

"A compelling tale. . . . This well-focused and well-told account brings  
America's most mythologized gemstone into sharp relief."

—*Wall Street Journal*

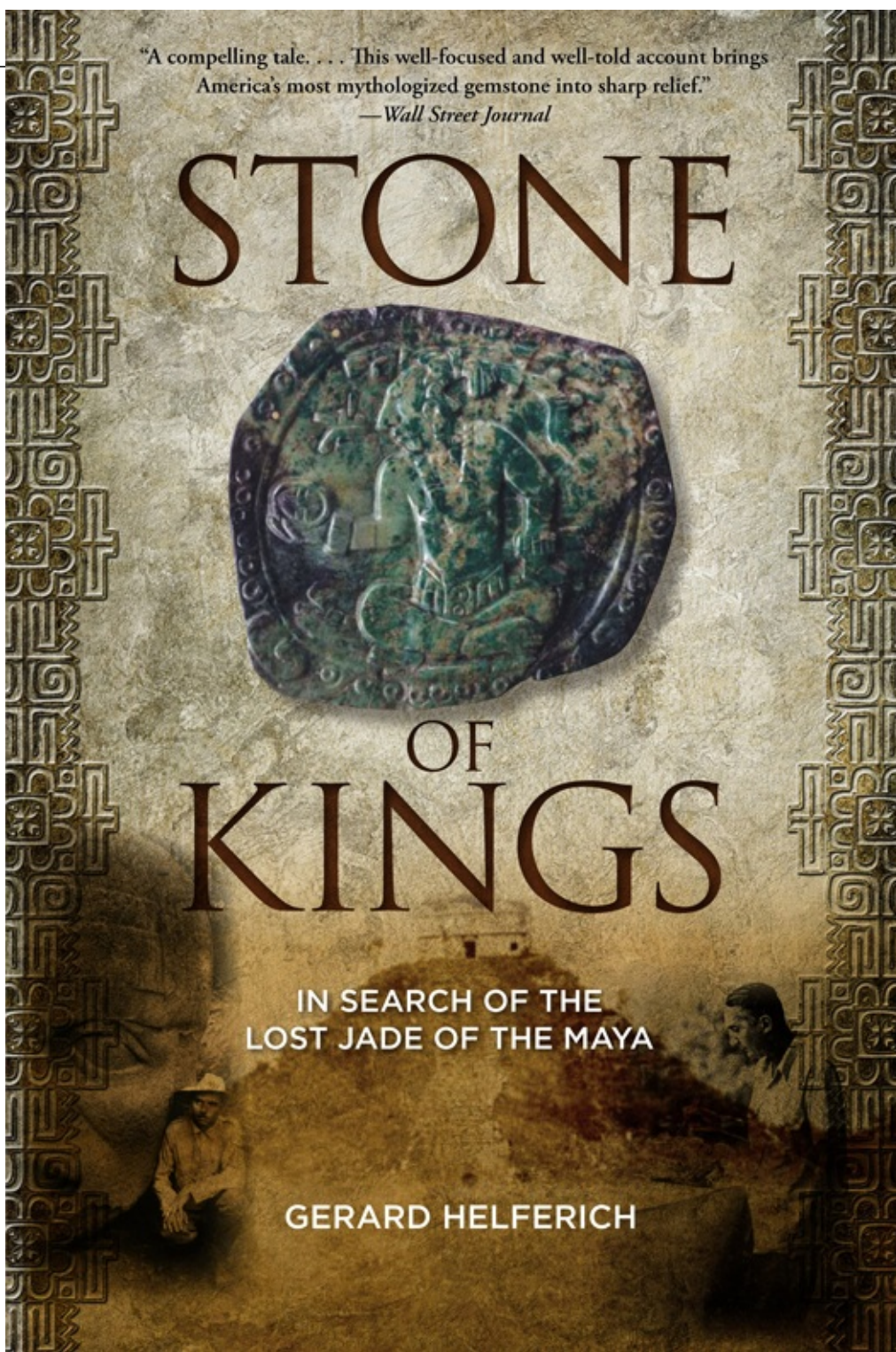
# STONE



# OF KINGS

IN SEARCH OF THE  
LOST JADE OF THE MAYA

GERARD HELFERICH



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ALSO BY GERARD HELFERICH

*High Cotton: Four Seasons in the Mississippi Delta*

*Humboldt's Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Latin American Journey That Changed the Way We See the World*

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To Florence Hood Nicholas,  
who has lived a quiet life  
of great adventure

# CONTENTS

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*Map of the Maya World*  
*Map of the Olmec World*  
*Prologue*

## Part I: The Bonediggers

One: “The Most Romantic of All Gems”

Two: Olmec Blue

Three: Maya Green

## Part II: The Entrepreneurs

Four: Serpentine

Five: Aventurine

Six: Jadeite

Seven: *Jade Guatemalteco*

## Part III: The Storytellers

Eight: *Los Jaderos*

Nine: “The Most Mysterious Stone of the World”

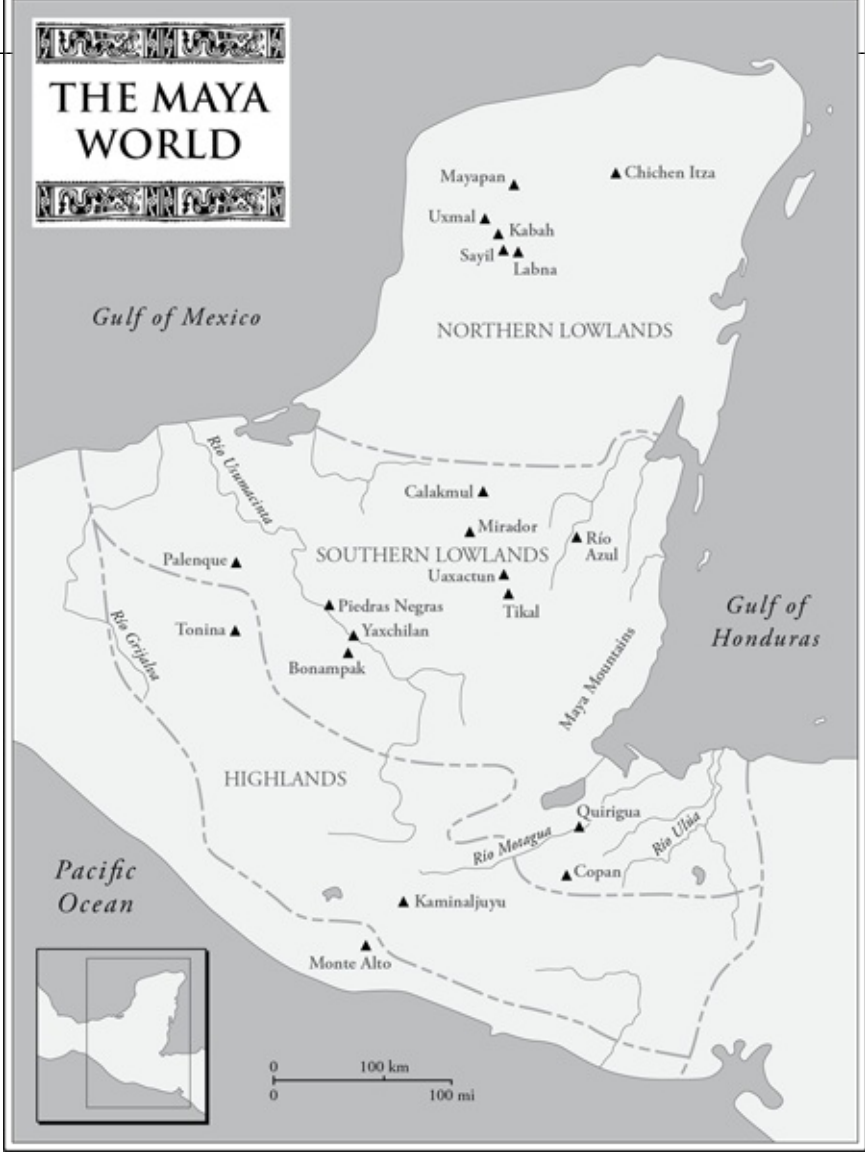
*Epilogue*

*Author’s Note*

*Acknowledgments*

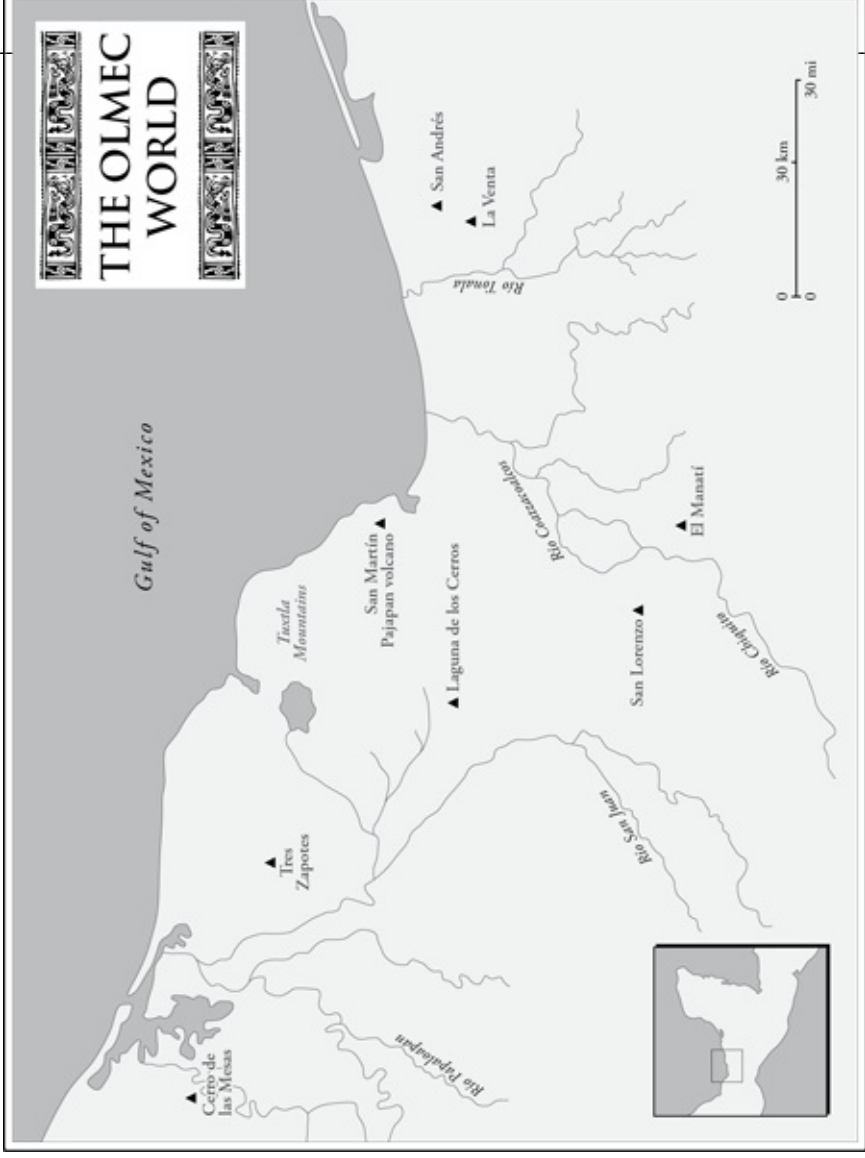
*About the Author*

**THE MAYA  
WORLD**





**THE OLMEC  
WORLD**



# PROLOGUE

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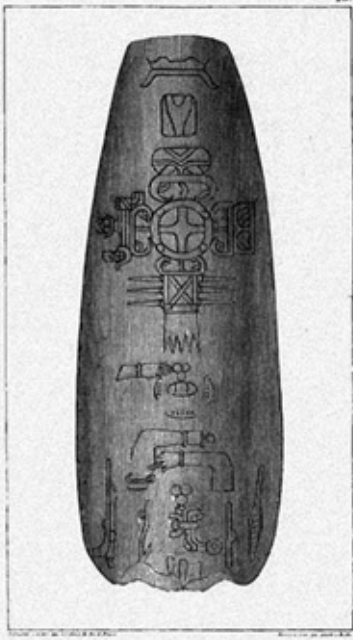
It's a warm April evening on the cusp of the rainy season. We're seated under the long, tiled colonnade of a centuries-old house in Antigua, in the highlands of Guatemala. My wife, Teresa, and I have come to do some research for a travel publisher. But as the shadows deepen and the volcanoes disappear into the darkness, our hostess begins to spin a remarkable tale.

A tall, blonde *gringa* of a certain age, she is the sister of a friend back in our adopted home of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. But you might say we were introduced by Alexander von Humboldt. A few years ago our hostess's husband read my *Humboldt's Cosmos*, an account of the great German naturalist's New World odyssey. As I relate in the book, Humboldt was born into an aristocratic Prussian family during the Second Great Age of Discovery, when titanic figures such as James Cook and Louis-Antoine de Bougainville were completing their historic circumnavigations of the earth. Though the young Alexander longed to make a grand journey of his own, his mother pressed him into a more sensible career as a government inspector of mines. But on coming into his fortune after his mother's death, Humboldt persuaded King Carlos IV to entrust him—not yet thirty, a foreigner, and a Protestant—with the first extensive scientific exploration of Spain's New World empire. And during five astonishing years, from 1799 to 1804, Humboldt, with his companion Aimé Bonpland, blazed a hazardous, six-thousand-mile swath through Latin America, from Cuba to Peru, from the Andes to the Amazon, opening the continent to science and transforming himself into one of the most celebrated figures of his age.

For reasons I don't fully appreciate at the time, our hostess's husband has been moved by Humboldt's story, and he has invited me to drop by if I'm ever in Antigua. When Teresa and I arrive, he's too ill to see us, but his wife graciously invites us for a drink. I expect a simple social call; then she begins her story of jade. Like most people, I've never thought much about the stone—where it comes from, why it's important or interesting, even what it is. But as her voice echoes down the darkening colonnade, I feel the mounting exhilaration of a writer encountering his subject.

When I return from Antigua, I begin reading about jade and pestering archaeologists and geologists, learning everything I can about its formation, its lore, its ties to the great cultures of the past. I also discover a connection I hadn't expected. In *Humboldt's Cosmos*, I wrote about his admiration for America's native peoples and his pioneering studies of cultures such as the Aztec and the Inca. Among the tens of thousands of specimens Humboldt brought back at the end of his journey were some pre-Columbian figurines, one of which was reproduced in my book.

The enigmatic Humboldt Celt, as it appeared in Humboldt's *Researches Concerning the Institutions and Monuments of the Ancient Inhabitants of America with Descriptions and Views of Some of the Most Striking Scenes in the Cordilleras*.



*Celt Azteque*  
A. Humboldt del Rio

But this time, my thoughts turn to another of Humboldt's souvenirs. It's a celt, a polished stone shaped vaguely like the head of an axe, which was presented to the explorer by Andrés Manuel del Río, a professor of mineralogy at Mexico City's national school of mining. Bluish in color, about nine inches long and a little better than three inches wide, the celt had lost its pointed end. The rest was incised with a dozen rebus-like symbols. Though a few were recognizable—a pair of crossed arms, a hand, an ornate cross, perhaps an oar and a spears-thrower—their significance was long forgotten. As Humboldt realized, the celt was carved from jade.

Back in Europe, Humboldt presented the artifact, which he believed to be an Aztec hatchet, to his sovereign, Frederick Wilhelm III

of Prussia, for display in the royal cabinet of curiosities, a collection of natural history and anthropological specimens. For the next century and a half, the Humboldt Celt, as it came to be known, remained in Berlin. Though the stone's message was inscribed in no known language, that didn't stop a scholar named Philipp J. Valentini from venturing an impressively detailed translation in 1881:

*The man, in whose tomb the sacred stone was laid, stood high in rank and personal achievements. He never failed to appear before his gods to burn the incense on the temple's brazier. He caused his arms to bleed and sacrificed his blood by sprinkling it in the glowing embers. When he entered the tlachco court, his was the victory. Like darts, his balls of hule were flying through the ring. He had no equal in bringing to the ground his foe by tlacoctli, and when he seized the oar and went upon the river, he was certain to bring home the sweet turtle quivering on the barb of his harpoon. Great was the strength of his arms; the heavy cudgel was the toy of his youth. There was no deer so distant nor its legs so fleet, that his eyes could not spy or his lasso reach.*

Eventually, the celt ended up in the national ethnographic museum on Stresemannstrasse. When the building was destroyed during the Second World War, the Humboldt Celt—shattered, looted, or perhaps buried in the rubble—was lost.

As I immerse myself in my new subject, the errant celt takes on a meaning for me as well, more vague but perhaps no less idiosyncratic than that suggested by Philipp Valentini: With its strange carvings and unexplained disappearance, it seems to embody the enigma of jade.

To peoples such as the Maya, jade was not only heartbreakingly beautiful but supremely powerful, and the substance was more eagerly acquired or more jealously guarded. Yet when Alexander von Humboldt arrived

in Latin America, a millennium after the Maya decline and three centuries after the Spanish Conquest, no one knew where the ancients had found their jade. Humboldt searched for the source, to no avail. “Notwithstanding our long and frequent excursions in the Cordillera of both Americas,” he wrote, “we were never able to discover a rock of jade; and this rock being so scarce, the more we were surprised at the immense quantity of jade hatchets, which are found on digging in plains formerly inhabited, from the Orizaba to the mountains of Chile.” Humboldt exaggerated the range of jade artifacts, but by the time his keepsake went missing, the mystery of the stone’s origin still hadn’t been solved. Like the Humboldt Celt, the Maya jade mines had vanished.

The story that our hostess shares this evening in Antigua is of the long search for Maya jade. Part history, part science, part treasure hunt, the tale spans more than three thousand years, embracing great kings, lost civilizations, renowned archaeologists, unlettered prospectors, and hopeful entrepreneurs. It’s a tale of mystery and obsession, and I can’t escape its peculiar pull. Like all the others, I’m drawn into the quest for Maya jade.

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PART I

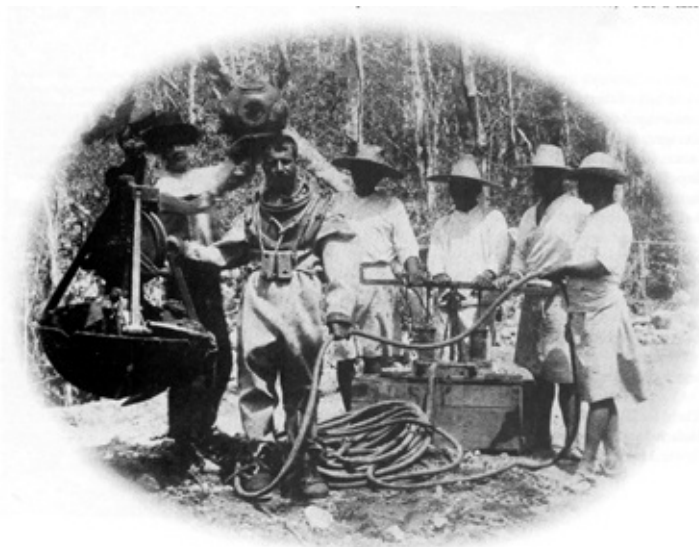
THE BONEDIGGERS

## “The Most Romantic of All Gems”

Yucatan, 1909. The middle-aged man was sweating inside his canvas diving suit. Peering through the helmet's tiny faceplate, he saw the tropical foliage spilling over the limestone walls of the cenote. At the other end of the pontoon, the Indian crew was working the pumps, and he felt the rhythmic puffs of oily air wafting into his helmet. He could only hope that Nicolas had trained the men well. Lumbering to the ladder, he carefully adjusted his speaking tube, lifeline, and air hose, their corked-bottle floats tied at intervals like so many crystal beads. Then, one by one, the workers approached, peered up into his clear blue eyes, and offered a solemn handshake, as though expecting never to see him again.

Chichen Itza's Sacred Well was dark and “still as an obsidian mirror.” The diver released his grip on the ladder and felt cool water envelop him. Weighted down by the copper helmet, the lead bars across his chest, and the iron-soled boots, he began to drop. There was a searing pain in his ears, and he reached for the valve on either side of his helmet. A hiss, and the pressure subsided. Drifting through the murk, he imagined himself as weightless as one of the silvery bubbles arcing to the surface.

Within the first ten feet, the scant sunlight faded from yellow to green to nearly black. He took out his submarine flashlight. There were thirty feet of water in the Sacred Well, and beneath that an unfathomable layer of muck, masking the secrets of centuries. Not far from the cenote's sheer wall, the dredge had opened an underwater pit eighteen feet deep, its flanks studded with stone columns and blocks. As he floated past one of the stones toppled into the darkness, loosing a shock wave that sent him tumbling; struggling to right himself, he felt as tremulous as an egg white in a glass of water. Then a strange thrill came over him when he realized that he was the only creature who had ever come here with any expectation of leaving alive.



*Edward H. Thompson in his diving gear at Chichen Itza, with his workers poised at the air pump. On his first dive into the cenote, Thompson wrote, “I felt a strange thrill when I realized that I was the only living being who had ever come here with any expectation of leaving alive.”*

The local people said that huge snakes and horrific monsters prowled the depths of the Sacred Well guarding the entrance to Xibalba, the underworld that Maya kings and shamans sought to penetrate in their ecstatic trances. In 1904, when the workers were beginning to dredge, a wise man from the village had pointed to a spot beneath the water and told him, “There is where the palace of the rain god lies.” Now bounding across the mud in that direction, the diver found a deep natural depression. Through the gloom he made out a whitish smudge on the hollow’s edge. Then as he drew closer, he saw that it was a collection of bones—not of jaguars or deer, but of human beings—three women, stretched out in the silt as though dozing in their hammocks. The cool, dark water had preserved fragments of their plain-woven cotton dresses, and around the neck of one were draped exquisite pendants of carved jade, their facets as crisp and lustrous as the day they were cast into the Sacred Well.



Edward Herbert Thompson had been obsessed with the ruined city of Chichen Itza for decades, ever since reading Diego de Landa’s *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* in his college days. Written around 1566 but rediscovered in a Madrid library only in 1862, the *Relación* was a veritable catalog of Maya language and culture, including their intricate, interlocking calendars. But Thompson had been especially captivated by Landa’s description of Chichen Itza’s Sacred Cenote and the grisly rites that supposedly had taken place there. “Into this Well,” Landa had written, “they had, and still have, the custom of throwing men alive as sacrifice to their gods in time of drought, and they believed they would not die, though they never saw them again. They also threw into it many other things like precious stones and things they prized, and so if the country had possessed gold it would be this Well that would have the greater part, so great is the devotion that the Indians show for it.” It was said that sometimes during these rites, the cenote’s water turned from jade green to blood red.

When it came to the religious customs of the Maya, Landa may not have been the most reliable witness. Even before his promotion to bishop of the Yucatan, he had conducted a pitiless inquisition that imprisoned and tortured hundreds of people and burned most of the Maya books, or codices. Consisting of bark pages that opened like a folding screen, washed with lime, then painted with a brush, the codices were the repositories of the Maya’s historical, religious, and astronomical learning. But to Landa, “they contained nothing but superstition and lies of the devil,” and thanks to his implacable piety, only three examples survive, named for the European cities in which they reside—Dresden, Paris, and Madrid. (The authenticity of a fourth, fragmentary codex, the Grolier, has been debated ever since it was supposedly discovered in a cave in Chiapas, Mexico, in 1965.) For good measure, Landa forbade the Maya from writing anything else in their elegant, playful, maddeningly complex script. But he did record the words for the days and “months” of the Maya calendar, and with the help of native speakers, he compiled an exhaustive syllabary pairing each letter of the Spanish alphabet with the corresponding Maya symbol.

But was Landa’s account of the rites that took place at the Sacred Well, repeated and embellished by later authors, just a sham to justify his repression—or had human sacrifices really been performed there? In 1571 Diego Sarmiento de Figueroa, mayor of nearby Valladolid, also claimed to have witnessed Maya rituals conducted at the cenote. After sixty days of abstinence and fasting, he reported, the “lords and principal personages of the land” would arrive at the Sacred Well at daybreak, “throwing into it Indian women belonging to each of these lords and personages, at the same time telling these women to ask for the masters a year favorable to his particular needs and desires.”

“The women, being thrown in unbound, fell into the water with great force and noise,” he went on. “~~At high noon those that could cried out loudly and ropes were let down to them. After the women came up half dead, fires were built around them and copal incense was burned before them. When they recovered their senses, they said that below were many people of their nation, men and women, and that they received them . . . and when their heads were inclined downward beneath the water they seemed to see many deeps and hollows, and they, the people, responded to their queries concerning the good or bad year that was store for their masters.~~”

For three decades, Thompson had dreamed of exploring the Sacred Cenote and testing these rumors of human sacrifice. Like other archaeologists of his time, he had no formal training in the science. His technique was spotty, and he was often guided by intuition more than evidence. But even as a boy in Worcester, Massachusetts, he'd been captivated by the past, digging up arrowheads and other relics and donating them to the natural history society. He'd devoured John Lloyd Stephens's bestselling accounts of his travels among the Maya ruins, which had only whetted Thompson's fascination with ancient cultures.

When he was an engineering student at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Thompson began publishing articles, including one called “Atlantis Not a Myth,” which appeared in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1879, the year of his graduation. Though he'd never been within two thousand miles of Central America, Thompson confidently wrote that Maya civilization had originated on the fabled lost continent popularized by Plato. Once, he claimed, “an immense peninsula extended itself from Mexico, Central America, and New Grenada, so far into the Atlantic that Madeira, the Azores, and the West India Islands are now fragments of it. This peninsula was a fair and fertile country inhabited by rich and civilized nations, a people versed in the arts of war and civilization, a country covered with large cities and magnificent palaces, their rulers according to tradition reigning not only on the Atlantic Continent, but over islands far and near, even into Europe and Asia.”

But this fabulous civilization was doomed by a colossal earthquake, which flooded Atlantis and severed the land bridge to Central America. “The earth rocks horribly, palaces, temples, all crashing down, crushing their human victims, flocked together like so many ants. Vast rents open at their very feet, licking with huge flaming tongues the terrified people into their yawning mouths. And then the inundations. Mighty waves sweep over the land. The fierce enemies, Fire and Water, join hands to effect the destruction of a mighty nation.”

Thompson later confessed his chagrin at the piece's audacity—and in his defense, the theory was only one in a rash of at-least-as-outlandish conjectures that the first American civilizations had been founded by immigrants from Egypt, Africa, Israel, and other unlikely places. But the article made an impression on two influential members of the American Antiquarian Society, Stephen Salisbury III, scion of one of Worcester's wealthiest families, and Charles P. Bowditch, noted Maya scholar and benefactor of Harvard's Peabody Museum. In 1885, when they were recruiting someone to do fieldwork at Maya sites in the Yucatan, the pair, along with U.S. senator George Frisbie Hoar of Massachusetts, invited Thompson to dinner and offered him the job. To help finance the work, Hoar had already persuaded President Grover Cleveland to appoint the twenty-five-year-old “consul-archaeologist” to the Mexican states of Yucatán and Campeche, making him the youngest member of the U.S. consular service.

Thompson spent several months poring over the Maya archives at the American Antiquarian Society and acquainting himself with Spanish and Mayan. Then he boarded a steamship for Mexico, along with his wife Henrietta, a schoolteacher and the daughter of a whaling captain (a combination that Thompson found “cannot easily be beaten as a wife and mother”), and their two-month-old baby, Alice. Landing at Progreso on the Yucatan's northern tip, they settled in nearby Mérida, a sleepy city of mockingbirds and church bells where barefoot women carried their baskets to market wearing white dresses; colorful *rebozos*, big go



earrings; and gold chains around their necks. None of the city's roads was paved, not even the major thoroughfares, and after a rain, residents would pay stout, bare-legged porters to carry them across the sloppy streets.

The Thompsons began to build a bungalow in the city's cooler outskirts. The site was the raised mound of a former Maya temple, and when workers dug the foundation, Thompson made his first archaeological discoveries—ancient potsherds, shells, fragments of obsidian, even beads of jade. Feeling a “white heat” for his work, he began to explore other sites near Mérida—the cave paintings at Loltun; Uxmal, widely considered the zenith of late Maya art and architecture; and the more modest ruins at Sayil, Kabah, and Labna. But time and again, Thompson's imagination returned to the pagan rites supposedly conducted at the Sacred Cenote of Chichen Itza.

It was a blistering April day when Thompson finally saw the ancient city. Climbing a winding path threading his way past enormous boulders and tall trees, he was reminded of forest trails he had known in New England. Then he realized that the massive blocks he passed were intricately chiseled into columns and pillars. As he began to grasp that the forest floor was actually an ancient terrace, he peered through the trees and glimpsed an ash-colored mass shimmering in the sun. He recognized it from photographs: Chichen Itza's great limestone pyramid, seventy-five feet tall, stepped and square and surmounted by a temple. In the woods beyond, verdant knobs jutted from the canopy—more decrepit temples and palaces waiting to be unearthed. The sense of antiquity was overwhelming.



*El Castillo before restoration, in a photo taken by Désiré Charnay around 1860. “Old and cold,” Thompson wrote on seeing Chichen Itza's ruins for the first time, “furrowed by time, and haggard, imposing, and impassive—they rear their rugged masses above the surrounding level and are beyond description.”*

The city that Thompson admired had been home to a Maya people called the Itza, who most likely migrated inland from the Yucatan coast, perhaps around A.D. 800. It was an apocalyptic time, as the great cities that prospered in the full flush of Maya civilization—from about A.D. 250 to 900, the period archaeologists call the Classic—were tottering toward collapse. But their demise created an opportunity for the interlopers, and for the next three centuries—during the so-called Postclassic period—Chichen Itza wielded a masterful combination of conquest and trade to dominate the Yucatan like no other Maya city-state before or after. Expanding to as much as six square miles, with a population of perhaps thirty-five

thousand, Chichen Itza grew into the most cosmopolitan Maya city ever built, featuring not only traditional Maya architecture but also a bold foreign style. Some of Chichen Itza's buildings so closely resemble those of Tollan, the capital of the powerful Toltecs in central Mexico, that for decades it was thought that the Toltecs had invaded the city, or at least had come to exert some powerful sway there. Now the similarities are thought more likely a reflection of Chichen Itza's sophisticated, determinedly mercantile outlook.

With its lavish temples and Sacred Cenote, and the largest ball court in Mesoamerica (a geographical and cultural area including Mexico and most of Central America), Chichen Itza also became the hub of a religious cult dedicated to the creator god, the feathered serpent Kukulcan, which had originated in central Mexico, where it was known by its Nahuatl name, Quetzalcoatl. It was in honor of Kukulcan that the Itza built their iconic pyramid, masterfully engineered so that a ribbon of sunlight slithered down the white balustrade of the main stairway on the afternoon of the spring and fall equinoxes, joining with a carved head at the bottom to form a glowing serpent. And on the pyramid's high platform, at the climax of the spectacular public ceremonies, priests would extract the beating hearts of their captives and collect the blood in shallow bowls, to sustain the god and repay him for the gift of life. Then about A.D. 1100, great Chichen Itza faltered, surpassed by its rival Mayapan, sixty miles to the west. Four centuries later, when Europeans arrived, they found only a handful of squatters at Chichen, though the cenote continued to attract pilgrims from hundreds of miles away.

Many other foreigners had passed through Chichen Itza in the centuries before Thompson. In 1531, the conquistador Francisco de Montejo had made it his headquarters, anointing the Pyramid of Kukulcan his "castle," perhaps for its appearance or perhaps to satisfy Spanish law, which mandated the establishment of a fortress with mounted cannon before the province could be considered conquered. The pyramid is still known as *El Castillo*, "the castle," but Montejo never did overcome the Maya's fierce guerilla resistance. In 1535, his army was driven from the Yucatan altogether, and it was left to his son Francisco to conquer the peninsula, which he finally achieved in 1546 after building walled strongholds at Mérida and Campeche. The last independent Maya king, an Itza named Can-Ek, didn't surrender to the Spanish until 1697.

A century and a half later, John Lloyd Stephens ("the father of Maya archaeology") reached Chichen Itza with English architect Frederick Catherwood. Others followed through the rest of the 1800s—Désiré Charnay, who recorded the ruins in moody sepia photos; the eccentric Augustus Le Plongeon, who believed that the roots of Freemasonry would be discovered in Maya culture; and Alfred Maudslay, who documented the site in his seminal, five-volume *Biologia Centrali-Americana*. But before Edward Thompson, no one had tried to plumb the Sacred Well.



In 1893, eight years after Thompson landed in the Yucatan, the spectacular World's Columbian Exhibition opened in Chicago to mark the five hundredth anniversary of Europeans' arrival in the New World. Determined to present "a perfect exhibition of the past and present peoples of America," the Peabody Museum's Frederick Ward Putnam, overseeing the fair's Department of Ethnology, commissioned Thompson to make full-size papier-mâché casts of portions of the Maya ruins at Labna and Uxmal. For nearly fourteen months, Thompson labored in the Yucatan's malarial wastelands, creating ten thousand square feet of molds—and nearly wrecking his health. As he accompanied his handiwork back to the States, he reported, his "half-conscious fever-racked body" lay in his stateroom, "tenderly cared for by [his] devoted wife."

In Chicago, the molds were filled with an artificial stone called staff, and the resulting "Mayan Village" was erected on the Midway alongside the world's first Ferris wheel, Buffalo Bill's Wild West, a Native American settlement, and a reproduction of a Cairo street populated by 175 Egyptians imported for the

occasion. “Everyone who visited the Exposition will recall the weird effect produced on the imagination by these old monuments of an unknown past,” said the official report of the Massachusetts Board of Managers, “standing in stately grandeur amidst all the magnificence and beauty that the landscape art and architecture of today could devise.”

Allison Vincent Armour, young heir to the meat-packing fortune and a trustee of Chicago’s new Field Museum, became a frequent visitor at Chichen Itza, and the year after the exposition, he donated the funds for Thompson to buy Hacienda Chichén, including the archaeological site and a hundred square miles around it; reports of the price range from seventy-five to five hundred dollars.

Thompson planned to raise cattle and timber on the hacienda, using the proceeds to finance his archaeology. But first, the sixteenth-century house, located a quarter-mile’s stroll south of El Castillo, needed to be restored after its recent sacking in the great Maya rebellion known as the Caste War. Perhaps the most successful indigenous uprising ever launched in the Americas, the revolt had been sparked in 1841 when three Maya insurgents were executed at Valladolid. By the following year, federal forces had been driven from the Yucatan except for the fortresses at Mérida and Campeche, and the Maya had established independent states across the peninsula. When Thompson arrived, the war had been raging for nearly forty years, and though it would officially end in 1901 with the capture of the Maya capital of Chan Santa Cruz, it would be another fourteen years before peace was completely restored.



*Reproduction of a structure from the ruins of Uxmal, part of the “Mayan Village” constructed from Edward H. Thompson’s molds and erected on the Midway of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago.*

With his house in ruins, Thompson hung a hammock in the long eastern wing of the ancient palace known as “the Nunnery” for its supposed resemblance to a Spanish convent. An imposing, rambling structure complete with sacrificial altar in front, the Nunnery served as his home for the year that it took to make the hacienda habitable. Thompson’s wife, Henrietta, had gone to work as a clerk in the consulate, and though she occasionally visited Chichen Itza, she resided in Mérida, seventy miles to the northwest, where she would give birth to seven more of Thompson’s children over the next dozen years.

Even before his house was reconstructed, Thompson began digging. Hacking the growth from a forty-foot-high mound, his workers revealed a four-sided pyramid, its main stairway flanked by serpent heads more than a yard across, with gaping jaws, bared fangs, and protruding tongues. On the pyramid’s upper terrace, they uncovered a heavy rectangular stone laid over a deep shaft.

Thompson ordered the men to lower him into the darkness on the end of a rope. At a depth of sixteen feet, ~~he discovered another slab, broken and dislodged.~~ It was the first in a fantastic series of seven graves stacked one atop the other like dominos and littered with skeletons, clay vessels, copper bells, crystal beads, and some very fine jades, including beads, pendants, and a carved head. Nothing like the tomb had ever been seen in the Americas, and it would have been a remarkable find in itself. But below the seventh grave, some thirty feet from the pyramid's apex, Thompson's trowel again rang on stone.

Brushing away the dust, he discovered a smaller slab, which he pried loose with his hunting knife to reveal a dirt-packed cavity. Working with great difficulty in the cramped space, where the six-foot Thompson often found himself "sprawled out like a lizard," he and the workers excavated another downward-leading corridor scattered with idols, jade and crystal beads, copper bells, and charred human bones. At the end of the passageway, they found yet another great stone and, lying on the ground, a jade fish. As he freed the dirt from the slab, Thompson felt a strong draft, and when he finally pried the stone loose, he found "an opening as black as night from which poured a rush of cold air as chill as the breath of death."

"Don Eduardo," one of the workers told him, "this is surely the mouth of Hell."

"Not so," Thompson answered with characteristic aplomb. "Since when has the mouth of Hell given forth a breath as cold as this wind?"

He attached a lantern to the tip of his metal tape measure and lowered it over the edge. As he played off the tape and watched the dizzying shadows cast by the swinging light, he wondered whether it would ever strike bottom. When the lamp finally came to rest, Thompson read the depth—fifty-two feet. The next day he returned with rope and tackle, and the men winched him into the blackness, a lantern in his hand and a Bowie knife in his teeth. He touched down in a central chamber eighteen by twenty-five feet, with several short passages radiating outward. On the floor, he spied a magnificent jade bead more than five inches in circumference. To one side of the chamber were fragments of a handsome white marble vase, as well as a jade torso that matched the head they had found earlier. Working by candlelight, Thompson retrieved a hoard of artifacts, including shattered clay vessels; shell beads; arrowheads of obsidian and flint; tiger's teeth; a pair of pearls; mother-of-pearl plaques; and amulets, beads, and pendants of jade. It was, he decided, "not merely the tomb of a great priest, but the tomb of *the* great priest, the tomb of the great leader, the tomb of the hero god, Kukul Can, he whose symbol was the feathered serpent." He called the place the High Priest's Temple, one of the names by which it is still known (along with "the Ossario," from the Spanish *osario*, "place of bones").

Despite these discoveries, or perhaps goaded on by them, Thompson never shook his obsession with the Sacred Well, which beckoned at the end of a thousand-foot-long limestone causeway. And he never lost his keenness to prove the cenote's part in human sacrifices to the rain god Chaak. But like others before him, he had no idea how to penetrate its depths.

The word *cenote* comes from *dz'onot* in Yucatek Mayan, meaning "well." This was no well in the conventional sense, but a great oval sinkhole 170 feet wide, with sheer walls rising seventy-five feet above the surface of the water. Like all cenotes, it was created after rainwater absorbed carbon dioxide from the air and formed a weak acid. As the acidic water percolated through the ground, it gradually eroded the soft limestone, carving out a water-filled underground cavern, until the surface crust collapsed and the well was exposed. In the northern Yucatan, graced with few lakes or rivers, cenotes were vital sources of water for the ancient inhabitants. Though there are two cenotes at Chichen Itza, only the Sacred Well was said to have been used for religious rituals; most likely, it was the one that had given the city its name, translated "Mouth of the Well of the Itza People."

When he returned to the States for a scientific conference, Thompson finally seized his opportunity. In Boston, he petitioned the Peabody and the American Antiquarian Society for a dredge, winch, tackle, rope,

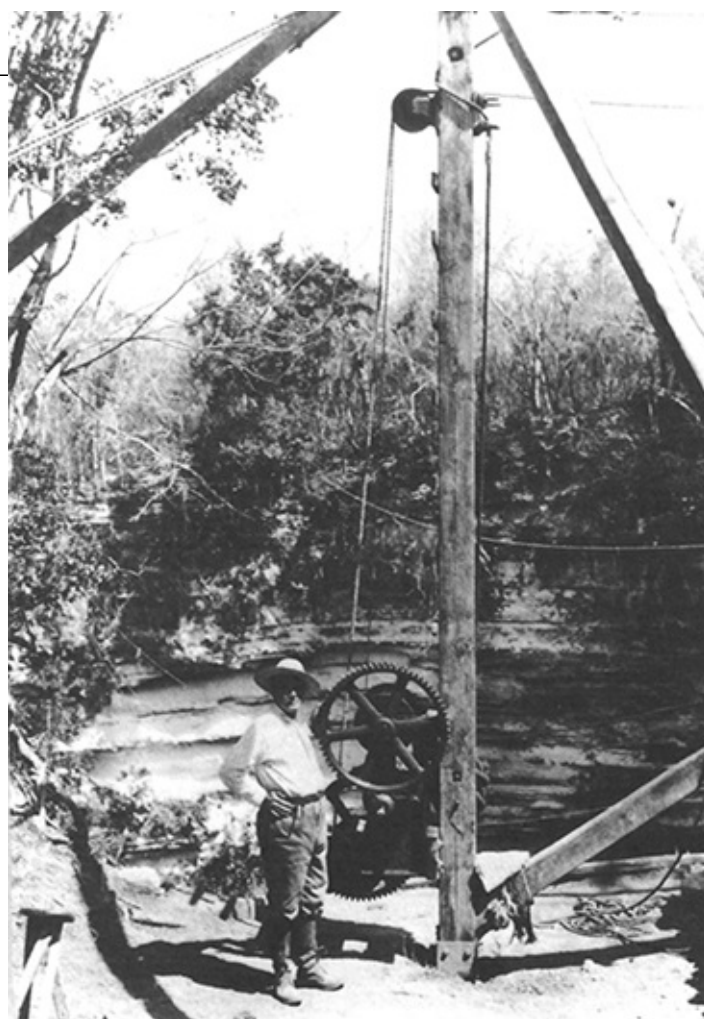
steel cables, and a derrick with a thirty-foot swinging boom. He also took diving lessons. Hearing of his plan, his friends objected that no one could descend into the Sacred Well and expect to come out alive. Thompson was fit and blessed with a rugged constitution, but he was over forty years old, after all. If he wanted to commit suicide, they asked, couldn't he find a less spectacular means? But in the end, his patron agreed to finance the scheme, dredge, diving suit, and all.

Thompson had the apparatus shipped to Progreso, where it was taken by train as far as the village of Dzitas. Since no trucks were available, the equipment had to be carted piecemeal the remaining sixteen miles to Chichen Itza, over the worst excuse for a road. After months of the hardest labor Thompson had ever known, it was all finally stacked beside the Sacred Well. Assembling the machinery was quicker but no less strenuous, and time and again Thompson expected to see the jumble clatter into the cenote or bury him and his men. He would have given years of his life, he swore, for the services of "one or two brawny, profane and competent Yankee 'riggers.' "

For weeks, Thompson sat at the edge of the Sacred Well, musing and calculating, taking measurements and soundings. Perched on a stone ruin above the cenote's rim, he heaved in logs weighing as much as an "average native," to gauge where sacrificial victims would have landed. Christening this the "fertile zone," he resolved to start work there.



On March 5, 1904, Thompson began dredging. Standing on the planked platform in his tall rubber boots and broad-brimmed hat, he felt an inexpressible thrill as the steel jaws swung out, hung in space, then plunged into the dark water of the Sacred Well. The workers strained over the winch handles. The cables tautened. Water boiled. Then the bucket broke the surface, and dripping, rose to the cenote's edge. The workers positioned the wooden boom over the platform, and a carload of dark brown matter spewed out—decayed wood, leaves, and mostly, mud.



*Edward H. Thompson with his dredge. "I doubt if anybody can realize the thrill I felt, when, with four men at the winch handles and one at the brake, the dredge, with its steel jaw agape, swung from the platform, hung poised for a brief moment in mid-air over the dark pit and then, with a long swift glide downward, entered the still, dark waters and sank smoothly on its quest."*

For days it was the same, the dredge working up and down, up and down, raising "muck and rocks, mud and more muck." Once its teeth gripped an entire tree trunk, which disintegrated on the platform during the next two days, leaving only a ghostly stain. Another time, the dredge raised the commingled bones of a jaguar and a deer. And there were dozens of potsherds. These tantalized Thompson, who wanted to believe them evidence of some ancient ritual, but in the end, he found them unpersuasive: Boys are boys everywhere, he figured, and a boy's instinct is to skip flat objects across smooth water.

While he waited, Thompson pondered the cenote's other legends. The water of the Sacred Well was usually turbid, ranging from jade green to rusty brown. But Thompson also saw the water turn blood red just as the ancient sources had claimed. The green, he determined, was due to algae, the brown, to decaying leaves. And the sanguinary tint was caused by red flowers and seeds that tumbled into the water during certain seasons, lending the surface the color of dried blood.

One day, Thompson was sitting in the cenote in his scow, writing notes while a repair was made on the dredge. The boat was moored directly beneath the derrick, and when he happened to glance over the gunwale, Thompson had a revelation: Reflected in the water he could see the "many deeps and hollows" reported by the maidens who had survived their plunge into the well. Rather than the contours of a supernatural landscape, the images were simply the reflections of the cavities and striations in the cliff walls.

As for the “many people of their nation” that the women had reported seeing, Thompson also glimpsed figures in the water—the reflected forms of his workmen on the bank above. And like the maidens, he heard voices—the murmurs of the laborers drifting down to him. It was, Thompson recalled, “the weirdest part of the weird undertaking. The whole episode gave me an explanation of the old tradition that developed so clearly as the details of a photographic negative.”

But when no other artifacts were found, Thompson began to regret exposing his patrons in Massachusetts to such expense and himself to so much ridicule. By day, he became increasingly nervous, by night, sleepless.

One morning, he arose from yet another bout of insomnia. The day was as dark as his thoughts, and tracing the path from his house, past the great pyramid and down the processional causeway leading to the cenote, he plodded toward the staccato clicks of the dredge’s brake. Taking his position under the palm-leaf lean-to, he watched the men working the winches. Slowly, the bucket emerged from the water and pivoted over the platform, as it had hundreds of times before. But as he glanced listlessly into the metal jaws, Thompson spied two yellowish, globular masses nestled in the chocolate muck.

Reaching into the bucket, he hefted the objects and saw that they seemed to be made of resin, which was confirmed by pinching off a bit and tasting it. There were some lighted embers nearby, and when he tossed a piece into them, it released a wonderful aroma; he realized he was holding globes of copal incense that had been hurled into the cenote hundreds of years before, during the rituals reported in the legends. It was just as one of the local wise men had said: “In ancient times our fathers burned the sacred resin—*pom*—and by the fragrant smoke their prayers were wafted to their god whose home was in the sun. That night for the first time in weeks, Thompson wrote, he slept “soundly and long.”

He decided he would make Chichen Itza his crowning accomplishment. First, he took leave from the consulate (where his duties, as chronicled in the *New York Times*, included bailing out of prison some American fishermen accused of poaching and reporting on the exorbitant price of *chicle*, the raw material for chewing gum). Later, he retired from government service to devote all his time to the ruins. There was hardly a day when something astonishing didn’t appear in the bucket of his dredge. Then, after five years when the machine began raising just mud and sticks and slivers of rock, he started to dive. The cenote was so cold that he could work only two hours a day underwater; surfacing with his lips blue and his body prickled with gooseflesh, he’d gulp hot coffee to revive himself. Meanwhile, ensconced in Mérida, Henrietta didn’t learn of her husband’s submarine adventure until it was over, some two years later.

In the end, Thompson recovered nearly thirty thousand artifacts from the cenote, a fantastic haul that has been called the single most important archaeological treasure ever recovered in the Americas. There were arrowheads, flint axes, spear throwers, and a spectacular sacrificial knife with a stone blade and a wooden handle carved with entwined serpents. There were terra cotta vessels of every form and size, and earthenware figures of animals and human beings. More pieces of copal, some still mounded in their ceremonial bowls, others sculpted into fantastical creatures, including a snake grasping a man’s head in its jaws. And there were incense burners, including one made from the skull of an adolescent boy. Of copper, there were chisels, bowls, and bells, pendants shaped like playful monkeys, and more skulls. Of gold, rings; bowls; cups; and basins, including one twelve inches in diameter; hammered disks, some incised with scenes of battle; realistic masks; a headband of entwined serpents; a round helmet stunning in its simplicity; ornaments in the form of human heads, deer, parrots, monkeys, frogs, turtles, crabs; and a finely wrought necklace of alternating beads and links. Dozens of skeletons of both sexes and all ages were also found, bearing out the legends of human sacrifice.

Then there were the jades. From the green waters of the cenote, Thompson raised plaques intricately worked with images of gods and kings; figurines of men and women, jaguars, and other animals; knives for extracting the living hearts of sacrificial victims; pendants of human heads, some with delicate, lifelike

features, others nearly abstract; and ornaments ranging from austere rings to elaborate flower-shaped earplugs, nose rings, and necklaces, as well as hundreds of beads carved in a bewildering variety of shapes—round, flat, tubular, square, swirled. Many of the jades were of a luminous, highly prized color that has become known as Chichen green.

Numbering more than five thousand, they are still the greatest assemblage of carved jades ever recovered. Before being cast into the water, most had been broken to liberate the spirit residing within. But at the Peabody, where Thompson shipped his finds, curators were able to reconstruct many of the pieces, and from stylistic clues it was determined that most were Late Classic works from the Maya's southern range, showing that the cenote was a major destination for pilgrims from about A.D. 800 to 1534. One striking jade head was carved in A.D. 688 and portrayed Yo'nal Ahk II, king of the Maya city-state known as Piedras Negras, some three hundred miles from Chichen Itza. Other pieces were older still, apparently heirlooms that had been cherished for centuries before being offered to the Sacred Well. No other collection of jades represents such a wide time period or range of styles.

Thompson must have succeeded at Chichen Itza more spectacularly than he'd ever hoped. Perhaps anticipating trouble from the Mexican authorities, he and his benefactors kept his find secret for a decade. When the hoard from the Sacred Cenote was finally publicized in the *New York Times*, on March 2, 1922, J. C. Merriam, president of the Carnegie Institution, and Marshall H. Saville, head of the Museum of the American Indian, pronounced it "the most important source of information in unraveling the story of the Mayas now available to science." But the ensuing years weren't easy for Thompson. He'd done permanent damage to his hearing during one of his dives, when he'd become absorbed in his work, forgotten to open the valve on his helmet, and surfaced too quickly. He fell behind in his taxes, which the Carnegie Institution stepped in to pay. In 1921, during the lingering violence after the Mexican Revolution, Hacienda Chichen was looted again and burned.

Even the cenote seemed to exact its revenge. Among the artifacts lifted from the well was a four-hundred-pound statue, half jaguar, half human, which Thompson had placed in his house despite the warning of one of his workers, who had told him, "Don Eduardo had better take care. He is taking away one of the servants of the rain god." For years, the figure sat uneventfully, but when the hacienda was burned, the piece was damaged by the heat. As workers picked it up, the stone split, and the heavy base landed painfully on Thompson's toes.

"Now you see," the worker chided, "the serpent god was angry and he took this means of avenging himself on Don Eduardo."

"*Bey Ani*," Thompson answered in Mayan. "It may be so."

In 1926, the Mexican government also vented its displeasure, seizing the hacienda and charging Thompson with the unauthorized exporting of archaeological artifacts. It would be eighteen years before the country's Supreme Court finally ruled that he had broken no laws. But Thompson had long since left Mexico, and in May 1935 had died at the home of his son Edward in Plainfield, New Jersey. Henrietta also didn't live to see her husband's vindication, having survived him by only a year. Thompson's heirs sold the hacienda, which today operates as an eco-spa hotel. In 2010, the Yucatan government bought 205 acres around the archaeological site for 17.8 million American dollars. And today, Mexico has much stricter laws regulating the collection and exportation of cultural artifacts. The Peabody began repatriating some pieces from the cenote in the 1960s, in what the museum's director called "a gesture to promote international understanding." But many works from the Sacred Well remain with the museum.

So on a warm July morning, I journey to Cambridge and stroll to the venerable brick building on Divinity Avenue. A few pieces, including the wonderfully expressive head from Piedras Negras, are displayed on the building's third level, arranged in old-fashioned cases on the creaky wooden floor, but the lion's share



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