



ANCIENT SKIES

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Official Logbook of the Ancient Astronaut Society

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PALENQUE: THE FINEST EXPRESSION OF TECHNOLOGY AND SOPHISTICATED ARTISTRY OF A LOST CIVILIZATION

BY GENE M. PHILLIPS, Founder of the Society

In November 1839, John H. Caddy, a Lieutenant in the British Royal Artillery and an accomplished artist, and Patrick Walker, an administrative official of the Settlement at Belize, British Honduras (now Belize), set out from Belize to win the "race" to Palenque. The other participants in the race, although they were not aware of the event, were John Lloyd Stephens, a New York lawyer turned world-traveller, and Frederick Catherwood, architect-artist.

Caddy and Walker knew that Stephens and Catherwood had left Belize before them, and they also knew that Stephens and Catherwood headed in the opposite direction, southward into Guatemala to explore that Central American country, as well as to examine the ruins at Copan in Honduras.

For political reasons, the British felt that it was important in 1839 to "beat" the Americans to the prize, although Palenque was then well-known on the traveller's itinerary. Nestled in the mountains at the edge of a rain forest 300 feet (91.4m) above the plain, the ruins are in the northeast portion of the Mexican state of Chiapas, just 90 miles (145km) due east of Villahermosa, capital city of the state of Tabasco.

Spaniards first saw the ruins about 1750, and we have reports of their visits in 1784, 1807, 1808 and 1822. In 1832 the Comte Jean de Waldeck spent some time at the ruins and did a great disservice to latter day students with his grotesque renderings of the site and the carvings. When Caddy came upon the scene in 1840, he set the record straight with his accurate and detailed drawings.

In late 1840, Stephens and Catherwood finally arrived in Palenque, months after Caddy and Walker had left, after an exhausting and hair-raising trek over the high mountains to the south. Stephens' phenomenally successful books on his travels, along with Catherwood's precise illustrations (he used a camera lucida to project the image of his subject onto his drawing pad which enabled him to reproduce the image with uncanny accuracy), became so popular that the Caddy-Walker account faded into oblivion.

It is unfortunate that the Englishmen let their national zeal spur them blindly to Palenque, because en route they passed unknowingly within a few miles of one of the largest of all the Mayan ruins - Tikal! - in northern Guatemala.

Caddy was familiar with Domingo Juarros' account of Guatemala, published in 1808 (Compendio de la Historia de la Ciudad de Guatemala), which stated as a fact that there were 25,000 inhabitants on the islands in the Lake Peten-Itzá and that people living on the shores of the lake were innumerable. Further, Juarros reported, "so great was the number of idols found in 21 places of worship" around Lake

Peten-Itzá, that it took the horde of conquering Spaniards all day to destroy them!

The route that Caddy and Walker took from Belize to Palenque took them first to Lake Peten-Itzá in northern Guatemala. Once there, Caddy concluded that Juarros' estimate of the number of inhabitants "must be a great exaggeration." Also, he wrote, "there are not in the whole district of Peten (the northernmost state in Guatemala) any remains of the ancient Temples of the Indians - at least to all our inquiries we gained no information with regard to any." This is truly incredible, because just 20 to 30 miles away were the ruins of Tikal, which covered 200 square miles and contained skyscraper-type structures rising 220 feet into the air! Only nine years after Caddy camped at Lake Peten-Itzá, the first official expedition found its way to the nearby ruins.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Palenque had been visited by many archaeologists, including Desiré Charnay, Alfred P. Maudslay and Teobert Maler. Fortunately, by that time photography had been perfected and we have excellent photos of the ruins as they looked to the early travellers.

In 1925, serious archaeology began at the site when Franz Blom mapped most of the area. Careful clearing of the jungle growth and slow restoration work continued until the Mexican archaeologist, Alberto Ruz Lhuillier was appointed Director of Research at Palenque in 1949, when the restoration efforts quickened. In that year, Ruz made a discovery in the Temple of the Inscriptions which was to have an everlasting effect on Palenque's future.

Clearing away some debris in the inner chamber, Ruz saw that the Temple's stone floor consisted of large stone sections, two of which had some circles about 5 inches in diameter inscribed into the slabs at each end. Upon closer examination, he saw that the circles were actually stone plugs fitted into holes that had been bored through the slabs. Removing some of the plugs, he was able to lift the stone slabs. He then realized that the wall of the building did not end at the floor but continued on down beneath the stone rubble. He quickly removed some of the rubble and found a stone stair. Teeming with excitement, he began to dig deeper and found another stair. The rubble was packed tightly and it took four seasons of digging for Ruz and his men to clear the entire stairway 22 meters (74 feet) to the bottom, where they literally ran into a "stone" wall. The diggers found the passageway blocked by stone and lime which had solidified over the centuries because of the water seepage over the limestone blocks of the structure. The digging became so difficult that Ruz was on the verge of giving up when a worker's pick broke through the far side. Enlarging the opening, they squeezed through and found the skeletal remains of six young persons, at least one of which was female.

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Spurred on by this find, Ruz began to examine the walls of the enclosure and finally located a triangle-shaped stone set vertically into the wall. The stone was 2 meters high (about 7 feet). Sensing that the triangular stone could be a door, Ruz directed his men to pry the stone loose, and it finally gave. The stone door was pulled open and the eager men flashed their lights into an enormous crypt, a large room with a high corbelled-arch ceiling. Ruz described the room as looking like an "ice palace" because of the profusion of stalactites and stalagmites which had accumulated due to the constant dripping of water from above. Unfortunately, at this point Ruz lost his archaeological "cool" and instead of making careful cuttings of the drippings to determine their approximate age, he ordered his men to clear the area after taking some photographs.

The main object in the room was a large stone slab 3.8 x 2.2 meters (13 x 7 feet) which later was estimated to weigh 4,500 kilograms (5 tons), resting firmly on a stone monolith, which was about 2.2 x 1 meter (7 x 3.5 feet). Suspecting that the block could be a burial vault, Ruz decided to drill two exploratory holes into the block. When the drill bit had progressed a few inches, it felt free. A wire was inserted into the hole and when it was removed, particles of red paint were adhered to it. Ruz knew that he had found a sarcophagus and that the gigantic stone slab would have to be raised in order to see inside. Felling a hardwood tree in the jungle and cutting it into poles which were used with four automobile jacks, the men carefully inched the giant slab upward. Miraculously, it was not damaged.

When the slab was raised high enough, Ruz could observe that the stone block did have a lid, which was inserted to be smoothly flush with the top surface. Its unusual shape was similar to that of an Egyptian mummy case! Ruz carefully removed the lid without damaging it and finally he looked inside at the skeletal remains of a tall male, possibly "of non-Mayan origin." One sensationalistic magazine ran an article on the Palenque "giant", reporting that the occupant was 12 feet (3.65m) tall! In fact, the man was 5 feet 9 inches (1.7m), which is "tall" in relation to the average height of 4 feet 10 inches (1.4m) of the Mayans of today.

Objects of carved jade jewelry were among the bones, including over 200 pieces of jade which when fitted together formed a perfect mask of the occupant's face. The mask is now on display in the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.

According to the local populace, the skeletal remains were left in the sarcophagus when it was resealed and we do not know of any report on whether a carbon-14 test was made to determine the age of the bones. Inquiries to Alberto Ruz on this and other questions (such as whether the age of the stalactites and stalagmites had been scientifically established) received no response, and in 1979 Alberto Ruz Lhuillier was laid to rest about 100 feet from the northwest corner of the pyramidal structure that he had helped to make famous in 1952.

But, as fate would have it, world-wide attention became focused not on the sarcophagus and its contents, but on the lid itself! The five-ton slab proved to contain one of the most intricate and baffling of all the stone reliefs found anywhere in the world. The entire surface of the stone is carved with a design in relief about one inch deep and the four sides are carved with hieroglyphics. The main design clearly depicts a person as the central figure in a rather unusual pose. One of the first official explanations of the carving was that it represented an indian on a sacrificial altar about to have his heart removed, not surgically but ceremonially!

This explanation seemed to satisfy most everyone until the late 1960's and early 1970's when Erich von Daniken shook the scientific community with his controversial space-age theories. In his best-selling Chariots of the Gods? and Gods From Outer Space,

the author suggested that the design on the slab represented a cross-section of a space capsule and that the "indian" was an astronaut seated on a padded cushion, working knobs, levers and other controls with his hands and feet! Since 1968, when the highway to Palenque was paved, a steady stream of visitors from all parts of the world has flowed to the Temple of the Inscriptions to see the astronaut.

Obviously, this heretical viewpoint had to be combated, and a group of scholars and archaeologists assembled at Palenque for the First Round Table discussion and in 1973 a "new" scientific interpretation of the sarcophagus lid was agreed upon. The result: the personage depicted is Pacal, King and ruler of Palenque, who is shown on a sojourn between heaven and hell, falling into the open jaws of a mythological monster!

In all the furor over the interpretation of the lid design, most everyone has lost sight of the fact that the ruins of Palenque are the most unique of all the Mayan ruins - so different, in fact, that one wonders if Palenque was built by the same people! Here can be seen the accomplishments of an advanced cultural, technological society, utilizing highly perfected engineering and scientific disciplines, architecture, construction techniques, hydraulics, technical skills, literature and art.

Perhaps the most astonishing of all the structures is the partially-restored, so-called "Palace Complex." Built on an artificial terrace 310 feet (94.4m) long, 260 feet (78m) wide and 40 feet (12m) high, the outer walls of the complex are 228 feet (68m) long by 180 feet (54.8m) wide. Inside is a variety of corridors, rooms, stairways, courtyards, reliefs, hieroglyphics and strange designs. The oriental flavor of the building design and many of the reliefs and the use of various styles of arches (including a Moorish arch), add to the mystery of this architectural delight. The blackened roofs contrasting with the light gray limestone structures and the mute personages depicted in the many reliefs create an eerie, mysterious atmosphere in this jungle setting. Constructed of thin stone shingles, the roof style of the Palace buildings is basically Mansard, with a Pullman-car type being used to cover the long corridors. Remnants of rococo-style stucco decorations can still be seen in the roofs, over the eaves and cornices and on the walls.

On each of the long sides of the complex, a row of columns separates open doorways into the first narrow corridor. The outer surface of the columns contains a design, ornately carved in high relief in stucco, each depicting a different scene with life-size figures. Some are in excellent condition, but much of the art work is missing on others.

The inside wall of the eastern outer corridor is adorned with rococo-style picture frames, elaborately carved in stucco! Dubbed the "portrait gallery" by early visitors to the site, it is unfortunate that none of the portraits have survived the ravages of man. Busts in bas-relief once filled the exquisite frames, but all that remains are the neck and shoulders of the forgotten personages.

The walls of the rooms and corridors are finished with a smooth plaster and vestiges of multi-colored, painted designs can still be seen on some of the walls.

The most prominent feature of the Palace Complex is the tower, which affords an excellent view of the entire site, as well as of the rolling savannah in the distance. The upper third of the tower and its roof were missing and have been rebuilt.

But the most surprising feature of the Palace is the indoor "plumbing." Stone toilets are strategically situated over channels under the floor, through which running water carried off the waste!

An extensive system of aqueducts throughout the site supplies fresh water from the mountains in underground channels completely lined with stone.

The Temple of the Inscriptions - named for the hieroglyph-covered stone slabs set into the walls

of the chambers of the building - is a long, narrow structure atop a 66 foot (20m) high, terraced, stepped pyramid of stone, now fully-restored.

The front of the building utilizes the same open corridor design with columns at the outer edge as are used in the Palace. And, each column once contained an elaborate design carved in high relief in stucco on the outer surface. The two end columns are now completely devoid of any stucco, but the four inner ones still contain remnants of designs, two of which clearly depict standing women holding babies in their arms. One can readily surmise that all six columns once contained carvings of babies, representations of the six young persons sacrificed outside the triangular door of the crypt underneath the structure. Ruz did suggest that the skeletal remains could have been the children of the tomb's occupant.

An examination of the Temple of the Inscriptions begins with a climb up the steep outer front steps of the pyramidal base - no easy task in itself. (For the faint at heart, there is an easier way up at the back of the pyramid.) Once at the top, the massive stone slabs of hieroglyphics set into the walls of the building are mute reminders of the futile efforts of a civilized society. Here, before your very eyes, carved in everlasting stone, is the account of a highly-sophisticated, technologically-advanced people, whose message we cannot decipher!

Once inside the inner chamber of the building, you see the holes in the floor sections that Ruz found. But these are no ordinary holes drilled through five-inch thick slabs of stone. Concave in design, with only a smaller hole going all the way through the slab, the area was covered with a convex-shaped stone "dish" with a protruding plug, which fit perfectly into the concave area and through the hole. A very intricate design, difficult to accomplish in metal today, even with our sophisticated equipment!

Your first view of Ruz' stairway is frightening. The steps are steep, with a low corbelled ceiling. There is no hand-rail, chain or rope to assist you and you cannot see the bottom in the dim light. If it has been raining out, which is usually the case, the steps and walls will glisten from the water dripping through the ceiling and the stairs will be slippery as ice. Then you simply scoot down on your rear, one step at a time.

The first section of the stairway consists of 45 steps down to a landing, which makes a 90° turn to the right. The landing proceeds a few feet, and another 90° turn to the right reveals 21 more steps, this time steeper. At the bottom is where Ruz ran into the "stone wall." A few feet beyond is where he found the first skeletal remains. You then see the stone triangular door, now permanently open. In the wall on your left is the opening, now protected with iron bars. Your first view of the now-lighted crypt is breathtaking, and after taking a few frantic photos, you sit and stare at the slab, now permanently raised to reveal the closed sarcophagus beneath it. Lost in contemplation, your reverie is ended when you realize that others have joined you and it is time to leave the opening and make way for them. Starting back to the steps, you wonder if you can survive the climb back to the top.

On the way up you notice that there is a stone "air-tube", fabricated from small, thin sheets of stone, at the right of each step against the wall. This forms a continuous ventilation shaft running from the tomb, up the steps and to the outer chamber of the temple at the top. Where the "tube" has cracked or broken, you can feel the rush of air!

Having carefully negotiated the descent on the front outer steps of the pyramid, again without the aid of hand-rail, chain or rope, you feel a sense of real accomplishment, assuming you survived without any broken bones.

A visit to the smaller structures clustered around a grassy "plaza" is somewhat anti-climactic

after Inscriptions. Temples of the Sun, Cross, XIV and Foliated Cross are buildings atop earthen mounds, which presumably were originally stepped pyramidal structures, and have received little restoration work. In the principal chambers of the structures are elaborate carvings in bas-relief on stone slabs set into the walls. Life-size figures of personages are depicted, with the ever-present descriptive hieroglyphics, which we cannot read!

A fascinating feature of this group is the acoustics of the Temple of the Sun and the Temple of the Foliated Cross. Standing in the doorway of either temple, you can speak in a normal tone of voice and converse with someone standing in the doorway of the other temple, 330 feet (100m) away!

One surprising stone slab carved in bas-relief in the small museum at the site depicts a "scribe" in a pensive pose, resting one elbow on a tilting writing table with pen in hand!

As with most archaeological zones, the restored area is but a fraction of the entire site. Forest-covered hills in the distance are really unexplored pyramids. We visited one of these - called the Forgotten Temple - which is taller than the Temple of the Inscriptions. After an arduous climb through jungle growth and up crumbling stone terraces, we arrived at the top to find a building in shambles, with remnants of carved stucco clinging to a column.

For centuries the jungle growth draped a shroud of mystery over the haunting beauty of the ruins. But the veil is about to be lifted and the mystique of Palenque will be no more. In the rain forest just below the escarpment on which the ruins are located, a multi-story Club Med Hotel complex will soon be built and the ravages of man will despoil Palenque.

Gilbert C. Griffin of Princeton University wrote that "Palenque will always be the most hauntingly eloquent site in Mexico." But always is about to come to an end.

RECOMMENDED READING ON PALENQUE:

INCIDENTS OF TRAVEL IN CENTRAL AMERICA, CHIAPAS, AND YUCATAN, by John L. Stephens. Two volumes. Dover Publications, Inc., New York.

INCIDENTS OF TRAVEL IN YUCATAN, by John L. Stephens. Two Volumes. Dover.

MAYA EXPLORER: JOHN LLOYD STEPHENS AND THE LOST CITIES OF CENTRAL AMERICA AND YUCATAN, by Victor W. Von Hagen. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma.

PALENQUE: THE WALKER-CADDY EXPEDITION TO THE ANCIENT MAYA CITY, 1839-1840, by David M. Pendergast. University of Oklahoma Press.

THEY FOUND THE BURIED CITIES: EXPLORATION AND EXCAVATION IN THE AMERICAN TROPICS, by Robert Wauchope. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

PRIMERA MESA REDONDA DE PALENQUE, PART I AND PART II. The Robert Louis Stevenson School, Pebble Beach, California. (Mostly in English).

SEGUNDA MESA REDONDA DE PALENQUE, PART III. Same.

EL TEMPLO DE LAS INSCRIPCIONES PALENQUE, by Alberto Ruz Lhuillier. Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia. Mexico City (Spanish).

PURSUIT OF THE ANCIENT MAYA; SOME ARCHAEOLOGISTS OF YESTERDAY, by Robert L. Brunhouse. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

IN SEARCH OF THE MAYA, by Robert L. Brunhouse. Same.

ERICH VON DANIKEN's latest book REISE NACH KIRIBATI is available in German from ECON Verlag, Dusseldorf, West Germany.

BOOK REVIEW: THE STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

By ZECHARIA SITCHIN

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Fact is stranger than fiction! So much so, that Zecharia Sitchin felt it necessary to place this informative statement on the dust cover of his new book, The Stairway to Heaven: "This is not science fiction."

But, in parts, the book reads like a gripping science fiction tale which would be worthy of the world-famous S-F author, Walter Ernsting (Clark Darlton). Witness the following:

"Four hundred fifty thousand years ago - according to our Sumerian sources - astronauts from this Celestial Lord (the Twelfth Planet 'Marduk') landed on Planet Earth."

"The first landing party numbered fifty astronauts, they were called Anunnaki - 'Those of Heaven Who Are on Earth.' They splashed down in the Arabian Sea...."

"... (A)stronauts from Marduk came to Earth in search of gold."

After the Anunnaki mined the gold ores in south-eastern Africa, they hauled them by ship to Mesopotamia, where they were smelted and refined and "the refined gold ingots were then sent aloft in Shuttlecraft, to an Earth-orbiting craft. There they awaited the periodic arrival of the Mother Spaceship, which took the precious metal back home.... (M)ore Anunnaki were landed on Earth, until their number reached 600, another 300 serviced the Shuttlecraft and orbiting station."

Incredible? Yes, but these quotations are not the result of the author's active imagination, but rather, are direct from an account of history etched in stone! With the discovery of the ruins of super-ancient Sumer (the Biblical Shin'ar) in southern Mesopotamia, thousands of tablets with Sumerian pictographic writing (which later was stylized into cuneiform wedge-writing) have been found and deciphered which give the history of mankind on Earth prior to Biblical times. In fact, the author points out, many of the stories related in the Old Testament are merely re-runs of earlier tales, but with more recent characters and names. For example, the hero of the Biblical flood, Noah, was called Ziusudra in Sumerian literature, which describes in detail the dimensions and instructions for his "ark."

Sitchin's explanation of the cause of the worldwide deluge is indeed fascinating, but I will not spoil the "plot" - you must read the book to find out what happened!

Tired of toiling in the gold mines, the Anunnaki (gods from outer space) resorted to genetic engineering. Extracting the egg of an apewoman who had evolved on Earth and fertilizing it with the sperm of a young "god," it was implanted into the womb of a female astronaut. The result - homo sapiens!

The basic theme of the book, as the title hints, is mankind's incessant and relentless search for immortality - not only in the spiritual sense, but physically. The Anunnaki travelled freely to and from "heaven" (Marduk) and their human offspring, which had become quite numerous because the sons of the gods found the daughters of man to be exceedingly fair, have attempted to emulate their "gods."

Several authors have suggested that the terrace at Baalbeck in Lebanon, with its gigantic 1,000 ton blocks of dressed stone, could have been the "Cape Canaveral" of ancient times. Stairway examines this site in detail and concludes that it probably was the Anunnaki's spaceport.

Countless questions have been asked concerning the origin of mankind on Earth but this scholarly work gives some convincing answers. Serious students of the ancient astronaut theory will find The Stairway to Heaven even more engrossing than the author's highly-successful first book, The Twelfth Planet. Gene M. Phillips.

THE ELUSIVE LAKE PETHÁ

During the recent Member Expedition to southern Mexico, an aerial reconnaissance of Lake Santa Clara proved that it was not the Lake Pethá described by Teobert Maler, the Austrian archaeologist who explored the Lacandon region in 1898. (See Ancient Skies 7:1) Santa Clara is much smaller and more shallow than indicated on the 1953 edition of Franz Blom's map from which we worked, and contains none of the characteristics of Lake Pethá.

Part of our confusion stems from the fact that the Lacandon Indian word for "lake" is "pethá." Hence, any lake is "pethá" to the Indians. Santa Clara is shown on an old map as "Lake Pethá," which is generically correct, but it is not our "Pethá."

We discussed the matter with Carlos Saenz Jurado, a veteran pilot who has flown over the region for the past 30 years, and later in Mexico City with Enrique Burmeister, Director General of ABC Travel Service, and they both suggested that Maler's lake is probably Lake Miramar, a relatively unknown lake in the extreme southern part of Chiapas, in the heart of the Lacandon Jungle. Called the "Sacred Lake of the Lacandons," Miramar was the site of the last battle between the Lacandons and the Spanish, who conquered them. Because of the sacred nature of the lake, few Indians venture onto its waters and their legends tell that when the last Lacandon is dead, the world will come to an end, with winds of such terrific force that the monkeys will be blown out of the trees. There are only 300 Lacandons surviving!

Lake Miramar is nestled in a valley surrounded by high mountains between the Rivers Jataté, Perlas and Azul. Thick jungle growth surrounds the lake which is 8 kilometers in circumference and although its depth has never been officially recorded, it is known to be over 400 meters deep (about 1,200 feet). This is certainly deep enough to float a steamship, as Maler observed. There is a waterfall, cliffs into the water, and unexplored ancient ruins on islands in the lake.

Plans are underway for a future member expedition to Lake Miramar to explore the region and to search for the Rocas de las Pinturas (Rock Paintings) Maler described. The trip will involve flying in small craft from Tenosique, in the northeast corner of the State of Chiapas on the Usumacinta River, into the jungle; travelling on the River Jataté in motor-powered rubber boats to the majestic falls of the River Santo Domingo; shooting the rapids in the river's canyon; two-hour marches through the jungle to the lake, where three days will be spent in exploring the warm, crystal-clear waters, which afford excellent scuba diving. This will be a physically-taxing trip, involving seven continuous nights of camping out in the jungle. Members in excellent physical condition who are interested in this exciting expedition should contact the Society office. Trips can be arranged between November and May, but each expedition is limited to 15 persons.

ENRIQUE BURMEISTER, Director General of ABC Travel Service in Mexico City, was recently honored by the city at a banquet attended by more than 700 civic leaders. Mr. Burmeister was awarded the city's highest award, the Golden Angel, symbol of Mexico City, for his contribution to the growth of tourism to Mexico over the past 50 years.

Mr. Burmeister is a Charter Member of the Ancient Astronaut Society.

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