

## Calakmul (Mexico)

No 1061

### Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The Ancient Maya City of Calakmul, Campeche
<i>Location</i>	Calakmul Municipality, Campeche Province
<i>State Party</i>	Mexico
<i>Date</i>	24 August 2000

### Justification by State Party

By virtue of the size of its main structures and its extent, this is a town that is comparable with other, better known sites of the Mayan culture that are already inscribed on the World Heritage List such as Palenque, Uxmal, and Chichén Itzá in Mexico and Tikal or Copán in Central America. However, it contains structures that are older than those to be found in these sites. In Calakmul the layout of certain groups of buildings and the general organization of the urban centre presents characteristics that also apply to the other sites in the Petén such as Uaxactún and Tikal.

The large city of Calakmul represents outstanding testimony to the exchange of influences over more than twelve centuries, beginning in the 4th century BCE, in the fields of political organization and cultural development over a vast area of the Mayan region, between Copán to the south, Edzná to the north, and Palenque to the west, which was intensified by its relationships and its rivalry with Tikal.

#### Criterion ii

Calakmul is the site which, up to the present, contains more stelae *in situ*, a series of tombs, some of them royal, with a rich variety of ornaments, ritual ceramic vessels, and a large number of jade masks. This assemblage of elements provides unique evidence of their kind about a rich vanished civilization.

#### Criterion iii

The dimensions of its pyramidal structures, the singular nature of certain constructional (barrel vaulting, stuccoed surfaces) and architectural solutions (the orientation of openings, adaptation to the topography of the site), as well as the composition of open spaces and the distribution of built volumes, make Calakmul an outstanding example of architecture which illustrates a significant period of human history.

#### Criterion iv

### Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

### History and Description

#### History

The settlement of the heavily forested Tierras Bajas region, now divided between Mexico and Guatemala, by the Maya dates to the end of the Middle Pre-Classic Period (900–300 BCE). It was formerly considered to have been an essentially egalitarian agricultural society, based on small settlements spread throughout the region, but recent discoveries have shown that large monumental ceremonial structures were being built, indicating a more advanced, complex form of society, capable of creating such enormous structures.

Recent excavations in Structure II at Calakmul have shown that between 400 and 200 BCE a monument some 12m high was built here. This challenged the previously held view that Nakbé (Guatemala) had been the main centre in the latter part of the Middle Pre-Classic Period. By the time of the transition to the Late Pre-Classic Period Calakmul had become one of the two dominant cities in the region, the heartland of the Maya world, the other being Tikal. Excavations have shown that they flourished, in a state of almost continual warfare with one another, until around 900 CE. Much light has been thrown on the turbulent history of this period by the many stelae found on the two sites, and in particular Calakmul.

The apogee of Calakmul is considered to have been in the Late Classic Period (542–695 CE). The centre of Maya power then moved gradually further north, into Yucatán, to Palenque, Uxmal, and finally Chichén Itzá, and by around 900 CE Calakmul was no longer a city with any influence. It was found to have been completely abandoned in the 1530s, when Alonso de Ávila carried out an exploratory mission in this part of the peninsula, which at that time was occupied only by people known as *cehaches*, who were probably the descendants of the inhabitants of Calakmul and the other once powerful cities of the region.

It was not until 1931 that the existence of the site was recorded by Cyrus L Lundell during a botanical expedition. It was he who gave it its present name, made up of *ca* (two), *lak* (near), and *mul* (mountain = pyramid) – ie "two neighbouring pyramids."

#### Description

The archaeological site is located within the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve (a MAB site since 1993), which was created in 1989 and is the largest reserve in Mexico. The Reserve covers 723,185ha, with two *zonas núcleo* of 147,195ha and 100,345ha respectively inside it, within which strict controls are exercised. The archaeological zone of 3000ha nominated for inscription on the World Heritage List is situated in close proximity to the southern *zona núcleo* 1. The remainder of the southern zone constitutes a substantial buffer zone, all of it under dense tropical forest cover.

The portion of what is recognized to have been a very extensive ancient settlement that has so far been explored consists of three large groups of structures. On the west there is a large group of platforms with buildings on them around open spaces, covering *c* 450m by 350m. A similar, slightly smaller, group lies to the east. In between these is the central zone, covering a roughly square area measuring 400m by 400m, in which very large public open spaces and the dominant Structure II are the main elements.

Between the central and eastern groups but seemingly distinct from them is the large pyramidal Structure I. This is slightly smaller than Structure II, but having been built on a natural eminence it is more or less the same height.

The central zone owes its configuration to two overlapping public open spaces. One of these is defined by the structures of the eastern western groups and Structure II. Within this open space, and also facing Structure II there is a group of buildings that form an open space measuring 120m by 60m, known as the Plaza Grande. This configuration of buildings disposed geometrically around a double open space can be linked to the layouts at other Mayan sites such as Tikal and, in particular, Uaxactún.

It should be stressed that the structures in the central zone date from all the periods of occupation of the site, indicating continuity of occupation over some twelve centuries. At the heart of Structure II is to be found the earliest building known from Calakmul, now covered by successive reconstructions of this dominant building. Within this building (known as Structure II sub C) is a barrel-vaulted chamber covering over 22m<sup>2</sup>. Analysis and interpretation of the complex iconography of its frieze decorated with large stucco masks show that this structure antedates stone structures from Uaxactún and El Mirador which were hitherto believed to be the oldest in the region.

The buildings of the central zone, with ceremonial and ritual functions, are flanked by the eastern and western groups containing buildings of palace type. Beyond them, to all the cardinal points, there are four groups, each with distinct characteristics.

Calakmul is especially noteworthy for the large number (120 to date) of stelae that have been found on the site. Not only are these of immense importance in establishing the history of the ancient city and in throwing light on the ancient Maya culture, they are also key elements in its layout. The "structure-open space" element is common to all Maya sites, but at Calakmul this is further enriched with stelae carefully sited in regular lines or groups in front of the stairways and main facades of the pyramidal structures.

The decorative sculpture and reliefs are artistically of a high order. Two exceptional massive circular carved stones are especially noteworthy for their quality and their rarity in the Mayan context.

## **Management and Protection**

### *Legal status*

The Calakmul Biosphere Reserve was established by Presidential Decree in May 1989. Since 1993 it has been a MAB reserve under the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme. The archaeological site is protected under the

1972 Federal Law on Archaeological, Artistic, and Historical Monuments (currently in the course of revision).

### *Management*

Ownership of the territories within the Reserve is 48.4% Federal and 49.6% communal. Only 2% is in private hands. The archaeological site is Federally owned, under the provisions of the 1972 Law.

Management of the Reserve is the responsibility of the Ministry for the Environment, Natural Resources, and Fish (*Medio Ambiente, Recursos y Pesca*), supported by the National Ecological Institute with regard to wildlife and in collaboration with the Campeche State Government, the Municipality of Calakmul, and the Ministry of Social Development (SEDESOL).

The National Institute for Anthropology and History (INAH), which is an agency of the National Council for Culture and the Arts (CNCA) and the Ministry of Public Education (SEP), is responsible for the management of the archaeological site, working through its Campeche Regional Office.

The objectives of the Calakmul Management Plan are as follows:

- To create a link that will enable the creation of a multi-sector planning process, which will in turn define and consolidate the implementation of the projects.
- To enable the institutions that take part, or will hopefully take part, in the site's management to go through a process of understanding of the principles and structure of the planning process itself.
- To reconcile the various groups that will take part in the site's management. This will imply the integration and standardization of shared responsibility between government, institutions, and society regarding integral conservation and sustainable uses of heritage, while strengthening its strategic role within the process of social evolution.

Standardization of planning through the management plan is described in the following terms:

- The plan standardizes, promotes, and guides the operational measures. However, this is not enough to create desirable implementation conditions.
- Socialization, understanding, and/or reorientation of the plan's postulates will lead to a process of identification and correspondence between reality and management proposals.
- Procuring the effective, thoughtful, critical, and active participation of the parties involved in management of a site will result in the decrease of piecemeal and inefficient proposals.

Having established these overall guidelines, the plan goes on to identify the methodological process for analysing the social, natural, and service issues that affect the conservation and management of the site:

#### *1 Management or operational conditions context*

- *Social context* studies the participation and/or influence of various elements related to the inner

workings of the site. It determines their use, appreciation, benefits, and compromises with regard to heritage.

- *Natural context* analyses the physical, chemical, and biological elements that affect the site, such as flora, fauna, weather, geology, and soils.
- *Infrastructure* diagnoses the state of conservation and working conditions of the movable and immovable property in order to make suggestions regarding adjustments and restrictions.
- *Feasibility*: In order to carry out priority projects, and considering previous records and urgent conservation needs, it is necessary to determine their feasibility according to *relevance, will, and benefits*.

## 2 Identification of priority projects

Once the context has been identified, projects must be prioritized with the cooperation of all areas involved in the site's management. As a result, the activities or needs which, should they not be taken care of in the short run, would affect the conservation and appearance of heritage properties, and would damage operational quality, must be identified. The fact that the implementation of priority projects does not interfere with or halt the progress of other operational activities must be highlighted.

## 3 Implementation mechanisms

- *Legal documents proposal*: All links established with any person or institution, whether public or private, national or international, through which resources or services for the implementation and follow-up of the management plan's projects can be obtained or provided, may be legalized as agreements, arbitrations, commissions, or committees of inter-institutional cooperation.
- *Follow-up and evaluation mechanisms*: Follow-up, permanent evaluation, and adaptation of activities guarantee the optimum implementation of a project, always according to the goals and the impact of a project on social and natural contexts. They also allow for feedback and nourishment of the planning process, even for new projects that will become part of the management plan., Therefore, the goals and implementation tools may be redirected in order to achieve the proper conservation and use of cultural heritage, as well as of its social and natural contexts.

Following this section, the document goes on to describe the vegetation, faunal, climatic, social, and hydrological context of the Reserve. It then passes to a detailed analysis of the archaeological site: description, historical and cultural background, and research to date. A lengthy section entitled "Diagnosis" covers research and conservation (archaeological and natural), the social context of the site, tourism, the legal framework, education and promotion, and management (human resources, material resources, infrastructure, and financial resources).

The final section, "Priority projects," identifies projects under the headings *Research and Conservation* (archaeological; natural; social), *Education and promotion*, and *Management* (human resources; material resources; infrastructure). All these projects are directed towards the better conservation and management of the site and are

well conceived. All that is lacking is a temporal framework within which it is planned that they should be carried out. The mission was assured that such a timetable existed and would be made available to ICOMOS (it had not been received at the time this evaluation was written).

Whilst this document is not a management plan *sensu stricto*, it contains all the elements required for the effective and continuing management of the site. It may therefore be deemed to conform with the requirement of paragraph 24.b.ii of the *Operational Guidelines* for "adequate ... protection and management mechanisms to ensure the conservation of the nominated cultural property..."

There is close and constructive collaboration between the INAH Campeche Regional Centre and the administration of the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve. The INAH site management team also has close and cordial relationships with the small indigenous communities within the Reserve, many of whose inhabitants work on conservation and restoration projects on the site and who are being trained in the relevant techniques.

The management team is headed by a senior archaeologist from the INAH Campeche Regional Office. He is supported by a number of professional staff (archaeologists, architects, etc) and a permanent on-site staff of fourteen custodians, maintenance personnel, etc. In addition, workers are recruited on short-term contracts from the small settlements within the Reserve on specific conservation and restoration projects.

The site was not open to the public until 1996, when there were 6100 visitors; in 1999 it reached 9149, and has grown since that time.

## Conservation and Authenticity

### Conservation history

Following the recording work of Lundell in 1931 and that of Sylvanus Morley and Enrique Palacios in 1932 and 1933 respectively, no investigative work of any kind took place at Calakmul until 1972. There was a major recording project between 1982 and 1988, with selective excavation beginning in 1984. Work began on Structures I and II in 1988 with the financial support of the National Geographic Society, but it was not until 1993 that the present major campaign of excavation and restoration began.

The state of conservation of the remains is surprisingly good, considering the harsh climatic conditions in the region (high temperatures and humidity). The quality of the work that has already been carried out and that in progress at the present time is irreproachable. Of particular interest is the exploration of the interior of Structure II, to determine the sequence of enlargements of this imposing monument.

The approach to restoration is also commendable. A policy of strict anastylosis is generally being applied. Clear distinction is made between original elements and reconstruction of walls (using material known to have collapsed from specific stretches of wall but where the original location of individual stones is not known), using a simple, ingenious method of differentiation. The mortar mix used for setting reconstructed walls and pointing those

in need of stabilization is based on the original composition, using local materials and eschewing the use of Portland cement.

It is important to reiterate that, until the Calakmul Special Project began in 1993, there had been no significant human interventions on the site of Calakmul for some five hundred years. This is an important factor because, unlike other major prehispanic sites in Mexico such as Chichén Itzá or Teotihuacan, where work has been in progress intermittently for more than a century, Calakmul is being explored, conserved, and restored according to a homogeneous and integrated policy based on the current best practices in these fields.

#### *Authenticity and integrity*

Because the site was not rediscovered until 1931 and there were few interventions of any kind until 1993, the level of authenticity is very high. This is reinforced by the meticulous observance of contemporary conservation and restoration principles and techniques now being implemented.

### **Evaluation**

#### *Action by ICOMOS*

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Calakmul in October 2001. ICOMOS also consulted a distinguished US specialist in Maya archaeology and history on the cultural significance of the site.

#### *Qualities*

Calakmul is an exceptionally well preserved and undisturbed Maya capital city in the Tierras Bajas region of Central America. It was one of the two main Maya capitals in the region for some twelve centuries, until the centre of Maya power shifted to Yucatán.

#### *Comparative analysis*

Calakmul is one of a group of Maya sites in the Mexican State of Campeche and the Petén region of Guatemala that flourished between 400 BCE and 900 CE. In political terms it was the equal and rival of Tikal (Guatemala), which was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1979. Its special characteristics, in particular the impressive number of important inscribed stelae that it has produced, and its exceptionally high state of conservation give it a high priority among Maya sites

#### *ICOMOS recommendations for future action*

There is a policy on the site of conserving trees both on the structures themselves and in the intervening spaces. This is a policy staunchly justified by the site director on the grounds that he does not believe that the natural forest cover of the Reserve should be interrupted by the removal of all trees from the site.

Nevertheless, it seems both dangerous to the stability of the structures themselves and inappropriate for fully grown trees to remain rooted into the fabric of the structures. Furthermore, there is a considerable loss of visual quality, as well as authenticity, by the retention of trees in the plazas and other open spaces between the structures.

### **Brief description**

Calakmul is an important Maya site, deep in the tropical forest of the Tierras Bajas of southern Mexico, which played a key role in the history of this region for more than twelve centuries. Its imposing structures and its characteristic overall layout are remarkably well preserved and give a vivid picture of life in an ancient Maya capital city.

### **Statement of Significance**

Calakmul is an exceptionally well preserved and undisturbed Maya capital city in the Tierras Bajas region of central America. It was one of the two main Maya capitals in the region for some twelve centuries, until the centre of power shifted to Yucatán, and provides crucial evidence about the art and architecture, the history, and the urban planning of the period.

### **ICOMOS Recommendation**

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria i, ii, iii, and iv*

*Criterion i* The many commemorative stelae at Calakmul are outstanding examples of Maya art, which throw much light on the political and spiritual development of the city.

*Criterion ii* With a single site Calakmul displays an exceptionally well preserved series of monuments and open spaces representative of Maya architectural, artistic, and urban development over a period of twelve centuries.

*Criterion iii* The political and spiritual way of life of the Maya cities of the Tierras Bajas region is admirably demonstrated by the impressive remains of Calakmul.

*Criterion iv* Calakmul is an outstanding example of a Maya capital city.

ICOMOS, January 2002