

Palenque - The Archaeological City Today

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INTRODUCTION

Most of the papers at this and other Mesas Redondas have dealt with Palenque, and Maya culture in general, when it was in full bloom, when Palenque was a living city. This in spite of the fact that at a former Mesa Redonda, perhaps by consensus, perhaps by decree, but certainly capriciously and hurriedly, Palenque was declared a necropolis with all the connotations and implications of the word.

Palenque, in a certain sense, is still a living city; it contains vast stores of knowledge and lore, much of it long forgotten, but still there and being slowly recovered. To this recovery the Mesas Redondas have contributed greatly. In the process of recovery, as in all research, there have been false starts, mistakes and a certain amount of dogmatism, but the general trend has been towards historical truth and much has already been achieved in this direction.

In contrast to most of the papers presented here, mine will contribute nothing to a better understanding of pre-hispanic Palenque. Today I would like to reflect on Palenque as it is today; Palenque as one of the most beautiful and interesting archaeological sites in the world; Palenque as part of that cultural heritage—rich in values and necessary to the well-being of mankind—which is universally and rapidly being lost and which it is our duty to conserve in all its historic and esthetic integrity.

The “history” of the Ruins of Palenque is well known; the discovery of the ruins by Ordóñez y Aguiar in 1773 and the early explorations by Calderón, Bernasconi and del Río have been recorded; the travel literature of the 19th Century was enriched by the accounts of the discoveries and observations at Palenque of such as Dupaix, Waldeck, Charney and, of course, the invaluable works of Stephens and Catherwood. The scientific investigations of Maudslay, Holmes, Seville and Seler at Palenque are highlights in early Mesoamerican archaeology.

But the work of these pioneers is not a part of my story today, because they all had one thing in common. Despite the difference in their methods, they all came to Palenque to discover, to explore, to find or to learn, to record and document—not to conserve. And this was rightly so; that was their purpose and motivation and in keeping with the needs and interests of their times; it was for others to conserve what they had wrested from the jungle and from obscurity. Furthermore it was quite impossible to have done much in the way of conservation, not to mention restoration, in their time and under the conditions in which they had to work; the sheer inaccessibility of Palenque was a formidable obstacle.

(The development of transportation and communications were important to much of Maya archaeology; Maudslay himself pointed this out when he wrote: “...Central America had been almost neglected as a field of archaeological research, owing ... in a large measure, to the difficulties of travel.... Such neglect is, however, never likely to occur again, for although many of the ruins are deeply buried in the forest as they were in Stephens’s time, steamboats and railways have now brought the points of departure for exploring expeditions within at most a fortnight’s journey from New York...” Frans Blom later would say: “... chewing gum and Maya archaeology are closely related,” meaning that it was the *chiclero* trails that opened up much of the Maya area to archaeologists. If transportation and communications were important for the development of archaeology, they were indispensable to the conservation of sites.)

The first efforts towards the preservation of Palenque go back to the last decades of the

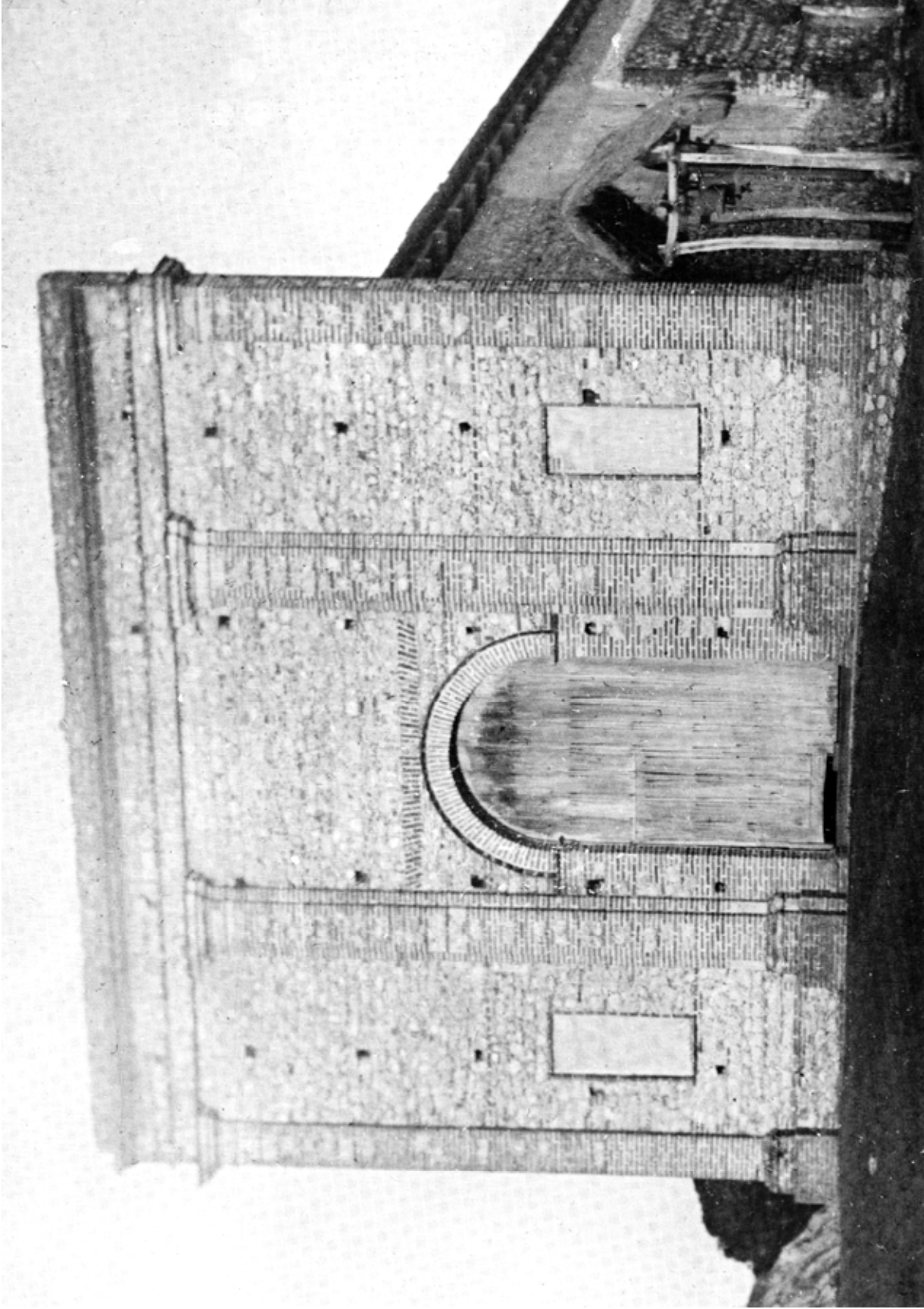


Fig. 1 Church in the plaza of the village of Palenque in 1904, showing the two carved Maya slabs inserted in its walls. Photography by Tozzer, reproduced by the permission of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

19th Century but they are mainly directed towards preventing vandalism and looting. In 1898 Benito Lacroix was appointed “Inspector of Archaeological Monuments of Palenque”. This Benito Lacroix accompanied Maudslay to the ruins in 1891 and apparently was in charge of clearing the jungle in that expedition. He also was the founder of the hotel business in Santo Domingo de Palenque and in a very interesting letter written in 1912 he states: “... *hesta he tenido que convertirme en el molesto y pobre oficio de hostelero, para ver de proporcionar las mayores comodidades posibles a los visitantes de las Ruinas...*” In this same letter he mentions that his father had been honorary guardian of the ruins for many years before 1898 and there is evidence of this, since Francisco Lacroix in 1888 was called upon by Leopoldo Batres to report on an alleged theft of some sculpture from Palenque. (You might be interested to know that the report states that no theft occurred and that during that whole year there was only *one* visitor to the ruins—an unnamed German.)

Benito Lacroix does seem to have done some occasional and sporadic clearing of vegetation on the buildings at Palenque; in 1908 he requests funds (\$500.00) for just such a purpose. He also probably carried on some rudimentary maintenance; in 1899 he requested \$250.00 to build a pillar to support a “curtain” (probably meaning a façade) in the Palace; by the time the funds arrived an earthquake had demolished this wall and the money was returned.

In 1909 there was a big event for Palenque; in February of that year the ruins were visited by Justo Sierra, then Minister of Public Instruction and Fine Arts. As a result of this visit, the last remaining slab of the Tablet of the Cross was removed from the temple and sent to Mexico City; the year before the Smithsonian Institute had returned to Mexico the slab which the U.S. Consul at Laguna had forwarded to Washington in 1842, so that both slabs were now joined to the central slab which had been in Mexico City since 1884 and the complete Tablet of the Cross was now exhibited at the Museo Nacional. However, despite the renewed interest in Palenque no plans were made, that I know of, for full scale conservation work on its building and monuments.

The first proposal, that I have found, for the Conservation of Palenque is contained in a report by Frans Blom, dated October 28th 1921, addressed to José Reygadas Vértiz, Jefe del Departamento de Arqueología. It is entitled “*Palenque – Condiciones en que se encuentran estas Ruinas así como una proposición para conservarlas y presupuesto aproximado para el primer año de trabajo*”.

In this report, Blom indicates that the first thing that must be done is to clear all the plazas and platforms around the main buildings of the exuberant vegetation that covered them and to prevent this vegetation from growing again. He suggests that all the large trees be cut down, saving this wood for later use in the building and furnishing of the necessary dwellings at the site. The unusable branches and trunks should be cut into smaller pieces and the low bush should be cut and all left to dry for several months so that this accumulation can be thoroughly burnt. Immediately after burning, grass should be planted on all the plaza for this, as he has observed at the village of Palenque, forms a thick carpet which prevents other wild plants and trees from growing again. He suggests that full-scale conservation operations do not begin until this first step of clearing and burning has been completed.

Blom suggests that priority be given to the consolidation of the roof combs of the Temples of the Cross and of the Sun and mentions that this last Temple, even though struck by lightning the year before, is in a better state of preservation than the other buildings at Palenque but will, nevertheless, shortly be reduced to a mound of rubble if measures are not taken soon. He further recommends repair of several walls in the Palace and the urgent consolidation of most Temple platforms since they present gaping holes at the corners. He notes that almost all of the lintels of all the buildings are missing and that this has caused the walls over doorways to fall leaving great heaps of rubble and suggests that the new lintels be made of chico zapote wood or metal. He mentions that large amounts of rubble left behind by Maudslay and other previous explorers must be removed and that many excavation holes must be filled in. He warns that many of the large trees

growing out of the roofs of the buildings should be cut down with great care and, in fact, reports that he has cut down several trees growing out of buildings but that others he had to leave intact because it is their roots that are holding the buildings together and consolidation work is necessary on the walls and roofs before attempting to cut down the trees. He strongly recommends the cleaning and waterproofing of all existing roofs.

Blom, a practical man, ponders on the problems of logistics and decides that the necessary materials can be bought at Frontera and from there transported by river steamer to Montecristo (now Emiliano Zapata). At this time there seemed to exist a passable motor road, built by an oil company, from Montecristo to the village of Palenque, and he suggests that a road be built from the village to the ruins at an estimated cost of 10,000.00 pesos. The existing road he mentions evidently was abandoned and shortly became of very difficult transit, as we shall see. He also mentions the lack of skilled labor and recounts his unsuccessful efforts to burn lime, being finally able to obtain just a small amount to make some very necessary repairs.

He envisions large scale work at Palenque and suggests the construction of houses for the guardians, a large museum and laboratory because “during the excavations a large amount of archaeological objects will be found,” and sufficient housing for the staff, since he requests, besides the archaeologists, an engineer, an architect, a photographer, a draftsman, technicians to make casts of glyphs and tablets and specialists to study the geology, the fauna and the flora of the region.

Blom’s report is rich in anecdotal value; Maudslay had described two slabs embedded in the walls of the church at the village of Palenque (Figs. 1, 2) which local lore as well as Stephens and Catherwood ascribed to the Temple of the Sun. He suggests that they really belong to the outer walls of the sanctuary of the Temple of the Cross and hopes that “the next visitor to Palenque will carefully remeasure both the sanctuaries and the slabs (to determine) their correct position.” Blom does just that and comes out for the Temple of the Cross and strongly recommends that they be withdrawn from the church walls which are in danger of collapsing. To the as yet unnamed buildings he ascribes Roman numerals and proposes that tiles with the numerals be made at Teotihuacan and placed on the respective building to “avoid confusion in future descriptions of the ruins and so the guardian can be more precise in his report.”

The report however contains no anecdote to compare with the beautiful one concerning the Rev. Mandujano, his lady-love and his band of musicians, published in “Tribes and Temples”.

The next important visit to Palenque, excluding the short visit by Blom in the 1926 Tulane Expedition, did not occur until 1933. In August of that year a commission led by Alberto Escalona Ramos came to report on the state of the ruins and to investigate the possibilities of conservation



Fig.2 Detail of one of slabs in the wall of the church in the village of Palenque. Courtesy of Dr. Enrique Berlín.

of the site. Escalona Ramos, an engineer by profession, rendered a very concise and pragmatic report; he states that the vegetation has again invaded the zone despite the efforts of the one guardian and one assistant that are permanently in the zone; he proposes that the vegetation be cut back more often and suggests that the clearing operations include the plaza to the South of the Temple of the Sun to give a better idea of this very important part of Palenque and that this plaza be named “Maudslay Plaza”. In the four days that he stays at the ruins he visits and describes more than 35 buildings. Interestingly, he notes that he visited the “archaeological quarry” implying that this was the quarry whence came much of the stone for Palenque buildings, but unfortunately, fails to state its location. Pragmatically, he states that “when the funds are available” consolidation works be started on the Temple of the Count and other buildings that are in dire need of repair work.

Another of the members of the commission that visited Palenque in 1933 was Luis Rosado Vega, Director of the Archaeological Museum of Yucatan. Rosado Vega was a good Yucatecan and consequently a romantic—romanticism was endemic among Yucatecans....

Rosado Vega wrote: *‘No puede ser mas penosa, mas desconsoladora la triste impresión que se recibe al contemplar la destrucción y el abandono en que se encuentran todos los edificios sin exceptuar uno solo. Seguramente si estos edificios, si estas piedras, si estas esculturas, si estas inscripciones pudiesen humanamente llorar, lo harían más a torrentes que los aguaceros que a diario se precipitan—sobre ellos, lamentando que tanto esfuerzo de civilización, de arte, de cultura diseminado allí por quienes fueron fundadores de nuestra raza, esté relegado a la postre a tanto olvido, a tanto—abandona, coma si los hubiesemos condenado nosotros, los hijos de esos nuestros esforzados ascendientes a la desaparición completa.... Sobre los mismos monumentos levántase grandes árboles cuyas raíces penetran en los techos ni más ni menos como puñales que les desgarrasen las entrañas....*

He then made an urgent plea for the conservation of Palenque but he falters at the end and proposes that, if even the most needed conservation work is not feasible, then the sculptures, the reliefs be removed from Palenque, abandoning the buildings to their fate if necessary.

I couldn’t tell you if it was the practical, no-nonsense, report of Escalona Ramos or the passionate, the heartrending pleas of Rosado Vega that produced results, but the fact is that the very next year funds were allotted for the first formal season of work at Palenque. In May of 1934, Miguel Angel Fernández, archaeologist of the Oficina de Monumentos Prehispánicos began “*los trabajos de reparación de la zona arqueológica de Palenque .*” Working conditions during that first season were none too good and Fernández writes that “the hut where I am living is very uncomfortable but I’ll have to get along with it, maybe next year I’ll be able to build myself a masonry room.” Fernández reports that the greatest difficulty was in the transport of material from Emiliano Zapata, since the road to Palenque was in terrible condition and because “there is only one ox-cart which normally charges \$35.00 a ton for transport to Palenque but for the government (Fernández) he demands \$600.00; take it or leave it.” Beyond this, Fernández does not indicate how he got himself, his tools and materials to Palenque, but information I have from Dr. Enrique Berlín who worked with Fernández for several seasons beginning in 1940, and to whom I am greatly indebted for much information regarding the modern history of Palenque, can give us an idea of the proceedings. In 1940, Dr. Berlín informs me, the party flew to Villahermosa from Mexico City; they stopped over at Villahermosa for all the necessary purchases and sent all the materials in a paddle-steamer called “Carmen” which plied the river routes of Tabasco, while they flew by light plane to Zapata. After several days wait the cargo arrived at Zapata and went on to Palenque on mule-back, the archaeologists leading the way on horseback. The road, even in 1940, was in deplorable condition; Berlín tells me it was not much more than a wide trail and the way not to get lost was to follow the telegraph lines. In his charming, self-effacing manner, Berlín adds that he was not a very good rider; on his day off, on Sundays, he didn’t ride, *he walked* to the village of Palenque.

During the first of the work in 1934, Fernández proceeded to clear the vegetation from a large part of the zone basically following the procedure suggested by Blom but leaving a few trees so as not to destroy the “artistic aspect” of the site. He mentions, incidentally, that “since the clearing ordered by Maudslay in 1890-91 the zone was abandoned until 1923, when Francisco Blom arrived and had to clear the zone again because the 33-year-old trees had formed a new jungle. The jungle has again invaded the zone with 12-year-old trees and many that Blom could not cut down and are now 40 years old.”

Aside from the clearing and burning activities Fernández concentrated on the restoration of the Temple of the Sun, since he also considered that while this building was in a better state of preservation, if it was not restored promptly it would soon be in the same ruinous state as the other buildings. He first had to remove all the debris from the Temple and from its supporting pyramidal platform; careful excavation revealed the limits of the pyramid and the main stairway which was very much displaced, but most of his efforts were devoted to restoring the Temple itself and fortunately by the end of this first season the Temple and the roof-comb were definitely consolidated and in very much the same state in which we know them now. He had to replace the lintels, all of which were missing, with new lintels made of



Fig. 3 Palenque: the Palace as restoration was begun in 1940.

chico-zapote wood and he cleaned and consolidated the remains of the stucco decoration of the frieze and roof comb, making a reconstruction drawing of these decorations, based on the stucco still in place and the imprints of the parts that had fallen off. (I have not been able to locate these drawings in the files.) In respect to the wooden lintels—most of which were missing from all of the buildings in Palenque—he wonders why he hasn’t found at least remains of rotted or burnt wood as he has found in other archaeological sites and he offers two possible explanations:

1) The wood rotted to absolute dust and no visible residue remains; this he considers unlikely.

2) The lintels were richly carved and therefore very valuable to the Palencans who, when they abandoned their city, pulled the lintels off the buildings and carried them away; in support of this supposition he mentions that Lacroix told him that, a long time before, a few undecorated beams had been found and used by the people from the village; he reasons that if these few had survived in a fair state of preservation, at least part of the many missing lintels should have also survived.

He also mentions that almost all the buildings and tombs that he has explored have been previously looted. Another interesting suggestion made by Fernández in his first report, is that he has explored all the rubble of the N.E. court of the Palace and he has found not one of the missing cornice stones; he speculates that these stones were used, at a later date, to make the friezes of



Fig. 4 Palenque: the Palace in 1940 before restoration.

sculptured figures in the platforms of the buildings facing this court and also used for the hieroglyphic stairway.

In later seasons he continued to work in containing the jungle from again invading the buildings, and since the three permanent guardians at the zone could not keep back the growth, Fernández had to direct extensive cleaning operations at the start of every new season; he kept all the main buildings free of vegetation. He also explored the Temples of the Cross and of the Foliated Cross, restoring the sanctuary of the first and consolidating the roof combs of both. During his work in these Temples, he found many random excavation and evidences of looting, which he attributed to del Rio and suggests that it was these excavations that caused the collapse of the front walls, or façades, of the buildings.

He worked mostly on the Temples themselves but, in the case of the Temple of the Sun, he restored the pyramidal platform, leaving the building in much the same condition as we see it now. He also worked at the Palace where he consolidated walls, vaults and floors, and where he carried out difficult clearing operations. Large trees still entwined the buildings and enormous trunks of trees, cut down by Maudslay and Blom, as well as much rubble left behind from previous explorations had to be removed. He found many of the sculptures and stuccos that are now stored in the Bodega. Under his direction were Enrique Berlín's reports on his work at Palenque, where he expresses some very sound ideas on the restoration of archaeological buildings and where he insists on the need for the consolidation and conservation of ruins as a prerequisite to further research.

Fernández worked in Palenque, under extremely difficult conditions, almost every year from 1934 to 1945. From 1940 on, he was assisted by Enrique Berlín and Roque Cevallos Novelo. In 1939 he had contracted yellow-fever at the ruins, and it is said, that on his last season he was so ill that he was taken away from the ruins lashed to the saddle of his horse. He died soon afterwards. His untimely death may have been due, in part, to the rigors of his 12-year work at Palenque, which prevented his following up many of his discoveries and caused lack of continuity in the conservation of Palenque.

Despite the hard labors of M. A. Fernández and his assistants, Palenque was still in ruin-

ous condition when it was visited by Eulalia Guzmán in December of 1941. She complained about everything, from the lack of plumbing at the “*campamento*” to the poor state of conservation of the ruins where “the pyramidal platforms are but steep mounds of rubble affording only a difficult and dangerous access ... where most of the lintels are still missing and the façades have cavernous gaps over all doorways.” She does recognize, however, that the difficult access to Palenque justifies somewhat the slowness of the work done by Fernández and the sad state of the ruins.

In 1947 Alberto Ruz made his first official visit to Palenque to establish a program of work in the exploration and conservation of the site and, though his report is much more factual and unbiased, he also found that most of the buildings and sculptures were in dire need of conservation work. The stuccos in the Palace, he says, are in fairly good state but “small fragments of stucco at the base of the piers indicate that they are being destroyed slowly but surely.” Like Eulalia Guzmán, he also reported that the pyramidal platforms of the Temples were just mounds of rubble overgrown with vegetation, except for the pyramid of the Temple of the Sun, which had been restored by Fernández. Ruz concludes: “the state of the ruins is due to the fact that there never has been the intensive and extensive work that is necessary.... The valuable work done by our late colleague M. A. Fernández, with very limited funds, has saved from destruction merely a minimal part of the architectural complex.” Ruz further states that the lack of communications have made it very difficult to work intensively in Palenque but that the construction of the railroad is advancing and the line will reach Palenque station by the end of that year (1947), thus greatly facilitating work at Palenque at a reasonable cost. He anticipates the problems that will be caused by the arrival of mass tourism, and he ends up by stating that the only way of saving Palenque from larger destruction is to provide sufficient funds for large scale exploration and conservation work at the site.

Alberto Ruz conducted his first season of work at Palenque in 1949 and he worked every year until 1958. The enormous amount of conservation done by Ruz at Palenque has been overshadowed by his discovery of the crypt and tomb in the Temple of the Inscriptions; everyone knows that Ruz discovered the tomb, but few appreciate the vast and impressive achievements of his conservation work.

The first season of work was mainly devoted to a more thorough clearing of the site and in making preparation for more extensive work in future years; suitable dwelling was necessary for the staff so that work was begun on the present “*campamento*”. Ruz continued the restoration of the Tower, (Figs. 3, 4) begun by Berlín in previous years and the exploration of the north side of the Palace platform, disproving the existence of a sub-structural building postulated by Fernández. A highlight of the 1949 season was the discovery of the tablet of the Palace, very fragmented but still adhering to the central wall of the North Gallery which had toppled over as a unit and had imprisoned the tablet underneath its great mass. This year, work was begun in the Temple of the Inscriptions.

The story of the discovery of the tomb is so well known that I will not repeat it, but it should be mentioned that an exploratory trench dug in the Temple floor, where one of the floor slabs was missing, revealed the steps of the interior stairway which, during this season, was dug out to the 23rd step.

By the time Ruz returned to Palenque in 1950, the road from the airport was being finished and the construction crew had cut through and destroyed a corner of a building in Group IV so that Lauro Zavala, one of the students working with Ruz, was commissioned to explore this building where he found the magnificent “Tablet of the Slaves”.

Miguel Alemán, then President of Mexico, had visited Palenque in 1950 and was impressed by the site and by the work being carried on; he ordered a special subsidy for the continuation of work at Palenque. His specific instructions to Ruz were that he was to give preference to the conservation of the buildings and monuments without, of course, neglecting the investiga-

tion concurrent and necessary for archaeological conservation.

Much work was done in the repair and consolidation of the stuccos in the Palace and the Temple of the Inscriptions. Ruz noted, however, that the stuccos that he had cleaned the year before were again stained, and he proposed that the lintels and cornices be reconstructed to protect the stuccos. This work was not finished until much later by Acosta.

Agustín Villagra was commissioned to copy the remains of the mural paintings already known and he discovered and copied others. Robert L. Rands started his work on Palenque ceramics. In this year the excavation of the interior stairway reached the 46th step and the landing where they change direction.

I will not go into more detail as to what was accomplished in the way of conservation during the 10 years that the work at Palenque was under the direction of Ruz. It should suffice to say that Palenque, practically as we know it now, was the result of this work. (The crypt was finally entered on Sunday, June 15th, 1952.)

After 1959 some time elapsed before regular work was again resumed at Palenque, now under the direction of Jorge Acosta who was also instructed to emphasize conservation and maintenance over excavation and research.

In the course of 1968-70 and again in 1973-74, the West stairway of the Palace was excavated and restored, as well as Temple XVI; much work was done in the conservation of the Palace Houses and in the pyramidal structure of the Temple of Inscriptions to try to lessen water seepage into the crypt, as well as in the North Group.

Acosta worked several seasons devoted to conservation and to pure, routine maintenance until his death in 1976.

Sometimes it must be frustrating to an archaeologist to be called upon to serve in the role of conservator of archaeological sites. The work is difficult and sometimes tedious; discovery is infrequently a welcome byproduct of this work, but, in general, it lacks the excitement of excavation or the satisfaction of pure research and yet it implies more responsibility. It must be done, and it is of the utmost importance. It carries a great challenge and responsibility because archaeological monuments and sites are not the property or the exclusive province of scholars and savants, they belong to people in all walks of life.

Palenque, for example, does not belong to us, it doesn't even belong to our generation; it transcends this concept because it is part of that universal cultural heritage that is vital to all mankind, enriches its vital experience and will continue to do so, we hope, for many generations to come.