

The Palace Intaglios: A Composite Stairway Throne at Palenque

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The artistic remains of the indigenous civilizations of pre-Columbian Mexico and Central America hold great and tantalizing promise for those who would understand the people who left those remains. Unfortunately, students of pre-Columbian art are often so eager to interpret its (obviously meaning-laden) imagery, that the detailed background work upon which such interpretations must be based is neglected; this problem is so pervasive that even the most fundamental characteristics of well-known exemplars of pre-Columbian art are often ignored. Conversely, pre-Columbian art holds fascinating surprises for those willing to undertake such, often tedious, background work (Porter 1981, 1989; Graham 1989). The Palace Intaglios at the Maya site of Palenque are an example of a work of pre-Columbian art which has been frequently studied, yet remains misidentified and poorly understood.

The Palace Intaglios are associated with a stairway, sometimes identified as an "altar," which abuts the south base of one of the best known landmarks of the site of Palenque, the palace tower. This stairway leads to a blank wall and cannot, therefore, have been intended as an access route. Such blind stairways are uncommon, though the "reviewing stand" at Copán is a blind stairway which has long been recognized as a seating facility; the compositionally similar Jaguar Stairway at Copán probably also doubled as a seating facility. In the absence of reasonable alternatives it is likely that the stairway at the base of the palace tower at Palenque also functioned as a seating facility.

In addition to the Palace Intaglios the palace tower stairway at Palenque is associated with the

low relief Scribe and Orator tablets, which flank the stairway. The two-plane relief Creation and 96 Glyphs tablets, the Palace Intaglio, and another intaglio are all stylistically linked by their program of incised ornament (de la Fuente 1965:142). This program consists of calligraphic effects achieved by stark two-plane intaglio incision, placing these slabs at the pinnacle of the refined graphic tradition which underlay all Maya relief art.

The strict two-plane intaglio program of the palace slabs appears on only a few other published pieces at Palenque. One of these (fig. 1), whose present location is unknown, is a fragment of the left edge of a slab 16 x 6.5 x 4 cm which was found in rubble on the western stairway to the palace (Acosta 1977). This fragment bears



Fig. 1. Probable upper left edge of Creation Tablet, a) front; b) left; c) back. By James B. Porter.

Fig. 2. Creation Tablet fragments, a) lower left (?); b) upper right; c) lower right. By James B. Porter.

Fig. 3. Creation Tablet with Acosta's and Schele and Matthew's fragments in place. By James B. Porter.

an Initial Series date of 9.10.15.6.8 4 Lamat on the front, as well as hieroglyphs on the left side and a portion of the wing of a serpent bird on the reverse. The fragment is virtually identical in thickness to the Creation Tablet, and the glyph style of the IS is identical to the other palace intaglio texts. Because the low relief carving on the reverse of the fragment is not cut by the edge of the stone, it is almost certainly integral to the original conception. Only the absence of reports describing the rear of the Creation Tablet prevents secure identification of this fragment as the missing upper left edge of that slab. Three other fragments (fig. 2), probably constituting the lower left (?) 13 x 8 x 3 cm, upper right 9 x 9 x 3 cm, and lower right 15.8 x 19.3 x 3 cm corners of the composition were found in the Tower Court and are in the collection of the site museum (Schele and Mathews 1979:143).

The Creation Tablet proper (fig. 3), now cemented into the wall of the site museum, is an elongated rectangular slab (from which both right and left edges are missing). The slab is 94 x 68 x 4.5 cm and was found in several fragments, most from rubble on the second-stage stairway on the west side of the lower court (Angel Fernández 1985b:148). However, one fragment was found on the second tread of the tower stair (Angel Fernández 1985c:162). The Creation Tablet bears a mix of hieroglyphic text and figural themes

on one of its broad faces with the text carved in intaglio and the figures carved in a mix of sunken relief and intaglio. If Acosta's fragment is truly the upper left edge of the Creation Tablet, then the slab was unique in bearing carving on both front and rear surfaces. Further, the principle of bilateral symmetry suggests that the right and left edges of the slab bore text columns of approximately seventy glyph blocks, while the sides of the slab bore at least six spot glyphs, all of which were broken away, probably deliberately, in antiquity.

The Tablet of 96 Glyphs (fig. 4), also cemented into the wall of the site museum, is an elongated rectangular slab 137.5 x 58.5 x 3.3 cm which was found in rubble at the east base of the palace tower (Angel Fernández 1985a:129). However, this stone slab was probably set into a depression, measuring 150 x 66 x 5 cm, in the center of the tread of the first step of the tower's blind stairway. Greene Robertson's (1985:pl. 1) valuable palace plan shows the slab in position on that first step. This slab bears an extensive hieroglyphic text on one of its broad faces and tiny drill holes near its corners.

The Palace Intaglio (fig. 5a), in the Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico, D.F., is an inverted trapezoidal slab 26.5 x 20 cm which was found by Rafael Orellana in a structure on the Southwest (Tower) Court (Ruz Lhuillier 1952:51). A mate to the Palace Intaglio (fig. 5b),

Fig. 4. Tablet of 96 Glyphs. By James B. Porter.



Fig. 5. a) MNAH Intaglio; b) Museum of Man Intaglio. By James B. Porter.

in The Museum of Man in San Diego, is another inverted trapezoidal slab 26.5 x 19.5 x 6 cm with no exact provenance (Mayer 1984:cat. 39). Both of these intaglio slabs bear conventional Maya grotesques on one of their broad faces which form mirror images to one another.

The style, provenance, form and dimensions of the four intaglio slabs and Acosta's fragment suggest that they are all components of a single sculptural conception which was assembled around the Tablet of 96 Glyphs on the first step of the Palace Tower's blind stairway. At Palenque sculptural assemblages are usually manifested as shrine or composite throne forms. Shrines generally consist of upright slabs which are assembled to form a small chamber against the rear wall of the rear room of a temple structure (Temple of the Cross, Temple of the Foliated Cross, Temple of the Sun, Temple XVIII, etc.). Absent evidence that any structure sheltered the palace tower's blind stairway, a composite throne form, generally consisting of a rectangular slab seat with one of its long sides set against a wall below an ornamented

back panel while the other long side is supported by two smaller upright slabs (fig. 6), is the most likely sculptural conception for the location. Also, a composite throne, with the upper half of the back screen projecting above the second step, is the only sculptural format which would permit display of carving on both the front and the rear of the Creation Tablet.

Dimensions and formal characteristics of the Palace Intaglios are also consistent with an identification as a composite throne. The Tablet of 96 Glyphs, at 58.5 x 137.5 cm, fits well within the dimensional range, from 40 x 95 to 95 x 220 cm (Greene Robertson 1985:86-93), of composite throne seats at Palenque. The 26.5 cm height of the twin intaglio tablets fits the 26 cm space between the floor of the, now overgrown, tower court and the bottom of the depression in the center of the first step of the tower's blind stairway and is a comfortable elevation for throne supports. The Creation Tablet most likely functioned as the upright back of this throne, just as the Oval Palace Tablet and the Palace Tablet serve as the respective

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backs of Throne 1 (Bench 8), with confronted figures in the center and serpent birds at the ends of the forward edge of the seat, and Throne 3 (Bench 13). Throne 2 (Bench 9) has no known back.

The iconographic associations of the Palace Intaglios also provide some support for their identification as elements of a composite throne. The composition ornamenting the front of the Creation Tablet is a variant of the confrontation theme, a theme which appears during Cycle 9 on two unprovenanced throne backs from the Usumacinta region (figs. 7, 8) (Mayer 1987, 1989) and on Piedras Negras Throne 1. The confrontation theme was also popular during Cycles 7 and 8, where it appears on the seats of thrones such as Stelae 8 and 10 and Altars 1 and 2 at Kaminaljuyu (Porter and Shook n.d.). However, the confrontation theme is not limited to thrones; it also appears on wall panels such as the tablets of the Sun, Cross, and Foliated Cross at Palenque, stelae such as Stelae 2 and 5 and Altar 13 at Abaj Takalik

Fig. 6. Palenque Throne 1, stone components only. By James B. Porter.

(Graham et al. 1978), and on circular Altars such as Altar 1 at Polol (Morley 1937-1938).

Despite the ambiguous nature of their iconographic associations, the foregoing evidence suggests that the Palenque intaglio carvings were assembled to form a composite stairway throne, Palenque Throne 4, which provided the central focus of a palace tower stairway seating facility. This facility was flanked by the reused Scribe and Orator tablets and was bounded by stucco figures ornamenting the back wall.

The text of Palenque Throne 4 was probably arranged as follows. A historical narrative commenced with the IS on Acosta's fragment, Columns A and B; the narrative probably continued down the right edge of the slab, Columns C and D; the three spot glyphs on each side of the slab, Column E (left side) and F (right side, omitted in drawing); and ended with the text of the 96 Glyphs, Columns G-R. Labeled separately,



Fig. 7. Unprovenanced throne back.
By James B. Porter.



Fig. 8. Unprovenanced throne back.
By James B. Porter.

Fig. 9. Photographs of Acosta's fragments [mis-labeled in original article as Piedras Negras Throne 1].



Fig. 10. Abaj Takalik Stela 5. By James B. Porter.

because they contain no calendric material and are probably not integrated into the narrative text A1-R8, are the text in the panels above the Creation Tablet medallions, Columns a-p; the glyphic seats within the Creation Tablet medallions, Glyph q (left), Glyph r (right); and the glyphs set into the foreheads of conventional Maya grotesques on the throne supports, Glyph s (left), and Glyph t (right).

Thrones set into stairways like Palenque Throne 4 are not common at Maya sites of any period, but other late Cycle 9 examples have been found at the sites of Uxmal, Copán, and Chichén Itzá as well as at Palenque. At Uxmal there is no tower and no composite throne, but a monolithic hieroglyphic throne is set into the base of the



Fig. 11. Codex Paris Page 3. By James B. Porter.

stairway leading to the rear structure inside the courtyard of one of that site's palaces, the Monjas. At Copán there is a monolithic throne set into the base of the hieroglyphic stairway of Structure 26. Above the throne a series of stone figures seated on the treads of the hieroglyphic stairway help define the monolith as a throne and the stairway as an elite seating facility.

A striking parallel to the siting of the Palenque composite throne occurs at Chichén Itzá, where a hieroglyphic stone was found in rubble filling a channel in the stairway leading up to the second platform of that site's tower, the Caracol (Ruppert 1935). Ruppert identified the hieroglyphic stone at Chichén as a "stela,"¹ set up at the forward edge of the stairway block above the channel which splits

the stairway. However, it is also possible (given the frequent suggestions that stairway blocks are actually seats) that the hieroglyphic stone was set back from the edge of the block to form the back of a stairway throne like that at Palenque.

The presence of a possible stairway throne at the Caracol emphasizes other similarities between the palace tower and the Caracol including construction during late Cycle 9 in association with impressive palace constructions, original designs excluding access to second-story entrances, and central spiral stairways and stairways with possible stairway thrones which were added after the original construction. The distinctive appearance of these two towers as we now see them results primarily from the addition of several large basal platforms and the split stairway, providing access to the second story doorway, of the tower of the Caracol. Indeed, the only significant contrast between these two towers in their original states is that the palace tower is square while the Caracol is round. Overall, the similarities between these two towers are so pronounced that they suggest direct influence from Palenque upon Chichén Itzá during late Cycle 9.

The siting of stairway thrones envisions groups of elite Maya accommodated on stairways with a few privileged individuals on the thrones themselves. The specific purposes for which Maya elites gathered on these special stairways during the final *k'atunob*² of Cycle 9 remain unknown and probably varied from site to site. However, the extensive texts on stairway thrones at Palenque, Uxmal, and Chichén Itzá (and on the Hieroglyphic Stairway of Copán Structure 26) may provide clues to those purposes — if the interpretation of Maya writing is ever sufficiently advanced to provide secure translations of anything beyond calendric notations (Porter n.d.).

In the absence of such secure translations of Maya texts, Maya ethnography and ethnohistorical documents provide significant clues to the nature of the Maya leaders depicted in Usumacinta confrontation scenes such as that which appears on Palenque Throne 4. Diego de Landa has observed that the Contact Period Maya paid special homage to the spirit of the *k'atun* through the intercession of "*K'atun* Lords", two of which were associated

with each *k'atun*. Thompson, a dedicated theist, believed that these *K'atun* Lords were deities (Thompson 1950, 1970a), but Edmonson (1979, 1982, 1986) correctly observes that these *K'atun* Lords were actually eminent Maya persons who shared spiritual/temporal power as senior and junior partners; after serving his time the senior partner would retire to a position of elder statesmanship while the junior partner would serve as senior partner to a new *K'atun* Lord. Similar systems of senior/junior leadership leading to elder status, though generally lasting only one year, continue to be documented by ethnographers in many modern Maya communities.

Some such system of dual leadership is most strongly suggested by the depiction of the confrontation theme on public monuments and emblems of power such as the Usumacinta region thrones; the senior/junior form of dual leadership is more specifically suggested by Abaj Takalik Stela 5 where the confrontation theme is accompanied by two IS dates which are approximately one *k'atun* apart (fig. 10). The priestly basis and divine sanction of such dual authorities is emphasized by the hieroglyphs of religious titles on which the figures depicted on Usumacinta region thrones sit,³ while the calendric context and parameters within which these authorities serve is emphasized by the careful attention to highly specific chronology in the accompanying texts. The specific calendric association with the *k'atun* described by Landa is underlined by the masked figure in the right cartouche on the back of Palenque Throne 4 which further recalls the enthroned *K'atun* Lords of the Codex Paris, each of whom receives a mask from an elderly figure (fig. 11).

Careful and meticulous examination of Mesoamerican art is always both challenging and rewarding. The examination of Maya art is particularly challenging because it continues to reveal closer connections between the ethnographic Maya and the pre-Columbian Maya than popular epigraphic interpretations will permit (Porter 1988). Doubtless, further research on stairway thrones, their texts, and related problems will continue to open new avenues to understanding the ancient Maya.

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Notes

1. Ironically, Angel Fernández also identified the Tablet of 96 Glyphs at Palenque as a stela.
2. Maya words are italicized and appear in Barrera Vásquez (1980).
3. See Porter (1988) for a fuller discussion of the significance of T687a, on which the eminent Maya in figure 8 sit.

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