



Dzibilchaltún
A Mayan Regional Center

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Dzibilchaltún, located a scant 15 kilometers from Mérida, the capital of Yucatán, is renowned for its architecture, plazas and roadways or *sacbe'ob*, all of which give it an urban air. The constructions with Mayan or corbelled vaults and cut-stone walls covered with stucco and paintings are typical of the city's unique style. The buildings in the central complex were occupied by representations of deities or the rulers; around them were stonework rooms for the elite, and around those, housing for the general population. The modeled, painted stucco-decorated façades sometimes had giant masks of the rain or sun deities on their

upper panels, or simple plant or animal motifs, like that of a serpent, probably indicating the cult of Kukulcán.

The site is only 17 kilometers from the Gulf coast, a privileged location that determined a marine-coastal economy which included products both from the sea and from inland agriculture. The nearby Mayan port of Xcambó, up the northern coast, played an important role in sea trade and must have been the source of exotic materials like Campeche's multi-colored ceramics and Tabasco's fine oranges. Society sustained itself mainly through rain-fed agriculture; from the Gulf waters, they obtained fish, salt and shells. Archaeological explorations of the site's platforms and buildings produced many artifacts made of conch shell, a material they also used to decorate their buildings.

Dzibilchaltún, at its height between A.D. 600 and A.D. 900-1000, a time known as the late/end classical period, reached a population of 20,000. Building, however, began

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The Temple of the Seven Dolls, named after the clay figurines found inside. These figurines are exhibited in Dzibilchaltún's Site Museum.

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in the upper pre-classical period (about 300 B.C.). Together with Tihó (built on the site of what is today Mérida), Dzibilam and Aké, Dzibilchaltún was one of the four most important regional centers in the very northern part of Yucatán. Its decline began in the early post-classical period and lasted until the late period (from A.D. 1000 to A.D. 1520), among other things because of the militarist expansion of Chichén Itzá. On the Europeans' arrival, the city was still relatively important, judging by the open chapel (also known as an "Indian" chapel) the Spaniards built in the Central Plaza to help them spread the Catholic Gospel, and by their efforts to destroy any vestiges of the icons depicting the old gods, which the conquistadors thought came from the devil.

The stelae, with their *bas-relief* work, are one of the forms of sculpture from the later classical and final classical periods. Of the 12 to 15 extant examples, many are incomplete, broken or reduced to simple fragments, making it difficult to determine exactly how many of them there are. One of the most outstanding, reminiscent of the ones found in Palenque, is Stela 19, next to Stela 18, depicting a figure with an elegant bird-shaped headdress made of precious feathers. Both stelae are part of the stone covering of the first platform on the only pyramid on the Central Plaza, Structure 36, which seems to indicate important social

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Stela 19, Structure 36.



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An example of graffiti displayed at the site museum.

changes at the site, linked to the end of a dynasty of Dzibilchaltún rulers and the incursion of people from outside, apparently linked to Chichén Itzá's expansion in the area.

In the central part of the site is the beautiful Xlakah *cenote* (sink hole), whose name means "old town," alluding to the name the modern Mayas use for the first settlement that would later be Dzibilchaltún. The sink hole was a source of water for the inhabitants and in times of drought, it attracted neighbors from the surrounding areas, one of the reasons the population began to grow. From its depths, archaeologists have recovered hundreds of ceramic receptacles and shards of pots that were used for holding water.

The site has three great plazas: the Central Plaza, the Southern Plaza, and a third to the southwest. Of the three, only the first is almost completely uncovered. Archaeologists are currently exploring the second, and the third has not been dug yet, even though it contains Structure 89, one of the highest pyramids in the area.

The Central Plaza was surrounded by buildings with terraced façades, giving them a surprising unity. It is thought that the plaza was used for mass gatherings during the celebration of special events related to their civic and religious calendars. Undoubtedly, these events were attended by both local inhabitants and visitors who would have arrived to the



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The “Indian” Chapel, built by Spaniards in the middle of the Central Plaza; to the left, Structure 36.

city using the *sacbe'ob* (roadway) system —Dzibilchaltún has 10— that linked the central part of the city with the surrounding areas. The National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) began the restoration of these ancient roadways in 1986.

Sacbe'ob 1 and 2 converge at the Central Plaza: the first connects it to the Temple of the Seven Dolls platform, located to the east. To the west, along the same line is the *sacbe'ob* 2, which about 200 meters from where it starts passes near the platform adjacent to the Standing Temple, so called because it is the only building that remained standing when in the 1940s, archaeologists recognized Dzibilchaltún's importance. It is a long, vaulted residential building with double rooms, erected in the late period. Several human burials were discovered underneath its floors, a common practice in Dzibilchaltún.

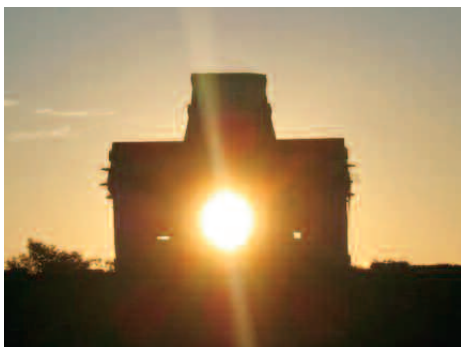
The best known building on the site is the Temple of the Seven Dolls. It may have been used as an astronomical observatory given its central tower open to the heavens on the south side. The four entryways face the four points on the compass, and it has four small windows, two to the east and two to the west, that let the sunlight in. The central part, covered with

a vaulted area, is surrounded by an interior hallway, a considerable architectural feat for its time.

In this building, on March 21, it is possible to see the lights and shadows that announced the arrival of the beginning of the rainy season and the need to begin preparations of the soil for planting. On September 21, they announce the beginning of the dry season and harvest time. At dawn on those days, the sun begins its ascent and, little by little, situates itself between the main openings in the building's wall; its rays go all the way through before continuing their way to the heavens. From the west, this gives the impression of a great mask of fire, which is why archaeologists infer that the building may have been dedicated to Kin, the Mayan god of the sun. The frieze was decorated with interlaced motifs evoking serpentine forms and eight great masks, covered with

painted stucco, one on each corner and one over every door, which must have given the whole a singular, impressive appearance.

The most important building on the southern side of the Central Plaza is the great Structure 44 which was used for administrative and ceremonial purposes. This is one of the buildings with the largest volume in the whole site, and one of the longest in



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the whole Mayan region (130 meters). The great stairway covers the entire front; its base is made with great blocks of stone and smaller flagstone slabs to reinforce it.

The upper rooms were long, narrow and vaulted with entryways at either end that, combined with the openings in the walls and the columns in relief, must have looked from afar like multiple entryways. The façade had two platforms placed back to back, one in the lower northeast, the other larger one at the center. Most certainly these platforms were used for dancing on days when special ceremonies were held. The building shows signs of four different stages of construction and was used the most at Dzibilchaltún's zenith,

open court a little more than 20 meters long and 12 meters wide with variations that tend to make it asymmetrical. The construction on the west was built atop a previously existing one, while the one on the east is completely new. Both were built in an area of minor altars, the best preserved of which ended up being completely immersed in the western part of the field. A smooth, fragmented stela served partially to mark the limit of the sidewalk's vertical wall.

Graffiti was used to decorate buildings that were no longer being used; the drawings were sometimes outlined in black. The motifs were usually faces, human figures or human games, like the so-called *patolli* in Central Mexico,



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The beautiful Xlakah cenote; visitors can swim in its crystal-clear waters.

when its functions were linked to the activities in the Central Plaza, which were carried out in this and the other buildings around it.

Another important building on the plaza is Structure 42. A large, low platform, approximately 67 meters long and 22 meters wide, what is left of its rooms are only 4.7 meters high at the most. Its long, vaulted rooms are aligned in a north-south direction. Apparently, this was the only building on the plaza used as dwellings for the governing elite, given that the central room was discovered to contain the most important burial site in Dzibilchaltún, that of Kalom Uk'uw Chan Chac, the ruler of Ch'iy Chan Ti Ho. Apparently, this was the site's original name and is carved as an emblem glyph in a deer bone found in the burial site. A similar, though incomplete, inscription is carved into Stela 19, which is inferred to represent the same figure.

Obviously, the city could not be without its ball game court, which seems to date from quite a late period. It is an

played with beans used as dice thrown against a drawing of crisscrossed squares. Some of these drawings were recovered on the floor and walls of the Temple of the Seven Dolls, Building 44 and Sub-structure 44.

Between A.D. 800 and A.D. 1000, Dzibilchaltún reached its zenith and its population was at its densest; its decline began toward the end of the early post-classical period. However, the power of Chichén Itzá had an impact on this area of northern Yucatán; the construction of buildings stopped and the population shrank drastically. It is thought that under Chichén Itzá's hegemony, Dzibilchaltún's population may have completely dispersed.

Given its importance, in 1986 an archaeological project was promoted in Dzibilchaltún, and on April 14, 1987, a presidential decree turned it into a national park to protect and preserve it. Nevertheless, the protection is only relative, among other things, because of the growing urban sprawl of the city of Mérida. **MM**