

UXMAL, Yucatan, about 50 miles south of Merida.

Uxmal (oosh-mahl, Mayan for "thrice rebuilt") is one of the great Mayan cities. Although not so extensive or well restored as Chichen Itza, it has several large and remarkably beautiful structures.

History

Uxmal was apparently occupied either continuously or intermittently from the 7th to the 14th or 15th centuries. The area was invaded about the 10th century by the Xius, a people of Mexican origin (that is, from the Valley of Mexico). Later, together with Chichen Itza and Mayapan, Uxmal was a member of the League of Mayapan, a triumvirate that ruled the Yucatan Peninsula. The city was deserted before the arrival of the Spaniards.

The Ruins

The most important buildings are the Pyramid of the Dwarf (the most prominent structure), the Nunnery, and the Palace of the Governor. The last two lie to the north and south, respectively, of the steep central pyramid.

Because Uxmal passed through several building phases, it reflects a variety of architectural influences. Most of the structures were built in the Puuc ("hill") style, in which almost all decoration is confined to the friezes on the upper portions of the building. However, there are several structures built in the elaborate Chenes ("wells") style, developed in the Campeche area. A later design influence can be seen in the feathered serpents, warriors, and phallic symbols decorating some of the buildings that are attributed to the people from the central highlands. Most construction took place between the 7th and 11th centuries.

The Nunnery.

This impressive group of buildings was undoubtedly an important ritual center and may possibly have been the residence of the city's priesthood. The large complex consists of four elaborately decorated buildings set around a central court. The courtyard is not an exact rectangle, for the builders used false perspective to accentuate its length; it is narrower and higher on the side opposite the entryway.

Entrance to the Nunnery is by way of a broad stairway and an arched passageway in the center of the southern building. The passage shows traces of red hands that were probably painted as symbols of the god Itzamna - "The Hand of the Heavenly Worker". The outer surfaces of the building are decorated with stone latticework and Mayan huts, and above each hut is a mask of the rain god.

The large northern building sits on a high platform at the top of a stairway flanked by temples. The rich profusion of decorations on the building includes Mayan motifs and elements added by the Mexicans from the highlands: masks of the rain gods; complex geometric patterns; Mayan huts; and sculptures of humans and animals, including a group of manacled prisoners at the rear of the structure.

The eastern building is decorated with latticework, masks of Chae, and a repeated motif of double-headed serpents grouped in the shape of a triangle. The frieze on the western building has a central sculpture of a strange creature—a turtle with an old man's head-sitting under a large, feathered canopy. The frieze also includes Mayan masks and huts, as well as feathered serpents with human heads in their jaws and statues of warriors and naked men.

Pyramid of the Dwarf.

The Pyramid of the Dwarf (or Pyramid of the Magician, as it is sometimes called) owes its names to a local legend ascribing its construction to a dwarf with supernatural powers. In contrast to most pyramids, the shape of this unique structure is elliptical, rather than square or rectangular, and it has a front surface that is much steeper than the rear.

This structure was built in various stages. Originally only a large temple stood on the site. Later a pyramid was so constructed that it partially covered the original building but left its facade exposed, and three temples were raised at the top. In the last stage of building, the pyramid was heightened, leaving part of a shrine showing, and still another temple was erected on the summit.

In its final state, the structure stands about 100 feet tall. The Chenes-style shrine on the landing (the top of the first pyramid) is the best preserved and most elaborate of the three exposed temples. Its facade is a composite of masks of the rain god Chac, which together form a large mask of the same god.

Palace of the Governor.

The stunning Palace of the Governor is considered by some authorities to be the finest example of pre-Hispanic art in the Americas. The rectangular structure consists of a central section and two annexes attached to the main building by archways that were originally open but were later blocked to form rooms. On the friezes running the length of the huge building, overlapped masks of Chac form a rippling band over an intricate background of latticework and fretwork. Over the central door on the eastern side is a throne with a figure in a great feathered headdress. The beauty of the harmoniously proportioned building is enhanced by its dramatic placement on a series of terraces raised over a natural elevation of the ground.

Other Buildings.

Numerous other buildings have been partially cleared or restored. They provide fascinating browsing, although information concerning them is very limited because study of them has not been completed. The most important are described here briefly:

Great Pyramid (just south-west of the Palace of the Governor), a large, rubble-covered mass with a temple. The rooms have been filled, apparently in preparation for the superimposition of a temple that was never built.

The Dovecotes (adjoining the Great Pyramid on the west), a very large complex, consisting of a pyramid and three courtyards surrounded by buildings. It is named for the beautiful openwork crest on the northernmost building in the group.

House of the Old Woman (south-east of the Palace of the Governor), a badly deteriorated group of structures with the openwork cresting typical of early construction and remnants of designs that may be Toltec in origin. The place received its name because it is the legendary dwelling place of the witch who mothered the supernatural dwarf.

Temple of the Phalli (about one-fourth of a mile south of the House of the Old Woman), a ruinous building with sculptures in the shape of phalli projecting from the walls; the projections may have served as rain spouts. The phallus, a symbol of fecundity and fertility of the soil, is portrayed in several buildings at Uxmal.

Ceremonial Arch (about half a mile south of the Palace of the Governor), the remains of an arch almost identical to one at Kabah. The two structures probably marked the ends of a road connecting the cities.

Chimez Temple (between the arch and the Palace of the Governor), a small, rubble-covered building, the only Uxmal structure with two stories.

House of the Turtles (north-west corner of the terrace of the Palace of the Governor), a partially reconstructed building with a colonnaded facade surmounted by carved stone turtles. Nearby, on the western side of the lower terrace, is a small temple with elaborate overall decoration in the Chenes style.

Ball Court (north of the Palace of the Governor), a small court with two side platforms but lacking the usual end structures.

Cemetery Group (about 200 yards west of the ball court), a complex consisting of several unreconstructed temples, altars, and a pyramid. The buildings are in Puuc style and have openwork cresting. They were named for the skulls and crossbones carved on several small platforms in front of the pyramid.

Platform of the Stelae (about 100 yards west of the Nunnery, reached from a path leading to the Cemetery Group), a platform with 15 monolithic carved markers.

Northern and Northwestern Groups, complexes of unexcavated pyramids, temples, and platforms.