

PALENQUE.

BY EDWARD H. THOMPSON.

VISITING Palenque, as I did in 1895, fresh from my work among the ruined groups of Yucatan, the impressions created and comparisons made may be of some interest to the Society.

I first noted how intensely tropical was the vegetation, great barillas, mahogany and cedars, six, eight, and even ten yards in circumference, towering sky-ward until their branches seemed like interlacing threadwork. In this tropical vigor of growth, the vegetation in and around Palenque far excels that around Chichen Itza, Uxmal or Labná.

Perpetual humidity surrounds Palenque. Situated as it is near the high hills of the Sierra Madre, the condensed cloud vapor of the region passes close by it or is deposited around it. Water drips and trickles from its walls, forming, from the excess of lime in its material, myriad little stalactites and, in places, thin sheets of calcareous incrustation, as if the edifices were limestone caverns instead of structures built by human hands. I searched in vain for a long time to find traces of wooden lintels in these structures; the lime deposits had so covered the spaces left vacant by the absence of the lintels that the closest investigation yielded no result, until at last, in a peculiarly protected location, I found clear traces of a wooden lintel, the lintel itself having fallen out or decayed, leaving in the once plastic mortar clear impressions of the knots, even the grain of the wood. This same percolation of lime particles in solution, while obliterating certain interesting

features, is destined to be an important factor in the preservation of the ruined structures themselves. It is fast binding the material, stones, mortar, stucco, and all, into one solid mass, that the roots cannot wrench apart or time destroy. It bids fair to make certain portions of the palace as eternal as the stones themselves. The so-called "subterranean" chambers to the right of the inner courtyard, looking out of the inner corridor, are simply combined into one coherent mass of limestone, a knitting together of all parts without greatly disturbing the original outlines. These lime incrustations proceed so fast that I noted a plant whose life at best cannot exceed one season, yet several of its leaves were whitened by a thin pellicule of lime incrustation formed from the dripping from above. The "subterranean" chambers were not originally subterranean chambers at all, as a very few minutes' observation served to show me; they were in reality the lowest chambers of one wing of the palace, now buried by the *débris* of the upper stories and also by that of the tall tower adjoining them.

I noted that the walls of these chambers were once more or less covered with mural paintings, a narrow band six inches in width extending around the upper portion of the vertical wall, just under the jutting portion that marks the commencement of the arch. Upon this band was painted a series of hieroglyphics in black pigment outlined in a clear, bold manner by the hand of a master. Noting that a piece of the first layer of stucco was about to fall, I detached it and found beneath it, as fresh as if drawn and painted yesterday, a bit of painting, arabesque in design, with yellow, red, brown, black and green colors. Doubtless, if the blurred and disfigured outer layer of stucco were removed, the uncovered layer would present some wonderfully fresh and perfect specimens of mural paintings.

I can hardly find words fit to express my admiration of

the sculptured figures held by the tablets that once adorned the various sanctuaries. They are unapproached by anything that I have yet seen in Yucatan, but the sculptors of Palenque had as a material to work upon, a stone far superior to that possessed by those of Yucatan, and to this I attribute a great deal of the superior finish of the Palenque work. The stone used in Palenque was also a limestone like that of Yucatan, but exceedingly fine grained, hard and laminated, and therefore susceptible of being easily worked into large smooth slabs of exceedingly fine texture, resembling to the eye and touch the fine German lithographic stone.

The sculptured bas-reliefs of Chichen Itza have a massiveness and an artistic breadth all their own; but those of Palenque have a certain refined freedom of technique, that combined with the magnificent material, make them incomparable with any similar work yet known in the Americas.

The stucco work and figures at Palenque are in most cases finely executed, but no more so than at Chichen Itza or Uxmal. They are more intricate, and in many examples do indeed recall "the rococo style of Louis XV.," as Charnay aptly states.

The largest stone mass that I encountered at Palenque was twelve feet long by three wide, and two and eight-tenths thick. This was a roughly hewn block used in the construction of the aqueduct below the Palace. I have seen solid stone masses used in the stonework of Uxmal ten feet long by three wide and nearly three thick, consequently it will be seen that there is nothing cyclopean at Palenque. I see no reason, however, to fix the limit of the stone masses or monoliths that could have been produced by the ancient builders of Palenque. Their stone-cutters had the same advantage over those of Yucatan that their brethren, upon the higher artistic plane of sculpture, had over those of their guild in Yucatan. The stone material being laminated, fine grained and homogeneous,

could be scaled to almost any dimensions, length, breadth or thickness; while the Yucatan workmen had to labor generally with a rock material, friable, coarse grained and full of faults. With all his modern appliances, the builder of to-day would find it exceedingly difficult to procure in Yucatan, many blocks of stone nine feet long, without a break or serious blemish.

The structures of Palenque are grand, the Palace complicated and artistic. The Temples of the Sun and Cross, hold or did hold, many gems of the sculptor's work; but, to my mind, the New World has no more magnificent work of the ancient builders, than that gigantic mosaic gem, the House of the Governor, amid the ruins of Uxmal.

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