

Maya Religious Treasure Exhibited in U.S.

Archæology

A turquoise plaque, that lay hidden for centuries in the ruins of the ancient Maya city of Chichen Itza, in what is now Yucatan, forms the subject of our cover this week. It was resurrected by scientists of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, and restored by S. Ichikawa, of the American Museum of Natural History. At the recent International Congress of Americanists in New York it was displayed, and later it was placed on exhibit in Washington.

The plaque was found in the Temple of the Warriors.

For four seasons the Institution staff has been engaged in the excavation and restoration of this beautiful Maya structure. In 1927 it was discovered that two chambers of a still more ancient temple lay hidden in the pyramid foundation which supports the Warriors' Temple. Excavations conducted by Mr. Earl Morris of the Carnegie staff, disclosed the fact that the builders of the newer temple, instead of demolishing the older structure filled its rooms with rubble and covered them over.

After the rooms had been cleared of the filling and the walls had been shored up to prevent collapse under the enormous weight of the newer structure, Mr. Morris began systematic search for ceremonial treasure. In the east room of the entombed temple he found unmistakable signs of an altar that had disappeared. He cut into the floor where it once stood. Near the rear wall his pick touched an object unlike the materials of which the floor was composed. Presently the lid of a limestone jar was exposed. With infinite care, the jar with its precious contents was removed from the place where it had been deposited centuries before, doubtless to the accompaniment of strange and weird ceremonies. It was carried to a room at staff headquarters where it could be examined with every precaution against damage.

The turquoise mosaic, the principal item in this offering to the gods, is between eight and nine inches in diameter. The body of the plaque, which was of wood, has been reduced to a brown powder with the result that the mosaic was held in place only by the paper-thin film of adhesive matter by which the turquoise pieces were encrusted upon

the wood. Two-thirds of the mosaic was relatively intact.

At the center of the plaque there is a disk of pinkish substance, about two and one-half inches in diameter, which is either fine sandstone or a paste containing much sand. Encircling the central disk is a narrow unbroken ring of turquoise mosaic. Outside this there is a concentric band divided by radial strips of vegetable material into eight panels, each approximately two inches wide at the outer edge. Four of these panels are of plain mosaic, but the alternating set bear decoration, in each case, consisting of the head and claw, of a reptilian creature seen in profile.

Approximately 2,500 pieces of turquoise were used in making the mosaic. Most of these pieces are so thin that the field equipment of the staff at Chichen Itzá contained no instruments of sufficient delicacy to measure them accurately. In quality the material ranges from a very good grade of blue to a greenish

white. Most of these elements were skilfully shaped to the places they were designed to occupy, hence very little of the black cementing material is visible except where the artist intended it to form a part of the pattern.

Mr. Morris in speaking of the significance of the plaque says:

"It stands among the finest examples of aboriginal American art. It is the first to be found within the Maya area. It was found in a definitely recognized and datable archaeological horizon. Moreover, the interest which the plaque commands for all these reasons is in no wise lessened by the realization that the tiny bits of stone composing it probably were mined in Arizona or New Mexico, fashioned and combined into beautiful form in or not far from the Valley of Mexico, then transported through some hundreds of miles of jungle finally to be sealed away as a dedicatory offering beneath a temple floor."

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