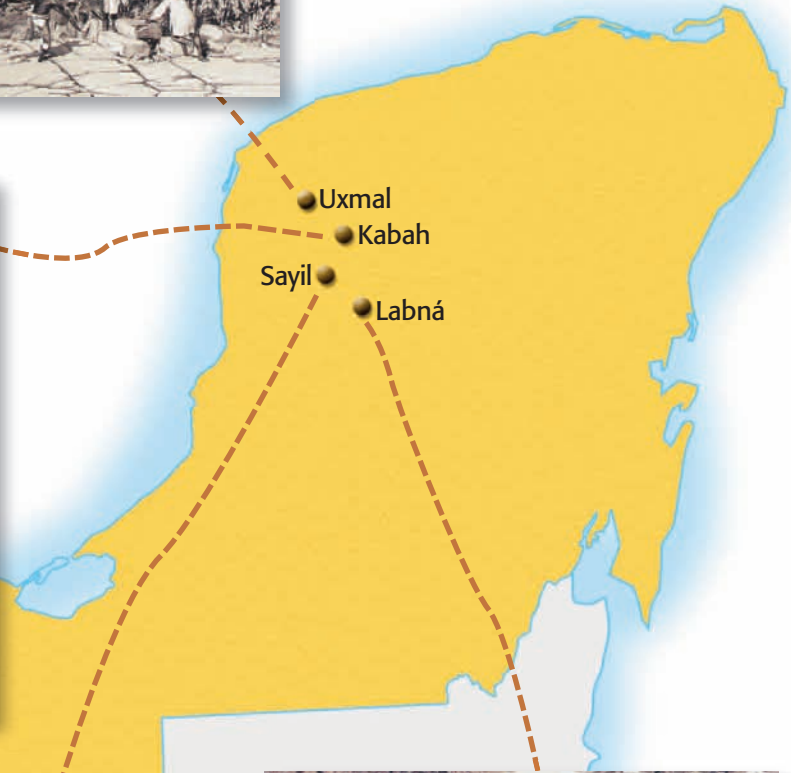


Puuc Style Mayan Cities Trimmed in Stone

Adriana Velázquez Morlet*



Uxmal
Kabah
Sayil
Labná





View of the Governor's Palace façade, Uxmal's architectural gem.

Photos previous page: Frederick Catherwood's drawings of Uxmal, Kabah and Labná taken from the book *Litografía y grabado en el México del XIX*, vol. 1 (Mexico City: Telmex, 1993), pp. 191, 198, 199; Catherwood's drawing of Sayil taken from *Las ciudades perdidas de los Mayas* (Mexico City: Artes de Mexico-Instituto de Cultura de Yucatán, 1999), p. 173.

When you think of the Yucatán Peninsula, it is hard to conger up a mountainous region. But, one of the archaeologically richest areas of the western part of the states of Yucatán and Campeche is precisely the small mountainous Puuc area. In Mayan, the name means “hill,” and the region covers the mountain range called the Sierrita de Ticul (Ticul Mountains), reaching from the town of Maxcanú to the town of Peto, and from the Uitz Hills to the south in the direction of Campeche, forming a kind of inverted “v.”

The Ticul Mountains are covered with intensely red, highly fertile soil. The Uitz Hills in the Bolonchén district are much flatter, with good soil interspersed with fields of flagstone and flood lands. In this small mountain area, the Mayas built a great system of settlements of similar size, almost equidistant from each other, creating a network of

* Archaeologist and director of the Quintana Roo National Institute of Anthropology and History Center.

Photos reproduced by permission of the National Institute of Anthropology and History, Conaculta-INAH-Mex.

cities that were very close politically, economically and socially. Among the most important sites in this area are Uxmal, Kabah and Oxkintok. By contrast, in the Uitz Hills further south, topography and soil characteristics created a less concentrated settlement pattern where Sayil and Labná are prominent.

The Puuc style makes repeated use of a series of architectural elements outstanding because of their technical perfection. In contrast with buildings in other Mayan regions, Puuc buildings were made with a solid nucleus of stone and plaster, covered by well-cut, worked stone that is purely ornamental, not structural; that is, if they are taken off, the building would remain standing.

The exteriors have smooth walls, sometimes decorated with columns on the bottom and friezes on the top including great masks of the god Chaac, as well as round molding and small drums alternating with perfectly executed stone mosaics depicting houses, serpents, sculptures and other decorations. The size and complexity of these buildings vary; some are small and isolated with only a couple of rooms; others are enormous, with two or three floors and almost 100 rooms, facing great plazas. These buildings may have been residences for medium- and high-level functionaries; the

largest ones may also have been used for administrative purposes.

Their building system was so efficient that many of the constructions have survived intact, making it easy even today to imagine a richly robed Mayan noble followed by his or her servants. Probably the celebrated travelers Stephens and Catherwood, who visited the region in 1843, came to similar conclusions, because, when they arrived at Macobá, in the southern Puuc, they found a building so well preserved that they were convinced that the site continued to be inhabited.

THE EXPLORERS OF THE PUUC

When Diego de Landa and Antonio de Ciudad Real came to the recently colonized Yucatán, one of the first regions they visited in 1588 was the Puuc, particularly Uxmal, where they wondered at its magnificent constructions. A short time later, Diego López de Cogolludo visited the same city and named the Governor's Palace and the Nuns' Quadrangle, thinking that they had functions similar to those of European buildings.



Rubén Vázquez

The entrance at the top of the Soothsayer's Temple.



Rubén Vázquez

Building on the Nuns' Quadrangle, Uxmal.

The Puuc was abandoned for many years until Baron Frederick Waldeck traveled through the area in 1834 and later made it known to the world. Later, John Stephens and Frederick Catherwood came through and for the first time made precise illustrations and descriptions of the site, formally initiating Mayan archaeology. After this visit, the Caste War put a stop to all visits to the area until the 1920s, when José Reygadas, Juan Martínez and Eduardo Martínez, among others, made detailed descriptions of the most outstanding places.

In 1922, Governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto headed up a great political project in which strengthening the Yucatán identity based on its Mayan roots played a fundamental role. Among many other actions, he built the highway to Uxmal and fostered its conservation. To make it known to the world, he invited the *New York Times* to send a correspondent to report on the region's archaeological sites; the paper sent Alma Reed, who, incidentally, became the love of the governor's life.

Since then, many researchers have worked on the sites in this area, among them Tatiana Proskouriakoff, Harry Pollock, Ignacio Marquina and, more recently, Ramón Carrasco, Sylvianne Boucher, Antonio Benavides, Jeremy Sabloff, Michael Smyth, Lourdes Toscano and José Huchim. All of them have done many different research projects underlining the enormous architectural and historical value of the Puuc Mayans.

At their peak, the Puuc cities produced an architectural style that we would not hesitate to call spectacular, because of its technical perfection and exquisite artistry.



Elsie Montiel

Detail of the House of the Doves, Uxmal.



Elsie Montiel



Elsie Montiel

THE REGION'S HISTORY

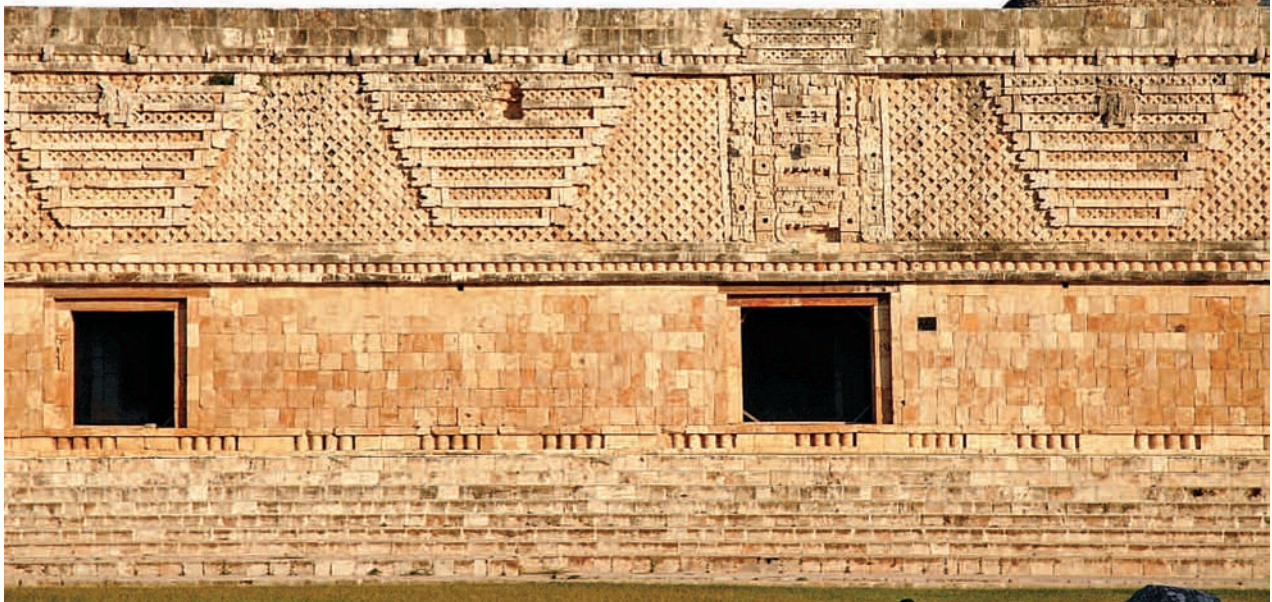
Little is known about the first inhabitants of the Puuc. The oldest evidence, dating from 7000 B.C., is of nomad hunter and gatherer camps. By 3000 B.C., there were small villages dedicated to corn cultivation, which the inhabitants complemented with gathering other plants and capturing local wildlife. The only finds from later centuries are a relief with Olmec touches, found in the Loltún cave, and isolated pottery and flint fragments, leaving much to investigate about the period.

The Puuc style developed and was perfected over a period of about 700 years, between A.D. 300 and A.D. 1000. Five stages in its development have been identified: the oldest is known as early Oxkintok, which includes rough, simply decorated walls with roof combs. In the sixth century the region's population grew rapidly, spurring the construction

of more complex cities whose building style is called proto-Puuc. This was of better quality, sometimes on pyramid basements, but still simply decorated. The most representative constructions in this style can be found at Oxkintok, Kupaloma, Xkalumkin and X'corralché.

Starting in A.D. 700, the Puuc became more powerful, and building techniques were perfected because it was important to create appropriate spaces for the rising ruling dynasties. This variety is called early Puuc, and its buildings combined the previous styles with more specialized elements like columns in porticos and decoration with geometric and human figures.

More than 100 buildings in this style have been uncovered in sites like Xculoc, Xkalumkin, Kabah and Uxmal, which was just emerging as an important city. They started the tra-



Rubén Vázquez

Uxmal boasts the best examples of the classical Puuc style.



dition of erecting monumental archways at the beginning of the white ways (*sacbe'ob*) connecting the region's many cities and soon turning into a broad network of roadways that facilitated contact among communities that may have been part of a single political system.

Around A.D. 850, the Puuc cities were at their peak, producing an architectural style that we would not hesitate to call spectacular, not only because of its technical perfection, but also its exquisite artistry. The Mayan architects achieved several variants of this style. The simplest, called *junquillo*, included only decorations with round stone molding (*junquillo*) and small drums along the tops of the façades. In the mosaic style, the decorations were made in mosaic frets and window lattices alternating with large masks, rose windows and round molding. The materials used in these buildings are highly specialized and masterfully and individually carved.

In Uxmal, the constructions are so perfect that specialists have given the style its own name, called late Uxmal, which defines some of the Mayan world's most refined architectural creations: palaces with extremely high vaults, vaulted passageways and decorations representing fantastic animals, gods and human figures.



Elsie Montiel

Detail of the masks of Chaac covering the Codz Pop, Kabah.



The Codz Pop building at Kabah.

THE PUUC CITIES

The Puuc's more than 7,500 square kilometers contain more than 100 ancient cities of different sizes and levels of architectural importance. The most noteworthy are Kabah, Sayil, Labná and, of course, Uxmal, the region's archaeological gem.

Kabah ("harsh rule")

This city is the second largest in the region and home to one of the most beautiful Puuc buildings: the Codz Pop ("rolled-up mat"), outstanding for its giant baroque Chaac masks, depicting the big-nosed god of rain, which in some parts of the building were placed floor-to-ceiling, creating a



Kabah's Great Palace.



Elsie Montiel

Labná's Arch, an icon of the region.

veritable sculptural complex. Also worth a visit at this site is the Great Palace and the arch at the beginning of a great *sacbé* that joins the city with Nohpat and Uxmal to the north.

Sayil ("place of ants")

Near Kabah is Sayil, nestled in a small, rich, agricultural valley. Perhaps for this reason, it was very large, reaching 10,000 inhabitants at its height around the eighth century. In Sayil is one of the largest Puuc constructions: the palace, with its three levels and 99 rooms, which were probably used both for living and administration. Here, the visitor should also see the Look-out, a beautiful building in the proto-Puuc style, erected on a basement and crowned by a very well preserved roof comb.

Labná ("old house")

A short distance away in the Uitz region is another small city boasting notable buildings like the Look-out (sharing not only the name with the one in Sayil, but also similar traits) and the palace, a great construction built on a wide platform, which is very interesting because it combines elements from different Puuc architectural phases. The two buildings are connected by a *sacbé* which must have been used for sacred processions and socio-political activities.

Labná's decorated arch with its exquisite stone mosaics has become an icon in the region.



Elsie Montiel

Detail of Labná's Arch stone mosaics.



Rubén Vázquez

The Look-out at Labná.



Elsie Montiel

Detail at the bottom of the Palace, Labná.

Labná also has an arch decorated with stylized giant masks and exquisite stone mosaics that have become iconic to the region and are reproduced in many other places. Only four kilometers away is Xlapak where the visitor can see beautiful examples of Puuc mosaic architecture.

Uxmal (“three-times built”)

This city is exceptional not only for its size and because it is surrounded by a defensive wall, but for the beauty of its constructions, a sample of the mastery of the site’s architects.

Perhaps the best known building in Uxmal is the Soothsayer’s Temple, according to legend, built by a little person in a single night. It stands on a great basement and its façade is decorated with stone mosaics. The Nuns’ Quadrangle, with its great patio and surrounding constructions, confused



Rubén Vázquez

Labná’s Palace combines elements of different Puuc styles.



by Spanish chroniclers with a convent, is one of the best examples of the most classical Puuc style given its decoration with great masks of Chaac, replicas of Mayan houses, sculptures and serpents. Also of enormous interest are the Ball Game Court, the House of the Tortoises, the House of the Doves, the arch that marks the beginning of the *sacbé* to Kabah and the Pyramid of the Old Woman.

But undoubtedly the architectural jewel in Uxmal's crown is the Governor's Palace, considered by many to be the pinnacle of Mayan architectural achievement due to its perfect proportions, stone filigree decorations and even its astronomical implications linked to the planet Venus. It may have been the residence of the great ruler Chan Chaac, who in approximately the tenth century turned the city into the only rival of the mighty Chichén Itzá, at that time a powerful political center.



Detail of the façade of the Palace, Sayil.

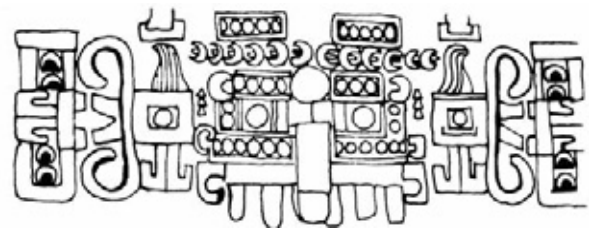
Elsie Montiel



Elsie Montiel

Sayil's Palace, one of the largest Puuc constructions.

The palace in Sayil is one of the largest Puuc constructions with three levels and 99 rooms, probably used both for living and administration.



The Puuc region still holds many secrets; some of its beautiful cities are barely beginning to be explored. Every time there are new finds, it becomes clearer and clearer that this is one of the regions where the Mayas most strikingly expressed their religion and political activities, reflected in marvelous art. Without a doubt, this is a legacy to be proud of. **MM**



Elsie Montiel

Detail of the façade of the Palace, Sayil.



Rubén Vázquez

Side view of the Soothsayer's Temple.