

Pioneers in Maya Archaeology: Count Maurice de Périgny (1877-ca. 1935)

Submitted by IMS webmaster Keith Merwin

At the end of the Nineteenth Century many explorers found the lure of the ruins of America impossible to resist. One of these explorers was an actual French count, (The) Count Maurice de Périgny was born in 1877 at the Chateau de Tourcairats in Tarn, France. Périgny received training as a geographer and joined the Geographical Society of Paris.

By 1902, Périgny was regularly traveling to the United States visiting New York City and Boston on an annual basis. In 1904, he attended the Eighth International Geographical Congress. It was during this trip that he chose to visit the ruins in Mexico. As a geographer, Périgny brought a professional style to his research. He liked to travel on foot in order to examine the topography of the area. He also carried photographic equipment and made many of the earliest photographs of the sites he visited.

Périgny's first expedition began in October of 1904 in Mexico City, but he then traveled to Mérida and the Yucatán Peninsula to visit sites written about by John Lloyd Stephens. The ruins he visited on this trip were Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, Kabah, Labná, Aké and Izamal. This trip ended in January of 1905.

After a short visit to France including reporting on his trip to the Paris Geographical Society, Périgny returned to the United States in August aboard the *SS La Gascogne*. He spent some time in Boston then began his second visit to Mesoamerica. Arriving in Veracruz in November, his trip included sites in Mexico, Guatemala and British Honduras (now Belize).

Périgny left Veracruz traveling southeast through Tabasco into Guatemala. There he visited Itsimté, originally known as Cinte, now known as Itsimté-Sacluk. Continuing east, he explored the island of Topoxté and the ruins of Yaxhá on the shores of Lake Yaxhá, then turned north to be the first to locate Nakum. His report would state that as keenly interested as he was in this unexpected treasure trove,

he had at the time neither the leisure nor the funds



Structure E excavated and restored by the Triangulo Project.

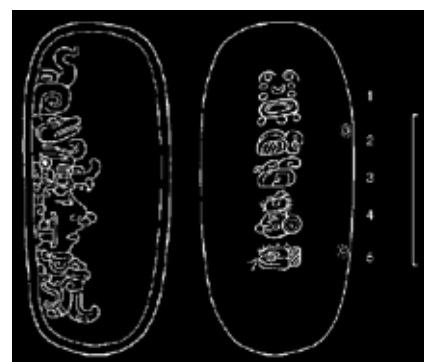
"to the disinterment from its living tomb of this monument of an ancient civilization", so he headed into British Honduras. After visiting Belize City, he set sail for Payo Obispo (Chetumal), in Mexico. From there, he traveled northwest to Bacalar, Quintana Roo and Chan Santa Cruz. Continuing north and west, he visited Peto, Yucatán, before ending this voyage in January, 1906 in Mérida.

After this trip, Périgny lectured in Boston and other cities in the United States before returning to France for a short time. Périgny planned on his third expedition to return to Nakum, but for reasons he did not elaborate on, he had to postpone returning to the Petén. Instead, he chose to travel to Payo Obispo and travel up the Río Hondo by boat to Esperanza, then proceed overland to the village of Ycaiché. Hearing of ruins with pyramids some distance from the village, he set off to explore that area.

Four days north of Ycaiché, Périgny located Río Bec. He named the site after the river in the area known as Beu Beque and for many years it was written as Río Beque. Returning to Ycaiché, he was directed to another set of ruins south and east. This site was located near a hot spring, so he called the ruins "warm water", or



One of four early images of Count Maurice de Périgny that author Keith Merwin acquired from a New York City antiques/bookstore.



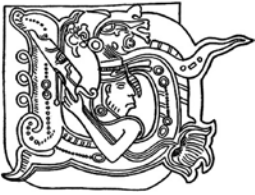
Jade pectoral (breastplate) discovered in the royal tomb in Pyramid 15. These images were forwarded to Keith by Polish archaeologist Jaroslaw Zralka, who helps co-direct excavations for the Nakum Archaeological Project.



More recent discoveries at Nakum from September 2011 include tomb burials within a structure that is described "as being like a mausoleum for the royal lineage for at least 400 years," said Wiesław Koszkuł, of the Jagiellonian University Institute of Archaeology in Krakow, Poland. Photo courtesy of Wiesław Koszkuł, Nakum Archaeological Project.

Chocoha in Mayan. He then journeyed to the area of Laguna de Hon near Xcopen where he found three additional groups of ruins.

We'll present the conclusion of this article by Keith Merwin in the October IMS Explorer. Meanwhile checkout The Nakum Archaeological Project's website at: www.nakum.pl/english/index.html



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Continued from September 2012, Vol. 41, Issue 9:

Périgny journeyed to the area of Laguna de Hon near Xcopen where he found three additional groups of ruins. The first he named Nohochná which he said was "Casa Grande" in Mayan. He found these ruins to be different in style, not like Río Bec or Uxmal or others he had visited.

About 500 yards away, another group included a monument topped with a structure with a great many rooms, so he designated it Yaabichna for "many rooms". The last find on this trip he called Nohcacab or "large town" in Mayan because the site had an avenue with a pyramid at one end and behind it a structure with a large interior court surrounded by additional structures. Périgny left Mexico after giving a report to the National Museum in Mexico City, then another for the Geographical Society of Paris describing his successful trip.

Périgny made his fourth trip in 1909, this time actually commissioned by the French Geographical Society and the French Department of Public Instruction. He visited the capital of Guatemala receiving a letter of introduction from President Manuel Estrada Cabrera to all officials he would come in contact with. During this part of his trip, he visited Palo Verde, Los Tarros and Santa Lucía Cotzumalhuapa. From there, he traveled to Coban to hire porters and guides.

Getting on the trail, Périgny visited a cave at Seamay with hewn stairs and rock art. Stopping at Dolores, he visited several sites in the area. Reaching Benque Viejo, he met up with the expedition from the Peabody Museum at Harvard University and stayed for two weeks. The Peabody Expedition had planned to visit Nakum and agreed to put off their visit for a month or two to allow Périgny time to work the site. Dr. Tozzer also offered to hold his report from publication until after Périgny had published his report.

Arriving at Nakum, he had the site cleared so he could photograph the site properly. He also made

casts of hieroglyphic moldings and stelae,

Keith presents three more of the four unpublished early images of Count Maurice de Périgny that he acquired from a New York City antiques/bookstore.



unfortunately they have since disappeared.

This trip ended in Belize City, British Honduras. Périgny's report to the French Geographical Society was covered by newspapers in Europe and the United States. He was a talented spokesman for his efforts calling Nakum "the capital of the Maya" and giving structures names such as "The Temple of King", "The Temple of Priests", "The Temple of Hieroglyphs". He also presented a report on his travels at the 1912 International Congress of Americanists in London, England.

Périgny returned to Central America in 1913, this time visiting Costa Rica and the Panama Canal. He reported to the French Geographical Society on the canal, a project they had followed closely since its earliest planning.

With the start of the war in Europe Périgny enlisted in the French Army as a sub-Lieutenant of the Nineteenth Regiment of French Dragoons. He would serve mostly in Morocco. He produced several reports on Morocco.

The Count did not return to Central America, in fact he became less and less involved in geography after 1920 and it appears he passed away in Brazil before 1935.

Each of Count Maurice de Périgny's four expeditions cost him several months of his time and he traveled and explored at his own expense. He also became sick with fever at least twice, both times requiring long recuperations.

During his adventures, Périgny located at least eleven Maya sites, two that are now well-known – Nakum and Río Bec. The French Geographical Society awarded him a Silver medal and a Gold medal for his work. These travels were clearly a labor of love.



Structure N, taken by Raymond E. Merwin during the Peabody Expedition to Nakum in 1909-10, compared to its restored version today (courtesy of www.authenticmaya.com).



Historic photo of construction along Culebra Cut on the Panama Canal, during the time that Périgny visited the project in 1913. Courtesy of www.canalmuseum.com

Sources: Dr. Eric Taladoire, 1995: *Maurice de Périgny, Archaeologist or Explorer?*; *Maurice de Périgny, 1907 – Maya Ruins in Quintana Roo*; various newspaper and magazine articles.