



UXMAL

By Allen Cox, Tacoma, Washington, U.S.A.

Maya legend tells of a dwarf in the ancient city of Uxmal, who claimed to have magical powers. Uxmal's ruler, confident that the dwarf was a fraud, made a foolish wager that if the dwarf could construct a pyramid overnight he could take over rule of the city. By the next morning, the ambitious dwarf had created the great Pyramid of the Magician, and became ruler of Uxmal.

The Pyramid of the Magician, with its distinctive rounded corners and unique and controversial elliptical base (drawing the accuracy of its reconstruction into question) possesses an organic quality, as though it naturally sprang from the earth. There is no other structure with its shape or design in all of Mesoamerica. Also known as *Adivino*, its near-vertical stairway, the steepest on any Mesoamerican structure, rises sharply, 37 meters above the ground. At the summit, the waiting mouth of a serpent is open and ready to swallow any who dare enter the temple.

The stonework at Uxmal is grand in scale and exceptionally ornate in design. Its architects and stonemasons, working in what today is known as the *Puuc* style (named for the region in which Uxmal is located), achieved a height of artistry unrivaled anywhere else in Mesoamerica. John Lloyd Stevens, the American explorer who visited the ruins in the 1840s, likened its scale and grandeur to Egypt's Thebes, but lamented that Uxmal sadly languished in obscurity.

Besides *Adivino*, two other structures at Uxmal are considered among the most significant in Maya architecture: the Governor's Palace and the Nunnery Quadrangle. The Governor's Palace, renowned for its symmetry and ornamentation, is a massive rectangular structure that covers five acres. The Nunnery Quadrangle, jaw-dropping in the intricacy and complexity of its stonework, consists of four buildings surrounding a vast plaza in the shadow of the Pyramid of the Magician.

It remains a mystery why the ancient Maya would have selected such a location for this grand and important city, which was at its height from the seventh to tenth centuries. The Maya typically settled near cenotes, natural sinkholes that pepper most of the Yucatán terrain and that, even today, serve them well, given the absence of surface rivers. Oddly, Uxmal has no nearby cenotes. Its architects solved their water problem by constructing large underground cisterns to catch rain water. Their worst enemy was drought.

Uxmal is a pleasant one-hour drive into the Puuc hills from Yucatán's capital city of Mérida, and a visit to the ruins makes an easy half-day excursion from the city. The entrance to the ruins has an excellent visitor center with a good restaurant, gift shop and bookstore. A pleasant aspect of Uxmal is that it draws fewer visitors than the more famous site of Chichén Itzá, but certainly not because it is less remarkable; the difference simply lies in Uxmal's unwieldy distance from the mega-resorts of Cancún and Playa del Carmen.

ANTONIO LÓPEZ DE SANTA ANNA By Dr. Crit Minster

In 1810, Mexico declared independence from Spain and 16 year old Antonio López de Santa Anna enlisted—on the Spanish side. After several years of fighting the independence movement, he switched sides, allying himself with the charismatic Agustín de Iturbide. He rose to the rank of general and was later instrumental in overthrowing Iturbide, who had declared himself emperor: Santa Anna preferred Mexico to be a republic.

In 1824, at the age of 30, Santa Anna was made governor of the Yucatán. In 1829, Spain made one last-gasp effort to re-take Mexico. Santa Anna defeated the larger Spanish force at Tampico, for which he came to be considered a hero and a military genius. Santa Anna himself made the most of it, referring to himself ever after as "the victor of Tampico." In 1833, Santa Anna was elected president for the first time. When several states rose up in rebellion, he would personally lead armies out to crush them. In 1835, he brutally put down a serious rebellion in Zacatecas before heading to Texas.

Texas, once a Mexican state, had been allowing American settlers for several years. These settlers eventually tired of Mexican rule and the state declared itself an independent republic in 1836. Santa Anna moved his army north and fought several battles with the rebels, culminating with the famous battle of the Alamo in San Antonio in February and March of 1836. Although the battle was a victory for Santa Anna—the fort was overrun and all of the roughly (no one knows for sure) 200 defenders were killed—more than 1,000 Mexican soldiers perished attacking the heavily fortified Alamo. In April, Santa Anna and his army were attacked by surprise by Texas rebels fighting under Sam Houston. It was a total rout: the Texans killed roughly 650 Mexican soldiers and captured another 600, including Santa Anna himself. Nine Texans were killed, and 18 were wounded. Santa Anna, to secure his release, signed a treaty recognizing Texan independence.

Back in Mexico, Santa Anna retired to his country ranch. But when the French invaded in 1838 to get compensation for unpaid loans, he returned to lead the counter-attack. The Mexicans eventually agreed to French demands, but Santa Anna was a hero again. His leg was amputated after a cannon shot crushed his ankle. He ordered his leg be buried with full military honors. Within a year, he was president again.

By 1845, his government had fallen apart and he was forced to escape and head into exile in Cuba. His exile didn't last long, however: in 1846 the U.S.—Mexican War broke out and he was welcomed back to lead the defense. The Mexicans lost the war, partly due to Santa Anna's military incompetence. Once again, Santa Anna went into exile.

By 1853 he was back for one last turn at the presidency. His conservative allies eventually abandoned him, however, and in 1855 he was overthrown and exiled again, and tried in absentia for treason due to the flagrant corruption of his administration. He lived in several countries for the next two decades before being allowed back to Mexico in 1874, where he died two years later. All in all, he was president eleven times.