

Pyramid of Kulkulkan/Quetzalcoatl

Chichen Itza, Yucatan, Mexico

While the earliest archaeological artifacts thus far found at Chichen Itza date from AD 1 to 250, it is probable that the site was settled at an earlier time. The flat limestone plateau that makes up most of the Yucatan peninsula had been inhabited by proto-Mayan tribes for at least 8000 years. These nomadic peoples would certainly have discovered (and imbued with legendary sanctity) the enormous natural well, next to which the great city of Chichen Itza later grew. As a social center Chichen Itza began its rise to prominence with the arrival of a seafaring people in the eighth century. Called the Itza by archaeologists, these merchant warriors first colonized the northern coastal areas of the Yucatan peninsula and then ventured inland. After their conquest of the holy city of Izamal (see photo#), the Itza settled at a sacred cenote that would become known as Chichen Itza, "the Well of the Itza." From this site they rapidly became the rulers of much of the Yucatan peninsula. Writing of Chichen Itza, Mayan scholars Linda Schele and David Freidel tell us:

After over a thousand years of success, most of the kingdoms of the southern lowlands collapsed in the ninth century. In the wake of this upheaval, the Maya of the northern lowlands tried a different style of government. They centered their world around a single capital at Chichen Itza. Not quite ruler of an empire, Chichen Itza became, for a time, first among the many allied cities of the north and the pivot of the lowland Maya world. It also differed from the royal cities before it, for it had a council of many lords rather than one ruler.

The written history of the city covers only a short period, with the earliest clear date being AD 867. The traditional interpretation of the history of Chichen Itza held that the city was occupied several times by various groups of people, beginning with the Mayans and ending with Toltec invaders from the city of Tula in central Mexico. While numerous archaeology and history books still ascribe to this interpretation, it is now known that Chichen Itza was occupied continuously by the Mayans. The Toltec influences found in the art and architecture of certain areas of the great city were the result of the patronage of a cosmopolitan nobility involved in trade with the Tula Toltecs and other Mesoamerican peoples.

The Temple of Kulkulkan (the Feathered Serpent God, also known as Quetzalcoatl) is the largest and most important ceremonial structure at Chichen Itza. This ninety-foot tall pyramid was built during the eleventh to thirteenth centuries directly upon the multiple foundations of previous temples. The pyramid is a store-house of information on the Mayan calendar. Each face of the four-sided structure has a stairway with ninety-one steps, which together with the shared step of the platform at the top, add up to 365, the number of days in a year. On each face of the pyramid the central stairway divides the nine terraces into eighteen segments representing the eighteen months of the Mayan calendar. The

pyramid is also directionally oriented to mark the solstices and equinoxes. The axes that run through the northwest and southwest corners of the pyramid are oriented toward the rising point of the sun at the summer solstice and its setting point at the winter solstice. The northern stairway was the principal sacred path leading to the summit. At sunset on the vernal and autumnal equinoxes, an interplay between the sun's light and the edges of the stepped terraces on the pyramid creates a fascinating - and very brief - shadow display upon the sides of the northern stairway. A serrated line of seven interlocking triangles gives the impression of a long tail leading downward to the stone head of the serpent Kukulkan, at the base of the stairway.

According to Maya scholars Linda Schele and David Friedel, the massive pyramidal temples found at Chichen Itza, Uxmal, Palenque and many other major Maya sites were symbolic sacred mountains. Writing in *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya*, Schele and Freidel explain that:

To the Maya, the world was alive and imbued with a sacredness that was especially concentrated at special points, like caves and mountains. The principal pattern of power points had been established by the gods when the cosmos was created. Within this matrix of sacred landscape, human beings built communities that both merged with the god-generated patterns and created a second human-made matrix of power points. The two systems were perceived to be complementary, not separate.The world of human beings was connected to the Otherworld along the wacah chan axis which ran through the center of existence. This axis was not located in any one earthly place, but could be materialized through ritual at any point in the natural and human-made landscape. Most important, it was materialized in the person of the king, who brought it into existence as he stood enthralled in ecstatic visions atop his pyramid-mountain....When new buildings were to be constructed, the Maya performed elaborate rituals both to terminate the old structure and contain its accumulated energy. The new structure was then built atop the old and, when it was ready for use, they conducted elaborate dedication rituals to bring it alive....So powerful were the effects of these rituals that the objects, people, buildings, and places in the landscape in which the supernatural materialized accumulated energy and became more sacred with repeated use. Thus, as kings built and rebuilt temples on the same spot over centuries, the sanctums within them became ever more sacred. The devotion and ecstasy of successive divine kings sacrificing within those sanctums rendered the membrane between this world and the Otherworld ever more thin and pliable. The ancestors and the gods passed through such portals into the living monarch with increasing facility. To enhance this effect, generations of kings replicated the iconography and sculptural programs of early buildings through successive temples built over the same nexus....As the Maya exploited the patterns of power in time and space, they used ritual to control the dangerous and powerful energies they released. There were rituals which contained the accumulated power of objects, people, and places when they were no longer in active use. And conversely, when the community became convinced that the power was gone from their city and ruling dynasties, they just walked away.

