

EXCAVATIONS IN A CEMETERY AT PALENQUE

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THROUGH THE YEARS, a sizable number of burials have been found at Palenque, Chiapas. Most noteworthy, of course, is the magnificent tomb within the pyramid of the Temple of the Inscriptions (Ruz Lhuillier, 1952c, 1955, 1958a). Apparently dedicatory in nature, other interments occur in stone crypts which are placed under the floors of temples (Sáenz, 1956; Ruz Lhuillier, 1958b, 1958c, 1958d). Burial crypts have been found in additional vaulted structures at Palenque (Maudslay, 1889-1902; Thompson, 1895; Holmes, 1895-97; Blom and La Farge, 1926-27; Ruz Lhuillier, 1952a). Much less frequently encountered, however, have been stone-walled graves directly in the ground, not inside buildings (Blom and La Farge, 1926-27, Vol. 1, p. 181).

In 1951, in the course of ceramic excavations, we located what might rightly be called a cemetery — the corner of a plaza used over an extended period for a series of superimposed burials. Three of the burials then discovered were excavated that year, with the collaboration of Arturo Romano Pacheco of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, and in 1959 Barbara Rands excavated ten additional burials. Although the burials were poorly, even disappointingly, furnished with grave goods, their close spacing, variety, and time depth provide unusual interest.

The skeletal material is generally in poor condition, many bones having disintegrated completely. Some bones, which appeared complete when first discovered, tended to fragment along a network of small cracks or fissures. Such pronounced deterioration of bones is common at Palenque, being comparable to the weathered condition of pottery at the site. Skeletal material from the cemetery excavations was deposited with the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia in México

and has been examined by Humberto Flores Alvarado (1960). We are indebted to him and to Sr. Romano for notes on the osteology.

The Palenque cemetery lies some 300 meters west of the site's main plaza, in the small building assemblage designated Group IV (Fig. 1), from which came the sculptured Tablero

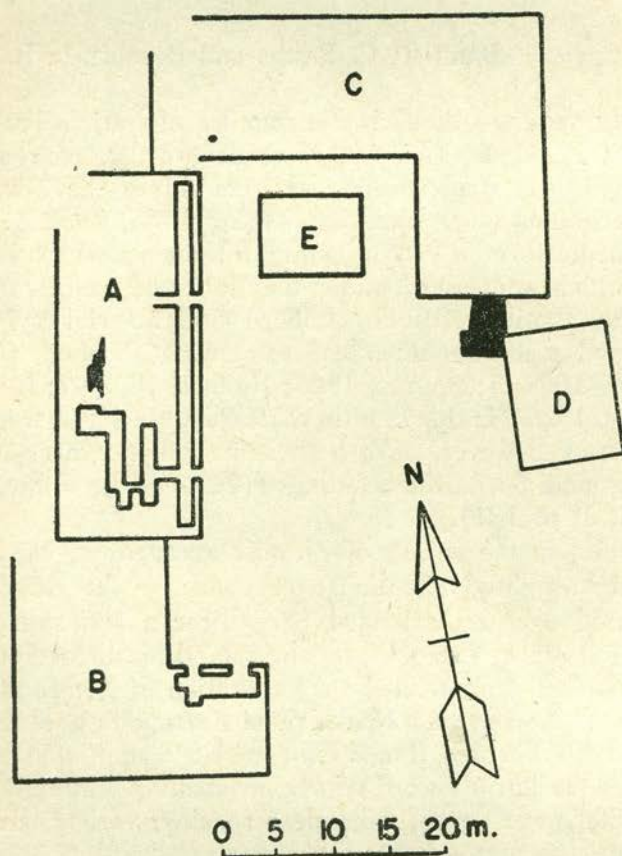


FIG. 1. Group IV, Palenque. Area of cemetery excavations appears in black, adjoining Structures C and D.

de los Esclavos (Ruz Lhuillier, 1952b, Figs. 10, 12). Bounded on the north by Structure C and on the east by Structure D, the burials are known to continue to the south and west; their extent is undetermined. The original excavation was enlarged in 1959 to uncover previously known burials, reaching a ma-

ximum size of approximately 4.25 m. north and south by 3.75 m. east-west. Burials ranged from approximately 0.25 to 1.75 m. below the present surface of the ground (Fig. 2).

Several of the burials were associated with a stucco-covered floor, which extended approximately two meters south from the stairway of Structure C. The presence of the floor, at an

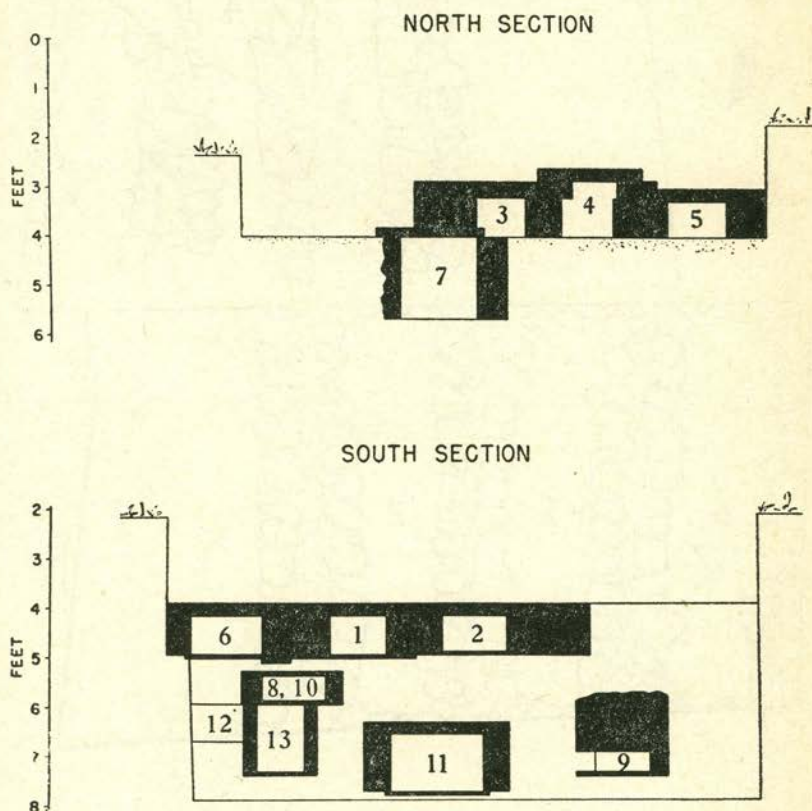


FIG. 2. Schematic profile, showing superimposition of burials in north and south portions of excavation. Stone construction of graves appears in black; stucco-covered floor in north is stippled. Depths are below datum point, on stairway of Structure C.

average depth of 50 cm. below present ground level, divided the excavation into northern and southern sections of roughly equivalent dimensions (Fig. 3). Three burials occurred in crypts which were constructed on top of the floor (Burials 3, 4, 5) and one, Burial 7, was cut into the floor (Figs. 2, 4).

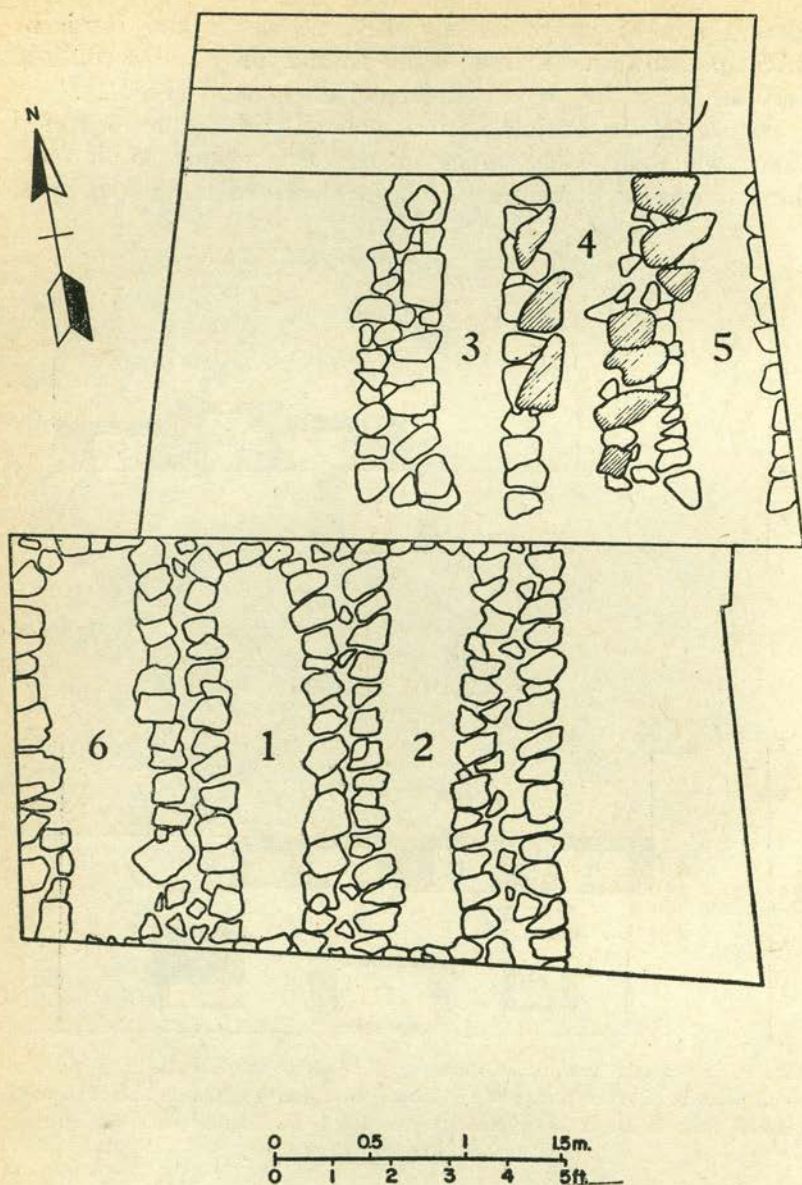


FIG. 3. Upper level burials in relation to stairway and balustrade of Structure C. Burials 3-5 occur above stucco-covered floor. Burials 1, 2, 6 lie to the south at a slightly lower level, their covering slabs being even with the top of the plastered floor.

To the south, the crypts of Burials 1, 2, 6 were built directly against the southern end of the floor. With their covering slabs

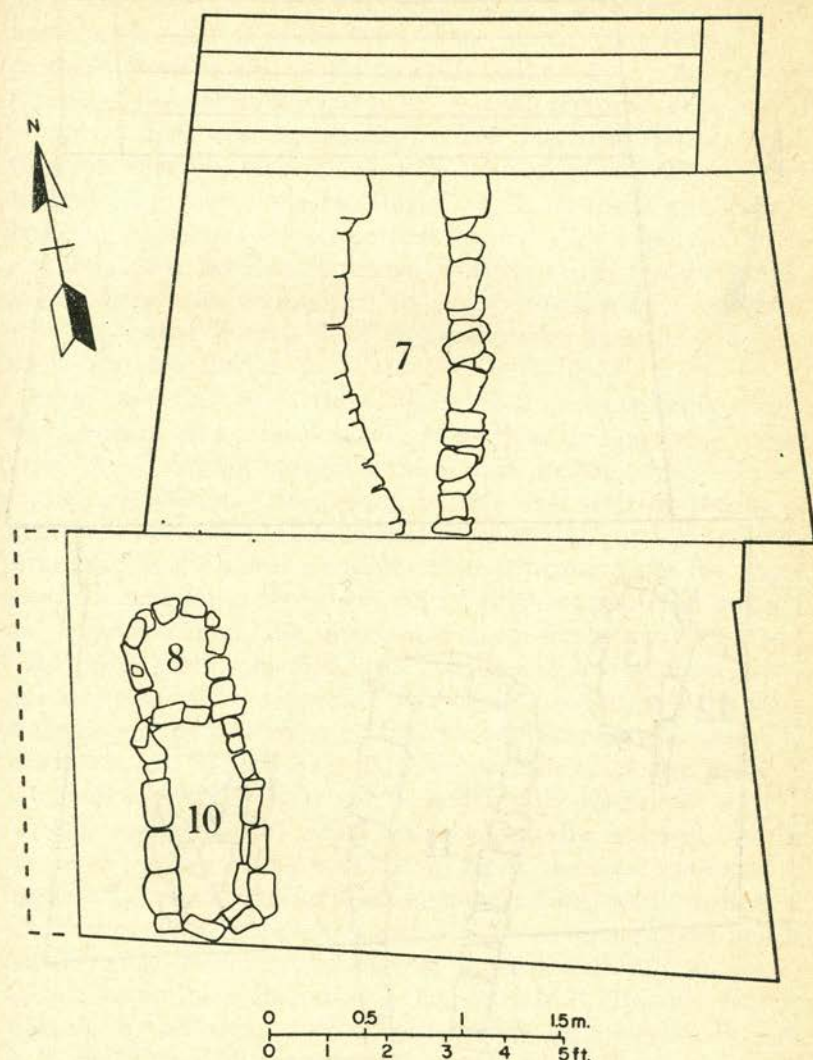


FIG. 4. Middle level graves. Burial 7, sunk into the stucco-covered floor, has characteristics linking it to upper level interments and probably preceded Burials 8, 10.

in position, they were flush with the top of this feature. The southernmost edge of the floor was smoothly plastered, de-

monstrating that the floor had not been cut away to permit the construction of these graves. Burials 1, 2, 6 must have post-

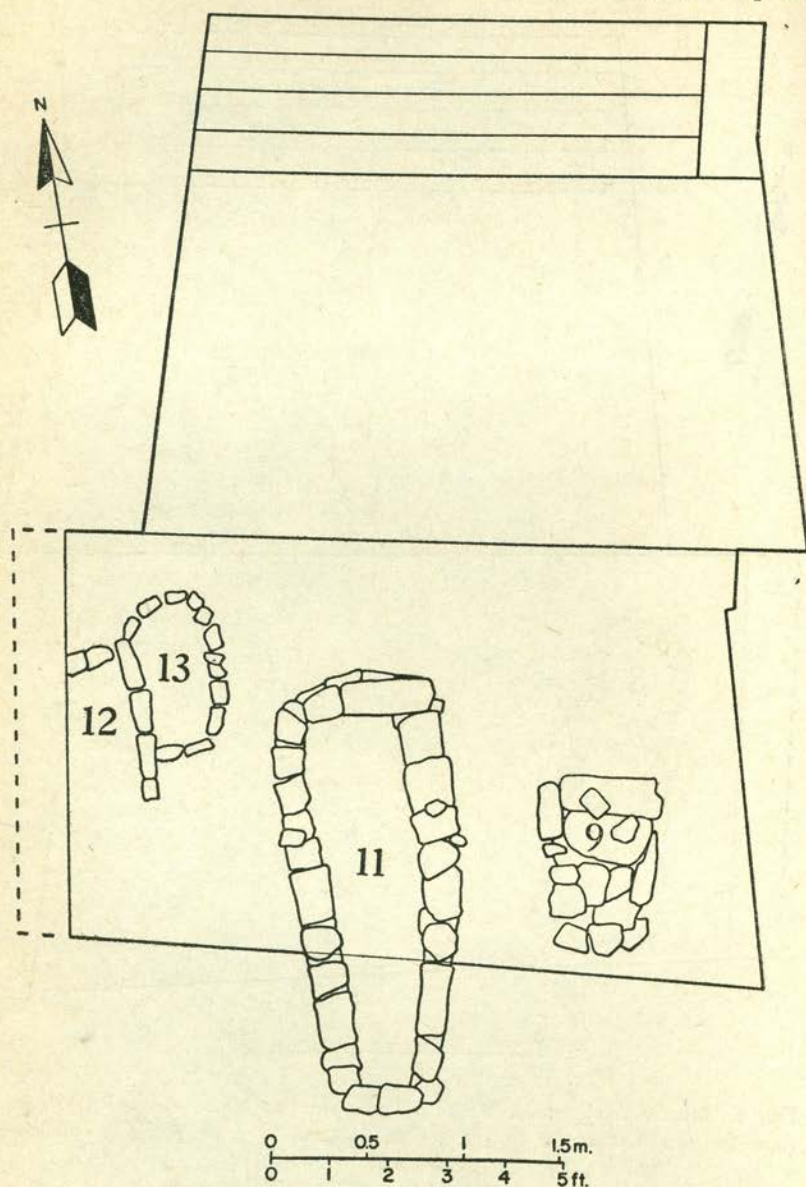


FIG. 5. Lower level graves. A heap of stones occurred over Burial 9, which, like Burial 12, lacked definite walls. Although Burial 11 is the deepest of the graves, it may pertain to a somewhat later period.

dated the construction of the stucco floor and the stairway of Structure C. This may, however, have been by only a slight interval, for, when sealed, these crypts provided an extension of the floor level to the south, eliminating what otherwise would have been a change in the level of the plaza. (Alternatively, an earthen floor could have originally served as a southern extension of the stucco-covered surface, being removed when burial crypts 1, 2, 6 were constructed.) The fact that Burials 1, 2, 6, when covered, were flush with the top of the stucco floor suggests that they preceded Burials 3, 4, 5; there would have been no apparent reason to attain this even level had the latter crypts already been in existence, rising to a still greater height. If the floor was maintained in an approximately even state, it is clear that Burials 1, 2, 6 were earlier than 3, 4, 5 and probably also Burial 7.

Sunk into the stucco floor, Burial 7 slopes markedly downward toward the north. Below its stone floor and partially under Structure C, lay an earlier architectural feature which was not excavated. Burial 7 is covered by the west wall of Burial 3, and must precede it. Characteristics of Burial 7, in spite of its stratigraphically lower position, relate it primarily to the upper level. In contrast to Burials 3 and 5, which were placed directly on the stucco floor, the intervening crypt-like construction was filled with earth. On this earth lay Burial 4. The large, irregular stones which supported this grave's covering slabs were superimposed upon the well-laid stones forming the walls of Burials 3 and 5. In the north, therefore, the sequence, early to late, was Burial 7, Burials 3, 5, and finally Burial 4.

Superimposition of graves was especially marked in the southern portion of the excavation. Here, the connected tier of Burials 1, 2 and 6 formed a contemporaneous unit, sealing in six earlier burials (Figs. 2, 4, 5). Three generalized levels occur in the southwestern part of the excavation, from early to late comprising Burials 12, 13, Burials 8, 10, and finally Burials 6, 1. Farther to the east, Burial 11 underlay Burials 1, 2, and Burial 9 was placed partially below the eastern wall of Burial 2. Temporal relationships among the lower level burials are not entirely clear. Hard-packed yellow earth underlies the lowest of these graves (9, 11, 12, 13, and also the southern portion of Burial 10). It completely surrounded Burial 9, suggesting that the earth was a plaza fill, contemporary with that

interment. Burial 11, on the other hand, appears to have been cut into the yellow earth, which surrounds it on three sides. Atop the heavy covering slabs of this grave was a different soil, sherd-bearing brown earth mixed with stones — apparen-

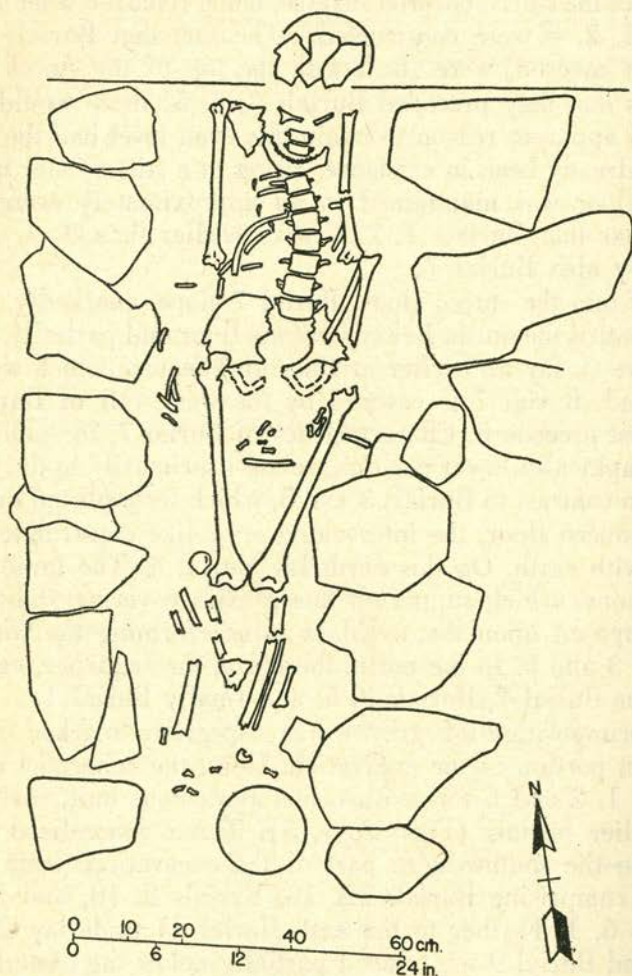


FIG. 6. Burial 4. Extended burial, head resting upon step of Structure C.

tly fill placed over the interment. Burial 9, therefore, probably preceded Burial 11 in time. Similarities in the construction of Crypts 10 and 11, discussed below, suggest the possible contem-

poraneity of these two burials. In the extreme western part of the excavation, a confusing series of varying soil pockets and contiguous grave walls defies complete interpretation. Disturbance seems indicated. The complexity of lower level burials in the south is in contrast to the orderly arrangement of upper level graves over the entire excavation.

The different interment types correlate closely with the general sequence of graves which has been outlined. The burials are discussed from late to early.

Burial 4 (Fig. 6). Extended adult burial in a crudely constructed crypt. The skull, lying on a step of the north stairway, was badly crushed by the heavy covering slabs which were placed directly on the head. A restorable bowl was present near the feet. Mutilated teeth, type unidentified, have been noted (Flores Alvarado, 1960).

Burials 3, 5, 7 (Fig. 7). Extended adults in crypts with walls of stone and earth, each topped by two courses of horizontally placed stone slabs. As in most of the burials, an air space was present above the bones, there being little earth within the crypts. The lower part of each body was covered by a thick, neatly arranged pile of accompanying human bones — skull caps, jaws, and especially leg bones (seven femurs plus fragments of several more were found in Burial 5). The secondary deposit of bones was deepest in Burial 5. Two of the multiple, badly broken skulls in this grave showed deformation: circular, with marked lambdoidal flattening (*tipo anular, variedad erecta*) and fronto-vertico-occipital (*tabular-erecta*). The latter is identified (Flores Alvarado, 1960) as an adult female, although skeletal material from these three graves seems mostly to relate to adult males. Six mutilated teeth occurred in Burial 5, representing Types A-1, B-2, C-6 and E-1 according to the classification of Romero (1958). Five mutilated teeth (Types B-6, E-1, G-2) were present in Burial 7. Perforated monkey teeth were found in Burial 3; bone needles in 3 and 5; a shell pendant, a quantity of closely grouped small, unperforated snail shells, and two pottery bowls in Burial 5; and one vessel each in Burials 3 and 7. As in other burials, the pottery vessels were placed near the legs or feet, and the primary burials were oriented with head to the north.

Burials 1, 2, 6. Extended single adult burials in stone-and-earth-walled crypts, each with carefully fitted covering slabs

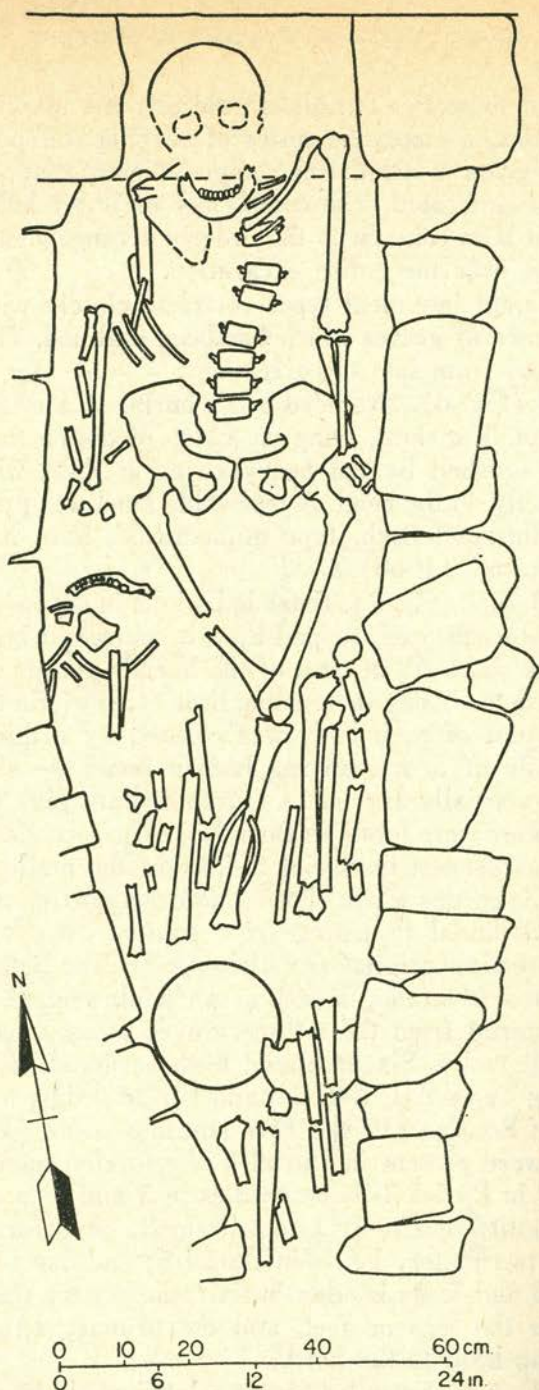


FIG. 7. Burial 7. Extended primary burial with bones of multiple individuals arranged at foot of grave.

and large stone slabs to form the floor of the grave. Cranial deformation of unidentified type was present (Burial 1) and mutilated teeth (Burial 6). A single vessel accompanied each burial.

Burial 8 (Fig. 8). Badly deteriorated remains of a child, possibly flexed or placed as a secondary burial. The bones, resting on a roughly circular group of stones and covered by earth, were without accompanying grave furniture. Mutilated teeth, of unidentified type, were noted.

Burial 10. Child of approximately six years, placed in a

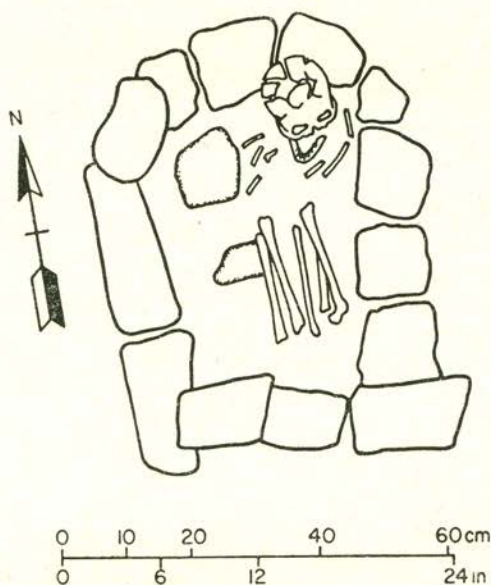


FIG. 8. Burial 8. Remains of child, flexed or secondary burial.

carefully made, miniature stone-walled crypt. Proportionately thin horizontal slabs formed a top and bottom to the grave. The skeleton was extended on its back, although the skull, showing fronto-vertico-occipital deformation (*tabular-erecta*), was found lying face downward. No accompanying grave goods were present.

Burial 11 (Fig. 9). Extended sub-adult male (stature approximately 165 cm.), in the largest and best constructed crypt found in the course of the investigations. The carefully shaped and laid stone walls, converging toward the south, were rounded

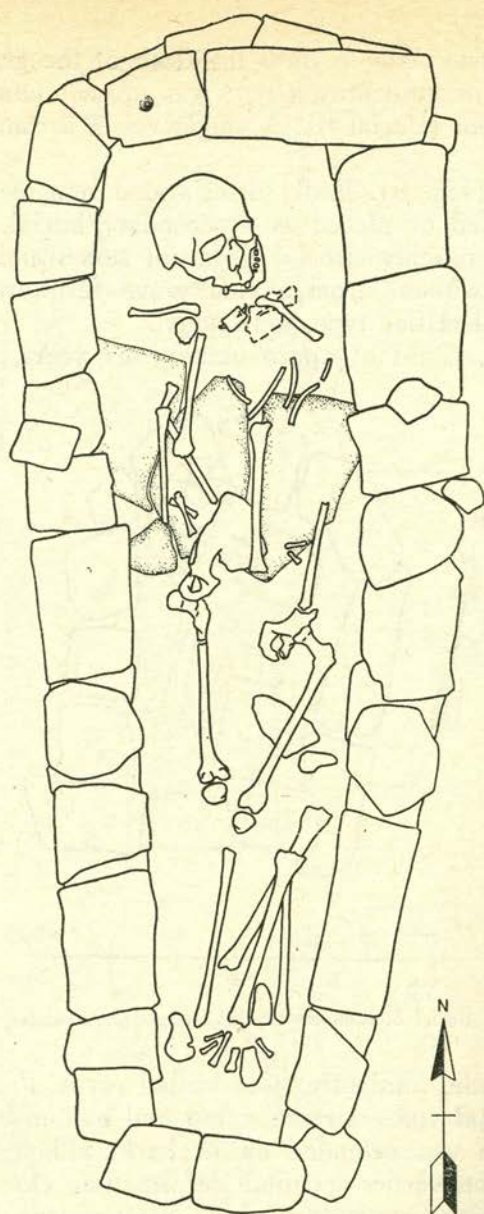


FIG. 9. Burial 11. Extended sub-adult, resting partly on stone slab.

on the north end. Rough stones mixed with earth were present over the great covering slabs. The skeleton, best preserved of those found in the cemetery, rested on hard yellow earth except for stone slabs under part of the torso. A single mutilated tooth (Type B-4) was found. Accompanying offerings were again completely absent.

Burial 12. Covered with soil and lying on yellow earth, bones of at least two individuals, one certainly male, were present in a small, poorly outlined grave with no capstone. Heavily worn teeth appear in the two mandibles, indicating middle age. Four inlaid teeth, including Type E-1, occur. Grave goods were absent.

Burial 13. Bones representing more than one person, including a young child, rested on an oval slab, beneath a thick fill of earth. The bones lay in a haphazard manner, perhaps being secondarily deposited, although such an appearance could have come about as a result of disturbance of a primary burial through later grave-digging. Walls were formed mostly of small stones, without a covering slab. There were no grave furnishings.

Burial 9 (Fig. 10). The flexed body of an adult (approximate stature 162 cm.) lay in dorsal position, arms crossed behind the back. The grave covering consisted of rough stones, overlying two horizontal slabs and partly supported by the surrounding earth. Apparently removed from this body, a male skull without lower jaw lay just to the north. Completely outside the stone heap, it rested in the hard-packed fill of essentially sterile yellow earth that surrounded the grave. An unstudied mandible, of corresponding size, occurred under the stones, with the well-articulated body. The presence of the preauricular sulcus suggests that the skeleton could have been that of a female (Flores, 1960), although this feature less commonly is present in males (Gray, 1954, p. 268). Seven mutilated teeth (Types B-2, C-5 and C-6) were present in the upper jaw. No definitely associated burial offerings were found.

Certain of the lower level burials in the south, which differ among themselves in other respects, share positive or negative traits which are in sharp contrast to Burials 1-7. Features showing stratigraphic priority include:

Crypt construction with walls of well-shaped rectangular stones laid end-to-end, the long axes of the stones and burial coinciding (Burials 10, 11). One stone in thickness, with little

earthen and sherd fill, they constitute the best laid burial walls in the entire excavation.

Partial slab floor, extending under only a restricted portion of the skeleton (Burials 8, 9, 11).

Rounded contour to northern end of grave (Burials 8, 11, 13).

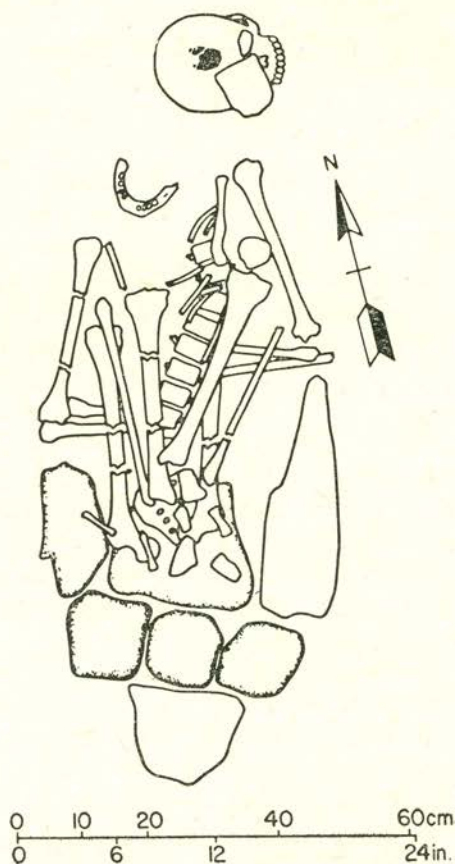


FIG. 10. Burial 9. Flexed adult in dorsal position, hands behind back and head lying covering heap of stones.

Flexed interment (Burial 9; also possibly 8, 12).

Burial of children (Burials 8, 10, 13).

Earth, instead of capstones, overlying bones (Burials 8, 12, 13).

Absence of grave furniture (Burials 8, 10-13 and probably 9, *i. e.*, apparently all of the lower level burials).

Upper level burials show a few features which are completely absent from the earlier examples in the south. Most distinctive of the later interments are Burials 3, 5, 7. In these, selected bones from multiple individuals were carefully arranged to cover the legs of extended primary burials. Interments 3, 5, 7 are further distinguished by the relative richness of artifacts, contrasting with the absence of grave goods in the earlier burials.

Certain features are shared by early and later burials. Among these, placing primary burials on their backs with head to the north seems the most inviolate pattern. Orientation to the north is a well-established practice elsewhere at Palenque. Mutilated teeth and artificially deformed crania were present in burials from upper and lower levels. In general, graves within the excavation were narrow, and the walls of Burials 7, 11 converge markedly toward the foot.

Among features of interest are possible indications of dismemberment or sacrifice. Comparative material suggesting human sacrifice, from elsewhere in the Maya area, has been discussed by Coe (1959, pp. 131-132). Although other possibilities cannot be ruled out, certain phenomena, observed in burials from the Palenque cemetery, are consistent with a general hypothesis of violent death through sacrifice or execution. To be mentioned are:

Burials 3, 5, 7 (Fig. 7). The presence of multiple femurs and other leg bones, arranged in careful north-south orientation over the legs of primary burials, and of skulls and jaws near hips and knees, is a highly patterned characteristic of these burials. Alternative explanations may be advanced. (1) The additional bones could have had some special connection with the extended individual, serving perhaps as trophies of war.¹ On the other hand, the additional bones may be fortuitous, possibly resulting from the disturbance of earlier burials, with salvage of some of the bones and reburial. In such a case, however, there must have been a highly judicious selection of the bones to be saved and redeposited; while long bones are subject to

¹ Long bones and skulls are pictured in Maya monumental art. Their ritual use is indicated on Altar 5, Tikal (Maler, 1908, Pl. 28); trophy heads are worn by warriors on the sculptured lintels of Bonampak (Ruppert, Thompson and Proskouriakoff, 1955, fig. 20); femurs are worn at Chichén-Itzá (Morris, Charlot and Morris, 1931, pp. 451-453).

less deterioration than many others, this factor alone seems inadequate as an explanation for their repeated occurrence. In any case, pottery vessels, when present, were consistently placed near the feet or knees in the various cemetery burials, and the arrangement of bones over the legs of the primary burial could well constitute a similarly patterned "offering".

Burial 9 (Fig. 10). In this case, the head, except for the mandible, appears to have been separated from an otherwise articulated body. (It has not been established whether head and body belonged to the same individual.) The head lay outside the grave, a stone crushed into the right orbital region. The body was flexed on its back, the spinal column twisted at a sharp angle, as though it might have been broken. Arms were placed behind the back, in the identical position frequently assumed by captive figures in Classic Maya sculpture. The suggestions of violent death in combination with the symbolism of the bound figure are striking.

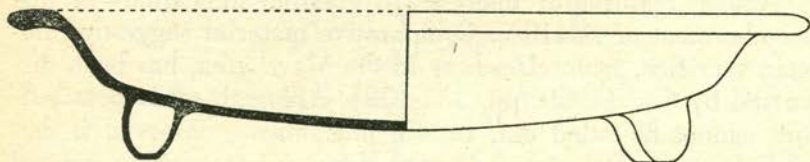


FIG. 11. Polychrome tripod plate, resting atop pile of stones covering Burial 9.
Diameter: 40.5 cm.

Study of the pottery uncovered in the cemetery excavation is continuing, as part of a broader investigation of Palenque ceramics (Rands and Rands, 1957, 1959, n. d.; B. C. Rands, 1954; R. L. Rands, 1961). A detailed discussion of the ceramic position of the various burials within the broader Palenque sequence will not, therefore, be attempted at this time. Temporal placement of the lower level burials in the south is particularly difficult due to the total absence of pottery vessels, as well as the scarcity of sherds in the fill and grave walls. However, a polychrome tripod plate (Fig. 11) and an unslipped, carbonate-tempered jar occur below the eastern wall of Burial 2, resting on the stones covering Burial 9 and possibly associated with it.² It is unlikely that Burial 9 would postdate the period of the

² Elsewhere at Palenque, certain offerings have been found on top of slabs covering burials (Holmes, 1895-97, pt. 2, p. 207; Ruz Lhuillier, 1955, p. 89, Fig. 7).

two vessels, a horizon equivalent to Tepeu 1 or 2.³ Sherds in the earthen fill of crypt walls or mixed in the earth covering the burials, although not necessarily contemporaneous with the associated interments, suggest relative antiquity for Burials 12 and 13. A dating early in the Late Classic period for most of the lower level burials seems reasonable.

Upper level burials, in Uaxactún terms, are datable as Tepeu 2-3. The use of phase names from the central Peten is,

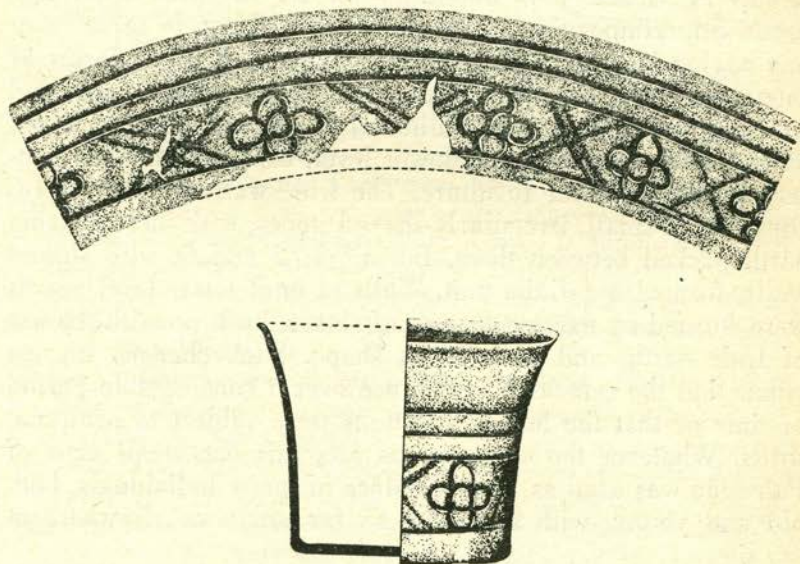


FIG. 12. Incised-and-dentate-stamped black bowl, Burial 3. Diameter: 15 cm.

however, highly misleading, for the pottery of Palenque displays strong regionalism. At the time of the upper level burials, ceramic ties were increasing with coastal Tabasco. These contacts are reflected in fine paste vessels from Burials 2, 4, 6 and in an incised-and-dentate-stamped black bowl from Burial 3 (Fig. 12). Dentate stamping, here combined with the popular Palenque design of a horizontal band of four-petaled flowers, has its major distribution on the Fine Gray pottery of coastal Tabasco. Flat-based bowls in the south (Burials 1, 2, 6) have nubbin tripod supports while those in the north are

³ Wide everted-rim tripods of similar shape occur in the tomb chamber of the Temple of the Inscriptions, associated with a probable date of 9.13.0.0.0 (Ruz Lhuillier, 1955, p. 94).

without feet, a distinction which may prove to have refined chronological value. Figurines, although present earlier, are especially abundant in the deposits which covered the upper level graves.

From previous investigations at Palenque, the usual burial pattern is known to have been that of a single extended interment in a rectangular, slab-lined crypt, accompanied by one or more pottery vessels and often jade or other artifacts. The Group IV cemetery is important for its variation from this norm. Superimposition of the graves is striking, in some cases one having been built directly atop another. Various forms of interment were present: simple extended; primary extended in direct association with additional bones and skulls; flexed; decapitated. Six graves, all lower level, contained neither pottery bowls nor other furniture. The wide walls of Burials 1-6 consisted of small, irregularly-shaped stones, with sherd-bearing earth packed between them. Burials 1, 2 and 6, with shared walls, formed a definite unit. Walls of most lower level graves were formed by narrow courses of stones, built up with the use of little earth, and differed in shape. Such changes suggest either that the cemetery was in use over a considerable period of time or that the burial traditions were subject to profound shifts. Whatever the explanations are, this one small area of Palenque was used as a burial place of many individuals, both old and young, with a variety so far unknown elsewhere at the site.

Acknowledgments. Our excavations at Palenque, including those in the Group IV cemetery, have been supported by grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Institute of Andean Research, the American Philosophical Society, and a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship. The close and generous cooperation of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia is also gratefully acknowledged. Drawings are by Charles M. Tilly.

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