

# Inscribed Tablets and Partitioned Skulls

1921-1924



During October 1921 Niven was digging at Santiago Ahui-zoctla, a hamlet contiguous to San Miguel Amantla. About fourteen feet from the surface he came across an unusual andesite tablet, covered with curious markings, the lines filled with red, yellow, and green pigment. "It was so singular and startling that I commenced at once a systematic exploration of all the clay pits and tepetate quarries within an area of 20 square miles." Soon he discovered more of the tablets. They ranged in height from a few inches to nearly thirty inches. The finds fell into two categories. One category represented undetermined characters and perhaps early writing; the other possessed recognizable features, such as human heads, animal figures, birds, reptiles, insects, and plants, crosses, swastikas, solar signs, temple plans, land divisions, and labyrinths or mazes.

Word of the discovery soon spread. In June 1923 archaeologists Sylvanus Morley, Frans Blom, and Thomas Gann of the Carnegie Institute in Washington, D.C., visited Niven's shop on San Juan de Letrán Street. Morley, who had studied under Professor Putnam at Harvard University, was noted for his work on Maya epigraphy. Morley, accompanied by Blom and Gann, both men with a great passion for ancient Mesoamerica, was engaged in documenting the Maya city of Chichén Itzá. They

three which you have so kindly submitted, I should feel greatly obliged.

Niven was gratified. "Since I began to unearth the carved stone tablets covered with mysterious symbols in 1921," he wrote back, "I have submitted drawings and photos to the most eminent anthropologists in the U.S. and Mexico, but none of them have even written a report. So you may know how pleased and satisfied I was this morning to receive your . . . astounding decipherment and interpretation of the old carvings. I thank you for your permission to use this wonderful information and I will feel glad that you make reference to my discovery in your new book . . ." Niven included additional rubbings and photographs to assist in Mann's investigations.

In January 1927 word came from the American Museum of Natural History. Clarence L. Hay wrote that the museum was "not yet in a position to make a definite decision" as to the significance of the tablets and offered to "send any or all of them" to Niven in case he should need them for his own study.

Niven felt betrayed. For forty years he had been donating material to the museum. Just five years earlier he had been elected an honorary life member (for the second time!) "in recognition of distinguished scientific service to the Museum." ready been donated to the museum. Either someone there had maligned his work, he thought, or, "I have given them a nut too hard to crack."

Niven applied to the Mexican National Museum for permission to continue excavations in San Miguel Amantla. Luis Castillo Ledón, Niven's former supporter, replied that excavations were under the jurisdiction of the Dirección de Arqueología and that Niven would need to apply there for permission. After he had that permission the museum would be pleased to cooperate with his efforts.

"I am sorry to inform you," the director of archaeology wrote on April 22, "that it is known by this department, that the various excavations previously conducted by you in the region surrounding Atzacapotzalco, San Miguel Amantla, Calacoaya, Naucalpán, Remedios, etc. have been made with commercial objectives, and that nearly all of the objects have been sold, and many of them have left Mexico." The Mexican government, the letter went on, granted permission only to Mexican citizens and, furthermore, to excavations with a