

The Legend of the Dwarf and the Governor¹



Views of the Pyramid of the Soothsayer at Uxmal, with Archaeologist José Huchim Herrera telling the story.

In 1843, explorer John L. Stephens wrote “Incidents of Travel in Yucatán,” an account of his travels through the Maya world. He tells of his arrival at Uxmal and meeting a local Maya man who was seated under a portal at the base of the largest pyramid at the site. The man narrated the following story:

In this very place near the Palace of the Governor, a long time ago, there lived an old woman. She had no children. One day she found an egg, a very special one, so she covered it with cloth and hid it in a corner of her house. She spied it every morning to see if the egg had hatched, and one day she found that the shell had broken, and a small child lay by its side. She was overjoyed, and she raised the child with love and care. The child was a quick learner, and by one year of age, he could speak and walk, but he also stopped growing. No matter, she had faith that he would become a great king. One day, the old lady instructed the Dwarf to go and challenge the Governor of Uxmal. The Dwarf had misgivings, but he conquered his fears and went to see the ruling man. “I challenge you to three trials,” said the Governor. “First,” instructed the Governor, “build a long road of stones, very straight, and very white.” The Dwarf ran back home crying for help. His mother gave him the following advice: “Go back and ask the Governor to place the first stone, and see what happens.” And so he did. The Governor placed the first heavy stone with much effort, and the Dwarf followed suit. Aided by the magical powers of the old woman, the dwarf easily built the long and straight road between Uxmal and the neighboring city of Kabah. The Governor, furious to see himself challenged by a dwarf, gave him the second trial. “Tonight you must raise a house taller than any other in the land, and if the house is not finished by sunrise, you will die,” said the Governor. The Dwarf ran home crying, but his mother consoled him and put him to sleep. The Dwarf woke up the next day lying on top of the tallest pyramid in the land. The Governor, seeing the beautiful and tall pyramid, became even more irate, and demanded to see the Dwarf to challenge him a third time. “Go get three cocoyoles, the hard fruit of that tree, and return immediately,” instructed the Governor. “We will hit each other over the head until one of us emerges triumphant.” The Dwarf ran home one more time, and his mother rubbed a corn tortilla on top of his head. The Dwarf returned to the Governor with the hard, round fruit, and the Governor broke them over the Dwarf’s head, but did no damage. The Governor’s subjects were all watching, so the Governor allowed the Dwarf to have his turn. The Dwarf hit the Governor over the head with one, two, and three cocoyoles and killed him. Everyone declared the Dwarf the winner, and he became the new Governor of the land. A few years later, the old lady died. The people of this place believe that she sits by the mouth of a very long tunnel that connects the nearby town of Maní to Tho’ (Mérida). She sits there, caring for the serpent that guards the underground waters. The great pyramid at Uxmal is now known as the Pyramid of the Dwarf, the Soothsayer, or the Magician.

¹ Adapted from *Arqueología Mexicana* Vol. 21, 2006 <http://www.arqueomex.com> by Archaeologist José Huchim Herrera (Yucatec Maya & Director of Uxmal Archaeological Site, Yucatán, México).