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THE CHULTUNES OF LABNÁ,
YUCATAN.

REPORT OF EXPLORATIONS BY THE MUSEUM, 1888-89 AND 1890-91.

BY

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EDITORIAL NOTE.

THE following paper on the Chultunes of Labná was received from Mr. Thompson as a part of his report on the explorations of the ruins of the prehistoric city of Labná.

In the second Memoir of this series a brief statement is made in relation to the Peabody Museum expeditions to Yucatan. Some of the interesting structures described by Mr. Thompson in the following pages were explored by the Museum expedition in 1888-89; others were examined during the second expedition in 1890-91; and further observations were made by Mr. Thompson during the year or two following.

Mr. Thompson's researches show that these subterranean structures vary in their character. Some of them, he thinks, were primarily excavations made for obtaining a peculiar earth, called by the natives "záhcab," which was extensively used as a stucco to cover the walls of the rooms in the stone buildings, as well as for sculpture and for moulding into various forms, as many specimens from Labná give evidence. These excavations were afterward used as cisterns for collecting and storing rain water,—a necessary provision in this limestone country where water is so difficult to obtain.

Stephens was probably the first author to call attention to these subterranean chambers, both at Uxmal and Labná. He was at a loss to explain their use, but was inclined to regard several of those he examined at Uxmal as cisterns. One which he examined at Labná is described as being unlike those at Uxmal and not likely to have been a cistern (*Travels in Yucatan*, Vol. II, pp. 55-59). In his account of the cisterns at Uxmal (*Travels in Yucatan*, Vol. I, pp. 226-234) he mentions one in which he found a mound of earth and débris, apparently similar to those in the Chultunes of Labná described by Mr. Thompson. In this cistern he found a number of potsherds and a tripod vase; but he did not remove the earth, and therefore we do not know whether or not it contained human bones, as Mr. Thompson found to be the case in many instances at Labná.

The finding of human bones and various objects in these subterranean chambers leads Mr. Thompson to believe that many of these singular structures were finally used as depositories for human remains, probably secondary burials in connection with some special rite, after which the opening to the Chultune was closed and cemented.

The use of these structures, so carefully made and so essential as reservoirs, as receptacles for human bones, and the fact that several have on the walls representations of birds, turtles, and other figures, indicate a singular and interesting feature in the customs of the unknown inhabitants of this ancient and ruined city. It is important to learn whether this custom prevailed in other prehistoric cities of Mexico and Central America.

The figures accompanying this report, showing the ground plans and vertical sections of a large number of these subterranean structures, together with the detailed accounts given on the following pages, represent the first systematic study of the Chultunes of Yucatan.

F. W. PUTNAM,
Curator of the Museum.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY, CAMBRIDGE,
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THE CHULTUNES OF LABNÁ.

THROUGHOUT many of the ruined groups of Yucatan there are subterranean structures of a peculiar class. These are generally single chambers of a vault-like appearance built from ten to fifteen feet beneath the surface and communicating with the outer world only by means of a narrow well-like opening placed near the apex of the vaulted roof.

These structures are sometimes well-built chambers, having their walls, roof, and floor of dressed stones, and finished with a coating of fine hard stucco. A typical example of this class is shown in Figs. 1 and 2, the original being the structure sunk into the second terrace of the "Palace," Ruined Group of Labná.

Others are of a much rougher class, and were formed in the cavities or pockets from which the white earth called by the natives "zahcáb" had been taken.* These cavities, when their size and position were suitable, had their entrances closed up until only the circular opening was left. The roofs, walls, and floors were coated with thick layers of cement like stucco, which after being allowed to harden for a while was burnished into an impermeable surface by means of smooth stone implements, and the resultant structures so economically formed were ready for use.

I have called them all subterranean reservoirs, but opinions differ as to the use of these singular structures. Some students believe them to have

* Zahcáb is very abundant throughout Yucatan. It is found in pockets of various sizes. It is a white earth of a peculiar character, and served the ancient builders, as it does those of the present day, as a building material to mix with lime in the place of silicious sand, which is practically unknown in Yucatan.

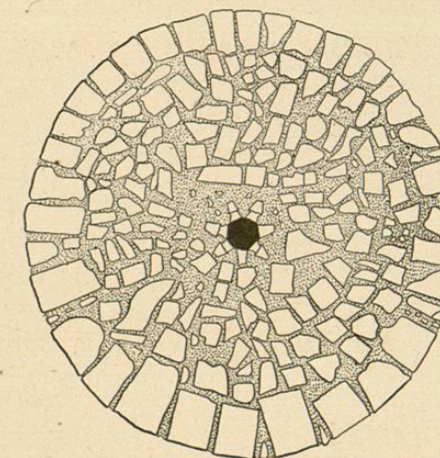


FIG. 1. — CIRCULAR PAVEMENT AROUND ENTRANCE TO CHULTUN, UPON SECOND TERRACE OF THE "PALACE," RUINED GROUP AT LABNÁ.