

**EXCAVATION OF THE PLATFORM OF VENUS,  
CHICHÉN ITZÁ, YUCATÁN, MÉXICO:  
THE PIONEERING FIELD WORK OF  
ALICE DIXON LE PLONGEON  
AND  
AUGUSTUS LE PLONGEON**

By

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**Abstract**

During November 1883, Alice Dixon Le Plongeon and Augustus Le Plongeon excavated the Platform of Venus at Chichén Itzá, Yucatán, México. They recorded the location and numbers of artifacts such as cone shaped carved stones, a statue, urn, and tenoned serpent heads in their field notes. Equally important, they recognized the importance of colors painted on the tenoned serpent heads and recorded them. They drew a plan and section of the platform, and took photographs of their excavation and the objects they found. To photograph the artifacts within

the excavation pit with the photographic technology of the 1880s was a major accomplishment that resulted in an important record of that structure and its contents.

### **An introduction to the current paper**

A version of this paper was first given at the annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in Minneapolis, Minnesota in April 1982 when I was a graduate student at the University of Colorado, Boulder. It was presented at the early hour of 8 am to only a few hardy archaeologists, but Jaime Litvak sat in the front row and listened to every word. After the session he came up and introduced himself, and to my surprise he complimented me on the paper! At some point he must have invited me to give it at the 1984 homenaje a Ignacio Bernal at UNAM. Appropriately, that was the 100th anniversary of the publication of Alice Dixon Le Plongeon's article about the excavation of the Platform of Venus in Scientific American. What really was exciting for a starving graduate student was that my expenses to get to México City would be paid!

I don't recall much about the homenaje other than being nervous about giving the paper, but I had plenty of slides which made it easier because the room was darkened! After the homenaje Jaime showed me around the new Institute of Anthropological Investigations building, introduced me to Paul Schmidt, Daniel Schavalzon, and I met many other scholars including Elizabeth Baquedano. He then gave me a huge poster (2 meters tall and about 1 meter wide) of Dr. Le Plongeon that had been made by the Institute photographer. It was just terrific. Even now, writing this in Palo Alto, California such a long time and distance from Jaime, I just can't forget what a great scholar he was, but also a great friend who was always there to help me, and it's a little sad that we can't sit down over coffee (me waving away his cigarette smoke!) anymore and talk about archaeology.

## **Excavation of the Platform of Venus, Chichén Itzá, Yucatán, México, 1883**

### **A historical perspective on the Le Plongeon**

For more than 20 years after the death of Alice Dixon Le Plongeon (1851-1910), most archaeologists thought Augustus Le Plongeon (1826-1908) had destroyed the photographic record he and his wife Alice made of their fieldwork in the 1870s and early 1880s in Yucatán. But the Le Plongeon's collection of photographs, drawings, correspondence, and field notes had been passed on by Alice to her friend Maude A. Blackwell. She stipulated that Blackwell wait until the American people showed an interest in the Maya before selling or donating the materials to an archive or museum, and if there was no interest she was instructed to destroy everything.

It was not until 1931 that Blackwell contacted Sylvanus Morley, director of the Chichen Itza Project for the Carnegie Institution of Washington, Frans Blom, director of the Middle American Research Institute at Tulane University, and Manly P. Hall, president and founder of the Philosophical Research Society in Los Angeles, California.

Both Morley and Blom carried on a lively correspondence with Blackwell for several months. Blackwell mailed Blom plans made by the Le Plongeons of the Governor's Palace at Uxmal, and Akabdzib at Chichén Itzá, and an excavation plan and cross-section of the Platform of Venus (Alice Dixon Le Plongeon and Augustus Le Plongeon 1883b). Morley and archaeologist Karl Ruppert interviewed Blackwell in the fall of 1931, and recommended that the Carnegie Institution purchase the Le Plongeon collection of photos, drawings, and writings. Unfortunately, Morley made a number of criticisms of the Le Plongeons' theories about Maya cultural diffusion which angered Blackwell, and she refused to part with the collection (Morley 1931, Blackwell 1931).

Her correspondence with Blom went on for a considerable amount of time primarily due to her insistence that the Le Plongeons had found Maya codices. She was probably confused, and was honestly attempting to find a way to bolster the reputation of the Le Plongeons whose archaeological theories had been rejected by professional archaeologists. A similar statement about codices was made to Morley, but his immediate rejection of the idea stopped her from going any further.

She even mailed Blom copies of plans she said were given to her by Alice that showed they had entered several rooms within the Adivino Pyramid at Uxmal from the passageway under the west stairway (Blackwell 1931). That passage under the stairway was filled with concrete and stone in recent years to stabilize the pyramid's west side. But, it was in an inner room accessible from that passage, she said, that they found ancient Maya books. Unknown to Blackwell, in 1907 Augustus had written Professor Charles Bowditch at Harvard University's Peabody Museum that he had a good idea where they might be found, and if the funds for exploration were available he might be able to locate them (Augustus Le Plongeon 1907). Blackwell ended her correspondence with Blom when negotiations for purchase of the collection by Manly Hall were nearing completion.

In 1873, Alice and Augustus Le Plongeon landed by ship at the port of Progreso in Yucatán, and began their many years of archaeology, photography, and research. They spent their first year in the vicinity of Mérida where Alice learned to speak Spanish (Augustus was fluent after spending 10 years in Peru), and they traveled to a number of the cities to the east of Mérida such as Izamal taking photos of the archaeological sites, cities, and the people. They then began to make arrangements for the long journey to Chichén Itzá, and in May of 1875 they arrived in Valladolid.

In Valladolid the Le Plongeons met with Yucatecan military officers to arrange for protection during the remainder of the journey, and at Chichén Itzá. The ongoing low intensity Caste War between the Chan Santa Cruz Maya and Yucatecan authorities was underway, and Chichén Itzá was not far from territory controlled by the Cruzob Maya. With two companies of soldiers they arrived at Pisté only to find it had been almost destroyed by the war, and only a few soldiers were stationed there.

They spent from late September 1875 to January 1876 at Chichén Itzá where they photographed the monuments in great detail, made tracings of the murals in the Upper Temple of the Jaguars, and excavated the Platform of the Eagles and Jaguars. It was in that platform, which they called the Mausoleum of Prince Chacmool, that they found the statue they named Chacmool. After several weeks of excavation it was finally pulled from the excavation pit, and then transported to Pisté on a hand built wooden wagon made by Augustus. The Le Plongeons had hoped to export it to the US centenary exposition in Philadelphia, but the president of México, Lerdo de Tejada, refused to sign an export permit. A short time later Porfirio Diaz

became president, and sent armed soldiers from México to Yucatán to bring the Chacmool to México City where it was installed in the National Museum.



Alice Dixon Le Plongeon and Augustus Le Plongeon camped in the center room of the Governor's Palace at Uxmal during their field work there in 1876. During their field work at Chichén Itzá in 1883, they lived some of the time on the upper part of the Monjas, and in Pisté. Note their surveying and photographic equipment, Alice's Remington Rolling Block rifle, hammock, and their dog Trinity sleeping in the corner. Not in the photo is their portable darkroom where they developed their photos. Self-photo by Alice and Augustus, 1876. Courtesy of the Dixon family, London.

The Le Plongeon returned to Mérida, and from there traveled to a number of sites including Aké and Uxmal. Before leaving for the east coast of Yucatán Alice made over 100 prints of their photos of Yucatán, and the sites of Chichén Itzá, Uxmal and Aké for the governor of Yucatán, Eligio Ancona, who purchased them for the museum in Mérida. Alice and Augustus then sailed down the east coast of Yucatán, and lived for several months on Isla Mujeres, and Cozumel Island where they explored and photographed the ruins. Alice took advantage of the quiet days of tropical island living to write quite a number of popular articles for the New York newspapers, and later they were combined in her book *Here and there in Yucatan*.

They then traveled to Belize (British Honduras) aboard a cigar smuggling sailing vessel, and were almost shipwrecked off the coast of Quintana Roo in Ascención Bay. After a harrowing trip they finally arrived safely in Belize where they lived for almost two years taking photos and writing. It was in Belize that Alice wrote her important paper, "Notes on Yucatan," that was later

published in the Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society in 1879.

In early 1880, the Le Plongeon returned to New York to arrange for funding for the planned work at Chichén Itzá, and were back in Yucatán that summer. They then traveled to México City to meet with president Diaz to see if permits for additional archaeological work in Yucatán could be arranged. Diaz was impressed with their previous work, and granted them the permits to carry out their work at Mayapan, Uxmal, and Chichén Itzá.

Their research at Mayapan resulted in a paper published in the Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society titled “Mayapan and Maya inscriptions,” published in 1881. The Le Plongeon then worked at Uxmal and photographed in 3D stereo most of the standing architecture using the wet collodion glass negative method, and continued their photography wherever they went in Yucatán until their departure in 1884 (Desmond and Bryan 2003).

They photographed Maya architecture partly for their own research, but they were also motivated to carry out detailed and systematic photographic documentation because they saw first hand the effects of the severe environment and looting. Their hundreds of negatives and over two thousand prints made by Alice of Yucatán, the people, landscape and archaeological sites are now archived in museums and archives in the United States and England (Desmond 2005).

### **Excavation of the Platform of Venus**

They began the rough and long ride to Chichén Itzá with all their photographic equipment packed into a big wheeled, mule drawn, *volan coche* in the fall of 1883. By November they were working to excavate the Platform of Venus which they called the Mausoleum of the High Priest Cay (fish). In addition to excavating the platform, they completed their previous projects by copying more of the murals in the Upper Temple of the Jaguars, photographed bas-relief carvings in the Lower Temple of the Jaguars in 3D stereo, and fully photographed a number of structures and their architectural details.

What motivated them to excavate the platform was its similarity to the Platform of the Eagles and Jaguars where they had found the Chacmool. In that platform they found a stone urn that contained what they thought were the cremated remains of a Maya Prince named Chacmool, and that led them to call the platform a mausoleum. They hoped an equally important sculpture of High Priest Cay might be found in the Platform of Venus which they named after the fish motif in bas relief on its sides.

Before the Le Plongeon began their excavation of the Platform of Venus, they made measurements, and took a compass bearing to determine its orientation. Their plan gives dimensions of 15.9 meters for the north and south sides, and 15.75 meters for the east and west sides. The height of the platform is given by Alice as 4 meters in an article she wrote titled “Dr. Le Plongeon’s latest and most important discoveries among the ruined cities of Yucatán” published in the Scientific American. In that article Alice provided considerable detail about the excavation and artifacts they found (Alice Dixon Le Plongeon 1884).

The dimensions of the platform itself (not including the stairs) were compared to a plan and cross section provided by Professor George Andrews of the University of Oregon. The north and south sides in his drawing measure 15.8 meters, the east and west sides measure 15.8 meters, and the height is 4.12 meters (Andrews 1981). The Le Plongeon’s measurements are surprisingly close to those of Andrews’ considering the complications the Le Plongeon faced in measuring a collapsed Maya structure with considerable construction variation.

It is interesting that they noted the small offset to the east of the platform, and gave a magnetic

compass orientation of 10 degrees east. They did not know the local declination of about 6 degrees to conform their magnetic reading to true north, and so used only a magnetic bearing. It is most important that they noted the small offset of the platform, and likely noticed an even more pronounced offset in other structures such as the Castillo Pyramid and the Great Ball Court.

As they excavated, Alice and Augustus took notes, made drawings, and made photographs to record their work. They began with a trench that started in the north west of the platform. Alice stated it was 1.5 meters wide, and at a point away from the stairs where facing stones were largely no longer in place. As they excavated through the mound working toward the center, they first encountered stones mortared into place (Alice Le Plongeon 1884:7145).

Alice continued by stating that after eight days of digging, their excavators (Maya) uncovered a sculpture about 1.5 meters north of the center of the platform and at ground level. They photographed the figure which is now called a “standard bearer,” and is on display at INAH’s Regional Museum of Anthropology in Mérida.

Alice gave more detail about the sculpted figure:

We saw a figure on its back, about one and a half meters north from the center of the monument, and exactly level with the surface of the earth. The figure was thickly coated with loose mortar. One leg was broken off below the knee, but we found it under the figure, and afterward adjusted it in place to make a picture [Alice Le Plongeon 1884:7145].

In the article, Alice went on to give the sculpture’s dimensions and colors. She noted that shell or bone finger nails, and a “shell eye” had become detached from the sculpture. Those artifacts were shown to Sylvanus Morley, director of the Carnegie Institution’s Chichén Itzá Project, in 1931 by Maude Blackwell. What happened to the nails or shell eye after that is not known, but Blackwell wrote to Frans Blom at Tulane University, “The Cay Tomb, same place, is where the curious finger nails came from (Blackwell 1931a).

And Morley was shown the nails and shell eye by Blackwell and wrote the president of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, John C. Merriam:

What was exceedingly interesting, however, were five finger-nails, made of highly polished bone or shell, and a bone or shell eye, which she [Blackwell] said Dr. Le Plongeon had told her he found on the ground by this statue, which, from his cross-section, would appear to have been buried in the very center of the Terrace of the Cones [Platform of Venus] [Morley 1931].

Within the platform Alice and Augustus also uncovered “conoidal pillars” (also called “cones”), and twelve “serpent heads”:

The pillars on which the statue rested were not the only ones; they extended over a space of about eight square meters, and in some places were three or four deep, the total number being 182...Two-thirds of the pillars are painted blue and one-third red; they vary in height from eighty centimeters to one meter twenty-five centimeters. On a level with the pillars were twelve serpent heads...[Alice Dixon Le Plongeon 1884:7146].

When this paper was first written in 1981, the cones had been moved from the platform and were stacked near the old Chichén Itzá entrance ticket office.

They next encountered twelve very large ornate tenoned serpent heads that had been used by the Maya as an architectural element in a structure. Alice indicated the direction each faced, and described their sculptural detail. “From the top of each head rises a kind of plume or perhaps flame, and on each side of the front of the head perpendicular ornaments like horns” (Alice Dixon Le Plongeon 1884:7146). Unfortunately, the horns and eccentric plumes were long ago broken from the sculptures.

The serpent heads were painted in a complicated scheme, and were described by Alice as having feathers incised on the upper part and painted green, the underside was covered with scales and yellow in color, the edges of the jaws were yellow, the forked tongue red along the gums, while the teeth were white. The eyes were encircled with blue, as was the brow, and the eyes were filled with white “shell.” The horns or nose plugs that project up from the snout were green and tipped in red, as was the top of the “feather” or plume (Alice Dixon Le Plongeon 1884:7146).

They then uncovered a stone urn which contained a “trapezoidal” flat jade piece with a human face sculpted on it, a jade tube, two pieces of jadeite made by cutting a bead in half, a spherical crystal described by Alice as “a ball of white glass nearly an inch in diameter” (Alice Dixon Le Plongeon 1884:7146), and the remains of a mosaic. Except for the two halves of a jadeite bead that are now in the American Museum of Natural History in New York, none of the other artifacts have been located.

As they excavated to bedrock they encountered more artifacts including an obsidian projectile point, sherds of “fine pottery...some painted blue inside & others with traces of white drawing on the outside,” the bones of a small animal, and three floors—the upper was white and the two below were red (Alice and Augustus Le Plongeon 1883a and 1883b).

From the center of the platform, they then trenched in a southwest direction, and uncovered a number of flat stones carved in bas relief. A description is not given of what was carved on the stones. Alice then pointed out that the red floor extended further south, and laying on it face down was a fish carved in bas relief with a serpent’s body folded around it (Alice Dixon Le Plongeon 1884:7146).

In the cross-section drawn by the Le Plongeon, the first floor (white) is indicated by a double line across the drawing that is 4 meters below the top of the platform, and level with the surface of the plaza. The first red floor is 1.1 meters below the white floor, and the next red floor (noted as yellow in the *Scientific American* article, but red in their field notes) is 40 centimeter below the first red floor or 6 meters below the top of the platform. Bedrock is indicated below the last red floor.

In February of 1980, during installation of the Sound and Light Show electrical lines, this author noted in a trench dug 5 meters north of the platform and 1 meter below the surface of the plaza the exposed the edge of a red floor with donut shaped bas reliefs carved on the edge. This floor is probably the edge of one of the red floors the Le Plongeon encountered within the platform.

The section drawing indicates that the cones, urn, and serpent heads were placed below plaza surface in a large pit dug into the fill within the Platform. The depth of fill in that part of the plaza is about 2.6 meters.

## **Conclusions**

The plan and section drawings made by the Le Plongeons of the excavated Platform of Venus may have been patterned after those made by Squire and Davis of mounds in the Mississippi Valley more than thirty years earlier. Augustus Le Plongeon worked for Squire in Peru in the 1860s, and was familiar with his and Davis' writings. But, the Le Plongeons' excavation drawings were more detailed, and sought to record the excavation of a structure more architecturally complex. And, while they recorded in detail what they found, what is very important is the Le Plongeons' recognition of the importance of colors on the objects they found. Alice recorded in detail what was painted on statues, artifacts, and the serpent heads.

In addition to their drawings, they took photographs of their work and the objects they found. This is fortunate because the tenoned serpent heads were seriously vandalized some time after the Le Plongeons left the site in 1884. The horns and flame elements were probably broken off and taken away as souvenirs. They took about twelve photos of the excavation in progress, and of artifacts they found. This may seem minimal by today's standards, but the only photographic technology available in the 1880s was the wet collodion glass plate negative process that required long exposures, and there was a high possibility that a plate would be ruined by passing clouds, insects, and dust. The glass negatives had to be developed in a portable darkroom within minutes of making the exposure. Attempting to photograph the statue and serpent heads within the excavation pit was a major accomplishment, and the photographic record supplements their written documentation of the interior and exterior of the platform.

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Now in 2007, I would like to thank Professor Paul Schmidt for inviting me to resubmit my paper for an homenaje a Professor Jaime Litvak King.

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