

# Archaeology's Heroic Age

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William Carlsen, *Jungle of Stone: The Extraordinary Journey of John L. Stephens and Frederick Catherwood*. William Morrow, 544pp., \$18 paper

**N**ew Yorker John Lloyd Stephens and British artist Frederick Catherwood are icons of the heroic age of archaeology, classic nineteenth-century adventurers immortalized for revealing the glories of ancient Maya civilization to an astonished world. Both were inveterate travelers long before they sailed for Central America. Stephens was a master of evocative travel writing, who brought the Nile, Poland, Russia, and other exotic destinations into American living rooms. To describe Catherwood as a gifted artist is an understatement. His drawings and paintings were accurate, vivid, and imbued with enough exotic romance to satisfy even the most exacting armchair explorer. Their extraordinary journeys through fever-ridden rainforests and politically hazardous landscapes recovered a forgotten Native American civilization. Even more importantly, they insisted that Maya civilization was an indigenous society, nurtured on local soil. Ultimately, all subsequent Maya research stems from their often hazardous adventures.

Every beginning archaeology student learns their names, and perhaps reads Stephens's wonderful description of the Maya city of Copán. He compared the ruins to a

“shattered bark in the midst of the ocean... her crew perished and gone.” The city was quiet, the only sound monkeys moving over the travelers' heads “in long and swift possessions, forty or a fifty at a time.” Memorable prose indeed, but these two talented men have faded into the historical background, except for a biography published in 1947. Now a gifted journalist, William Carlsen, has stepped forward with a comprehensive biographical tale of Catherwood and Stephens, based on skilled detective work, wide travel through Central America, and as many primary sources as he could muster.

There was far more to his heroes than just archeology. As Carlsen points out, they were unlikely partners, Stephens a gregarious New York lawyer, who had dabbled extensively in politics, Catherwood a reserved architect and businessman. Carlsen ranges widely in his biography, placing each of them in the broad contexts of their earlier lives and their initial travels. Catherwood's success came from travels up the Nile. He exhibited huge canvases in a famous “panorama exhibition hall” in New York. Stephens dressed as a Cairo merchant and managed to visit Petra, at the time a dangerous place jealously guarded by Bedouin tribesmen. His travel books rapidly became bestsellers. The two met in New York and heard rumors of cities in the Central American rainforest. In 1839, they set sail for what is now Belize. Stephens wangled himself a diplomatic

appointment as U.S. attaché to Central America. This was a wise move, for it opened doors in a region plagued with civil wars. Carlsen is particularly adept at placing their archaeological travels through the brutal terrain of the tropical rainforest in a wider context of volatile, and sometimes very hazardous, political factionalism. He gives us vivid insights into their journey to Copán, and then to Guatemala City and Palenque. We meet some compelling individuals, like Francisco Morazán, who became the supreme master of Central America from total obscurity in two years, and the mestizo rebel general Rafael Carrera. Stephens and Catherwood walked a tightrope throughout much of their journey, beset by constant threats of violence, to say nothing of appalling travel conditions and endemic fever. There is no question that Stephens' diplomatic protection and his ability to get on well with all kinds of people allowed them to travel without undue hinderance.

Copán was a triumph, Palenque, with Stephens now clear of his diplomatic chores, a challenge of arduous travel. Previous visitors, and the lavish publications of the eccentric Lord Kingsborough, had prompted rumors of an isolated very ancient city far from Europe. Stephens and Catherwood promptly shattered the myth with accurate descriptions and rudimentary surveys. Plagued by mosquitoes and constant rainfall, they revealed an elaborate center, once a "scene of unique and gorgeous beauty and magnificence." From Palenque, they made a quick trip to Uxmal, less covered in vegetation, where Catherwood made memorable sketches.

Back in New York, Stephens wrote his bestselling and lavishly illustrated *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, which appeared to great acclaim in 1841. The two men were now celebrities. Anxious to deter competitors, they slipped away to the Yucatán, where they picked up

their work at Uxmal. Catherwood used a daguerreotype as well as drawing to record the Nunnery and other imposing structures in some of his finest work. From Uxmal, they visited Kabah and other ruins, which invariably astonished them, descended into the huge Balonchen cave with its precious water, and the dazzling ruins of Chichén Itzá, dominated by the Castillo with its colossal serpent's heads and four stairways. Finally, they visited Tulum and its temples.

By the end of 1843, the two-volume *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán* devoted 937 pages to their new discoveries and to Maya civilization. In it, Stephens wrote of the indigenous Maya as rising "like skeletons from the grave." Their mysteries, he wrote, "will not be easily unraveled." How right he was! Meanwhile, Catherwood was ruined by a fire that destroyed his New York Panorama. Fortunately, most of his artwork from the expeditions survived.

Thereafter, the exhausted team split up. Stephens dabbled in railroad schemes in Central America, but his tropical diseases caught up with him and he died in New York in 1852. Two years later, his devoted friend Catherwood died in the *Arctic* steamship disaster in the Atlantic.

*Jungle of Stone* is not only a definitive biography but a thoroughly compelling read. The adventures pile on fast and furious, the characters encountered are often compelling. But, above all, it is the archaeology, and the achievements of the Maya, that form the powerful backdrop to the story. Two men came home with stirring adventures to recount. They documented an astounding pre-industrial civilization, whose artistic and social achievements rivaled those of their contemporaries in places like Angkor Wat in Cambodia and in China. This is an important book to be savored and enjoyed, which also restores two amazing archaeological pioneers to the limelight they so richly deserve. Even better, Carlsen's writing does them justice. A