

A Chronological Framework for Palenque

ROBERT L. RANDS
Southern Illinois University

In-depth examination of the iconography of Palenque, including problems of localized developments and relationships within the Mayan and Mesoamerican areas, requires some understanding of the chronology and cultural position of the site. In part, such information may be obtained from a variety of sources — epigraphy, architectural stratigraphy, style analysis. Each approach has its special values and practical limitations. Ceramic dating can provide a generalized time-space perspective for the study of iconographic developments. Nevertheless, it is only occasionally that a sculptured relief or stucco design can unequivocally be assigned to a given ceramic complex, and little of the ceramic decoration is immediately germane to problems of iconography. Important exceptions do, of course, exist. In part, the present paper is intended to review such exceptional occurrences — dedicatory caches, tombs and buildings which are ceramically dated (often in conjunction with architectural stratigraphy or epigraphy). Based primarily on the ceramic data, chronological and regional perspectives for the site of Palenque as a whole will also be provided.¹

Identifiable ceramic complexes are named after arroyos at or near the Palenque ruins and so consist of both Spanish and Chol Maya words. Following Middle and Late Preclassic occupa-

tions, which will not be discussed beyond noting their feeble representation at Palenque, the ceramic complexes, from early to late, are:

Picota (generally equivalent in time to the early or middle part of the Early Classic period, possibly extending back to Protoclassic times).

Motiepa (apparently middle to late in the Early Classic period).

Otolum (temporally equivalent to Tepeu 1, ca. A.D. 600-700.² It appears possible to divide Otolum into early and late facets).

Murcielagos (the temporal equivalent of early and middle Tepeu 2, perhaps A.D. 700-770. The complex appears to have been of short duration, but even so there is evidence of internal change, especially in the frequency of imported polychromes. Possibly an even earlier terminal date is warranted).

Balunte (equivalent in time to late Tepeu 2 and early Tepeu 3, ca. A.D. 770-850. The Balunte Ceramic Complex is divided into an early facet, toward the close of elite occupation, and a late facet, following the eclipse of Classic culture at the site. The collapse itself probably occurred

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² In the present paper, all dates in the Christian calendar follow the 11.16.0.0.0 (Goodman-Martinez-Thompson) correlation.

sometime between A.D. 800 and the explosive spread of Fine Orange Ware at approximately A.D. 830).

Characteristics of the Palenque ceramic complexes differ markedly from those of more centrally located Mayan sites such as Tikal, Uaxactun, Altar de Sacrificios, or even those of relatively nearby Piedras Negras. Once allowance has been made for the substitution of fired brick for stone construction, the architecture of Comalcalco closely resembles that of Palenque; yet ceramic differences between these two important western Maya sites exist on a greater scale than might be suspected on the basis of the architecture. The far southeastern site of Copan — which shares with Palenque the peak of iconographic sophistication in the Maya area — differs fundamentally in its ceramic patterns. To be sure, Palenque pottery shared a number of modes that were widely spread in the Maya lowlands and participated in generalized tradition trends.

It should also be noted that Palenque, in spite of its location on the northwestern Maya periphery, shows less in the way of specific central Mexican ceramic or sculptural influence than do sites in the Maya heartland, such as Tikal. Motifs of Mexican derivation (e.g., Tlalocs) are much more frequently represented at Copan, on the southeastern periphery, than at Palenque. Yet Palenque's outpost position in the Southern Maya Lowlands is reflected in some aspects of its ceramics. Probably as a result of Gulf Coast influences, fine paste pottery had exceptional time depth and importance at Palenque (Rands 1973). Again, an unusually early occurrence (extending back into the Early Classic period) is indicated for moldmade figurines, a trait of probable Mexican derivation (Rands and Rands 1965).

Because of its escarpment location between highlands and lowlands — the rich soils of the Chontalpa lie not far to the north and west — the geographical position of Palenque appears in some respects ideal to have fostered the role of the Palenqueños as middlemen in a symbiotic trading relationship. Although this may indeed have been the case, little in the way of ceramic evidence supports such a conclusion. It may legitimately be argued that pottery styles do not adequately reflect

the varied cultural contacts of a people. At the same time, in viewing the problem of Palenque's partial isolation in a frontier situation, one should bear in mind the near or complete absence of such typical traits of Classic Maya culture as stelae and eccentric flint or obsidian caches. That this isolation was culturally selective, being bridged by varied contacts on at least an elite theocratic level, is obvious.

From these general observations we now turn to the ceramic complexes of Palenque. An overview of their characteristics will be given (for greater detail see Rands in press), although primary attention is directed to outside relationships and the ceramic dating of particular structures at Palenque.

Picota Ceramic Complex. The Picota assemblage is strange for an Early Classic Maya site. Polychrome and orange-slipped pottery are absent. Instead, monochrome red is common, but this is not the waxy red of the preceding Preclassic period, nor does it have the hardness and luster characteristic of Classic Maya Gloss Ware. Resist painting incorporates circles, scrolls, and other linear patterns. Zones of closely-spaced vertical grooving, separated by wide blank spaces, constitute a distinctive decorative feature. Deep bowls often have everted rims, a Preclassic-like mode, although ring-stand bases, a Classic trait, are also present. Basal-flange bowls, another Early Classic marker, appear sparingly. Exceptionally massive solid slab feet are a curious feature, occurring on outflared bowls rather than on cylindrical tripods of Teotihuacan affiliation. Fine paste pottery is unusually well represented for an Early Classic Maya complex. In summary, there appears to have been retention, in regionally modified form, of some Preclassic traits, together with the influx of certain Early Classic forms. Typologically, however, Picota has little or nothing in common with the Tzakol Ceramic Sphere.³

As yet, no major architecture at Palenque has been shown to date from Picota times. However, mixed Picota and Motiepa refuse is present in the plaza fill underlying the Temple of the Conde and in deposits beneath the Inscriptions pyramid (Ruz Lhuillier 1962, Figs. 12, 13).

³ See Willey, Culbert and Adams (1967) for the concept of the ceramic sphere.

Motiepa Ceramic Complex. This Early Classic complex is characterized by the incorporation of Peten-derived ceramics with a modified Picota base. It is now possible to speak of "Tzakol" pottery types, although these are found so infrequently that Motiepa remains outside the Tzakol Ceramic Sphere. Gloss Ware of the Aguila (orange) and Balanza (black) Groups is present. Dos Arroyos (orange) Polychrome is found, although very rarely. Both the importation and imitation of Peten-like pottery appears to have taken place. In particular, close affiliations exist with some of the pottery of Piedras Negras.

Unlike earlier ceramic developments, Motiepa pottery is better known at the central precinct of Palenque than in the western portion of the site. Among other possibilities, this may be because the major ceremonial center shifted to its present location in Motiepa times. Sherds belonging to this complex are well represented, for example, in the nucleus of the pyramid of the Inscriptions.

Motiepa vessels are present in the earliest known burial at Palenque, Tomb 3, in a partly dismantled structure underlying Temple XVIII-A (Ruz Lhuillier 1962, Figs. 5, 9a-f). Here, pots of local Picota derivation (Ruz Lhuillier 1962, Pl. 46) and of Tzakol affiliation exist side by side.

Insofar as pottery may be taken as an indicator of broader cultural relationships, Motiepa would seem to have been in existence at a particularly important time. For in this ceramic complex, more than in any other, Palenque is seen to have had significant ties with the "core" portions of the Maya lowlands. This should have provided the opportunity for an amalgamation to have taken place between iconographic concepts which had evolved locally and in the Peten, since the close of the Preclassic. Nevertheless, we know nothing directly of what this "local" iconography, inferentially peripheral to that of the Classic Maya tradition, might have been.⁴

Otolum Ceramic Complex. Ceramics of the Otolum complex, which ushered in the Late Classic period, appear strongly localized. Techno-stylistic data suggest that the pottery was largely produced

at Palenque and adjacent sites along the Low Sierras. Polychrome pottery corresponds to usual Late Classic Maya norms in color combination (red, black and orange over a cream primary slip). Surfaces are badly weathered, the slip apparently being less resistant to erosion than in Peten Gloss Ware. Notwithstanding difficulties in ascertaining the original surface, it appears that linear designs predominated, at the expense of figure painting. The major vehicle for the Palenque polychrome was the wide everted-rim tripod plate, cylindrical vases rarely being painted. Polychrome pottery achieved its greatest frequency at Palenque in Otolum, but at this time, as throughout the history of the site, the casual use of polychrome vessels as burial furniture stands in sharp contrast to usual Classic Maya funerary practices.

It appears useful to divide Otolum into early and late facets. In the case of the wide everted-rim tripod plate, trends are from strongly convex to gently convex bases, from tilted to almost flat rims, and from relatively deep vessels to more shallow examples. Jars also underwent changes, from unslipped forms with short flaring necks to vessels with high, almost vertical necks and restricted shoulders. The late facet jars were occasionally orange slipped and incised.

Late-facet Otolum pots occur as burial furniture or dedicatory caches in several of the major structures at Palenque. Unslipped cylindrical vases and an everted-rim polychrome plate have been recovered from sub-floor tombs in the Temple of the Conde (Ruz Lhuillier 1958c, Figs. 3, 14). Three plates, only one of which is polychrome, and two cylindrical vases were associated in the Inscriptions tomb (Ruz Lhuillier 1955:90, Fig. 7). A dating of approximately A.D. 683, (9.12.11.5.18), is indicated. Two late-facet orange-slipped jars are among vessels from a sub-floor cache in the Temple of the Cross, to be dated at A.D. 692, 9.13.0.0.0 (Ruz Lhuillier 1958a, Figs. 2-4). All of these vessels were apparently dedicatory, placing much of the major temple construction at Palenque toward the close of the Otolum Complex. It is of no little interest that the Conde, which shows presumably early features in the ratio of wall thickness to room width and in the

⁴ Non-Classic Maya sculptural styles in the Palenque region are summarized briefly in Rands 1973. Proskouriakoff (1950:120-121, 136-137) notes the retention of early stylistic mannerisms at Palenque and in the adjacent Chiapas Highlands.

absence of an inner sanctuary, falls ceramically, with the Cross and Inscriptions, in late Otolum. One is left with the overriding impression that this was a time of rapid architectural change when Palenque, hitherto a relatively small and uninfluential site, was emerging as one of the major Classic Maya centers.

Murcielagos Ceramic Complex. Locally-produced polychrome and its principal vessel form, the wide everted-rim plate, largely disappeared at Palenque. Resist decoration became more important. Fine paste pottery gained rapidly in popularity and, in sharp contrast to most Maya developments, constituted a major focus of polychrome decoration.

In many respects, Murcielagos ceramics appear to have been less localized than those of Otolum. Technological data, chemical as well as petrographic, indicate that a greater proportion of the Murcielagos pottery was being introduced from outside sources. Centers of the new influences, although not precisely known, appear to have been toward the north, perhaps in the Tabasco plains. This was probably the locale of peoples who participated only tangentially in Classic Maya culture.

Such a phenomenon is subject to varying interpretations. It could be argued that the influences affecting Palenque were the result of expanding, commercially aggressive units who were beginning to intrude on the Classic Maya frontier. However, at the beginning of the Murcielagos Complex, the elite culture of Palenque appears to have had exceptional innovative vigor. Provisionally, I would prefer the explanation that Palenque was the expanding unit in Murcielagos times, incorporating previously independent zones into its economic, ceremonial and perhaps political sphere. In any case, pottery gives almost no indication of *direct* affiliation with Maya "core" cultures in the Peten.

Late Otolum and early Murcielagos apparently were the climax of monumental architecture and other hierarchal works at Palenque. A resist-painted cache vessel from the Temple of the Foliated Cross appears to date the construction of this temple as Murcielagos (Ruz Lhuillier 1958a, Figs. 7, 10, 11). In iconography and epigraphy, however,

the Foliated Cross is intimately associated with the Temple of the Cross, which is ceramically identified with Otolum. Yet one would not expect ceramic patterns to have changed overnight, and it appears appropriate to place the beginning of Murcielagos at approximately 9.13.0.0.0, shortly after A.D. 690.

Murcielagos sherds occur in plaza fill to the west of the Inscriptions, marking a time shortly after the closing of the ventilating shafts and other modifications on the pyramid's western face. I suspect but cannot demonstrate that a great deal of construction at the Palace dates from Murcielagos. This would follow, for example, if both the Long Count dates suggested for Murcielagos and Proskouriakoff's style dating of the stucco piers from Houses A, C and D are substantially correct (Proskouriakoff 1950:192). Temple XVIII, with a wealth of epigraphic material dating from Katun 14, and its twin, Temple XVIII-A, should fall in Murcielagos; pottery from sub-floor tombs seems consistent with this date or with the beginning of Balunte (Ruz Lhuillier 1958b, Fig. 32a-f; 1958d, Fig. 10a-c; Saenz 1956). Again, the disinclination of the ancient Palenqueños to furnish their burials with chronologically-sensitive polychromes is a matter of archaeological frustration and despair. It may also be that by the second half of the Murcielagos Complex the polychrome ceramic tradition was already experiencing the reduction which was to become almost complete in Balunte.

Balunte Ceramic Complex. A heavy decline in polychrome pottery took place in Balunte. Contrasting slips of any kind became rare. Well polished surfaces and extremely thin walls were characteristic, however; fine craftsmanship continued. The outcurved or flaring-wall beaker was a favored form for incised decoration, this often being accompanied by zoned dentate stamping. Fine paste pottery increased in frequency, apparently reflecting both foreign and indigenous, or fairly localized, sources of manufacture.

Important contacts existed to the north, perhaps partly because of population movements from out of the Low Sierras to the nearby plains but also as the result of a now expanding non-Classic tradition with basic northern affiliations. On a ceramic and presumably societal level, how-

ever, Palenque's most fundamental relationships continued to lie in a restricted band along the northern ranges of the Low Sierras, at least until late in Balunte.

Early-facet characteristics include lustrously smudged black pottery and moderate amounts of Fine Gray Ware. The latter gained added prominence in the late facet of Balunte, when it was supplemented by small quantities of Fine Orange Ware. The Fine Orange pottery shows primary affiliations with the Balancan (Z) Ceramic Group, which was soon to become dominant in the Tabasco plains. But Fine Orange Ware never attained the frequency at Palenque which one would expect had the occupation of the site continued over a significantly longer time span.

Although considerable mixing of early and late facet refuse has taken place, obscuring the characteristics of each, the early facet of Balunte has been identified, in part, on the basis of archaeological contexts which suggest the existence of a functioning Classic society. The final rebuilding of the north stairway of the Palace represents such an organized, large-scale endeavor (Ruz Lhuillier 1958d, Fig. 1). A number of Palace caches dating from the early facet are also known. A large number of intentionally smashed vessels, with bird bones, were placed in a specially constructed sub-floor box in the northwestern corner of the Northwest Court. Figurines were cached in association with the drainage canal (water closets) in the Southwest Court (Ruz Lhuillier 1952b, Pls. 35-40). A Fine Gray bowl placed beneath the floor in construction west of the Tower also appears to date from the earlier part of Balunte (Ruz Lhuillier 1958b, Pl. 63b, Figs. 1, 32g). In summary, a series of relatively minor modifications, which nevertheless appear indicative of organized theocratic activities, took place in the Palace during early Balunte. A different type of evidence for the retention of Classic culture is the esoteric knowledge expressed in a carved Fine Black vessel. This handsome specimen bears a correctly recorded

Initial Series and entry of a base in the 819-day count (Ruz Lhuillier 1952a:39-42, Fig. 14, Pl. 27; Thompson 1962:17-18). The date of the vessel, 9.18.9.4.4 (A.D. 799), provides the minimal cutoff date in our attempt to subdivide Balunte.

So far as we can now tell, the late facet of Balunte, which followed the collapse of elite culture and the abandonment of the site on a major scale, has nothing directly to offer to the study of Palenque iconography. It can only be speculated whether the late Balunte occupation of the site by users of Silho (X) Fine Orange pottery could have resulted in the retention of certain of the iconographic concepts of Classic Palenque, thereby contributing to future developments elsewhere in the Maya area.

Concluding remarks. The ceramically-based observations which have been made omit two important sources of iconographic data. I refer on the one hand to the highly elaborate, symbolically sophisticated decoration of the clay flanged cylinders which, whatever their actual function may have been, reflect much of the Maya *icensario* style and tradition and may, indeed, have served as receptacles for holding incense burners. (See Rands and Rands 1959; Rands 1969:522-524). On the other hand, reference is made to the pottery figurines of Palenque, many of which show a wealth of iconographic detail.

Objectives, however, have been of another sort. By linking the Classic ceramic complexes of Palenque with specific architectural units, assistance in dating associated art forms may be given, as well as a feeling for the nature and direction of Palenque's outside contacts at a particular time. Yet too much should not be expected. Probably only exceptional social and historical circumstances would lead to the close temporal spacing of ceramic and iconographic developments or to the existence of identical cultural affiliations for these distinct, though sometimes interrelated, domains.

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