

## INTRODUCTION

THE massive pyramids of southern Mexico, Yucatan and Guatemala, dominating their surroundings, epitomize the nature of the theocratic civilizations that built them, old, out of tune with modern industrial culture, majestic but stony-hearted. In effect they call to mind the pyramids of Egypt, and many wild hypotheses have been built upon this resemblance which is as superficial as that between their respective peoples. Putting aside the temporal difference of four thousand years, the Egyptian pyramid was made to glorify an individual, the Pharaoh, and to become his tomb, the Mexican pyramid to honor the gods, or one of them, and to raise a foundation for his temple; the leader who built it was unhonored and unrecorded.

In Middle America, pyramids form a criterion by which to differentiate those native cultures which, though on a similar and almost equal economic plane with several others, had evolved a highly theocratic organization. In this the priesthood played the major role, religious ceremonies were incessantly carried on, and art, architecture, and all cultural florescence were cast in a religious mold. The objective remains of this development, the pyramids, the ruined masonry temples and other edifices, and the great stone sculptures, are the most impressive features of these higher civilizations, and those that today attract so much popular interest.

This physical expression of the emphasis on the religious aspect of life was a rather late feature in the long development of native cultures in Middle America; several thousands of years of slow toiling up the ladder of economic improvement lay behind it. The earliest evidences of this urge for material religious expression apparently arose in the first centuries of the Christian Era; it probably reached its climax a thousand years later, and was still very strong at the time of the Spanish Conquest in 1520. Its principal exponents were the Mayas, the Aztecs, the Toltecs and the builders of Teotihuacan, the Zapotecs and Mixtecs, and the Olmecs and Totonacs.

Archaeological excavations have proved that the Middle American pyramid was not the product of a single plan and builder, but an evolutionary development. The earliest temples were built close to ground level; these were later covered over by successively higher and broader platforms until a high pyramid was produced. The concept of a temple raised on a high platform having thus been standardized, in later years the foundation for a new temple was built as a pyramid but usually enlarged by superposition at several later periods until a higher and more massive temple substructure was attained.

The name "pyramid" popularly applied to all large high substructures in Middle America is really ill chosen and untechnical. All Mexican pyramids are truncated, that is, with small, flat tops; all are stepped or built in several terraces; all are equipped with at least one staircase up the side. None was built of solid cut stone but most of them were faced with masonry, generally covered with plaster. Their solid interiors are of stone rubble, less often of sun-dried brick. Not all are square, and some not even rectangular. Related to them is the acropolis, a great mound supporting many edifices at several levels; this is often a modified hill. (*Frontispiece*)



Figure 1. Maya carved stone face,  
Copan, Honduras