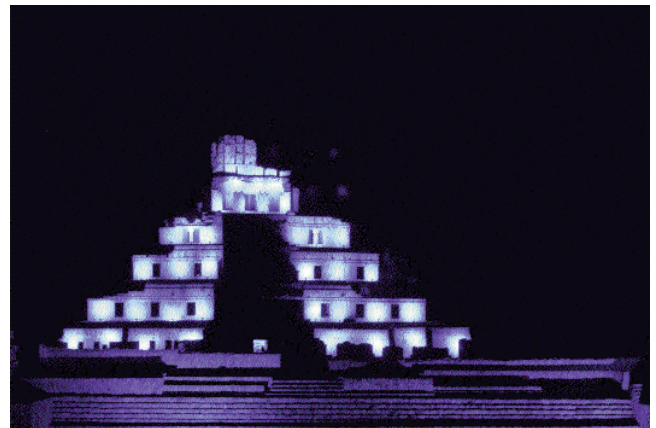


# The Río Bec, Chenes and Puuc Styles in Campeche's Mayan Cities

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Campeche's many Mayan cities boast several different architectural styles. The early developments, mainly in the south, offer outstanding examples of monumental constructions in the Petén style and sites where we can observe archi-

tectural elements covering previously existing structures or new construction and iconographic systems.

## THE RÍO BEC STYLE

Part of this large southern area was explored between 1906 and 1907 by French traveler Maurice de Perigny,

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Photos by Elsie Montiel.



Panorama of the three towers in X-puhil's Structure I.



Relief at the top of X-puhil's Structure I, depicting an open-mouthed deity.

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Structure VIII in Becan, also Río Bec-styled.

who was amazed by the enormous towers that characterized the structures in some sites. One of these was named Río Bec after a nearby stream that looked like a river and by the large number of oak trees (*bec* or *beec* in Mayan), giving the site's architectural style its name.

The Río Bec style's main characteristics are: a) three-levelled structures. The constructions are laid out on a long, low platform with a single story of rooms and high towers on the ends. Their front looks like a very steep basement with steps that are unusable because they are so steep and narrow; b) the use of rounded corners, molding, engaged columns, panels with geometric designs that look checkered and equal-sided crosses carved into the stone; c) the top of the towers is a solid temple with a giant, full-faced mask on the façade, also known as a zoomorphic facade or monster temple.<sup>1</sup>

The mask is facing the front; it has eyes and a nose and the mouth is open because it is the doorway to the temple. This figure has been identified as the "Monster of the Earth." It is associated with the underworld and the building represents a mountain.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, what its makers were trying to transmit through this visual language was more important than the function of these architectural complexes, particularly the towers that were a symbol of the power of the governing elites. Thus, the power of the sovereign is demonstrated because he had access to the underworld, to the cave, to the mountain, to the road that allowed him to communicate with the deities and his ancestors who were the figures who dignified his strength and power. Among the most representative archaeological sites in this style are Río Bec, X-puhil, Hormiguero, Becan and Chicanná.

X-puhil's Structure I complex, with three towers, is one of the best known examples. The three towers, as well as 12 rooms, are all built on a platform; the towers with rounded corners are made up of eleven bodies stacked on top of each other with fake temples on the top and have a very steep stairway in front of them. They also had facades with giant masks and combs or ridges on the roofs, but there is little evidence left of them. Toward the bottom, level with the cavity simulating the entryway to the inside of the temple, we can see a figure in high relief facing forward with its mouth open. This site has many more structures that show that its period of activity was from the late pre-Classical (400 B.C.) to the early post-classical (A.D. 1200).



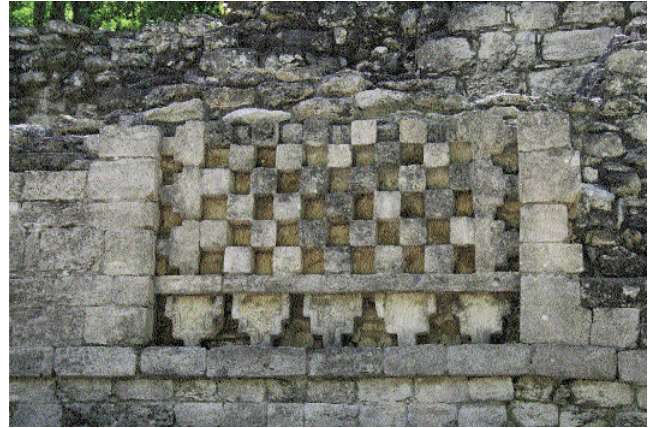
The Petén style that had been used in some cities seems to have declined, and between the sixth and seventh centuries in sites like Becan, Río Bec-styled constructions began to appear. Thus, Becan's imposing Structures I and VIII had high towers on each side. On the south side of Structure I, two levels of vaulted rooms were built; and in some buildings, we can observe reliefs with geometric designs in a checkerboard pattern. The political and economic power Becan achieved was due, among other things, to the fact that it was situated at an important place on the trade route to the Quintana Roo coast.

Another interesting site is Chicanná, neighboring on Becan. Its Structure I has two rows of chambers, towers with rounded corners and stairways that lead up to fake temples. Structure 20, with its square base, has 12 rooms on the first floor and four on the second floor, while both the upper and lower facades boast zoomorphic figures.

#### THE CHENES STYLE

Although with certain differences, the Río Bec and Chenes styles—the word “Chenes” comes from the Mayan word *ch'en*, meaning a well or cave of water—shared certain architectural characteristics.<sup>3</sup> Some cities have constructions in both styles, like Chicanná, whose elegant Structure II is one of the most outstanding in the Chenes style. It is made up of two parallel rows of rooms and three entryways. At the center is a representation of the enormous Monster of the Earth with crossed eyes, a frown, nose, ear plugs and an open maw. In contrast with the simulated doorways in the Río Bec towers, here there is real access to the inside. The building's low platform extends to the outside like a walkway. In the area where the giant mask is, the floor is higher and it reaches outside rather in the manner of a tongue. On the sides, like above and on the sides of the doorway, a few teeth remain, representing the mandible. On the two sides of the Monster of the Earth, there is a line of large-nosed masks in profile, one under the other.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to mention that inside the high relief of the great mask, there are remnants of blue, ochre and dark red paint. Also, the lower walls of Structure II



Checkerboard pattern on one of Becan's buildings in the Río Bec style.

The Petén style seems to have declined, and between the sixth and seventh centuries in sites like Becan, Río Bec-styled constructions began to appear.



Chicanná. An example of a Río Bec-style relief.





Chicanná. Structure II, an outstanding example of the Chenes style.

At the center of Chicanná's Structure II is a representation of the enormous Monster of the Earth with crossed eyes, a frown, nose, ear plugs and an open maw.

may well have been covered with murals judging by a small fragment of a red hieroglyphic inscription that can still be distinguished on the right side of the great mask. Imagining this building full of color, with its high and bas-reliefs, is to think of the impressive effects of light and shadow that its facade would have projected.

Another element of the Chenes style is the stone salients, often found in the mid-level molding or on the combs, that held sculpted figures. These can be seen in Chicanná's Structure II and also in Structure I at the Hochob site, in the northwest part of the region, one of the most typical examples of this style.

#### THE PUUC STYLE

The Puuc hills stretch from northwestern Yucatán to central Campeche, reaching a maximum altitude of 100 meters above sea level. A great many sites whose architecture is in the Puuc style are in northern Campeche, and more in southern, eastern and central Yucatán.

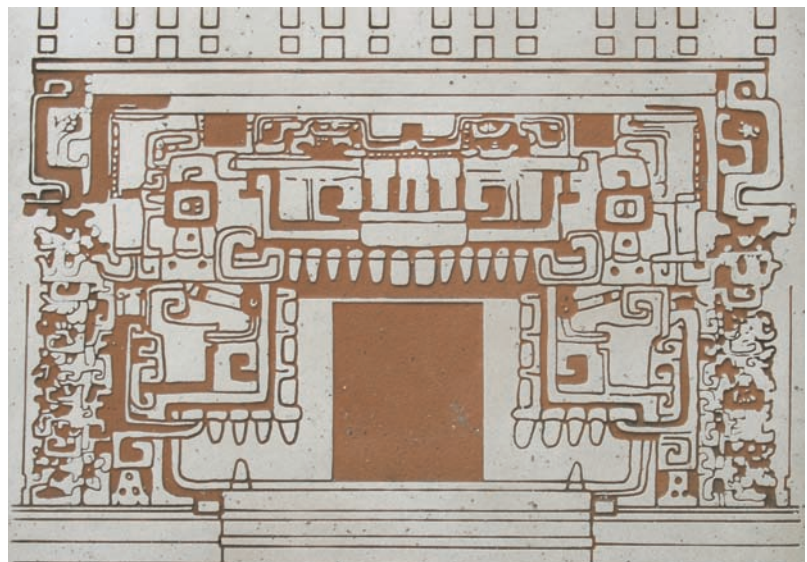
This area is crisscrossed with underground rivers and pools called *cenotes* or natural wells. Local inhabitants also devised *chultunes*, or cisterns, to store rain water, and they are commonly found in many sites in this region, like Edzná, where they also built an extraordinary hydraulic system: an extensive network of canals, cisterns and pools that guaranteed enough water for irrigation.

It was mainly during the late classical period (A.D. 600-900) when these cities decorated their buildings

in the Puuc style, with stone mosaics. Mayan scholar George F. Andrews distinguished several phases in the style's development based on his study of the changes in the buildings and their decoration. However, here, we will only mention a few of the general characteristics.<sup>5</sup>

One characteristic of the Puuc style is that the long, palace-like buildings are several stories high with many rooms built on enormous platforms, like the temple-palace of Edzná's Building of the Five Stories or Yucatan's Sayil Palace, with its 90 rooms.

The buildings are arranged in quadrangles and the construction is lighter, revealing clear interest in making the interiors larger with a horizontal feel. The walls are made with well-cut, worked stones. The facades are generally smooth and sometimes alternate with



Drawing of the Monster of the Earth on the entrance to Structure II, Chicanná.

groups of columns. The friezes, entablatures and cornices have a variety of designs created in worked stone mosaics, which required carefully polishing the tiny stones and then placing them to create the desired images. The surprising thing about them is that they fit perfectly.

The complexity of the designs can be seen on the extraordinary facades: single or layered frets, little columns, Mayan huts, window lattices, drums, rhombuses, serpentine shapes, diagonal crosses and human figures representing the rulers. Just like in the Chenes style, we continue to see the giant mask or long-nosed god on the friezes or the corners.

Edzná, located south of the city of Campeche, began its architectural development around 300 B.C., continuing up until A.D. 1000, although some small buildings were erected as late as A.D. 1200. Its monumental constructions point to it being a powerful political center with a centralized government; some specialists think it was a regional capital.

The earliest constructions can be found in the Small Acropolis, a quadrangular basement on which four buildings have been erected, dating from 200 B.C. Some of these buildings preserve great stucco masks modeled in the Petén tradition. Antonio Benavides



Edzná's ball game court still has some remains of rooms.

**One characteristic of the Puuc style is that the long, palace-like buildings are several stories high with many rooms built on enormous platforms.**

considers that the buildings from that period were partially dismantled to erect new ones.<sup>6</sup>

The Building of the Five Stories is a temple-palace with marked Puuc characteristics. It is noteworthy because of its size and location along the central axis of the Great Acropolis. It has five successively smaller stories and each one has a series of rooms with several doorways interspersed with masonry columns of single pieces or drums stacked one on top of the other and topped by square capitals. Underneath the broad stairway are vaulted passageways. Like at other sites, the builders continued the custom of building roof combs ornamented with stucco figures. On the vertical part of every step in the stairways there were blocks of glyphs, where the date A.D. 652 can be seen.

In addition to the Building of the Five Stories, this Great Acropolis is flanked by other structures, among them, the Nohochná or "Big House," with four galleries divided by pilasters. It looks like bleachers that may



Edzná. Monumental structures point to it being a powerful city.





have been used for spectators to watch events or ceremonies held in the plaza. The Platform of Knives had four vaulted rooms on the ends and was reutilized to build roofed rooms with temporary materials. Another construction is the ball game court where the remains

of rooms can also be seen. To conclude, it should be noted that these examples barely give a glimpse at the scope of Mayan architecture and the different styles with which this great civilization decorated its majestic cities. **MM**



#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Paul Gendrop and other scholars of Mayan architecture analyzed these facades in detail and called them partial and comprehensive zoomorphic facades. See Paul Gendrop, *Los estilos Río Bec, Chenes y Puuc en la arquitectura maya* (Mexico City: Div. de Estudios de Posgrado de la Facultad de Arquitectura-UNAM, 1983); George F. Andrews, *Los estilos arquitectónicos del Puuc, una nueva apreciación* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia/Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1986); and F. David Potter, "Maya Architecture of the Central Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico," *National Geographic Society* 44 (New Orleans: Tulane University Program of Research in Campeche/Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, 1977), among others.

<sup>2</sup> Several specialists have identified this being as the supreme Mayan god Itzamná. However, today, iconographic analyses are more inclined to accept that this is the personification of the Monster of the Earth. We should also mention that Román Piña Chan identified it as the lizard that symbolizes the Earth and the underworld.

<sup>3</sup> Their similarities have made some scholars lump them together in a single style called the Central Yucatán style.

<sup>4</sup> The large-nosed masks that are part of the Río Bec and Chenes iconography and abound in the Puuc style, are often called Chaac (the god of rain). However, several studies concur that because of the number of symbolic elements that make up this figure, it is not always this deity, and therefore, it is preferable to call it the mask of the long nose or the large-nosed god.

<sup>5</sup> The phases of the puuc style are Early Oxkintok, Proto-Puuc, Early Puuc, Junquillo, Mosaic and Late Uxmal. See George F. Andrews, *Los estilos arquitectónicos del Puuc, una nueva apreciación*, Colección científica (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia/Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Antonio Benavides, "Secuencia arquitectónica y papel político de Edzná, Campeche," *Estudios de cultura maya* vol. XXII (Mexico City: UNAM), 2002, pp. 53-62.

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