

# Across the Petén to the Ruins of Machaquilá

By IAN GRAHAM

*Photographs by the Author*

Any student of the Maya civilization will be aware of how incomplete a record there is of the ancient ceremonial centers of this people; quite large areas of the archaeological map are perfectly blank, and are likely to remain so for a considerable time, especially as there is no organized effort to correct the situation. In view of this I have spent some time over the past four years following up stories of newly encountered ruins in the Department of Petén, Guatemala (a region that is best known, of course, for the great ruins of Tikal). It was a uniquely favorable time to do this, because petroleum geologists were intensely active in Petén, criss-crossing the jungle for seismic and gravity surveys, and investigating surface geology; also building camps, heliports, and so on. This massive campaign proved to be a failure as regards oil, but it did yield a number of "new" ruins as a by-product. (Hitherto, nearly all reports of ruins had come from chicle gatherers, never a very precise source of information.)

I made a tour of the oil companies' offices in Guatemala City in order to question anyone who had been in the field. In this way I heard that Alfonso Escalante, of the Union Oil Co., had come across ruins midway between Poptún and the River Pasión, finding there some beautifully carved stones. Three of these had been brought out by helicopter, and I was shown one of them: one glance at it, and I was resolved to visit the

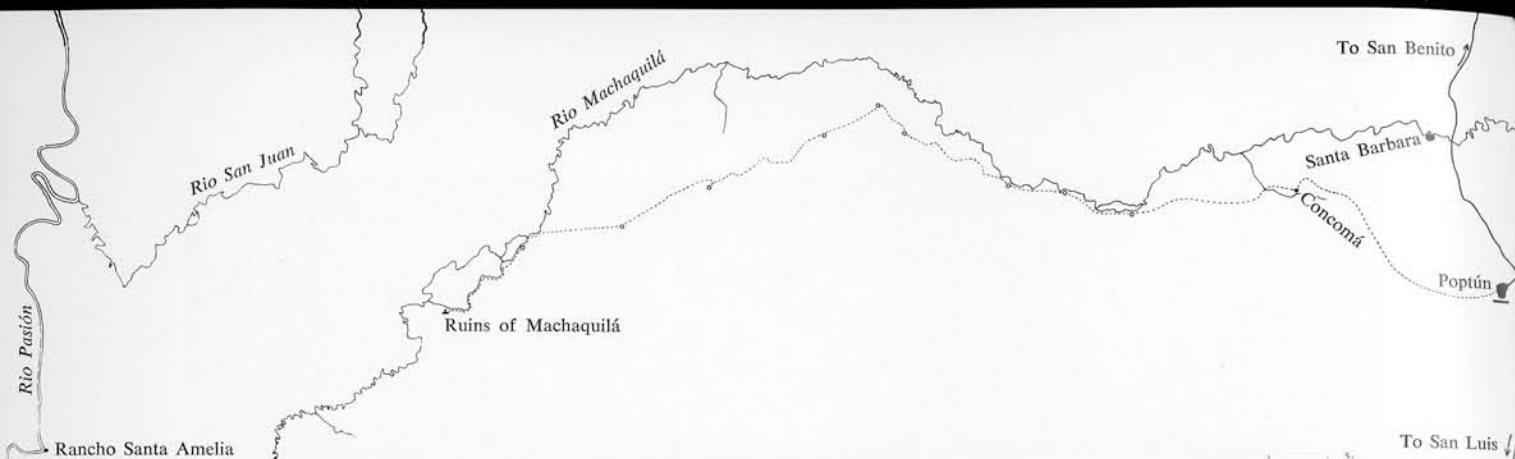
site. For this was clearly part of a hieroglyphic stair; and who could tell how many other monuments and inscriptions might not be lying there, in that most inaccessible and least explored part of Petén?

The remoteness of the place was rather forbidding to me then, and I confess that for two years I was vaguely hoping to be wafted there by helicopter, as I learned much later Linton Satterthwaite had been (in 1958, but maddeningly for him, for a stay of only 15 minutes!). By 1961 I had gained some experience of travelling in the jungle, and the journey seemed less formidable; in any case, the helicopter patch near the ruins would have become hopelessly overgrown by then. And so in May of that year I set out on foot from Poptún with four men and a cargo mule for a preliminary reconnaissance. Two of my men had been employed by Union Oil to cut trails for geologists; thus we were not completely in the dark, and in fact only once went wrong—and then we wasted a day struggling through terrible little valleys with vertical rock walls (actually very large sink-holes), an experience that gives me real sympathy for Cortés, that time he was lost in similar terrain.

After five days we arrived at the ruins, which

*Back of Structure 32 at Machaquilá showing masonry veneer of very high quality.*





(Above) The journey across the Petén to the ruins of Machaquilá; overnight camps are indicated by small circles. (Right) Map of Guatemala with the above area shown in white.

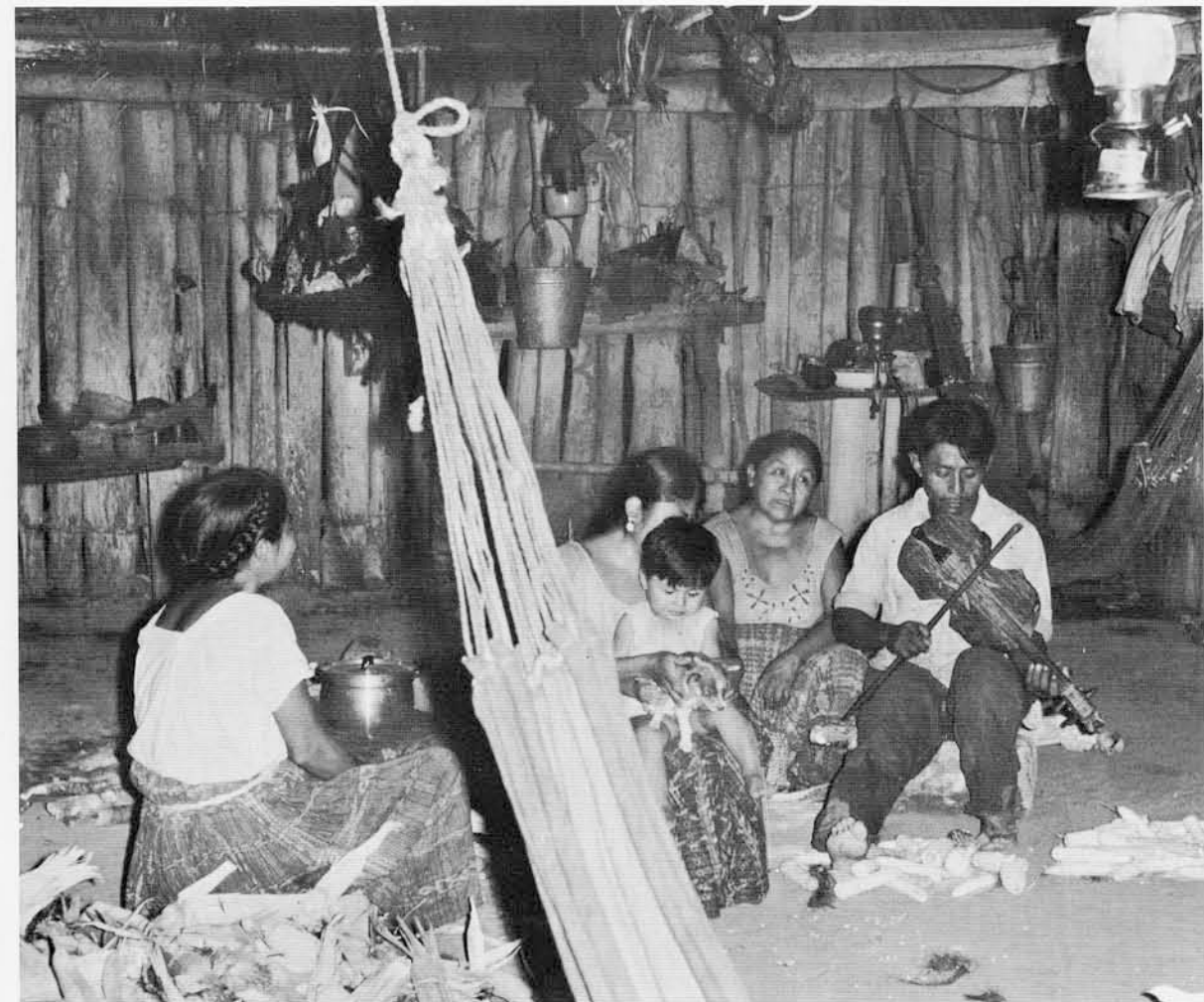


stand on the south bank of a branch of the River Machaquilá that is dry at that time of the year. In the four days that our limited food stores allowed us to stay, I could do no more than carry out a lightning survey with compass and tape, and make a record of two of the stelae we found there. There were at least eight more carved stelae, all lying face downwards (what luck!), some well-preserved walls of extraordinarily fine veneer masonry, a vaulted chamber—the first to be encountered in southern Petén—and a large carved altar still supported by four cylindrical stone legs, which I espied under a tangle of vines and leaf-mould at the very moment we were leaving for camp on the fourth day. I would have to return the following year . . .

In October 1961, Hurricane Hattie devastated Belize, and passed on to spend its force in Petén. Poptún I knew had suffered badly, but no one could tell me to what extent the forest was affected over to the west. The wonderful aerial photographs of Petén taken the following March for the Guatemalan Directorate of Mapping would have settled the point; but perhaps it was well that the prints covering just this region happened not to be available when I asked for them—had I seen them, I should never have attempted the trip!

For various reasons it was not possible to start until late May. In addition to the usual supplies, I had brought two hydraulic jacks for raising stelae, kindly lent by the Peabody Museum, and four 5-gallon tubs of latex for making moulds of them, the gift of the British Museum. I signed up Pablo Paredes, one of my guides the year before, whom I knew to be the best worker and most loyal friend one could wish for; his young brother-in-law Hilario; Nemesio, known as "Mecho," for a cook; and Lorenzo, or "Lencho" the mule-driver, with his three mules. It was Sat-

urday, May 26th, when the men came round in the early morning and somehow managed to load everything onto the unfortunate beasts; then we set off. The first day took us to Concomá, a settlement of four Kekchi Indian families. To describe the journey, I will quote some extracts from my journal, denoting the days by numbers. *Day 1:* . . . the trail, of course, was clear to Concomá, but here and there all the big trees had been blown down in a heap. Stayed in Santiago's house as before. In the evening lit the Coleman lamp and Santiago took down one of his two homemade violins (one string of nylon, the others of fiber from a corozá palm). Only one tune really, but soft and soothing and nicely played. His youngest nephew aged 1½ danced, although he has never seen anyone dancing. Quite a squash at night with 12 adults and several children sleeping in the house. Santiago's wife sleeps on the smooth inner surface of bark from a "lanilla" tree, the same that provides kapok for pillows. In the morning, Mecho the cook said a large rat had fallen from the roof into his hammock. Later it ate through his little bag which had tortillas in it.



Santiago's house at Concomá

*Day 2:* Engaged Santiago and two other Concomá boys to come with us; what I saw of the forest yesterday, and heard last night, convinces me we shall make slow progress . . . Camped 3 leagues on, (a league is 4 km., an hour's journey with mules), by the river bank; this trail already partly cleared.

*Day 3:* Soon after breakfast a mule standing nearby started violently and there was a shrill scream. We rushed to see what was up; crashing noises; then I saw a tapir with young. Ran to get my camera, but they moved off and plunged into river with huge splash. Caught a glimpse of them swimming, like tiny hippos.

*Day 4:* Sent José (Concomá boy) back to Poptún to bring 35 lbs. of food. With 3 extra men to feed we shall not get far unless the going improves soon. Moved on 1½ leagues to Corozal. Boys caught 15 huilín (catfish) using tinamou entrails as bait.

*Day 5:* Went along with men to do a little amateur machete work. Some big trunks to cut through—sometimes twice, to roll a section out of the way. About ¾ of trail completely new. I walked back in 15 minutes along a trail that took us 2½ hours to cut. Pablo killed a 2-foot *chaltate*, said to be nearly as poisonous as a fer-de-lance. In the evening, José trotted in with his load, and 2 pineapples to boot.

*Day 6:* Moved on about 1¼ leagues. Had just put up shelter for Mecho and his fire when wham! torrential rain. Noticed mules making purposefully for river bank, then heard heavy splashing (only a pool in a dry river bed here; all the flow is underground). Mules scrambled out and ambled off down river bed for home. I caught one, Lencho the others.

*Day 7:* Fine morning; dried our things. Found a little grasshopper, clear green, with body 6 millimeters long, its feelers ten times that length . . .

Decided to send a man back to hire another mule and its owner, to bring 100 lbs. maize, plus grinder, lime, etc. Kekchi boys feel weak on diet of flour tortillas. Also sent S.O.S. letter to John Gatling (head of Guatemalan Sun Oil Co.) asking him transmit \$100 on loan to Poptún. Progress today again discouraging, but I don't want to give up and lose all the work we have done.

Day 8: Mules are really too naughty; 3 times today they swam across pool in a bid to escape. Poor things, they are savanna-bred and not used to the jungle. Carried a bucket of water at mid-day to the men. 1½ leagues of rough going, taking care not to spill it. Exhausted. Men returning brought an armadillo and a tinamou (a bird with tender meat, and a surprising lot of it).

Day 9: Talking last night after dark Lencho said that the writing on stones you find at old ruins could not be read. Pablo put in: "Oh, but don Juan can" (I wish I could!), "he's not a mere geologist, but an *archgeologist!*" . . . Mecho the cook gets up very early to make tortillas. This morning I heard him calling Pablo; an armadillo had come right up to him, attracted by the light or the smell . . . Little progress today: many large tamarindo trees, which are worse than zapote to cut, as the wood is stringy.

Day 10: Lencho and I had tremendous battle with the mules, to prevent them landing on the far side of the pool. The three of them swam about for ages while we beat them back with branches. Poor Lencho is worried and depressed by the mules; always taciturn, he has withdrawn more than ever, and will scarcely eat. Sudden sharp rain at 3. Now, after the storm, Lencho announces that the mules have run away! But we left the trail blocked at Corozal. Men say they have still not reached Machaca, as hoped; but we'll move on tomorrow if the mules are back in time.

Day 11: Mules recaptured. Moved on 2½ leagues; rained all the way. 6 p.m. and exultant whoops announced arrival of José with Pedro Ik and his mule. Everyone very cheerful; the sheer numbers—9 of us—made a party spirit.

Day 12: Another day of discouragingly slow progress. Mecho told us of his frightening encounter with the zizimit, a stout furry (and mythical) beast against which a gun is useless: sheer terror always causes the weapon to drop from one's nerveless fingers. Feet attached backwards, to confuse would-be trackers.

Day 13: Onwards one league, to Machaca. Last year's champa still standing. Half day off for men; two went fishing, another collected lemons from site of small village that was here in the early 1950's. All my paper-backs finished, so



(Left) *Sereque*. (Right) *Xul hieroglyph*

passed time trying to decipher Chinese hieroglyphics, using Quaker Oats tin as Rosetta Stone. (It has instructions in 6 languages.)

Day 14: Sent Santiago back to Concomá to bring 150 lbs. of maize.

Day 15: Men brought back a *sereque*, a large relative of the guinea pig, I think. I drew its portrait: could it be the prototype of the *Xul* animal of Maya hieroglyphics, I wonder?

Day 16: Men have reached "La Cuchara"—so named because the geologists lost a spoon there. They have brought back a peccary.

Day 17: Moved on 2 leagues to La Cuchara.

Day 18: Weather forecasting, Petén-style. *Signs that it is going to rain:* a tree falling; wet frog falling upon a person; call of a small black bird "quo-quo-quo"; many little flies; tilted moon; much heat. *Signs that it is not going to rain:* none.

Day 19: Record progress today: nearly 3 leagues. Mostly through flat *corozal* where there are fewer big trees, and there's room to take detours. José had shot a spider monkey, to capture its baby. Poor thing, it cries pitifully.

Day 20: Miserable monkey cried most of the night. Pablo on his return reports good progress, but is puzzled not to have made contact with River Machaquilá.

Day 21: Nobody slept much because of monkey. I turned it loose, and it slowly climbed a tree; hope its relatives will find it. Men returned with disappointing news of still not hitting river. Where can we be? Very gloomy after figuring up the food and money position.

Day 22: Moved on almost 2 leagues. Men came back in the evening after unpleasant day working through flood water up to their knees. I decided to make one last bid, sending José and Pedro back to Poptún with a mule for more supplies, and they will airmail a letter to my bank in London.

Day 23: Water ahead receding. A mule has escaped for home; one ought to have a mare along as *madriña* (godmother) to keep them content. Pablo's report of meeting the river at last is backed up by a load of fat machaca fish. Leaf-cutting ants, *zompopos*, have cut three neat



The table-altar at Machaquilá, with one coat of latex. Left to right: Santiago, Pablo Yaxcál, Hilario, Lencho, Mecho, Pablo Paredes, Pedro, José.



Machaquilá Stela 11.  
 Maya date: 9.15.10.0.0  
 3 Ahau 3 Mol;  
 A.D. 741 in the  
 Goodman-Thompson  
 correlation.



Machaquilá Stela 3.  
 Maya date: (9.19.5.0.0)  
 2 Ahau 13 Yaxkin;  
 A.D. 815 in the  
 Goodman-Thompson  
 correlation.  
 (Mosaic photo,  
 slightly retouched)



Hieroglyphic step brought  
 out of Machaquilá. Now  
 in the National Museum  
 in Guatemala City.



Pedro and José toasting  
 tortillas while fish  
 and birds are smoked.

NOTE

The Dedicatory Date of Stela 3 is an especially valuable new source for students of Maya art and inscriptions. This is because of its excellent condition and the comparatively late position of its Maya date in the Late Classic period. Specialists will be interested in the complete chronological structure of the text, involving three dates.

Date A	(9.19. 4.15. 1)	8 Ahau 14 Zotz
	2.19	
Date B	(9.19. 5. 0. 0)	2 Ahau 13 Yaxkin (Dedicatory)
	11. 0	
Date C	(9.15. 6.11. 0)	1 Ahau 13 Cumku

Mr. Graham confirms that there is a one-dot mistake in the first distance number (3.19, not the required 2.19), and agrees with the above reading.

One may speculate that, for the Maya, Dates A and B were Full Moon days, with Date C a lunar conjunction day.

Mr. Graham calls attention to an irregular order in recording the "Initial Series" date of Stela 11. Fortunately this rare all-glyphic monument is in mint condition, also a rarity. His arduous journey "paid off" handsomely.

—LINTON SATTERTHWAITE

round holes in my nylon cape.

*Day 24:* Moved camp to river bank, 1 3/4 leagues on. River very high and fast. I went on with the men in the afternoon, clambered through appalling pile of trees blocking a small pass, to set eyes on the "dry branch" of the river—now a raging torrent. Returned with 1/2 lb. Quaker Oats tin from last year's camp, which has helpful variant text for my pastime. Wish I could contribute to the trail-cutting, but I simply put everyone in danger, including myself, when wielding a machete.

*Day 25:* Small bird sang all morning "Hip, hip, hooray!"—pfuit!" Another makes my mouth water with "Haricots verts!" Bad obstructions reported along last stretch of river bank before ruins.

*Day 26:* Went along to look and (?) help. Long stretches of clean trail through which we passed at exhilarating speed. Then severe obstructions, always in the narrowest defiles between rocky hillside and river. It certainly looks as if the old gods had made a last desperate bid to keep us away, throwing down a *chechem* tree, full of caustic sap and therefore impossible to cut, with its roots close up to a rockface and its branches in the river. Climbed through with nervous anticipation to see what shape the ruins were in; found a lot of fallen trees—it would have been quite impossible to survey this year—but, wonder of wonders, the plaza where the stelae are is completely clear!

*Day 27:* The Great Day! Squeezed past the *chechem* tree roots, and camped between ruins and river. Bushed and cleaned up the main plaza in the afternoon.

The next 2 1/2 weeks were spent in a frantic attempt to take moulds of all the sculpture. Raising the stelae was a nerve-racking task: Stela 10 for example was very large and thick, and when I think of the precarious supports arranged under the little jacks, and the coating of slippery mud on everything, I marvel that no one lost his life, or a limb, under one of these monuments. We also had trouble persuading the latex to harden on the rain-sodden stones. Removable shelters had to be provided for each, and fires kept going. We also built a walled house with shelves for a final drying of the peeled-off moulds.

Pedro and José returned with maize, and some letters for me, on the 29th day. Then I paid off the four Kekchi boys, who spent the day amassing birds and fish to smoke, and carry back home. The wretched mules were not accustomed to *ramón* leaves and bark (a nourishing food), and refused to touch them. Daily they grew thinner, and Lencho more doleful with them. On the 37th

day the cook gave notice! We were not *conforme*, he said, and evidently I was not satisfied with his work. It was true I had bawled him out twice; and he was *not* a good cook. I couldn't believe he would actually go; but next morning I saw him packing up his things. However, I buttered him up and he stayed . . . To Pablo goes much of the credit for keeping Lencho and Mecho with us, on ever-diminishing rations. Salt then ran out, and at last Lencho announced his intention of leaving next day. I was in despair, since I needed *one* more day. At that moment we discovered a little cache of salt wrapped in a maize husk, left over from Pedro and José's journey. Stay another day at double pay? Yes. Tinned peaches to celebrate—a taste from another world!

Working frantically that last day, I was driven nearly insane by the call of the Petén dove. Previously I had thought it cried "Quick Quaker Quotes!" but now it was unmistakably "Quick, not so slow!" So, one hears words that express one's preoccupations; psychologists might develop an aural test analogous to the Rorschach.

On the 42nd day, then, we started for home, happy to have achieved most of our objectives. The river was much higher now, and for long stretches along its banks and across low-lying ground our trail lay beneath one or two feet of water. Two streams we had crossed dry-shod before were full, and we were obliged to hump the cargo across along fallen trees, and swim the mules over. We were now counting the last grains of maize and hunger drove us to daily marches of nine hours. The return journey to Poptún thus took three days only; we had a surplus of provisions amounting to about 10 cents worth of peppercorns, and four ounces of baking powder.

IAN GRAHAM studied physics at Cambridge and Dublin Universities, graduating in 1951. He has done research work in radar; and in techniques of picture conservation at the National Gallery, London. He first visited Central America by accident in 1958, and has since returned each year for several months to gather material for a book of photographs on Maya art and to examine unrecorded sites in the Petén district. The fruits of these explorations will be published by Tulane University.

