



Notes on *Izamal* City of Three Cultures

Luis Millet Cámara*

HISTORY OF THE SITE

The remains of the ancient city of Izamal go beyond the limits of the modern town. The site has been continually inhabited for more than 2500 years, from the mid-pre-classical era, between 700 and 450 B.C., until today. To preserve the cultural vestiges of this long, continuous occupation, Yucatán natives have called Izamal “the city of three cultures.”

The greatest activity during pre-Hispanic times took place in the early and late classical periods, when the most important buildings and the extensive network of roads or *sacbé*s were built, certainly reflecting the city’s political and economic importance.

The central part of the ancient city, although severely affected by the passage of time, still preserves many remains of the imposing buildings that were distributed around its great plazas. The biggest faced north to south and was 300 meters long and 200 meters wide. On each side were two tem-



Friar Diego de Landa.

The convent was founded in 1549, thanks to the efforts of Friar Diego de Landa; construction was directed by the distinguished architect, Friar Juan de Mérida.

* Archaeologist at the Yucatán National Institute of Anthropology and History Center.

Photo previous page: Frederick Catherwood’s sketch of the giant stucco mask found in a Kabul building in 1842. The mask has since disappeared. Taken from *Litografía y grabado en el México del XIX*, vol. I (Mexico City: Telmex, 1993), p. 206.

ples called Kabul and Itzamatul, dedicated to the wise deity and benefactor Itzamná. On the northern side was a building known as Kinich Kak Moo, dedicated to the god of the sun.

Chronicles mention the existence of four roads or *sacbé*s pointing in the four directions of the compass, but archae-



Photos by Elsie Montiel



The Franciscan monastery built on the basement of the P'ap'hol-chaak, the highest building of what was the pre-Hispanic city.

ological research has only uncovered two of them: the one leading west that ends at the Aké site is the longest (32 kilometers), and is 12 meters wide and almost a full meter above ground level. Although shorter, the road facing south that ends near the modern town of Kantunil, is no less a great work of engineering.

Izamal must have been in frank decline during the early post-classical period, which must have had an impact on the growing presence of the Itzaes in the region. The books of Chilam Balam mention that Izamal was conquered by this group that hailed from Chichén Itzá, probably around the final classical period (A.D. 800-1000). By the time of the Spanish conquest, the main buildings must have been abandoned, although we know that around the central area there were still small villages subject to the local strongman or *cacique*, Ah Kin Chel.

The Franciscan monastery that is today a symbol of the city was built on the basement located on the south side of the great plaza. Most certainly picking Izamal to build it was related to its legendary fame as a sanctuary for one of the main Mayan gods. During the entire colonial period and even up

until today, this monastery has been a focus for religious pilgrimages in the Yucatán peninsula because of its famous image of Our Lady of Izamal. The city still preserves many dwellings from the colonial period and the nineteenth century; the custom is to paint them yellow, giving the city its distinctive look.

BUILDINGS AND LEGENDS

Kinich Kak Moo. This is the largest building on the site and in the entire Yucatán peninsula: an enormous, 200-meter-wide, 34-meter-high square. It has a large terrace with rounded corners surrounding the entire building. Atop the terrace is a wall with a slight talud that held up an enormous molding in the front, some of which has been preserved, particularly next to the stairways. It has six large stairways: two on each of the east and west sides, one on the north side and the main stairway on the south side. The latter uses large rocks as stepping stones. On this platform is a temple with graded bodies built between A.D. 1000 and A.D. 1200, while the great base-



The monastery's atrium is surrounded by a series of extraordinary arches.

ment was raised around the year A.D. 500. Diego de Landa's sixteenth-century description of the building corresponds very precisely to the vestiges found during the excavations.

According to ancient tradition, this building was dedicated to the sun, a god who came down every day in the form of a fire macaw to pick up his offerings. It is also said that when Itzamná died, his body was divided up and buried in different parts of the site and that the Kinich Kak Moo was built over the place where his heart was laid to rest.

On the eastern side of the basement is the entryway to a small cave that tradition says is the ancient place of worship where a twin sister of the monastery's virgin lives. Each year for the December 8 festivities, mysteriously, the Virgin of the Cave takes the place of her sister in the monastery, and the pilgrims visit and pray both there and on top of the pre-Hispanic building.

El Itzamatul. This building is on the east side of what was the great plaza of Izamal. Recent excavations show that there were at least three stages to its construction; the oldest is a one-story, nearly square, 21-meter-high building. The basement has terraced, talud-style walls; recessed, rounded corners; and a stairway on each side. The top constructions no longer exist. In the last stage, this building was immersed in a large platform

more than 100 meters on each side, of which only the eastern side has been relatively well preserved. The oldest stage of construction is from the same period as the basement of Kinich Kak Moo, dating it around the year A.D. 500.

El Kabul. This was another building dedicated to Itzamná on the west side of the old plaza and, apparently, it was the starting point for the *sacbé* that united Izamal with Ake. It has an enormous basement with two structures on top; it was particularly noteworthy for its giant stucco mask which the English sketch-artist Frederick Catherwood drew in 1842. In 1886, French explorer Désiré Charnay did some archaeological work in this building and found other stucco pieces. He also illustrated his work with an engraving of an enormous mask found to one side of the main stairway; unfortunately all these sculptures have disappeared over time.

El Habuc. This group of constructions to the south of the ancient plaza has a basement measuring almost 90 meters on each side and four meters in height; on top of it are some buildings forming a quadrangle. Archaeological evidence indicates that it may have been built between A.D. 250 and A.D. 400, making it one of the city's oldest constructions. On the west side is a building with a megalithic-stone stairway leading to a series

of rooms with walls made of stones of the same size, illustrating the engineering capabilities of that time.

Chaltunha. This building in the middle of a highly populated residential area has a large basement measuring 60 meters on each side and three meters in height. On top is a temple of terraced bodies and platforms.

El Conejo. The vestiges of this structure are located to the east of Izamal. Pillage has left its different stages of construction exposed; the large stones in the walls of the oldest part of the building are of particular interest.

The Franciscan Monastery. On the south side of the great plaza was the P'ap'hol-cháak. According to the chronicles, this was the highest building in the pre-Hispanic city. Today, only some parts of the old walls from that time are visible. The Franciscans took advantage of the fact that this basement was surrounded by several plazas to build one of the most important monasteries in the Yucatán peninsula there, giving the lay-out of the colonial city its very own flavor and great presence to the building itself.



View of the Kinich Kak Moo from the back of the monastery.

During the colonial period and even up until today, this monastery has been a focus for religious pilgrimages because of the fame of its image of Our Lady of Izamal.



Founded in 1549, construction work began very rapidly thanks to the efforts of Friar Diego de Landa and directed by the distinguished architect Friar Juan de Mérida. By 1562, most of the building had been finished. Three broad ramps led to a vast atrium with a *posa* chapel in each of its four corners and with access to the church, the “Indian” chapel (also known as an open chapel), the convent with its high and low cloisters and a large orchard and vegetable garden irrigated by a well.

The church boasts a simple Renaissance door, but the rest of its façade was changed at the end of the colonial period and the old “Indian” chapel was transformed into the Third Order Chapel. Valuable mural paintings were recently restored, outstanding among which are the ones on the doorway and the baptismal font.

The beautifully proportioned nave ends in a chancel covered with vaults carved with bows and ribbons, which contains the altar of the Immaculate Conception, a much-revered sculpture that according to tradition was brought by Friar Diego de Landa from Guatemala. In the seventeenth century, two long portals were added, uniting the *posa* chapels and the Virgin’s chamber, noteworthy because of their great arches and the two buttresses supporting them. The atrium’s extraordinary series of arches, the church’s classical proportions and the beautiful view that can be taken in from the high Virgin’s chamber make this a must for visitors to this stunning city. **MM**