

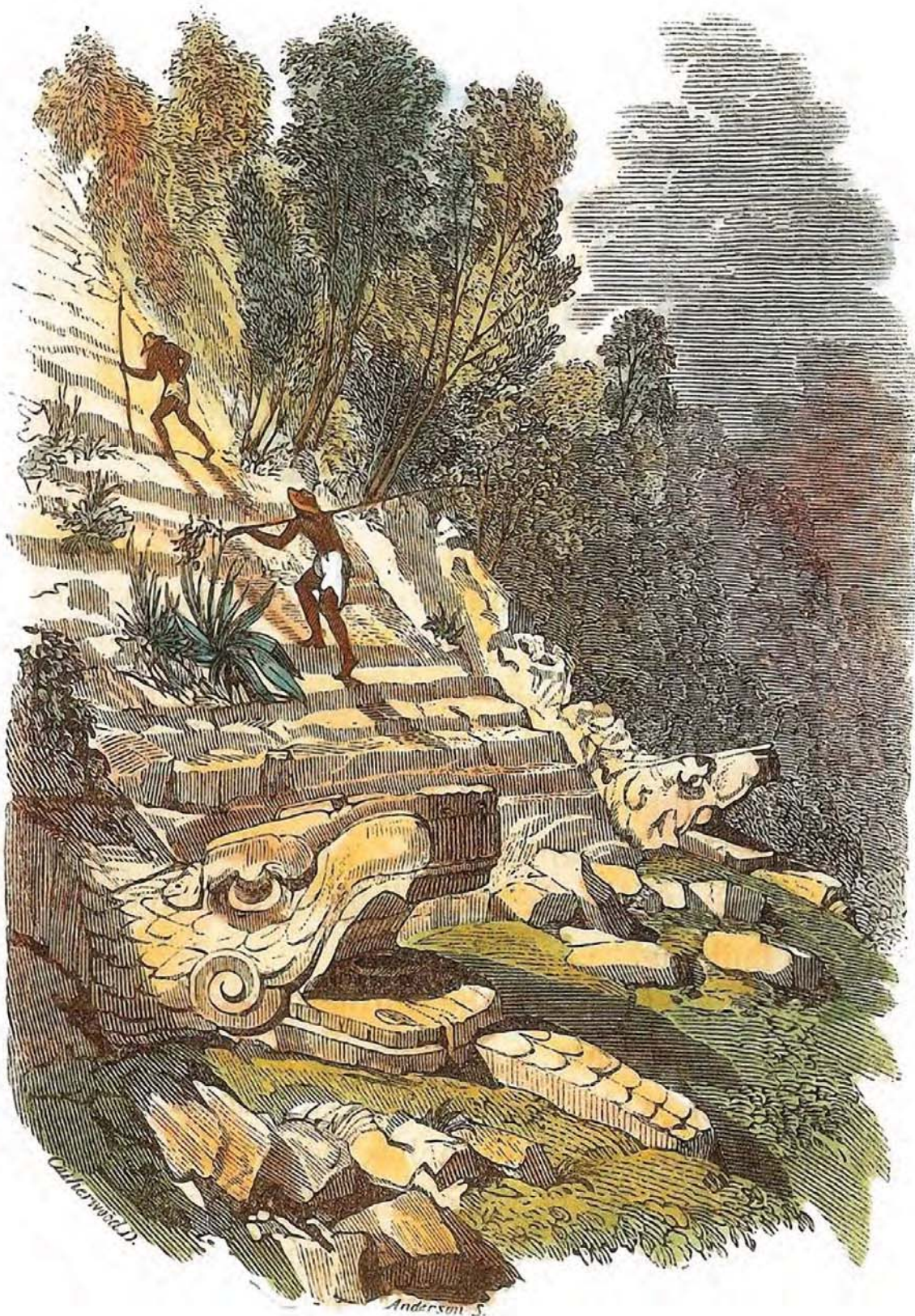
The Essence of Maya

For their great achievements and advances in the fields of both science and art, the Maya are considered the most original and sophisticated ancient culture of the American continents. Already in the sixteenth century, the Spaniards marveled at the complexity of this civilization and the splendor of its architecture. For example, in his *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* (Account of the Things of the Yucatán), the priest **Fray Diego de Landa** highlights the grandiosity of the monuments of **Izamal**, **Chichén Itzá**, **Mayapán**, and **T'hó**, the ancient city of Puuc that was painstakingly destroyed to proudly found **Mérida**, the very heart of Spanish dominion in the northern Maya lands.

Despite these early impressions, not until the nineteenth century would explorers and travelers acquaint the modern world with the spectacular Maya cities that lay hidden in the jungles of southwest Mexico and Central America. These same sites offer valuable evidence today of a unique culture, one that underwent astonishing development which would only be possible within the framework of social, political, and economic organization.



Photo: Patricia Carrillo Medrano. Partial view of El Castillo, Tulum, Quintana Roo, Mexico, 2006.



Frederick Catherwood. Detail of the stairs and one of the plumed serpents descending from El Castillo, Chichén Itzá, Yucatán, Mexico, 1843 (lithograph).

As more and more travelers visited the region and gave reports of the spectacular Maya sites, myths about this culture began to spread, inspired by the travelers' amazement at these enigmatic cities. It was only natural to wonder who had built and lived in them, a question that gave rise to myriad hypotheses on their true origin. Thus, for

example, for the explorer **Augustus Le Plongeon** (1825–1908), the only possible explanation for how such a culture could have developed in America was that it was the work of immigrants from Atlantis, an idea taken up again by his wife, Alice Dixon Le Plongeon (1851–1910), for the plot of her work *Queen Mío's Talisman*.



Photo: Luis Alberto Martos López. Panorama of the inner precinct at Tulum, Quintana Roo, Mexico, 2006.

After the Second World War new myths fired the imagination, idealizing Maya culture. Scholars tried to find in the Maya an exemplary society—a unique civilization in which aggression and warfare had no place; a people that lived in harmony throughout its history and came to realize grand achievements under the beneficent, peaceful, and wise leadership of its kings and priests. It was only logical, following the bleak horrors of the war, to long for

the existence of a peaceful society devoted to agriculture, commerce, the observation of the heavens, and the development of the arts and sciences.

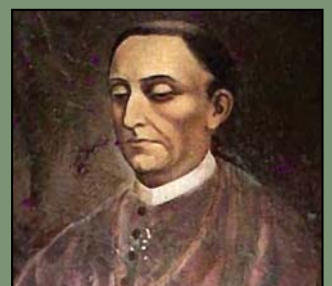
As research advanced, however, the myth collapsed. Notwithstanding their accomplishments, we know today that warfare among the Maya was as common as their mathematic calculations or agricultural techniques.

Based on this research, and shedding all myths and hypotheses, we shall attempt to identify the essence of Maya. What elements define this peculiar culture that forms part of the Mesoamerican mosaic? There is no simple answer, given that this was a civilization that developed great knowledge in science and the arts. But exhaustive analysis of archaeological, historical, and epigraphic findings brings us closer to understanding Maya essence. Its defining characteristics fall into two general categories: formal and functional.



Frederick Catherwood. Zoomorphic altar stela, Copán, Honduras, 1841 (lithograph).

On the seacoast there are some caverns, on the coast of Polé [Xcaret] and Ascension Bay, that hurl water up among the hollows within the crags and rise more than two spears high.



Fray Diego de Landa



Frederick Catherwood. El Castillo, Tulum, Quintana Roo, Mexico, 1843 (lithograph).