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CAVERNS OF COPAN,
HONDURAS.

REPORT ON EXPLORATIONS BY THE MUSEUM, 1896-97.

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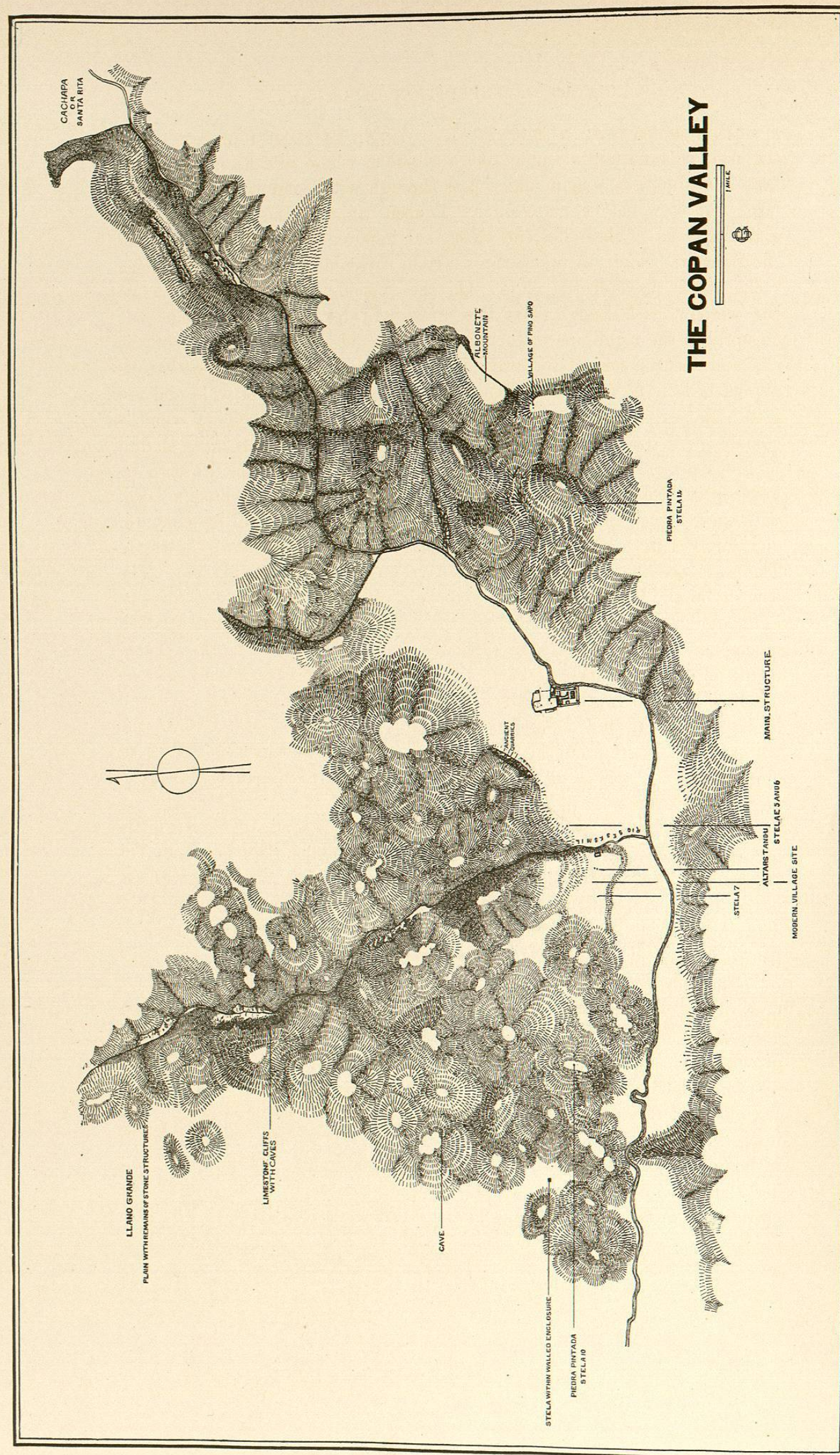
CAVERNS OF COPAN.

IN the mountains surrounding the valley in which the ruins of Copan are situated the rocks are of a twofold character. The lower rocks of the region, as I believe is the case throughout Central America, are limestone; overlying these are the beds of trachyte which furnished the building stone for the builders of Copan, and from which the ancient quarrymen hewed the massive blocks on which the sculptor carved those intricate designs which adorn the ruined temples and columns and altars to-day.

At a distance of about four miles from the principal group of ruins, towards the northwest, in a limestone ridge that rises abruptly from the rocky bed of a mountain stream called the Sesesmil, are a number of caverns, which I discovered and explored during the twelve days from April 1 to April 13, 1896, and revisited in June, 1897, to complete their examination. Along the course of the Sesesmil from its confluence with the Copan to a plain called Llano Grande, the outcrops are mostly of trachyte, except where the stream intersects the high ridge called Cerro Maria, the site of the caverns which are to be described.

The gorge occupied by the river is narrow, and the sides steep. The western side rises from the bed of the stream in a steep but even slope covered with a thick growth of medium-sized trees and by shrubbery, and overhung by rugged cliffs that rise in perpendicular masses for another five hundred feet, making a total height of a thousand feet from the stream to the top of the cliffs. The lower five hundred feet can be climbed by holding on to the trees and shrubs. The cliffs in places may be scaled for some distance by using a great deal of exertion and care, but to reach any of the caves except those at the base of the cliffs is extremely dangerous and difficult, if not impossible, for any one not practised in such exercise. The caverns which open into the face of these cliffs are therefore very difficult of approach.

The first of these which I entered is situated at a height of more than two hundred feet. After scaling the rocks, which afford few resting-places, the entrance of a passage is reached which runs upwards at an angle of 45° and parallel to the face of the cliff. The passage thus resembles a stairway closed on the outside by a wall of rock. At the top it expands into



a small chamber with a landing. At a height of about four feet above the floor is a natural opening like a window, whose dimensions are such that a medium-sized man might pass through with comfort, but to a very large man it would be inaccessible. It opens right on the face of the cliff, and overlooks a sheer descent of several hundred feet and the gorge of the river far below. Any one thrown from it would be mangled among the rocks at the base of the cliffs. On the outside, about three feet below the window, is a ledge, about two and a half feet in width, which ends abruptly to the right, and to the left leads around a turn in the face of the cliff and forms a sort of roadway to the entrance of the cave, which can be approached in no other way. This entrance is about six feet wide and ten feet high, expanding towards the interior, and forming a lofty vaulted chamber with projecting masses of dark rock oddly and fantastically shaped by the sport of nature. Just inside the entrance a large stalactite with its lower part broken away is carved into a rude likeness of a human head, with curved lines for the eyebrows and nose and round holes for eyes, mouth, and ears. This is the only bit of sculpture observed in any of the caves. There are no other stalactites in this cave, and there is no moisture. The deposit on the floor, which appears to be quite deep, consists of a fine dry light-colored earth. It did not have the appearance of having been trodden much, and the surface, though soft, was even and without marks. Fragments of pottery stuck through the surface. This cavern may be one hundred feet in length by fifty feet in width; no galleries were observed leading from it, and its only approach is that described. Besides the pottery, there were charcoal and pitch-pine firebrands which might be of almost any age; the conditions being as they are in the cave, this wood might endure for a great length of time.

The second cave is some seventy or eighty rods south of this, a little higher up and equally difficult to reach. It is smaller than the first, but otherwise the two are similar. A quantity of reeds, such as the natives use to-day for making partitions in their houses, and beds to sleep on, and for many other purposes, were lying on the floor. They were cut to a length of five or six feet, and had the appearance of great age.

The third cave, situated where a curve in the cliffs follows the slope upward, is farther north than either of those already described, and at a greater elevation. The entrance is almost hidden by a clump of bushes growing on a projecting ledge. This is the most interesting of the caverns discovered, and was explored to a greater extent than any of the others. It consists of three chambers, of which the first or outer is the largest. Just inside the entrance was an old abandoned eagle's nest surrounded by heaps of bones of small animals, such as squirrels, small hog, tepisquintli, young deer, and many other species. Overhanging masses of rock protect the entrance from the falling rains, and the interior is perfectly dry. The first