINS IN THE OPEN CONTRY OF CENTRAL PETEN

a, Large mound in Chakantun; *b*, Evidences of more habitations in the Sabana Kalto (see fig. 2). Such scattered remains are found everywhere in the region.



a



b



c



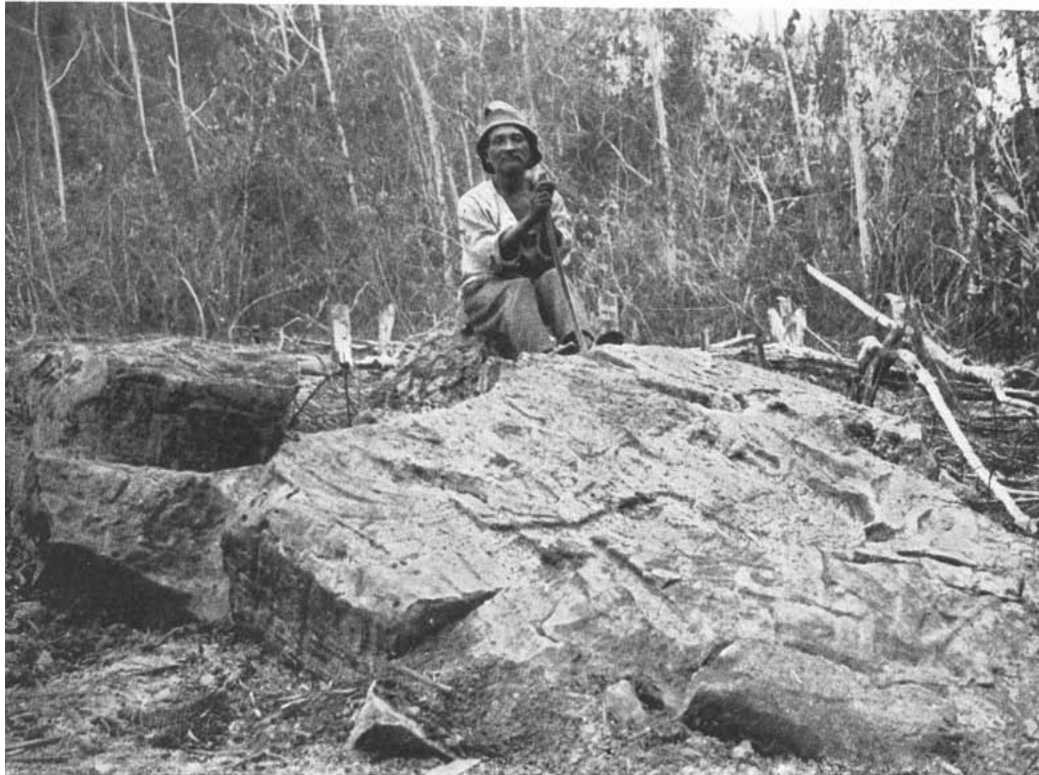
d

STELAE AT POLOL

a, Stela 1, Initial Series on the left side. *b*, Stela 2, inscription on right side; *c*, Stela 2, front; *d*, Stela 2, detail of sculpture on front.



a



b

STELA 4 AT POLOL

a, Glyph-panels on bottom of back sides; *b*, Don Pancho sitting on the monument, the largest in Polol.



a



b



c



d

STELAE AT POLOL

a, Stela 4, Initial Series on left side; *b*, Stela 4, Closer view of Initial Series on left side; *c*, Stela 4, Supplementary Series on right side; *d*, Stela 5, inscriptions on one side.



a



b

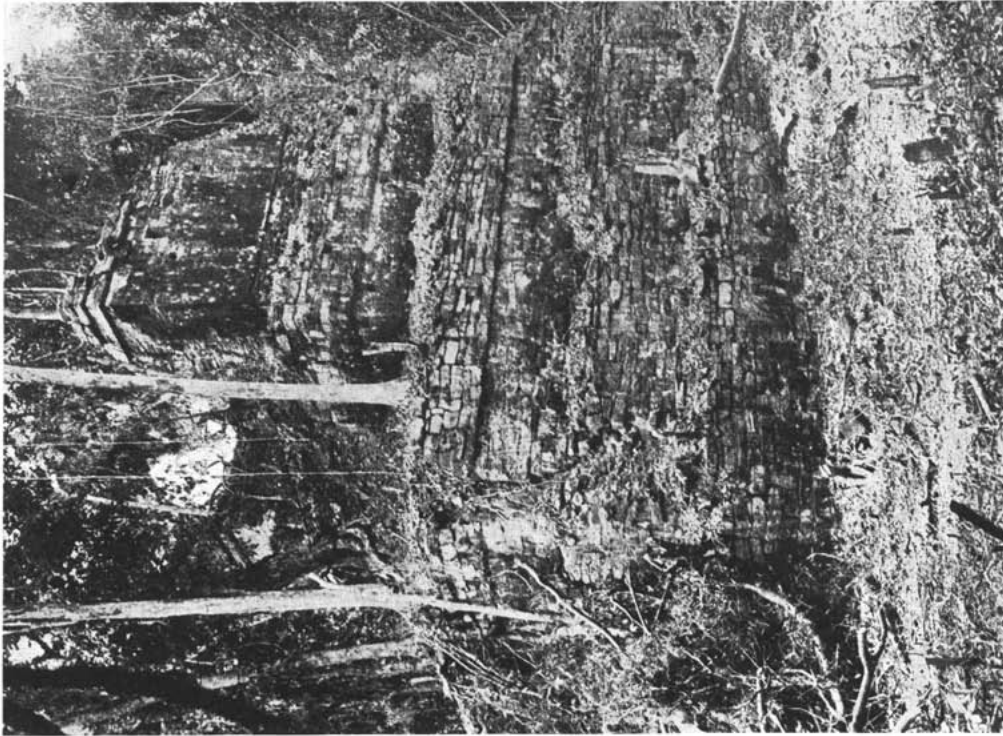


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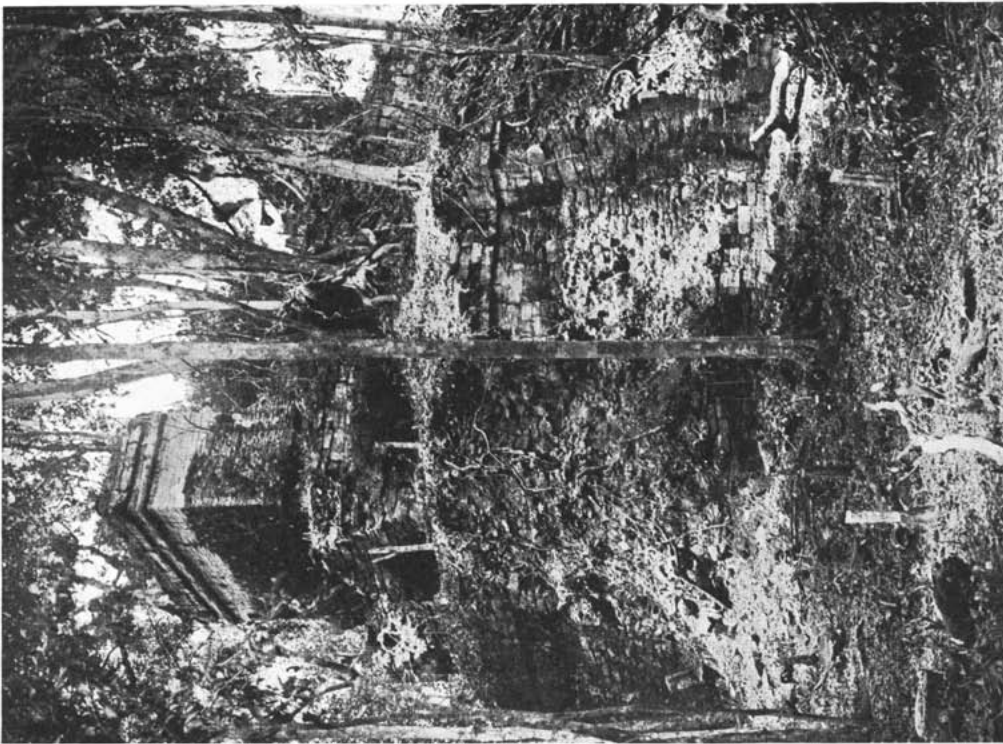


d

PICTOGRAPH ON STUCCO-COVERED TERRACE AT TAYASAL
a and *b*, Detail of design showing whorls and crosses; *c* and *d*, A section prior to being chalked and afterward.



b



a

MAIN TEMPLE AT TOXOXTE

a, Northwest corner of temple; *b*, Southwest corner. Note that Maler photographed the structure from this same angle



a



b

SMALL UNSCULPTURED STELAE AT TOPOXTE

a, Five of the nine monuments, Stalae A1 to A9 inclusive, located on the west side of the structure D; *b*, Small holes in the stelae, presumably for holding stucco to the stone.



a



b



c

SCULPTURED STELAE AT TOPOXTE

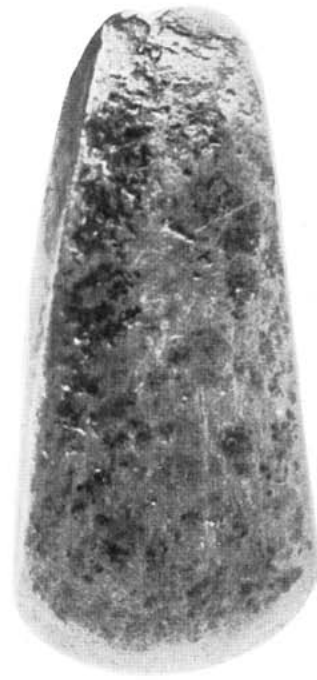
a, Stela 1, the sculpted front face; *b*, Stela 2, the sculpted front face; *c*, Stela 2, glyph-panel at the left.



a



b



c

SCULPTURED STELA AT TOPOXTE, POTSHERD AND COPPER AX-HEAD
a, Stela 3 at Topoxte (on the third or westernmost island), the sculptured front face; *b*, Potsherd with design made from a stamp, found near Benque Viejo, British Honduras; *c*, Copper ax-head found near the Yaxha ruins.