Don Juan Mountain and the Road to Palenque

Karen Bassie-Sweet, Julia C. Miller, Alfonso Morales C.

Figure 1: Don Juan Mountain as seen from the northwest. On the first ridges are the sites of El Retiro and Miraflores.

The Don Juan Mountain range is a massive limestone formation that rises to an elevation of 1,170 meters and dominates the landscape (Figure 1). The coastal plain and the lower Usumacinta River drainage spread out as far as the eye can see to the west, north and northeast of Don Juan Mountain. The Cojolita Mountain range and river valleys that lead to the upper Usumacinta River and Peten are to the east. On the south side of the Don Juan range is the Tulilja River Valley, the Cordon Sumidero range and the Tumbala mountain range. The north side of Don Juan has a series of lower ridges that parallel the main mountain. The Classic Period site of Palenque is located on the first ridge at the east end of the mountain range. Travelers journeying from Palenque toward the coast to such sites as Tortuguero and Comalcalco had to skirt the northern base of Don Juan Mountain, while travelers heading to the central highlands of Chiapas in the south were forced to climb over it. This article explores these two routes as well as the cosmological importance of the mountain.

The main mountain of the Don Juan range is composed of a long ridge with two main peaks along its top—Don Juan and Cerro Norte. The water draining from the south side of the ridge empties into the Tulija River or its tributary the Bascan. The water from the north side of the mountain empties into two different river systems. The Chacamax River Valley separates the eastern end of the main mountain from the Palenque ridge. Water draining from this area flows into the Chacamax River, which eventually comes out onto the plain through a gorge at the extreme east end of the range. The Chacamax ultimately joins the Usumacinta. The Michol River runs westward along the plain, parallel to the first range of ridges, and curves around the western end of the mountain to join the Tulija just below the modern town of Salto de Agua. The waters from the first ridges and from the western end of the main mountain feed the Michol. There are only

two breaks in the front ridges where these western rivers emerge. One is at the modern town of Agua Blanca where the Agua Blanca River and San Leandro River come out, and the other is at Miraflores where the much smaller Agua Azul River exits onto the plain.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the road from Palenque to Salto de Agua ran along the plain on the north side of the Michol River. Although archaeological surveys have been conducted in the vicinity of Palenque, there are only two published reports on the northwestern slopes of Don Juan Mountain. In May of 1925, Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge (1926) passed through this region while conducting an archaeological and ethnological survey of Chiapas. From the main pathway between Salto de Agua and Palenque, they took a side trail to the Iowa rubber plantation near the village and pre-Columbian site known as Las Colmenas. They took this detour to investigate reports of a nearby site called El Retiro which was said to have a hieroglyphic panel in one of its buildings. From Las Colmenas, their guides from the plantation took them a short distance up the Michol River in a canoe, and then they climbed up and over the top of the first ridge to reach El Retiro. Unfortunately, a huge cedar tree had recently fallen on the building containing the panel and collapsed the center portion. Blom and LaFarge cleared the site of underbrush in order to measure and map the building, but they did not have the manpower to remove the tons of rubble covering the panel.

In 1964, Robert Rands visited the area to collect pottery samples for his regional ceramic study of the Palenque area (Rands, Bishop and Harbottle 1978; Rands, personal communication, report in preparation). He obtained samples at Las Colmenas, El Retiro, Miraflores and Cueva del Conducto (a ritual cave on the first ridge). At the time, the area was covered in dense rainforest, but now the landscape is a mixture of cattle pastures, *milpas* and secondary growth. With directions from Rands, we were able to relocate El Retiro while touring the area in January of 2002, and after obtaining permission from the landowners we visited El Retiro in April.

The site is located on one of the highest points on the south side of the first ridge, just south of Las Colmenas (Figure 2). Its elevated location is not only very defensible, but it also provides a strategic view in all directions. To the west, north and northeast is the coastal plain. To the east

Figure 2: El Retiro from the south side of the first ridge.

Figure 3: The view from El Retiro, overlooking the Bajo Grande.

and southeast are the Miraflores valley and the northwest end of Don Juan Mountain. The Bajo Grande valley, a series of ridges and the lower Tulija valley are to the south (Figure 3).

Figure 4: El Retiro Structure 1.

Blom and LaFarge's ground plan indicates that the building containing the panel had the same kind of configuration as the Palenque Cross Group buildings, including a small inner sanctuary centered on the back wall. Blom noted that the front of the building was divided into three doors by two large pillars which had the remains of stucco figures on them, and that the exterior walls were perforated by eight small windows. He also indicated the presence of a roof comb. The Iowa plantation supervisor told Blom he had seen a carved panel on the back wall of the building. The guides said that the panel was on the front of a small altar or bench that resembled a writing desk, and that it contained two rows of hieroglyphs. Although the report seems contradictory, it is possible that the building contained both a carved altar/bench and a wall panel. Because of the spacious width and height of the rooms, Blom dated the building to sometime after 9.12.0.0.0 (A.D. 672).

Remarkably, the walls and roof of the rear room in the northwest corner of the building are still standing (Figure 4). The room itself is half-filled with rubble from a looter's pit (Figure 5). Remnants of the roof comb are evident, but the only decoration remaining on the building is a stucco design on an inner wall of the room. The lower portion of the exterior south wall is also intact. The large cracks through the exterior west wall indicate that the roof of the El Retiro building will likely collapse in the very near future unless considerable consolidation is undertaken immediately (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Rubble from looter's pit.

It is possible to speculate on the nature of the El Retiro building given its resemblance to the Palenque Cross Group buildings. The Cross Group consists of three temples facing a quadrilateral plaza. The Temple of the Cross is on the north side, the Temple of the Sun is on the west, and the Temple of the Foliated Cross on the east. Each temple contains a small inner sanctuary with a wall panel on its back wall, and each panel illustrates the Palenque ruler K'inich Kan B'ahlam II performing rituals on the occasion of a pre-accession event when he was six years old and on the day of his accession (Bassie-Sweet 1987, 1991, 1996). Each panel also refers to the birth of a particular lightning bolt god known by the nicknames GI, GII and GIII.[1] These births occurred in 2360 B.C. The Cross Group texts also refer to each temple sanctuary as a sweatbath (Stuart cited in Houston 1996). It was the custom in the Maya area for women to give birth in sweatbaths; thus these buildings replicate the sweatbaths in which GI, GII and GIII were born. The texts and iconography indicate that these temples and sweatbaths were also identified with mountain and caves respectively (Bassie-Sweet 1987, 1991:167, 1996:112; Houston 1996). In other words, these Palenque deities were thought to have been born in a mountain cave. If future excavations of the El Retiro inner sanctuary reveal that it does indeed have the same configuration as the Cross Group, it can be argued that it too repre-

[1] The Palenque Triad were parallel to the Popol Vuh lightning bolt gods known as Juraqan Lightning Bolt, Ch'ipi Lightning Bolt and Raxa Lighting Bolt (Bassie-Sweet 2001). In addition to being lightning bolt gods, the Palenque Triad also had planetary identifications. In the Cross Group narratives, there is an event which occurred on 9.12.18.5.16 2 Cib 14 Mol (23 July, 690 A.D). In the months preceding and following this date, Jupiter, Mars and Saturn appeared in the same area of the night sky and their paths interwove as they came in and out of conjunction. Because of these alignments, it has been argued that these heavenly bodies were manifestations of the Palenque Triad gods. See Lounsbury 1989 for an overview of this interpretation.

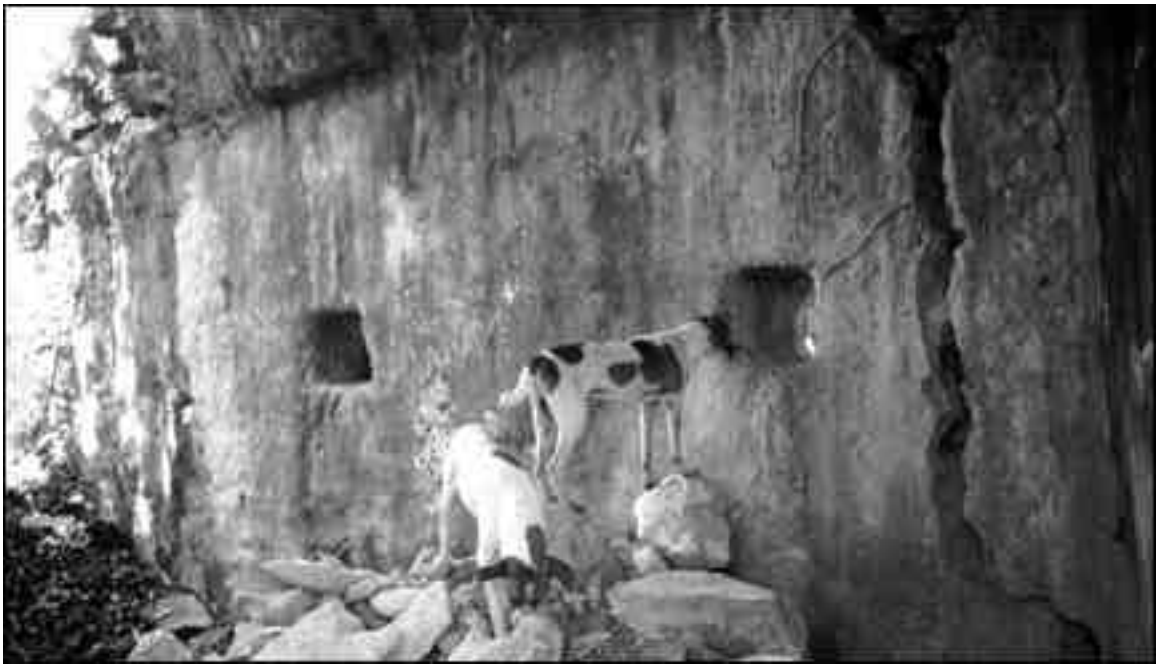

Figure 6: The back wall of Structure 1 with cracks.

sents the birth sweatbath/cave of a deity. If the panel, by some small miracle, has not been looted, its hieroglyphic text may identify which deity this building honors.

Blom and LaFarge's guide told them that he had been to another location with large pyramids several leagues further into the forest. Although there are several sites in the vicinity, the guide was likely referring to Miraflores, which is situated about 6 km. to the east of El Retiro. The village of Miraflores is in a valley between the first and second ridges. As noted above, the Agua Azul River flows through a break in the first ridge at this location. The pre-Columbian site of Miraflores consists of three separate building groups located nearby. Like El Retiro, the Miraflores buildings are all on private land. Group III is found west of the village, halfway down the south side of the first ridge. This location provides a commanding view of the valley to the east, which extends all the way to Agua Blanca and the western slopes of Don Juan Mountain. Group II is across the gap on the east side of the Agua Azul River at the top of the first ridge. Like El Retiro, it too has a panoramic view of the area. On the north side of the second ridge just south of Group II is Group I.

In 1952, seven limestone panel fragments were discovered in Group I. Karena Shields photographed the fragments shortly after their discovery. Shields spent part of her childhood (circa 1910-13) on the Chiapas Rubber Plantation at San Leandro, which was located on the plain just 4 km northeast of Agua Blanca. In the 1940s, she returned to the area and purchased the plantation. She maintained the property until her death in 1972. George Stuart and Shields' daughter Lauren Essex are currently planning a publication featuring Shields' photographs. In 1954, Heinrich Berlin (1955, Mayer 1991:plate 28-31) photographed the fragments in the Miraflores school where they were housed and examined the building in which they were found. At some point in time, the Miraflores fragments were stolen from the schoolhouse and taken to Macuspana. Berlin's Fragment A was eventually purchased by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in 1961. Regrettably, it has been trimmed and it no longer contains its upper glyph blocks (Mayer 1980:plate 17). The present location of the other Miraflores fragments is unknown.

In 1964, Robert Rands (personal communication) collected surface samples from a field adjacent

to Group III. In 2001, Juan Antonio Ferrer, Alonso Mendez and Karen Bassie visited Group III, and in 2002 Group I was visited by Karen Bassie, David and Ann Stuart, Christina Halperin and Jon Spenard. Like most unprotected Maya sites, the Miraflores buildings have huge, gaping trenches created by treasure seekers. The building in which the fragments were found has a massive trench through its center that will severely limit the effectiveness of any future archaeological investigations.

Despite the lack of archaeological excavations at Miraflores, some vital information about the relationship between Palenque and Miraflores can be gleaned from the Miraflores hieroglyphic texts which refer to a local lord of Miraflores as the sublord of K'inich Janahb' Pakal (David Stuart, personal communication). This relationship indicates that at some point during the reign of K'inich Janahb' Pakal (A.D. 613-683) Miraflores was under Palenque's control.

As noted above, the mule trail which connected Palenque to Salto de Agua and the coast ran parallel to Don Juan Mountain on the north side of the Michol River. This road also serviced the rubber plantations and ranches out on the plain. However, this may not have been the pre-Columbian route to the coast. As noted, there is a natural break in the first ridge at Agua Blanca. This wide break provides access not only to the main mountain, but also to the narrow valley between the first and second ridges that extends from Agua Blanca to Miraflores. Travellers walking from Palenque to Miraflores would find this route much easier to follow than the coastal plain with its multitude of creeks and seasonally inundated areas. Continuing westward along the Miraflores valley brings one to the Bajo Grande valley and El Retiro. This flat valley extends all the way to Salto de Agua. In fact, villagers from the Bajo Grande area still walk to Salto de Agua by this route. The position of El Retiro and Miraflores adjacent to these inner valleys as opposed to the coastal plain suggests to us that the pre-Columbian footpath from Palenque to the coast came though these valleys.

Crossing the Don Juan Mountain range is not an easy task. The eastern end of the main mountain contains extremely uneven terrain while the steep sides of the central area make it virtually impossible to cross through this zone. In 1840, John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood made an epic journey through parts of Belize, Guatemala, Chiapas and Yucatan in search of Maya antiquities. Stephens' published account of that adventure includes a vivid description of his climb over Don Juan Mountain, and indicates that the western end of the mountain was the preferred route (Stephens 1841). Using native carriers to transport their equipment and guide them, Stephens, Catherwood and their traveling companion Henry Pawling left Ocosingo in central Chiapas on May 4. Riding their horses, they followed the main road over a mountain range and down several valleys to reach the village of Chilon at the head of the Yajalon valley. The next day they continued up the Yajalon valley and climbed the southeastern end of the Tumbala mountain range. Their goal was the remote town of Tumbala, located near the top of the mountain. On a clear day, the high elevation of Tumbala (1500 m) provides a panoramic view of the surrounding area, and Stephens described the landscape as one of the grandest, wildest and most sublime he had ever beheld. From his vantage point, he could see across the Cordon Sumidero, the Tulilja valley and the Don Juan Mountain range to the coast.

On the third day, the expedition descended the mountain and made their way over the Cordon Sumidero range to the village of San Pedro in the Tulija River Valley. The following morning they crossed the Tulija valley and climbed up the southwest end of the Don Juan Mountain range, skirting the Cerro Norte peak. The steepness of the ascent forced them to dismount and lead their horses. At one point, Stephens and Pawling even resorted to being carted up the mountain in a *silla* by their native carriers, but soon abandoned that method because of the hazards of falling

down a ravine on the narrow trail. A *silla* was a high-backed chair transported on the back of a native carrier (Figure 7). After reaching the top, the party began their descent down the north side of the mountain adjacent to the San Leandro River drainage. Finally, they came out on the coastal plain at Agua Blanca. On the fifth day of their journey, they rode parallel to the base of Don Juan Mountain and arrived in Palenque in the early afternoon.

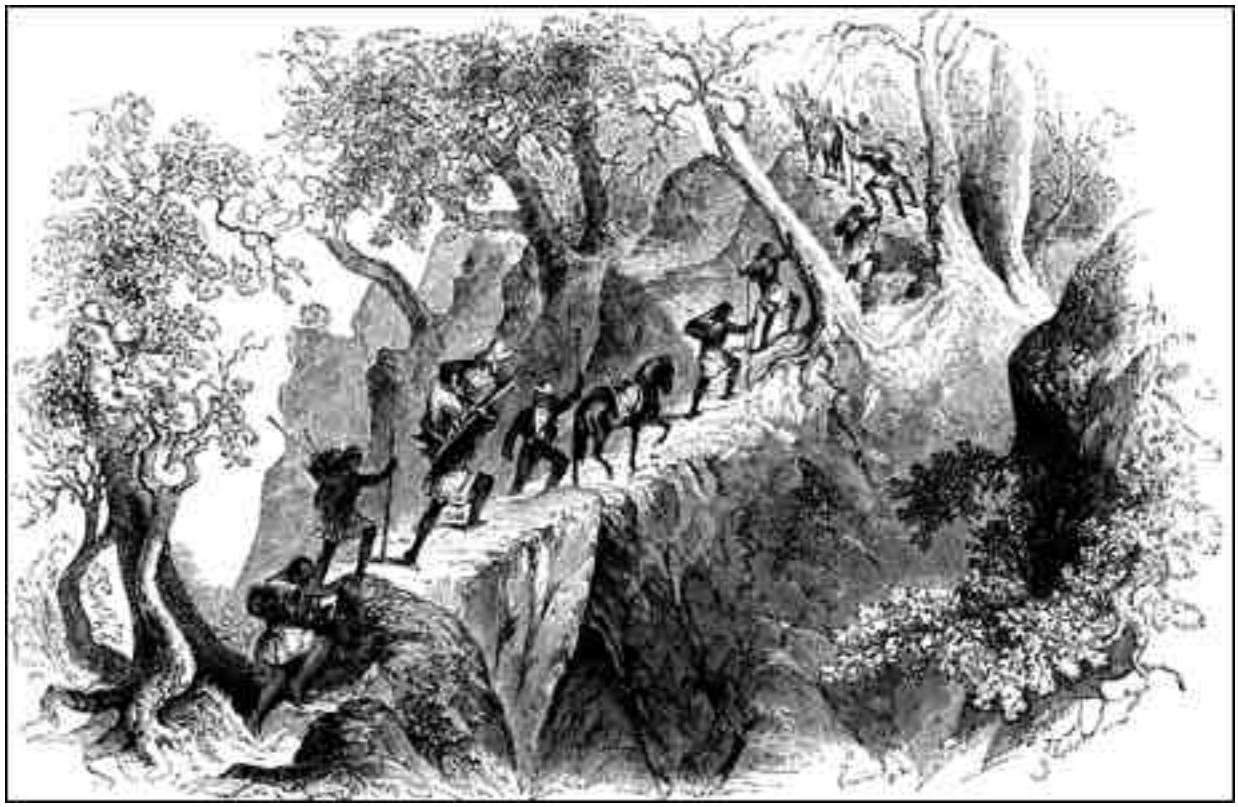

Figure 7: "Riding in a Silla". Lithograph from *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (Stephens 1841).

A 1933 US Army Map and a 1955 USAF Map both show the Tumbala/Palenque route over the west end of Don Juan Mountain (Jan Rus and Robert Rands, personal communication). The route was also mentioned by Karena Shields in her memoir (1959:41, 49, 174-75). Although it is no longer in use, the path over Don Juan Mountain is still known to some older residents of the region (Jolja' Cave Project field notes). Despite the fact that Stephens complained bitterly about its vertical nature, the west route is the only way over the Don Juan Mountain range that does not require crossing extremely uneven terrain and a second set of ridges on the north side of the mountain. The natural break in the foothills at Agua Blanca was an important control point of this route. In summary, travelers journeying from Palenque would follow the base of Don Juan Mountain to Agua Blanca, and then they would either take the route over the mountain to the central highlands or they would take the path up the Miraflores valley to the coast.

The pre-Columbian Maya of the region did not view Don Juan Mountain as simply an obstacle that had to climbed or circumnavigated. The Maya believed that mountains were the sacred homes of the deities who controlled lightning, wind, rain and fresh spring water, and petitions to these deities were made at the many ritual caves located on the slopes of the mountain. The concept of mountain gods who own the earth and control the lightning, winds and rains is still found throughout the Maya area. The name Don Juan derives from the contemporary Chol belief that a mountain god called Don Juan inhabits this mountain, and they petition him for health, rain and

good crops. He is known by a variety of names like our father, the cave lord, the spirit of the water, and the owner of the earth. He is said to look like a very old, bald man, and he has a thunder drum. These are the attributes of the pre-Columbian creator grandfather who was called Itzamna in the lowlands, and Xpiyacoc in the Popol Vuh (Bassie-Sweet 1997, 2001).

At the time of the conquest, Spanish priests noted that the Maya always made offerings to the mountain god whenever they journeyed over a mountain pass. With the conversion to Christianity, pre-Columbian shrines were replaced with cross shrines. Stephens (1841:270) mentions such a cross marking the top of the Cordon Sumidero range. In 1894, Karl Sapper noted that the custom of making offerings to the mountain god was still practiced and he described the rituals his native carriers made at a mountain shrine between Tila and Sabanilla (to the west of Don Juan Mountain). It is therefore quite likely that a pre-Columbian shrine, and later a cross shrine, marked the summit of the Don Juan route.

Don Juan is assisted in his duties by lightning bolt spirits who are parallel in nature to the Palenque Triad gods. Given the numerous incensarios bearing the images of the Palenque Triad deities that have been found in the caves on Don Juan, it is clear that the pre-Columbian Maya thought that these lightning bolt gods also inhabited the mountain. This should come as no surprise to anyone who has watched the storm clouds gathering on Don Juan Mountain and seen the thunderbolts blazing across its slopes. Stephens (1941:276-77) gives a vivid description of a Don Juan storm when he descended the north side of the mountain:

> At this time the sun had disappeared; dark clouds overhung the woods, and thunder rolled heavily on the top of the mountain. As we descended a heavy wind swept through the forest; the air was filled with dry leaves; branches were snapped and broken, trees bent, and there was every appearance of a violent tornado. To hurry down on foot was out of the question. We were so tired that it was impossible; and, afraid of the being caught on the mountain by a hurricane and deluge of rain, we spurred down as fast we could go. It was a continued descent, without relief, stony, and very steep. Very often the mules stopped, afraid to go on; and in one place the two empty mules bolted into the thick woods rather than proceed. Fortunately for the reader, this is our last mountain, and I can end honestly with a climax: it was the worst mountain I every encountered in that or any other country, and under our apprehension of the storm, I will venture to say that no travelers ever descended in less time. At a quarter before five we reached the plain [Agua Blanca]. The mountain was hidden by clouds, and the storm was now raging above us.

The Palenque texts indicate that GI, GII and GIII were the children of a deity called Muwaan Mat who was from a location called Matawil (Stuart and Houston 1994). The Cross Group texts specifically say that the Triad gods were born at Matawil, and several Palenque rulers are also called lords of Matawil. Although Matawil is viewed by most researchers as a mythological location, the Cross Group at Palenque is clearly designed to replicate that location. It is quite possible that the Palencanos also envisioned Don Juan Mountain or some location on Don Juan Mountain as an earthly replication of Matawil.

Illustrations

Figure 1: Don Juan Mountain as seen from the northwest. On the first ridges are the sites of El Retiro and Miraflores.
Color version: <www.mesoweb.com/features/DonJuan/fig1.html>
Figure 2: El Retiro from the south side of the first ridge.
Color version: <www.mesoweb.com/features/DonJuan/fig2.html>
Figure 3: The view from El Retiro overlooking the Bajo Grande.
Color version: <www.mesoweb.com/features/DonJuan/fig3.html>
Figure 4: El Retiro Structure 1.
Color version: <www.mesoweb.com/features/DonJuan/fig4.html>
Figure 5: Rubble from looter's pit.
Color version: <www.mesoweb.com/features/DonJuan/fig5.html>
Figure 6: The back wall of Structure 1 with cracks.
Color version: <www.mesoweb.com/features/DonJuan/fig6.html>
Figure 7: "Riding in a Silla". Lithograph from *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (Stephens 1841).

References

Bassie-Sweet, Karen

1987 Illustrated Stories: The Relationship Between Text and Image. Paper presented at the 86th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropology Association, Chicago.

1991 *From the Mouth of the Dark Cave:* Commemorative Sculpture of the Late Classic Maya. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

1996 *At the Edge of the World.* University of Oklahoma Press, Norman

1997 Human Diviners and their Supernatural Counterparts. Paper presented at the University of Pennsylvania Maya Weekend.

2001 Maya Creator Gods. *Mesoweb.com* <www.mesoweb.com/features/bassie/CreatorGods/CreatorGods.pdf>.

Berlin, Henrich

1955 News from the Maya World. *Ethnos* 20(4):201-209.

Blom, Frans, & Oliver La Farge

1927 *Tribes and Temples.* Middle American Research Series, Pubs. 1-2. Tulane University, New Orleans.

Houston, Stephen

1996 Symbolic Sweatbaths of the Maya: Architectural Meaning in the Cross Group at Palenque, Mexico. *Latin American Antiquity* 7(2):132-151.

Mayer, Karl Herbert

1980 *Maya Monuments: Sculptures of Unknown Provenance in the United States.* Acoma Books, Ramona, CA.

1991 *Maya Monuments: Sculptures of Unknown Provenance Supplement 3.* Verlag Von Flemming, Berlin

Sapper, Karl

1897 *Northern Central America, With a Trip to the Highland of Anahuac: Travels and Studies of the Years 1888-1895,* translated by A.M. Parker.

Shield, Karena

1959 *The Changing Wind.* Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York

Stephens, John Lloyd

1841 *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan.* Harper and Brothers, New York.

Stuart, David & Stephen Houston

1994 *Classic Maya Place Names.* Dumbarton Oaks, Washington.

Rands, Robert, Ronald Bishop & Garman Harbottle

1978 Thematic and Compositional Variation in Palenque Region Incensarios. In *Tercera Mesa Redonda de Palenque,Vol. 4,* ed. Merle Greene Robertson & Donnan Call Jeffers, 19-30. Palenque: The Pre-Columbian Research Center, San Francisco.