



A Glimpse of *Ek' Balam*

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Ek' Balam, the capital of the ancient Talol kingdom, one of the most important in the pre-Hispanic Mayan region, is located in the far-eastern part of the state of Yucatán. According to our epigraphic data, Ek' Balam means “jaguar day-star” or “jaguar splendor.”

This archaeological site, mentioned as early as the nineteenth century by the first explorers and travelers who passed through the Yucatán peninsula, among them, Désiré Charnay in 1886, only began to be studied scientifically in the second half of the 1980s. This work, done by a group of U.S. researchers, produced among other things a site map putting its size as approximately 12 square kilometers. Beginning in 1994, we Yucatán-born archaeologists from the Yucatán offices of the National Institute of Anthropology and History

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Photos previous page, a view of Structure 18 from the Oval Palace, and Ek' Balam's glyph. Photos by Elsie Montiel.

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Detail of the monster of the Earth façade.

Elsie Montiel

(INAH) initiated the Ek' Balam Architectural Conservation and Research Project, which continues until today.

Ek' Balam's location is very significant, situated as it is between the ancient domains of Cobá and Chichén Itzá. It is also important chronologically, since it was at its height after the domination of Cobá and before that of Chichén Itzá, although it was also contemporary with both of them, relating to them to a certain extent. Thanks to the research done in Ek' Balam, we now know that a large part of the northern Mayan lowlands were not only ruled over by Cobá and Chichén Itzá, but also by the Talol *ajawlel* or kingdom.

Ek' Balam's importance also resides in its antiquity and the long period it was inhabited. Archaeological evidence shows that its first inhabitants settled there as early as the



The Oval Palace seen from the entrance.

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The entrance to Ukit Kan Lek Tok's tomb.

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They are part of the settlement's central nucleus, together with approximately another 45 constructions of different sizes and characteristics. Outstanding among all these are the large structures numbered 1, 2 and 3, which make up the North Plaza. The main building is Structure 1, known as the Acropolis, which is 162 meters long, 68 meters wide and more than 32 meters high. Structures 2 and 3 are each more than 120 meters long and over 20 meters high. Other very small structures are scattered around the plaza, like a few altars, the smallest shrine in the site and a circular steam bath located across from the Acropolis.

middle pre-classical era (approximately 700-200 B.C.); it remained inhabited until the post-classical era or beyond, as is demonstrated by the vestiges of a small colonial settlement that can still be found at the site. It was a living city, then, for a very long time, but the height of its power and development came in the late classical period (approximately A.D. 770-870), with an explosion in construction and the flowering of science and the arts, including painting, sculpture and writing.

After 13 years of research and work at the site, several buildings distributed in the two main plazas have been restored.

TOURING THE SITE

You get to the center of Ek' Balam by walking along *sacbe* number 2,¹ which crosses the two concentric walls surrounding the area. A Third Wall joins the main buildings together. These three constructions were a defensive, protective perimeter around the seat of power and the residence of the rulers of the Talol kingdom at a time when they must have been subject to warring attacks by neighboring settlements.



The Ball Game, Structure 9.

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View of the South Plaza from the Oval Palace; in the back the Acropolis.

Ukit Kan Lek Tok' gathered the best specialists, architects, sculptors, painters and craftsmen of his time to create extraordinary works of art.

Sacbe 2 leads to a building known as Structure 18, a peculiar vaulted passageway in the form of a cross that was the formal entrance to the site.

Past this structure is the Ball Game Court, formed by Structures 8 and 9, which have rooms decorated with small friezes of columns. It is interesting to observe the gradated talud walls of Structure 8, unique in Ek' Balam, decorated the same way as the Acropolis.

Next to the Ball Game Court is the South Plaza, which boasts several restored buildings, among them the Twins, easily identifiable because they are two large identical buildings situated on a single basement. Next to them is the Oval Palace, whose lower level is made up of oval bodies superimposed on one another. The building was later changed and rooms were built on the first and second floors of the front. However, on the sides, there is a single floor. These rooms were used as living quarters, but on the highest part is a small shrine that was used for rituals.

On the far eastern side of this plaza is a large basement, Structure 10, with large, leaning walls topped by huge stones forming a cornice. At the top is a small space that was used for religious purposes, just like the one atop the Oval Palace. There are also other smaller shrines distributed around the site's two main plazas.

In the middle of this plaza is the Platform of the Stelae, which has two monuments: Stela 2, to the right is much eroded, but on Stela 1's surface, on the left, we can still see beautifully carved figures and writing. Among the distinguishable shapes is the main figure, King K' ihnich Junpik Tok' K'uh...nal, who must have erected the monument to commemorate his ascension to the throne in A.D. 840. At the top of this monolith is the carved figure of the *ajaw* Ukit Kan Lek Tok', the builder's ancestor and founder of the ruling dynasty in the late classical period. Everything we can now see in Ek' Balam we owe to the genius of this last figure, who came to the throne in A.D. 770. Ukit Kan Lek Tok' dedicated his reign to the construction and decoration of Ek' Balam's most important buildings, mainly his palace, the Acropolis.

Arriving at this enormous, complex six-level palace, we are welcomed by the Hieroglyphic Serpents, two stone monuments representing open-jawed snakes whose tongues "descend" along the staircase and on which is carved the in-

scription containing the distinctive emblem glyph of the kingdom of Talol and its rulers.

A little above this, flanking the great stairway, are two constructions whose façades were completely covered with giant masks stylized in a cascade, only vestiges of which remain at the lower part, although on the southeast corner there is a good sample of what they originally were like.

Ukit Kan Lek Tok' gathered the best specialists, architects, sculptors, painters and craftsmen of his time to create extraordinary works of art, although we have only recovered fragments of most of them. It is our good fortune that the best example of their creativity has been preserved and that today we can appreciate it thanks to the fact that in pre-Hispanic times it was covered up to protect not only its decorations but Ukit Kan Lek Tok's royal tomb inside. The ruler's remains were deposited in this space with a more than 7,000-piece funeral offering, including 21 vessels made of ceramics and alabaster and jewels and other objects made of shell, flintstone, jade, bone, pyrite and rare materials like three pearls and a gold pendant.

The façade boasts the face of the monster of the earth, a mythical being that the ancient Mayans used to symbolize the entrance to the underworld. The impressive figure surrounding the door recreates the monster's maw, that "devoured" or "spit out" whoever entered or left by it, and its jaw juts forward forming a walkway crowned by large fangs. Also very beautiful are the statues of figures atop the façade, richly dressed in jaguar-skin skirts, the large belts of ballgame players, and feather fantails, making them look like winged beings. At the center is Ukit Kan Lek Tok', seated on a throne resting on the monster's maw.

These Chenes-style façades express the same basic idea as those found in several archaeological sites of neighboring Campeche state. However, these stand out because of the large size of the molded stucco, showing how highly specialized the craftsmen who produced this kind of extraordinary work, unique in the Mayan area, were.

On either side of this magnificent building are two small spaces with the representation of the monster of the earth only on the frieze. On the right-hand structure, which we call the Temple of the Fish because there are three fish on it, a small mural can still be made out on the entrance's right door-jamb. It depicts the building itself at the moment of a meeting between the lord of Ek' Balam, seated at the center, and several figures who may have come from other cities and who seem to be presenting him with gifts.



Arriving at the Acropolis, we are welcomed by the Hieroglyphic Serpents, two stone monuments representing open-jawed snakes whose tongues "descend" along the staircase.

Interestingly, the city's architecture and decoration are very specific: even though they share similarities with those of other Mayan cultural regions like the Petén, Puuc and Chenes, the way they are combined with others of local origin results in a site that is very different from other known Mayan settlements.

In general, we could say that the most important thing about Ek' Balam is that it is a wonderful opportunity to enrich archaeological research because of the diversity of its materials and the fortunate preservation of several glyph texts that have allowed us to uncover part of its history. Lastly, its restoration, conservation and opening to the public will allow visitors interested in the Mayan culture to see an archaeological site unparalleled in this part of Yucatán. **MM**

NOTES

¹ *Sacbe* is the Mayan word for pre-Hispanic roads and means "white road." This *sacbe* is one of five in Ek' Balam, although the others are no longer visible.