

The accompanying plan of the principal part of the Ruins is from a survey by Mr. Gordon, who made the drawings for several of the illustrations in the text. Other illustrations are from drawings by C. C. Willoughby, who has also assisted in the preparation of the report.

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Curator of the Peabody Museum.

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EXPLORATION OF COPAN.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE.

WITHIN the territory of Honduras, about twelve miles from the frontier of Guatemala, in a beautiful valley watered by a rapid, winding stream, and shut in by mountains that rise in ridges to a height of three thousand feet, are situated the Ruins of Copan (lat. 14° 51' 30"). The only roads leading to the ruins are rough mule-tracks over the mountains; the shortest route from the Atlantic coast is that from Yzabal, crossing the mountain ranges of Mico and Espiritu Santo, between which the river Motagua flows in a circuitous course to the sea.

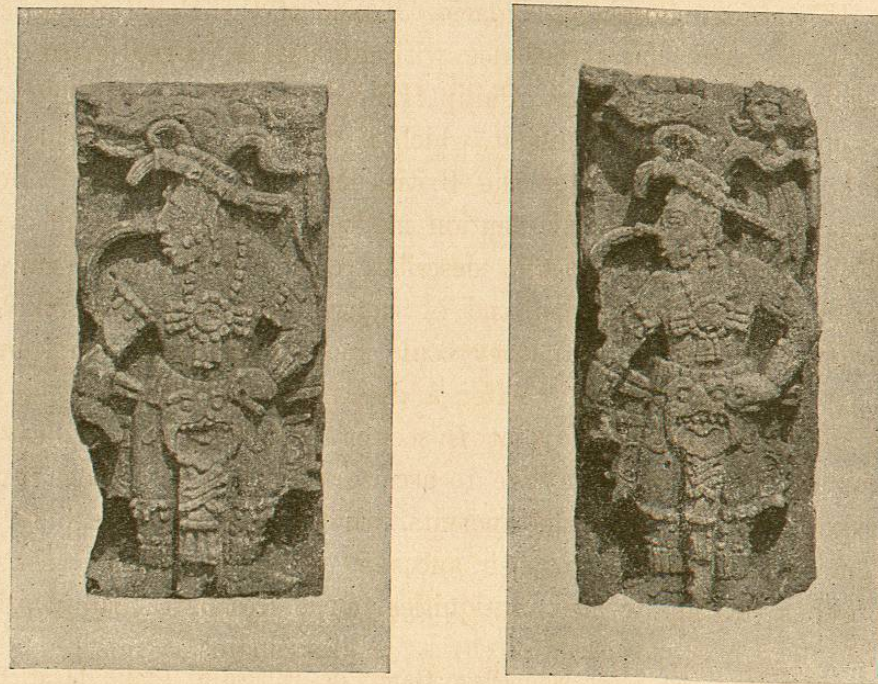
After leaving Comotan, the last town within the territory of Guatemala to which the account given by Stephens in 1839 applies to-day, the road crosses the river Copan on its way to join the Motagua and ascends a mountain ridge, from whose summit glimpses can be caught of the stream, winding in and out between precipitous banks, tumbling over ledges and leaping among the rocks, a perfect cataract, not navigable even to the lightest canoe. The road reaches a height of 2,800 feet, and then descends abruptly into the Copan valley, which has an elevation of 2,000 feet above the sea. The upper slopes of the surrounding mountains are covered with open pine forests, but the foot-hills and the plain of the valley are clothed in an impenetrable thicket of low trees and brush.

Stephens states that at the time of his visit, in 1839, the whole valley was buried in a heavy forest. Monkeys stared at him from the branches of the trees, and passed to and fro high above his head. To-day there are no monkeys in the vicinity, and the deep, gloomy forest where they like to roam is wanting.

According to information obtained from the oldest inhabitants of the modern village of Copan, the forest of gigantic trees that clothed the place in Stephens' day was cut down about thirty years ago by a colony from Guatemala who came to plant corn and tobacco in the fertile lands of the valley. They left the trees that grew on the higher structures of the ruins, making a picturesque grove, a remnant of which still remains, a few cedars and ceibas of gigantic proportions, clustered about the ruins of the temples,

shrouding them in a sombre shade, and sending their huge roots into the crevices and unexplored chambers and vaults and galleries of the vast edifices.

The valley in which the ruins are situated has the form of a level plain, about one and a half miles wide and seven or eight miles long, enclosed on all sides by the mountains, which rise in gentle slopes in front, and farther back in more precipitous ridges terminating in rounded peaks and level table-tops. The river flows in a southwesterly direction. It emerges by a narrow passage from the mountains, flows with many windings through the plain, and disappears through a gorge to the west. The principal ruins are situated on the right bank near the centre of the valley, where the river runs close to the eastern foot-hills. Taking an abrupt bend to the west, the river flows directly against the ruins, by which its course is again turned abruptly to the south. As would be expected in a level valley like that of Copan, the river is constantly changing the position of its bed. For a long time it has been making encroachments on the ruins, and the entire eastern side of the great pile known as the Main Structure has been carried away by it, leaving the interior exposed in the form of a cliff one hundred and twenty feet high. The whole of this elevation is artificial; pieces of pottery and obsidian knives can be picked out of it even at the water's edge. The river is subject to annual freshets, during which an immense body of water is thrown with great force directly against the opposing cliff, from whose face a fresh portion falls in each succeeding year. So swift is the current that little of this fallen material is left when the water subsides.



SCULPTURES FROM TERRACE EAST OF THE GREAT PLAZA. (See page 24.)

HISTORICAL SKETCH.

COPAN has been visited in former times by several travellers and explorers who have given more or less accurate information respecting what they saw.

In 1530 Hernando de Chaves made an expedition into the neighborhood, from the capital city of Guatemala, and conquered an Indian stronghold called Copan; but neither he nor any of his associates on the expedition left any account, so far as is known, of the people or towns.

The later historians of the country have made an attempt to identify the place called Copan, conquered by Chaves, with the ruins which since their first mention have been known by that name; but there is nothing within the range of our present knowledge of the facts to justify such a conclusion. There are, on the contrary, historical evidences which seem to prove almost beyond a doubt that the place conquered by Chaves was very inferior to, and more modern than, the ruined city called Copan, to-day, concerning which history is silent. It is now the general opinion of students that this city of antiquity was a complete ruin long before the arrival of the Spaniards; all tradition concerning it was lost, and its name forgotten.

In 1576 Diego Garcia de Palacio, Justice of the Royal Audiencia of Guatemala, travelling in accordance with his duties, passed through the ruins, and in a letter to King Philip II. of Spain gives a description of what he observed. This document, which is preserved in the Muñoz collection of Spanish manuscripts in the British Museum, is of great value,—containing as it does the only mention made by the early Spanish writers concerning these ruins. Palacio describes what he saw as “ruins and vestiges of a great population and of superb edifices, of such skill and splendor that it appears that they could never have been built by the natives of that province.”* After a description that corresponds very well so far as it goes with what is seen to-day, he goes on to say: “I endeavoured with all possible care to ascertain from the Indians, through the traditions derived from the ancients, what people lived here, or what they knew or had heard from their ancestors concerning them. But they had no books relating to their antiquities, nor do I believe that in all this

* A letter from the Licenciado Diego Garcia de Palacio to Philip II. of Spain; dated Guatemala, 8th March, 1576. Maudslay's translation.