The Red Queen

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Introduction

Palenque is built on the first foothills of the eastern highlands of Chiapas. It was once a large city covering some 16 square kilometers and comprising more than 800 structures, counting temples, platforms, substructures, palaces, bridges, aqueducts, and residential units, which were built following the topography of the terrain along a roughly east-west axis that skirted the mountain range.

The first foothills of the eastern sierra of Chiapas (photo: Joel Skidmore).

The ancient city revolved around what we now call the Great Plaza, an approximately rectangular space bounded by major architectural elements on its east, west, and south sides. This space is considered to have been the political and administrative heart of the city. In its east rises a colossal construction known as the Palace. Inside, buildings surround inner courtyards, forming a large complex of open spaces, corridors, subterranean galleries, drainage works, and a tower that may have been used as an observatory. This structure is the result of several architectural transformations occurring over a 400-year span.

At the Great Plaza's west end rises a pyramidal substructure on top of which lie the remains of a ruined temple. It is known as Temple XI and it remains unexplored to this day. The Plaza's northern limit is marked by a broad stairway which once gave access to it from a lower platform. Finally, on the south side, covering more than half the total length of the Great Plaza, lies a very large platform,

From left to right, the Temple of the Cross, the Temple of the Inscriptions, Temple XIII (the Temple of the Red Queen), and Temple XII-A (photo: Joel Skidmore).

the result of many modifications carried out on the flank of a large hill. On this platform rise four structures known as the Temple of the Inscriptions, Temple XII-A, the Temple of the Skull, and Temple XIII.

Beginning with the 1993 field season, we concentrated our efforts on the Great Plaza, where we carried out conservation work both in the Temple of the Inscriptions and in the Palace. During the 1994 field season, we carried out the exploration and restoration of the Temple of the Skull, Temple XII-A, and Temple XIII.

The Temple of the Skull (photo: Joel Skidmore).

In the course of the work, we were able to recover archaeological information in the sector, notably the discovery of a tomb inside Temple XIII. This tomb comprises a sarcophagus placed inside a mortuary chamber within an architectural complex of large dimensions and great quality of execution. It can be considered as one of the richest ever found, exceeded only perhaps by the one in the Temple of the Inscriptions. The building is now popularly known as the Temple of the Red Queen, on account of the tomb and the red cinnabar covering its occupant.

The Temple of the Red Queen, Temple XII-A, and the Temple of the Skull (photo: Joel Skidmore).

Explorations in Temple XIII

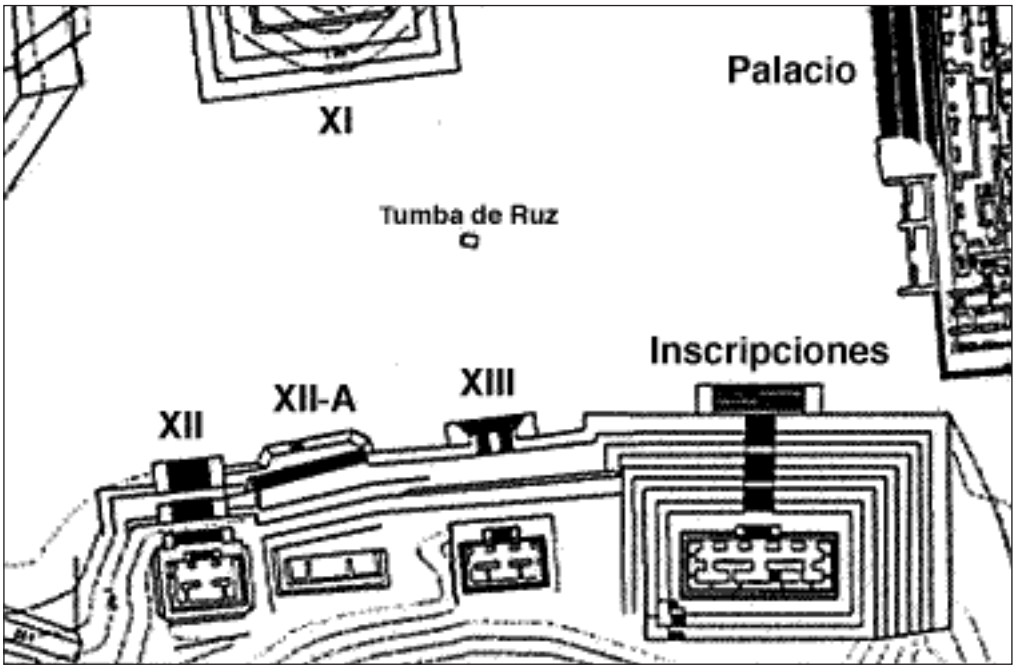
Previous references to Temple XIII are few and brief. The main reason behind this is that the temple had collapsed and did not make a strong impression on the first visitors and explorers who came to the site between the end of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth. It was only in 1889 that Alfred P. Maudslay, in carrying out his topographical survey, showed for the first time the location and topography of the temple, assigning it the number by which it became subsequently known.

In the course of his 1923 visit, Frans Blom wrote the following, regarding the structure we are dealing with: "To the W. of the Temple of the Inscriptions, there are two structures, the first of which is Temple XII [here Blom is clearly referring to Temple XIII], a mound lying on a terrace at a level slightly lower than that of the Temple of the Inscriptions. The other building is further W. and consists of a temple with parallel galleries. Only its E. portion has been preserved" (Blom 1991:142-143).

In 1954, Alberto Ruz Lhuillier initiated exploration and consolidation work at the temple, clearing its supporting substructure. The building displays all the architectural features of the traditional

Palenque temple. These include a three-doored portico and an internal gallery subdivided into one central and two side chambers. During excavation work carried out on the portico, a tomb, looted in ancient times, was discovered. It still contained 25 jade beads and remnants of green and red paint, as well as some teeth and insignificant bone fragments (Ruz 1956:135).

Finally, in 1973, Jorge Acosta finished work on the northwestern corner of the Temple of the Inscriptions, which led him to work on part of the first and second levels of the substructure supporting Temple XIII, given that these abut the Temple of the Inscriptions (Acosta 1975).



Map by Ed Barnhart/FAMSI.

Discovery of the Tomb of the Red Queen

One of the goals in carrying out archaeological work on Temple XIII was to get to know its construction sequence and the way it was built on the skirt of the hill that it abuts. Work was started with the digging of two approach trenches, with the dual purpose of locating the contours of the temple's substructure and its main stairway. In continuing the exploration of the first two levels that had been initiated by Jorge Acosta in 1973, it was possible to locate the remains of the totally collapsed main stairway. As cleanup work was started, we located a small blocked-up door on the vertical section of the substructure's second level, some 2.80 m. over the level of the Plaza.

After removing the masonry that blocked the way, a narrow corridor was uncovered, six meters long with a north-south orientation, which led to one of the best preserved galleries in all of Palenque. This gallery was found completely free of debris. Oriented east-west and measuring 15 meters in length, it was built with large blocks of limestone.

The southern end comprises three chambers, the first and the last of which were empty, while the central one was blocked by perfectly placed stonework finished with a coat of stucco that still retained remnants of black pigment. The limestone lintel indicated that the chamber was once functional before being completely sealed up. A noteworthy element here is a cornice that caps the walls of the facade, made of several layers of thin slabs, an arrangement which brings to mind similar solutions at several temples at the site. Portions of this cornice had fallen down and had to be rebuilt and restored.

To the southeast and southwest of the gallery, two completely sealed doorways were found, while two additional sealed doorways were found in the gallery's east and west ends. The narrow corridor, the gallery and the chambers at its ends all feature the Maya arch, so common at Palenque and other Maya sites.

At the northern end of the gallery can be seen the large limestone blocks used for its construction. Noteworthy here are the remains of a stucco coating with the imprints of human hands, found to the right of the section of the gallery where the narrow corridor ends. An important architectural element that must be mentioned here is the fact that the narrow corridor was once much broader, as can be observed in a construction juncture in the inner face of the gallery. The corridor's width originally coincided with the breadth of the central chamber.

The inner building presented no finishings at all, save for some remains in the upper and lower portions of the chambers.

Despite the good state of preservation of the substructure, at the beginning of May, 1994, we started cleanup and consolidation work on the outside of Temple XIII, with a view to stopping the constant rainwater seepage into the substructure.

One of the things that we found most remarkable was the presence of remnants of charcoal located at the foot and on the upper portion of the threshold to the sealed chamber. In the course of our work, many of us constantly wondered what the sealed chamber might contain. To get some answers and put speculation to rest, we decided to make a narrow cut on the upper left of the wall. Before deciding upon the penetration of a part of the wall that would allow us a glimpse into the chamber, we had to address several concerns. One of these was the possible presence of decoration on the inside of the wall to be penetrated. Normally, tombs in the Maya area and in other areas of Mesoamerica are laid out on a north-south axis. If this chamber had been reused as a mortuary chamber, there was a real risk of damaging a portion of the inner decoration of the chamber, given the fact that we would be excavating its northern wall. All necessary precautions were taken and a 15 cm. x 15 cm. penetration was made, through which we were able to glance for the first time in centuries upon one of the richest tombs of Palenque, second only to Pakal's.

Description of the Tomb

Through the perforation, we could look into a perfectly vaulted chamber measuring 3.80 x 2.50 meters, most of the surface of which was occupied by a rectangular limestone sarcophagus. To the south, we could make out the main door of the chamber, as well as five steps that gave access to it.

Upon thus discovering the main access to the tomb through the perforation we had made, we assumed that the sealed doorways at the ends of the gallery might take us to it by locating an access gallery. Thus, we decided to explore the gallery's southeastern and southwestern doorways, since they displayed the same orientation as the main access to the tomb. After 15 days of explorations, we were able to ascertain that the doorways led to inner, ascending stairways which originally gave access to a construction built above. Through the use of test pits, we tried to locate the access to the chamber from the outside, but we had to abandon this endeavor after having excavated down for eight meters with negative results.

Given our fruitless efforts in trying to get to the chamber's access door, we decided to enter the tomb through its north wall. We thus proceeded to enlarge the small perforation, once we were satisfied that there was no decoration that would be destroyed on the inside of the wall.

The sarcophagus was painted red through the use of cinnabar, and it was carved in one single piece. On top of it lay a monolithic limestone slab 2.40 meters long, 1.18 meters wide and 10 centimeters thick. Standing roughly at the center of the slab was a lidded censer, and at the foot of this censer lay a small bone spindle whorl.

At the extreme western end of the sarcophagus, a badly preserved skeleton was found. It belonged to a male adolescent who must have been roughly eleven years old at the time of his death. The body was laid on its back, along a north-south axis. One of its main features is cranial deformation.

At the extreme eastern end of the sarcophagus, a second skeleton was found in an extended position face-down, along a north-south axis. This second skeleton belonged to a female whose age has been calculated to have been between 30 and 35 years at the time of death. Apparently, these two individuals were sacrified to accompany the main occupant of the tomb on her journey to the underworld.

On the first steps leading into the chamber were placed a large brown ceramic plate and two orange vases also made of ceramic. On the next-to-last step a secondary interment was found, made up of long bones and jade-inlaid teeth.

After registering and collecting the elements surrounding the sarcophagus and having begun cleaning the slab lid, a small orifice, roughly 3 cm. in radius, was found to have been drilled in the middle of the slab. This orifice went through the full thickness of the slab, and it afforded us our first view of part of the tomb's funerary accouterments.

We proceeded to remove the monolithic slab that served as a lid to the sarcophagus. Lifting this slab some 20 centimeters from its original resting position took us 14 hours of arduous labor. With the lid out of the way, we were able to look at the contents of the sarcophagus: the remains of an adult female lying on her back with the head towards the north. Her height has been calculated at 1.54 meters and her age at the time of death must have been between 40 and 45 years.

The Red Queen (photograph courtesy of Arnoldo González Crúz and INAH).

A large collection of jade and pearl objects, bone needles and shells both covered and surrounded the skeleton. Some 1140 pieces were once part of a mask, which complemented other pieces that probably were parts of necklaces, earspools, and wristlets adorning the entombed body. Among these objects and worthy of special mention was a diadem made of flat, circular jade beads worn around the cranium, and several rectangular pieces of an apple-green material that also surrounded part of the cranium as well as the chest, and which laboratory tests identified as being made of malachite. Given their distribution, we think they may be parts of a mask.

In the skeleton's chest area was a large concentration of flat jade beads, as well as four obsidian blades. Around both wrists small jade beads were found, possibly belonging to wristlets, and in the pelvis area were located three small limestone axes which, in all likelihood, were once part of a belt. Between the left hand's phalanges and the eastern wall of the sarcophagus, we located a high concentration of jade plaques that were probably once assembled in mosaic fashion. Given their

characteristics, they are probably the remains of a small mask. One of the most relevant pieces in this set is an extremely small figurine carved in limestone, which was found inside a bivalve shell at the northeastern corner of the sarcophagus. The walls of the sarcophagus, the body, and all its accompanying elements were heavily covered in a red dust which has been identified as cinnabar.

Architecture

Excavation of the architectural complex has permitted the identification of three building phases. The first phase corresponds to the building we have been referring to here, inside which the tomb was located. Given its characteristics, we think that this first construction was exposed rather than enclosed, given the presence of a cornice on the temple's facade and also considering that it had an original function other than mortuary, as attested by the north door of the central chamber, which was sealed off to allow for it to be used as a mortuary chamber. This building, as we have pointed out, was built on the second level of the substructure, 2.80 meters above the plaza level, and access was gained to it through the use of a narrow stairway.

In the following construction phase, the substructure was elevated an additional 4.15 meters through the building of two additional levels (the third one being 2.05 meters high and the fourth 2.10), in order to construct a second building, which was completed while taking care not to destroy the first. Of this last building, only two piers survive, and given its characteristics it must have had a three-doorway entrance, such as can be observed on the fourth level of the substructure. This second building also had a narrow stairway leading to it, the dimensions of which were similar to those of the first building. It was during this phase that the internal stairways were built descending to the first building, as well as those ascending from the plaza. Afterwards, during this same period the narrow passageway was built and the decision taken to use the original building as a tomb.

In order to achieve this, the ancient Palencanos built the main tomb stairway which, through the use of 13 steps, communicated with the upper building. They also enlarged the narrow passageway leading to its northern facade. The width of this passageway coincides with the breadth of the northern doorway of the central chamber and with that of the sarcophagus, which suggests that the sarcophagus itself was brought into the chamber using this passageway, since the main access to the tomb is much narrower. Once the bodies and their accouterments had been deposited, all passageways were sealed, leaving only the narrow side and north passageways.

During the third and last construction phase, the structure grew an additional 1.80 meters in height through the addition of two more levels (the fifth and sixth, each 0.90 meters high). Thus, the substructure reached a total height of 12 meters. In order to achieve this final height, the Palencanos had to dismantle the previous building's superstructure. The staircase was enlarged, attaining 11 meters in length, and ballustrades were added to it, sealing off the last open passages inside the substructure.

Architecturally, this construction pattern at the site reminds the observer of the Temple of the Inscriptions where, through an inner staircase starting at the center of the temple, it is possible to descend into the funerary crypt. A similar access is found in Temple XV, where a side stairway leads

to a substructure comprising three chambers. At a smaller scale, this repeats the inner distribution observed at Temple XIII, down to the use of the central chamber for funerary purposes. Another case of this can be found in the Temple of the Beautiful Relief. Unfortunately, these last two tombs were looted and destroyed towards the turn of the century, for which reason we have next to no information about them.

Final considerations

According to our knowledge of pre-Columbian funerary practices at Palenque, people were buried either directly in the ground, in stone cists, or in masonry chambers. The excavations for these were generally under the floor of residences or beneath large temple and palace structures. And we have the unique case of a sarcophagus inside a crypt on top of which the Temple of the Inscriptions was built, covering the remains of Pakal, the most important ruler of Palenque.

The importance of the discovery of the Red Queen's tomb resides mainly in that it affords another example of a sarcophagus inside a mortuary chamber within an architectural complex. Its features make the Red Queen's tomb similar to the tomb under the Temple of the Inscriptions. We think it is signficant that the buildings are adjacent and are both part of the ancient city's Great Plaza. Both buildings have inner stairways leading to the tomb, and both contain a monolithic, lidded sarcophagus inside a mortuary chamber: unique cases in the Maya area. Both tombs include sacrificed secondary characters meant to accompany the tombs' main occupants in their journey to the underworld. Both of the tombs' main occupants wore mortuary masks, diadems, jade beads, pearls, and three small axes once forming part of a ceremonial belt. Finally, the insides of both sarcophagi were painted red with cinnabar.

In the case of the Temple of the Inscriptions, the crypt and the sarcophagus present a unique decorative wealth on the mortuary chamber's walls and on the four sides of the sarcophagus proper, not forgetting, of course, the elements that form the complex imagery of the sarcophagus lid. By comparison, the crypt and sarcophagus of the Red Queen are much smaller and are completely lacking in decoration or glyphic inscriptions. The absence of texts prevents us from knowing the identity of the female character laid to rest within it. This unknown personage has thus come to be known by the provisional nickname of "Red Queen." It is evident that her social status must have been very high, particularly when considering that her tomb is, after Pakal's, the most lavish of all tombs found at Palenque. The above notwithstanding, it should not be surprising that the Red Queen's royal tomb displays an absence of glyphic texts. In Palenque, it is the rule rather than the exception that tombs never contain inscriptions. Pakal is exceptional both in being the most important character yet found anywhere in the ancient city and in that his tomb is the only one with extensive texts identifying its occupant.

The sparse ceramic evidence found inside the Red Queen's tomb allows us to tentatively date it, without closing the possibility of refining such dating through the use of new data that may become available in the future. Given the shape and characteristics of the censer, the vases and the plate, we can state that these materials correspond to the Otolum ceramic complex, which has been placed between AD 600 and 700, within the Late Classic, as per Rands' classification (1974).

Osteological analyses carried out to date have produced relevant information. In the case of the main personage we know, for example, from the fact that the ankles of the skeleton were found close together that the corpse must have been bundled inside a shroud before being placed in the sarcophagus. Her height (1.54 m.) has been considered uncharacteristically tall for the female population of her region and times. The skull presents severe tabular slanting deformation in its pseudoanullar variant. This kind of cranial deformation, shared by the majority of population buried in the center of the ancient city, was attained through the use of a cephalic apparatus made of two flat boards held together with constricting bandages.

Another important observation is the presence of shovel-type upper incisors, a distinctive feature of mongoloid populations. Two lower incisors are fused, and both third upper molars are missing. Dental decoration attained through filing is present, resulting in the shape identified as type A1 (in the classification of Romero [1986]).

The presence of plaque, cavities, and abscesses has been detected, indicating a mildly abrasive diet and bad oral hygiene. Further analysis has revealed that this person probably consumed a high meat-content diet and, given the slenderness of many bones, mostly observable in the cranial parietals and the extremities, suffered from advanced osteoporosis (Romano 1999).

As to the accompanying burials located at the ends of the sarcophagus, it would seem both individuals were sacrificed specifically to accompany the main tomb occupant. Given the position of the bones at the time of their discovery, it can be inferred that neither the female nor the male adolescent was bundled in a funerary shroud. The latter's cranium displays tabular erect deformation in its occipital plane variant, probably attained through the use of a deforming cradle.

Many other studies are still ongoing, as is the case of DNA testing. Adequate samples have been difficult to come by, given the antiquity of the remains, their bad state of preservation and the thick covering of cinnabar which penetrated the surface layers of the bone, making it more difficult to

extract nucleic acids. Nevertheless, it is expected that the techniques will be refined and applied to an adequate osteological sample that may yield information as to the genealogy of the personage found in the tomb (Romano 1999).

Finally, we believe there are still many questions for which no answers have been produced. Some of these deal with the lack of direct evidence as to the origin and presence of certain materials in the tomb, most notably malachite, cinnabar, and jade. Comparative studies should also be carried out regarding the funerary patterns found in Palenque, including associated offerings and architecture, in order to be able to determine the site's social rank indicators and compare these with other Maya cities of the Classic period.

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