monumental upper façade of the Palace of the Governor at Uxmal contains hundreds of Maya Venus symbols. This view, looking back along the Venus axis, begins with the red-headed jaguar platform, continues across the fallen stone cylinder, and ends at the door of the Palace of the Governor. (Robin Reesor Krupp)

...at the time the Palace of the Governor was erected, about A.D. 800. This is a plausible interpretation of the orientation of the Palace of the Governor, which sits from the axis most other structures at Uxmal have in common.

The upper façade is one of the marvels of Maya stonework. More than 20,000 individually cut and fitted pieces create a very deep mosaic of glyphs, patterns, serpents, rain god masks, and other symbols, including more than 350 emblems of Venus. An ancient Maya astronomer standing in the center doorway at the right hour, in the right season, and in the right year, would have seen Venus dramatically appear in the large platform plaza in front of the Palace. Rising before dawn, it toed its line with the small altar on the Palace's central axis and over the distant outline of Nohpat. Here again, at Uxmal, the finished architecture implies the nomical answer was already known to the Maya skywatchers.

Though the Palace of the Governor could have been used to verify and date the ion of Venus at its southern extreme, the extravagant vaults and rooms and the building tell us that something more than a lone astronomer's observatory of Venus went on here. It is a monumental building on an even more monumental platform. The open area in front of the Palace of the Governor provides ample space for ritual, for sacred drama, or at least for an assembly of a large number of...