

# THE HISTORY OF THE ICHMUL DE MORLEY BALLPLAYER PANELS

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## **Abstract**

*While on an archaeological expedition across northern Yucatán in 1918 searching for Maya inscriptions, Sylvanus Morley photographed two carved ballplayer panels. Morley discovered each panel embedded in the walls of two different hacienda plantations in the area near the modern town of Uayma. Recent archival research into where exactly the panels were discovered by Morley confirms his assertion that the panels were originally part of the archaeological site that now bears his name: Ichmul de Morley. A brief history of the documentation of the panels in the form of photographs, rubbings, and line drawings, is also provided.*

## **Resumen**

*Durante una expedición arqueológica por el norte de Yucatán en 1918 en busca de inscripciones Mayas, Sylvanus Morley tomó fotos de dos paneles tallados con jugadores de pelota. Morley descubrió los paneles incrustados en las paredes de dos haciendas en plantaciones diferentes cerca de la ciudad moderna Uayma. Investigaciones de archivo recientes sobre dónde exactamente los paneles fueron descubiertos por Morley confirmaron su propuesta de que los paneles originalmente eran parte del sitio arqueológico que hoy lleva su nombre: Ichmul de Morley. También se proporciona una breve historia de la documentación de los paneles en forma de fotografías, calcos, y dibujos técnicos.*

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## **Introduction**

The archaeological site known today as Ichmul de Morley received its name in 1918 when famed Mayanist Sylvanus Morley led an expedition across the Yucatán peninsula in search of hieroglyphic inscriptions (Figure 1). The collapsed buildings he visited at Ichmul are the remnants of what once was a medium-sized town that was primarily occupied during the Late and Terminal Classic Periods, around A.D. 700–1100. In this work, I review recent archival research of Morley's visit to Ichmul and the two carved limestone panels he documented.<sup>1</sup>

Since Morley, the site has only received sporadic attention. No visits (or at least ones that made it into the archaeological literature) were made between Morley's visit and 1977, when David Vlcek recorded the site as part of the Archaeological Atlas of Yucatán Project (Garza T. and Kurjack 1980a:102, 140, 1980b:Hoja 16Q-d(9)). Members of the Cupul Project briefly visited Ichmul de Morley in 1988 and collected some surface ceramics (Andrews et al. 1989; Gallareta N. et al. 1988). As the Ek Balam Project directed by William Ringle and George Bey got underway in the 1980s, Ringle became interested in the relationship between Ek Balam and Chichen Itza, located some 50 km to the southwest. Because of its location almost exactly halfway between Ek Balam and Chichen Itza, he started laying plans for further investigations

at Ichmul de Morley (Figure 2). In 1990, Ringle, Tomás Gallareta Negrón, Craig A. Hanson, and others made a detailed map of the site center (Figure 3). As part of my dissertation fieldwork at the University of Pittsburgh, I first came to Ichmul de Morley in 1997. Over that summer, Ringle and I managed to map a 500 x 500 meter quadrat of settlement to the north of the site (Figure 4) and conduct test excavations in a wide variety of architectural contexts (Ringle and Smith 1998; Smith 2000; Smith et al. 2006). After a long hiatus, I enlisted Alejandra Alonso Olvera to help relaunch and co-direct the Ichmul de Morley Archaeological Project in 2017.

### **Ichmul de Morley Panels: History of Documentation**

Although Ichmul now bears Morley's name, he was not the first archaeologist to visit the site and document two ballplayer panels associated with it. That honor goes to Teobert Maler, who visited Ichmul either in 1886 with Désiré Charnay (Merk 2018:49) or in 1908 (Graham 1997:XXXV).<sup>2</sup> While he was there, he took photos of two carved panels which are available in the digital collections of the Ibero-American Institute and to my knowledge have not been published until now (Figure 5). While at Ichmul in 1918, Morley's informants led him to two carved panels at two different nearby haciendas. Morley photographed the panels and, only quite recently, these photos were scanned and made available to interested researchers through a partnership between Harvard's Peabody Museum and the database Artstor. Although eroded, Panel 1 (Figure 6) is largely intact and features two opposing ballplayers with a ball in between them. This panel is mentioned by Morley in Volume IV of his *Inscriptions of Peten* and he provides some important information in a footnote about where he found it. He states "[Panel 1] is built into a wall at the hacienda of Komche, about 4 km. east-northeast of Dzitas, Yucatán, and about 8 km west of Ichmul" (Morley 1938:263). In the notes associated with the scanned photograph now available from the Artstor database and the Peabody Museum's online database, the discovery site is listed as "Kumche" and the description, presumably from Morley's original notes of the photograph, says "Sculptured stone built into wall is from Ichmul 2 leagues [about 6 miles or 10 kilometers] away."

Panel 2 (Figure 7) is broken but also appears to display two opposing ballplayers. A few years after photographing it, Morley published a drawing of Panel 2 (Figure 8) and in his *Inscriptions at Copan* (1920:574), he had this to say about it: "This is only the upper part of the monument, the lower part having disappeared. It is now built into the wall of a house on the Hacienda of Ichmul, some 40 kilometers east of north from Chichén Itzá. Two human figures hold in their right and left arms respectively a large central glyph-block, which records the day 6 or 7 Ahau, probably the latter. Across the top of the monument runs a row of glyph-blocks, of which originally there would seem to have been 24." A bit more information about Panel 2 was published in 1938 when Morley wrote in *The Inscriptions of Peten*: "One of the two sculptures [Panel 2] stelae from Ichmul is now at the Museum of Archaeology and History, Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico. The catalogue number for this specimen is 14" (Morley 1938:263). Morley also mentions that Panel 2 was removed from the Ichmul hacienda and brought to the Mérida museum in either 1923 or 1924 (1938:419).

While Morley asserted that these two panels were originally from Ichmul, their association with the archaeological site has always been considered tenuous. The major reason for the skepticism is that while both panels feature ballplayers, no ballcourt has been identified at Ichmul. However, recent epigraphic research coupled with the archival research reported below makes me quite confident that both panels were originally from Ichmul de Morley and were robbed from the site during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century henequen boom when scores of haciendas popped up across Yucatán, including those in the Ichmul region.

In order to delineate where the panels were located when Morley visited them, I started with an examination of the photos. The photo of Panel 1 (see Figure 6) isn't particularly useful for figuring out where it was originally located at Hacienda Kunche because there is no background scenery in the photo. The one clue as to the panel's placement is the vegetation that is visible at the bottom of the photo, which indicates that the panel was embedded close to the base of the wall rather than towards the top. The photo of Panel 2 (see Figure 7) is much more informative because it clearly shows that the panel was embedded in the lower corner of a building at Hacienda Ichmul. A house with a thatched roof is visible in the background and the area between the panel and this house is cleared of vegetation.

To uncover more precise information about the location of the panels when Morley photographed them, in 2018 I had the opportunity to look at Morley's original notes at the Peabody Museum (Figure 9).<sup>3</sup> Morley's 1918 field notes and diary provide no new information about Ichmul Panel 1. It does appear that he encountered this panel at the hacienda in Kunche, located about 16 km north of the Ichmul hacienda. I visited hacienda Kunche in the summer of 2019 to re-locate the possible hacienda wall where Panel 1 wound up embedded (Figure 10). Unfortunately, there has been substantial modification to the hacienda buildings over the years that makes delineating the location of the panel where Morley took his photograph unlikely without more archival research into the hacienda.

Morley's notes about Panel 2 proved to be much more informative. He mentioned that the panel was embedded in a wall of a building that is south of the church at Hacienda Ichmul. The church is still standing and has recently seen some restoration work by the current landowners. This clue, coupled with the photograph he took that features some hacienda buildings in the background, allowed me to re-locate where Panel 2 was located when Morley was there (Figure 11).

After Morley's discovery of the two Ichmul panels, a few other researchers have also documented them. Edited photographs of the panels that Morley took were published by Proskouriakoff (1950:Figure 82a,b) but without much commentary. Subsequent photographs of both panels were made by Karl-Herbert Mayer in the 1970s and 1980s and are accessible online from The Maya Image Archive (2019). The next scholarly attention given to the Ichmul ballplayer panels was Ian Graham. He made preliminary line drawings of the panels and sent copies of them to me in the 1990s. These line drawings have not been published. Merle Greene

Robertson made rubbings of both panels (Figure 12) and these were first published by Kurjack (Kurjack et al. 1991:Figure 8.14; see also Smith et al. 2006:Figure 8.3) in his discussion of northern lowland ballcourts.

Daniel Graña-Behrens made the first line drawings of the two panels that were published (Figure 13; see also Grube and Krochock 2011:Figure 3; Smith and Bond-Freeman 2018:Figure 5.3). These drawings provide much more detail than the rubbings and include some readable glyphs from both panels. Graña-Behrens argues that an emblem glyph is present on Panel 2 and is most likely an emblem glyph of Ichmul de Morley. Moreover, according to Graña-Behrens, the left figure on Ichmul de Morley Panel 1 is the most famous king of Ek Balam, Ukit Kan Lek. If so, this helps date Panel 1 more securely since this king took the throne in A.D. 770 and evidently died in A.D. 801 (Grube and Krochock 2011:208).

Today the Ichmul panels are in two Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) museums. Panel 1, after many decades in the lobby of Hotel Mérida, in Mérida, was transferred in July, 2016, to the Museo Regional de Antropología de Yucatán Palacio Cantón, also in Mérida (Rodríguez 2016; INAH 2016). Panel 2 is in the Museo Maya de Cancún.

### **Final Remarks**

Returning to the question of the Ichmul panel's original provenience, the archival work presented here coupled with the epigraphic work of Graña-Behrens (2006) suggests that both panels were originally part of a building (or buildings) at the site of Ichmul de Morley. Panel 2 was clearly discovered by Morley at Hacienda Ichmul, only a hundred or so meters east of the archaeological site. Panel 1 was found more far-flung from the site so its connection to Ichmul de Morley is a bit more tenuous. Why did Panel 1 wind up at Hacienda Kunche? As mentioned above, Kunche is 16 km north of Ichmul, meaning that the panel, which weighs over a ton (Rodríguez 2016:1) was transported a fair distance to become embedded in a wall there. Did the owner of Hacienda Ichmul give or sell it to the owner of Hacienda Kunche? Without archival research into the two haciendas, we cannot be sure.

Graña-Behrens' work solves the puzzle I mentioned above about why ballplayers were depicted on public monuments at the ballcourt-less site of Ichmul. If Graña-Behrens has correctly identified the left figure of Panel 1 as King Ukit Kan Lek of Ek Balam, then the ballgame being depicted was almost certainly being played at Ek Balam, which has two ballcourts. To cement an alliance, it appears that at least one leader at Ichmul had the honor of being invited to play the ballgame at Ek Balam with their royal *kalomte*'. Local rulers at Ichmul de Morley would have cashed in on the social prestige of visiting Ek Balam by commemorating the event in the form of public monuments like the Ichmul de Morley ballplayer panels.

How likely is it that there are other carved sculptures at Hacienda Ichmul or the site itself? In carefully looking over Morley's photo of Panel 2 (see Figure 7), I noticed that the lower right part of the panel is much darker than the rest. A pile of white material can also be seen at the base of the panel. When Morley was there, only the lower right part of the panel was visible

and, being exposed to the elements, had become darker. Plaster had been covering the rest of the panel and Morley had chipped it away before taking his photo which left the pile of plaster dust at its base. Had the panel been completely covered in plaster, Morley would have never seen it. Are there other carved panels hidden beneath a layer of plaster at Hacienda Ichmul today? Given that both Ichmul panels were installed at the base of hacienda buildings (which makes them easy to observe) and the recent renovation or restoration of many of these buildings (which often entails re-plastering walls), I doubt it. A more likely place to find additional carved sculpture at Ichmul de Morley would be extensive excavations in the site center, which, as of 2019, have yet to take place.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> An interesting subtext to Morley's 1918 visit to Ichmul is that this is the same time that he had been hired as a spy by the U.S. Government to keep an eye on any German activity in this part of Mexico (Harris and Sadler 2003).

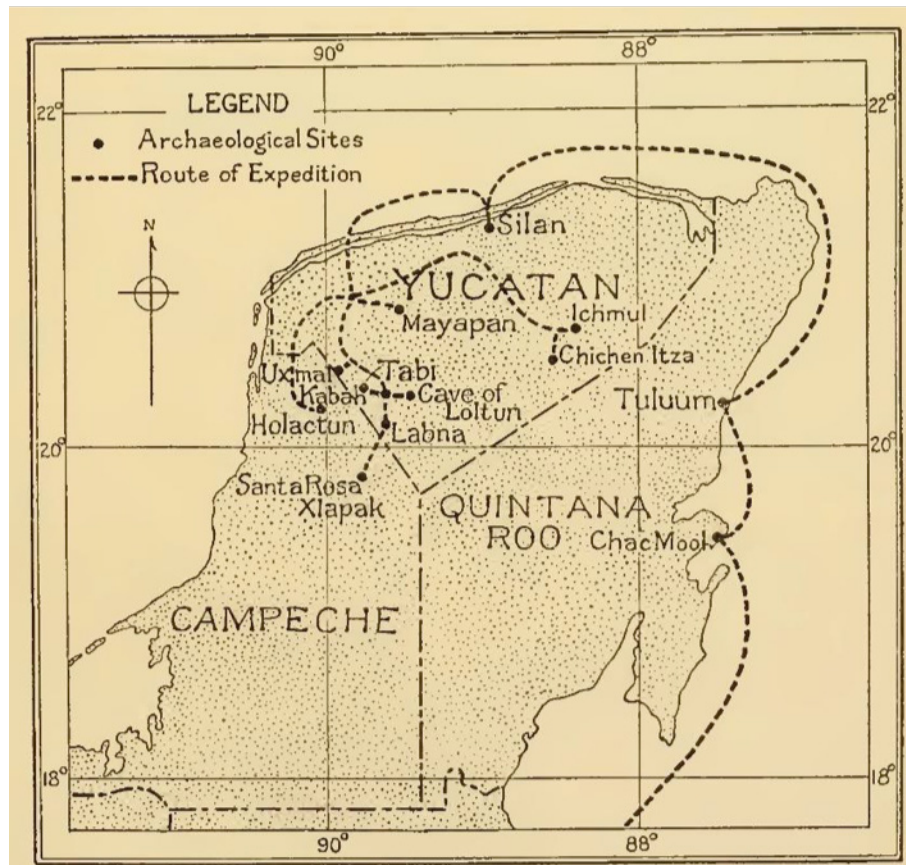
<sup>2</sup> Thanks are due to Karl-Herbert Mayer for informing me about Maler's visit to Ichmul and to William Ringle for his assistance in tracking down Maler's photos of the two panels.

<sup>3</sup> I would like to acknowledge the current owner of Hacienda Ichmul, Don Gaston Alegre, and his son Luis Alegre for their financial support that made the archival research at Harvard possible.

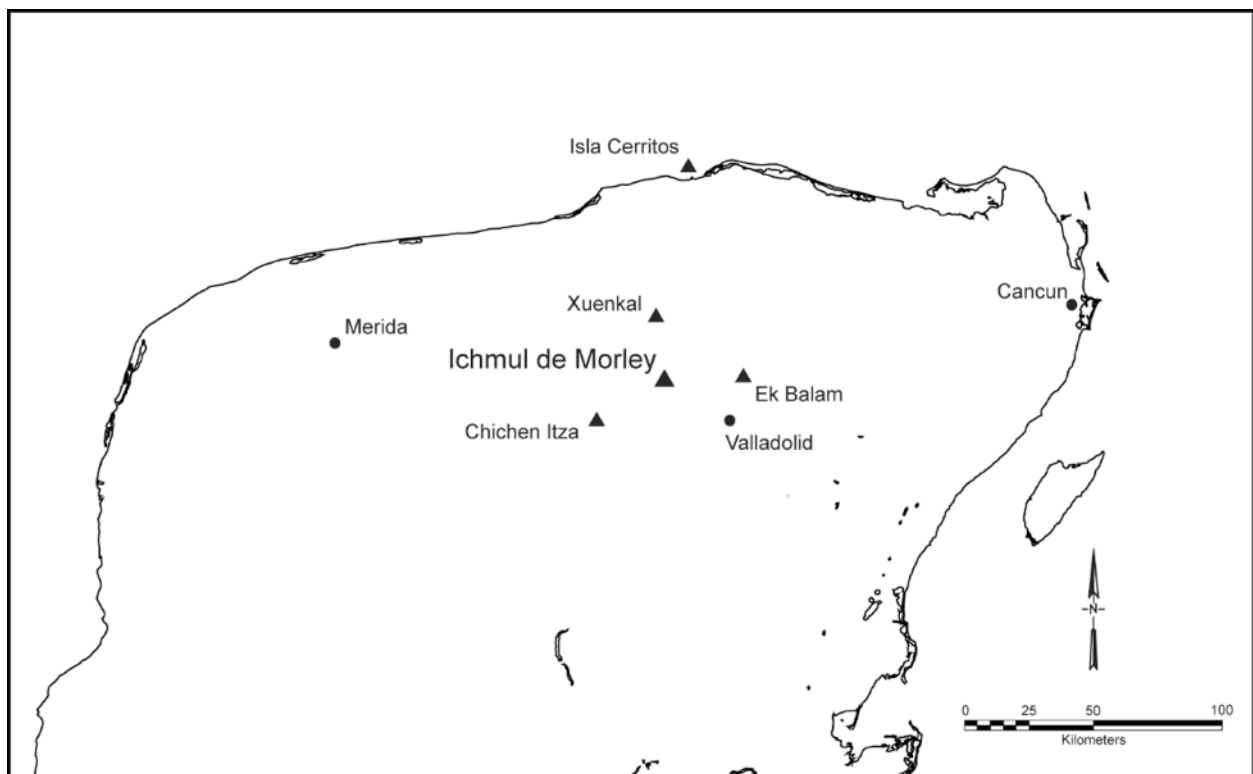
<sup>4</sup> Note that although Figure 8.1 shows the Ichmul panels, the caption was erroneously switched with Figure 8.3.



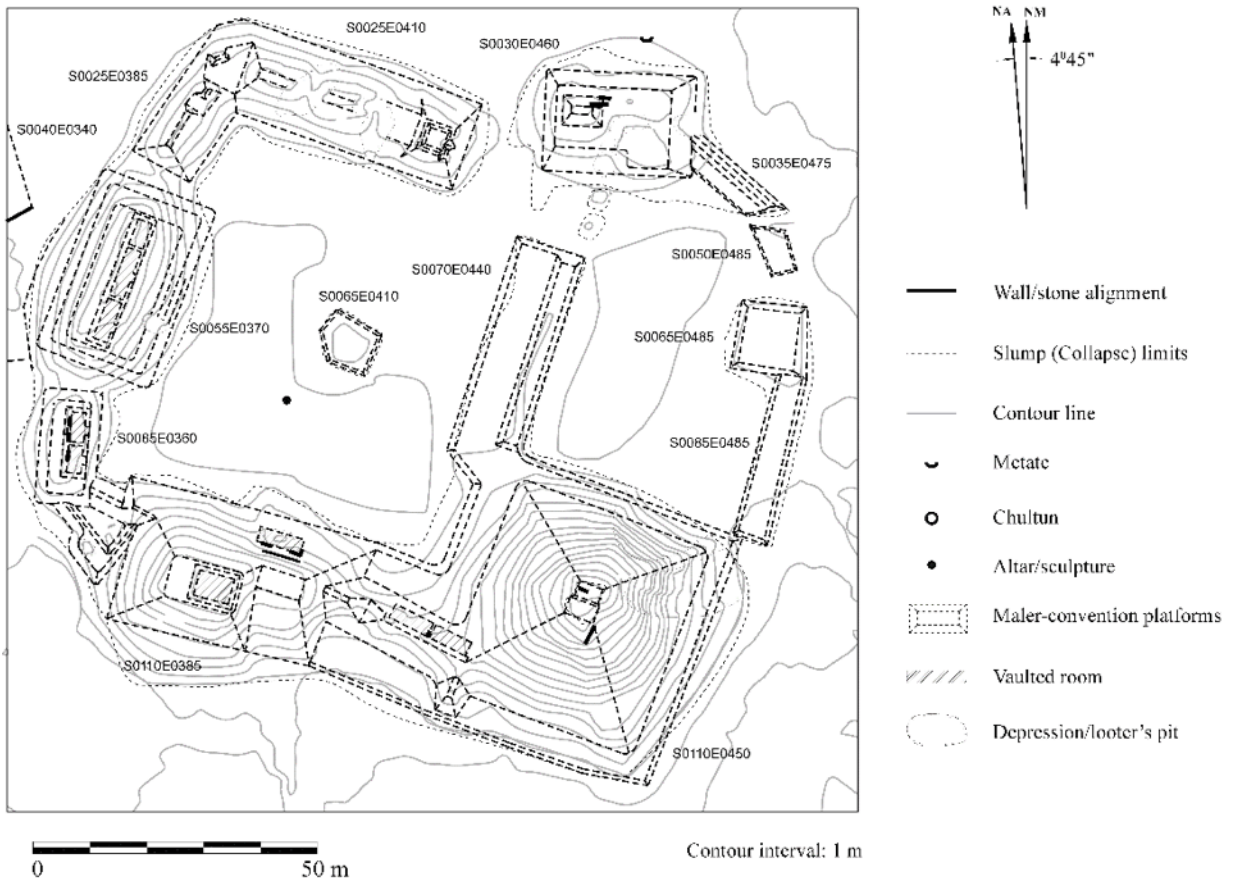
## Figures



**Figure 1.** Morley's map showing sites visited during his 1918 expedition, including Ichmul (Morley 1919:Figure 1).

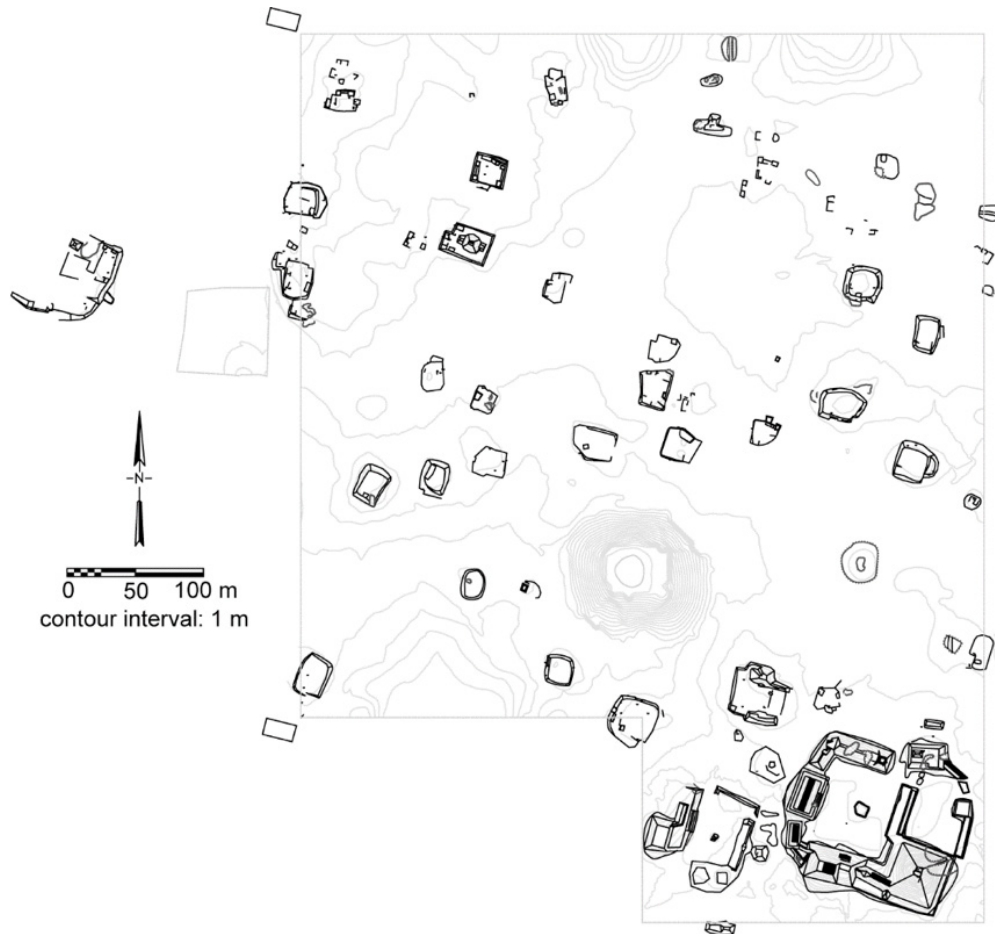


**Figure 2.** Location of Ichmul de Morley in Yucatán (map created by J. Gregory Smith).



**Figure 3.** Site center of Ichmul de Morley (Smith et al. 2006:Figure 8.2)

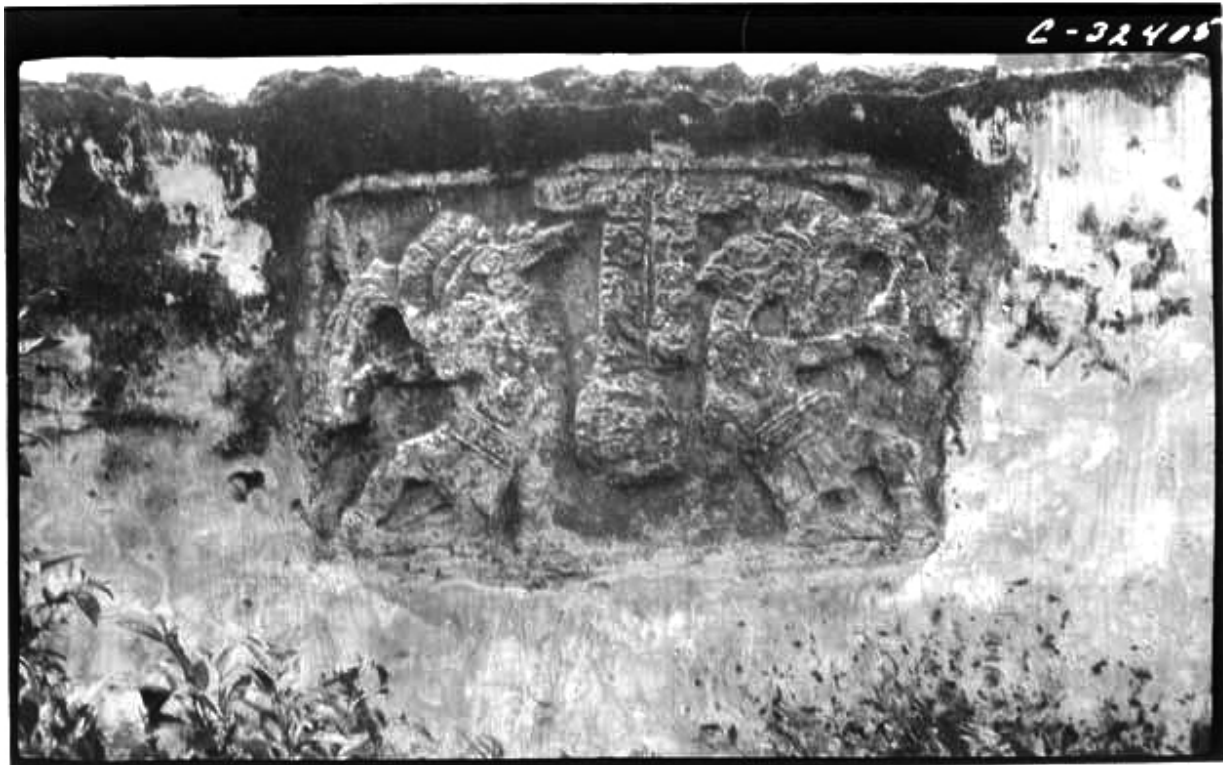




**Figure 4.** Map of Ichmul de Morley showing site center in the lower right and associated residential settlement (Smith and Bond-Freeman 2018:Figure 5.2).



**Figure 5.** Maler's photographs of Ichmul de Morley Panel 1 (above) and Panel 2 (below) (<http://resolver.iai.spk-berlin.de/IAI00006A3C002A0000>)

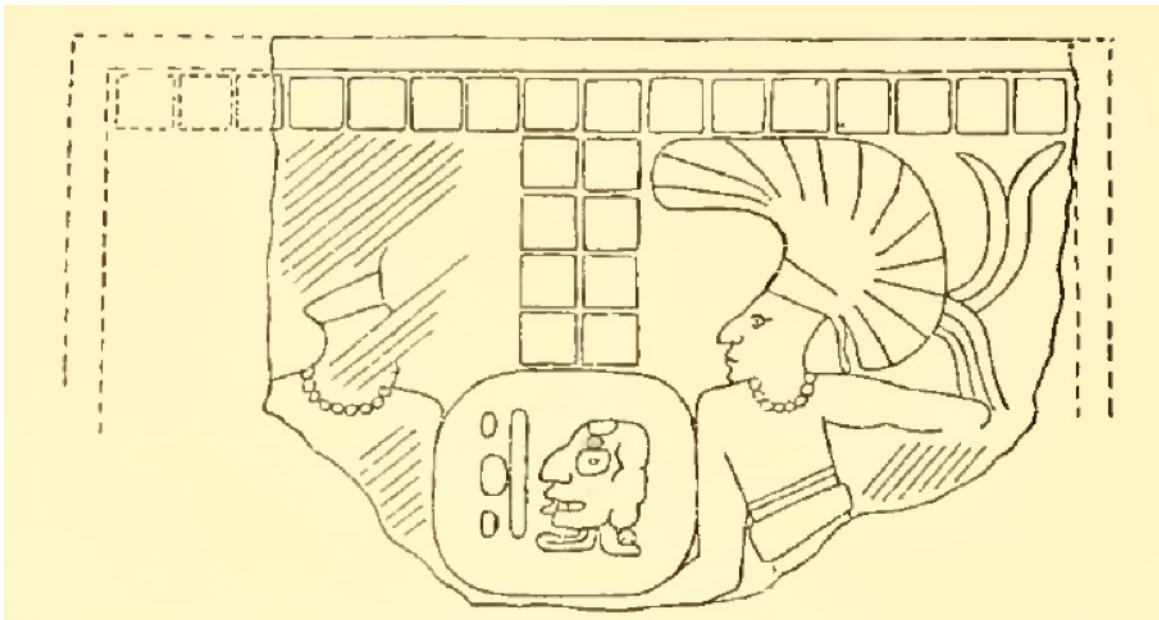


**Figure 6.** Morley's 1918 photograph of Ichmul de Morley Panel 1 (Carnegie Institution of Washington #58-34-20/33654. [www.peabody.harvard.edu](http://www.peabody.harvard.edu)).

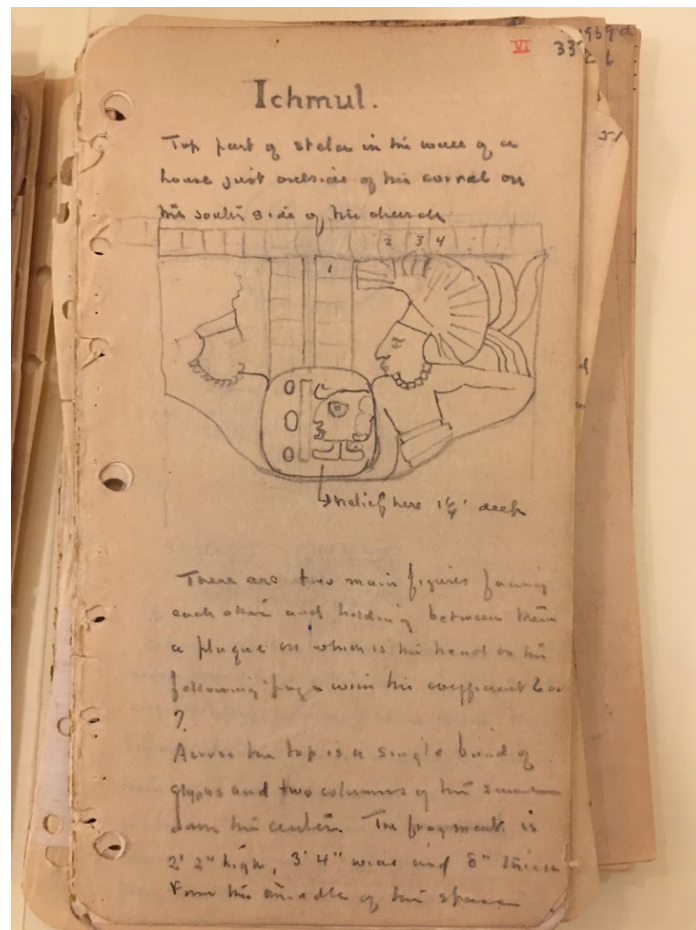




**Figure 7.** Morley's 1918 photograph of Ichmul de Morley Panel 2 (Carnegie Institution of Washington #58-34-20/63487. [www.peabody.harvard.edu](http://www.peabody.harvard.edu)).



**Figure 8.** Morley's drawing of Ichmul de Morley Panel 2 (Morley 1920:Figure 89).

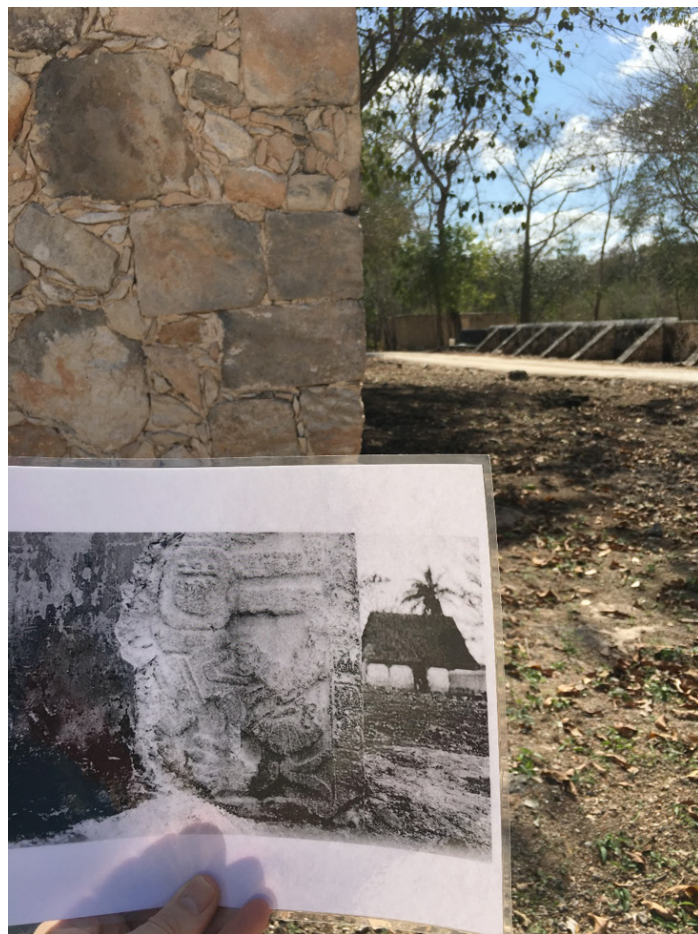


**Figure 9.** Morley's original notes about Ichmul (photograph by J. Gregory Smith).



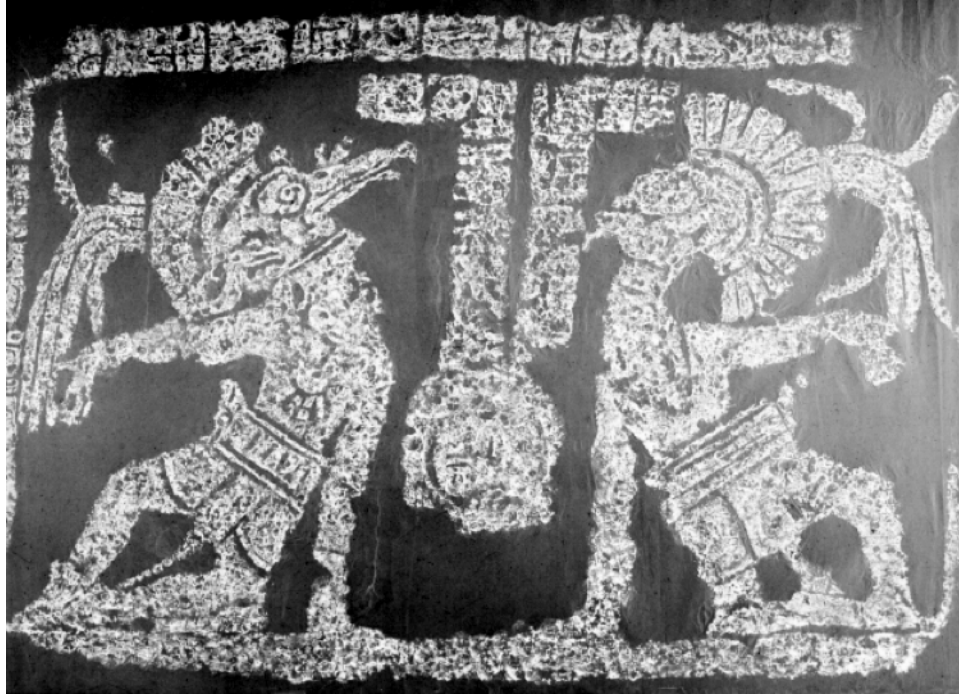


**Figure 10.** Hacienda Kunche in 2019 (photograph by J. Gregory Smith).



**Figure 11.** 2018 photograph with me holding Morley's 1918 photograph in the same location where he took it (photograph by J. Gregory Smith).



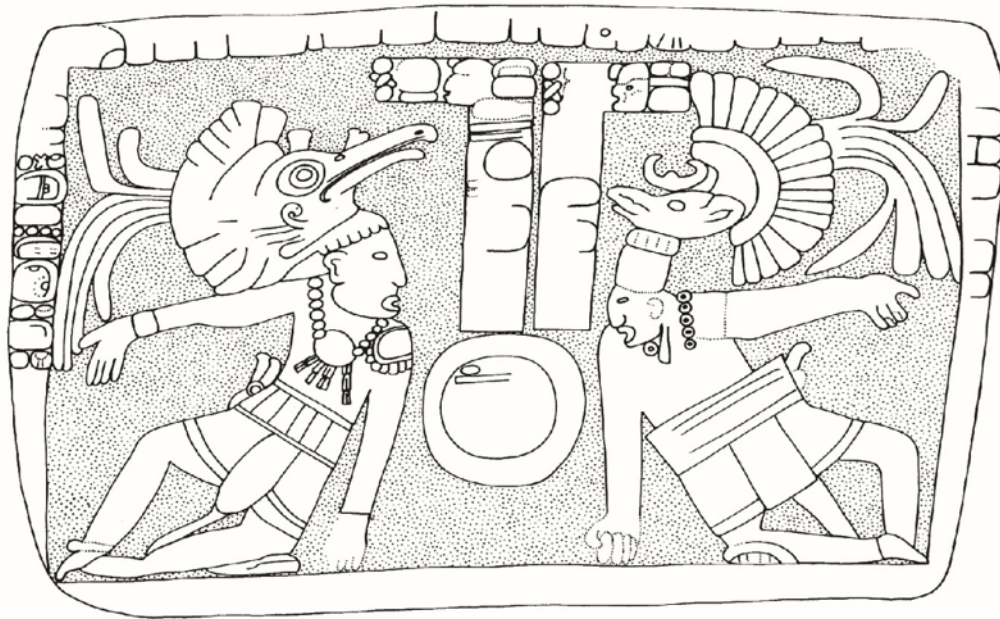


a

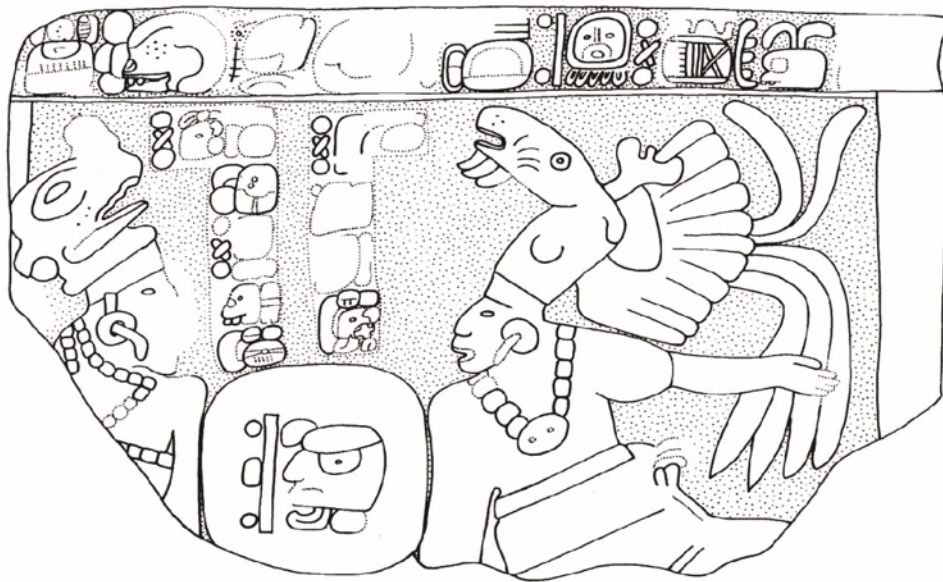


b

**Figure 12.** Rubbings of Merle Greene Robertson of the Ichmul de Morley panels: a: Panel 1 (Greene Robertson 1993: Rubbing 20024), b: Panel 2 (Greene Robertson 1993: Rubbing 20025).



a



b

**Figure 13.** Line drawings of the Ichmul de Morley panels by Daniel Graña-Behrens: a: Panel 1 (Graña-Behrens 2002:Abbildung 116), b: Panel 2 (Graña-Behrens 2002:Abbildung 113).

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