

ANCIENT TOMBS OF PALENQUE.

BY EDWARD H. THOMPSON.

SOUTH, sixty degrees west, of the so-called Temple of the Cross No. 1, and about two-thirds down the western slope of the pyramid, I discovered a series of sealed tombs. These were, for the most part, so destroyed by the roots of large trees and by the breaking away of the face of the pyramid, that their original outline could only be conjectured. But I had the good fortune to encounter one practically intact, and from this I gleaned the following facts:—

The tomb itself was built into the side of the pyramid and formed a small rectangular room six feet eight inches long, by six feet wide, and seven feet high. It was well built of lime material and stones, and had the appearance of having been once smooth-finished with white stucco. Of this stucco hardly a vestige now remains in place, but the floor of the tomb was covered with its finely disintegrated fragments. The roof was vaulted after that form of the corbel vault known as the Maya arch. In the centre of this tomb was a rectangular stone burial-case, five feet long, two feet wide, and one and one-half feet high, each side of which was formed of two smooth-finished stone slabs, each two inches thick. The inner slabs were sunken below the edges of the outer, sufficiently to allow the slab that served as a cover to be let down flush with the edges, thus forming a well-finished, decent and simple deposit for the dead. The top of the burial-case was covered with *débris* that time and dampness had hardened into a cemented mass. Carefully clearing off this adherent material, I found upon the exposed surface the votive offerings of the ancient

mourners, consisting of a small, broken, terra-cotta effigy of a warrior, with flowing plumes and other warrior vestments, lance heads, jade beads, and terracotta pendants, all broken purposely before being placed within the tomb, as the position of the fragments indicated. This ancient custom of breaking the burial offerings prevailed to some extent in Yucatan, as my excavations have shown. Lifting the heavy top, I found the remains of two skeletons, but so utterly decomposed that a touch destroyed them. One was lying upon its side with its arms and knees drawn up toward the chin. The other was so nearly obliterated by the many streams of water that had entered through the joints of the case, opened by some disturbance of the pyramid base, that its exact position could not be ascertained. A small earthen jar, a bowl-shaped vessel, some jade beads and a beautifully engraved spinning-whorl of jade were found in the grave, which was carefully recovered and left to undisturbed quiet for perhaps another lapse of centuries.

About twenty-five yards to the north of this sepulchre lies the now shapeless mound that holds a veritable Chamber of the Dead. A narrow opening in the top of the mound, two feet, five inches wide by six feet long, once securely sealed by heavy slabs of worked stone cemented into place, leads down a stairway of six steps, ending in a platform three feet by four and one-half feet; two more steps at right angles to the others give one the entrance to a narrow chamber fourteen feet, three inches long, six feet, seven inches wide, and eight feet, four inches high. The left-hand wall of this chamber has no opening. The cement has mostly dropped off and its place is supplied by countless brilliant points of lime incrustations, and from the vaulted roof depend innumerable stalactites. The right-hand wall of the chamber has three small openings, each five feet, four inches long by two feet, six inches wide, solidly sealed with cement and stone, but now opened by

the finder, Mr. German Kohler, a resident of Palenque. Through the first opening I crawled, and descending one step, found myself in a well-planned burial chamber of the same general shape as the one discovered by me, but larger, being seven feet long by six feet wide, and ten feet, ten inches high. This chamber held no burial-case, the skeleton lying directly upon the cement floor of the chamber, and so far as I could ascertain the body was placed with the head toward the north, and the votive offering, a simple shallow vase, on a line with the right shoulder.

The second chamber, of the same general size and appearance as the first, held near its centre a large, well-made case, five feet long by two feet wide, and two feet high, of smooth, handsome slabs of stone, in general appearance resembling the burial-case in the grave which I discovered. This case held, beside the skeleton, two vessels, one bowl-shaped and the other like a huge ladle, both of hard-burned clay, two obsidian blades eight inches long, and one spindle-whorl of terra-cotta.

The third chamber, similar in size and shape to the preceding, held one body placed directly upon the cement floor of the tomb, but covered by two large stone slabs placed tent-wise, one resting against the other, with the open ends covered by smaller slabs, all securely cemented into place. Underneath this curious, yet effective burial-case, was resting a single skeleton and one ordinary shallow vessel.

At the southwest corner of the great chamber was found a skeleton placed with head toward the west, with an ornamental clay vessel close by the left shoulder. This principal chamber opens on the west into a smaller one, in reality a continuation, but separated by a half-wall. This smaller room also held a skeleton without burial case of any description. In the wall appears an opening leading to a tomb, probably similar to those already described, but the top and sides of this portion of the structure have caved

in, and much excavation would be necessary before investigations could be made.

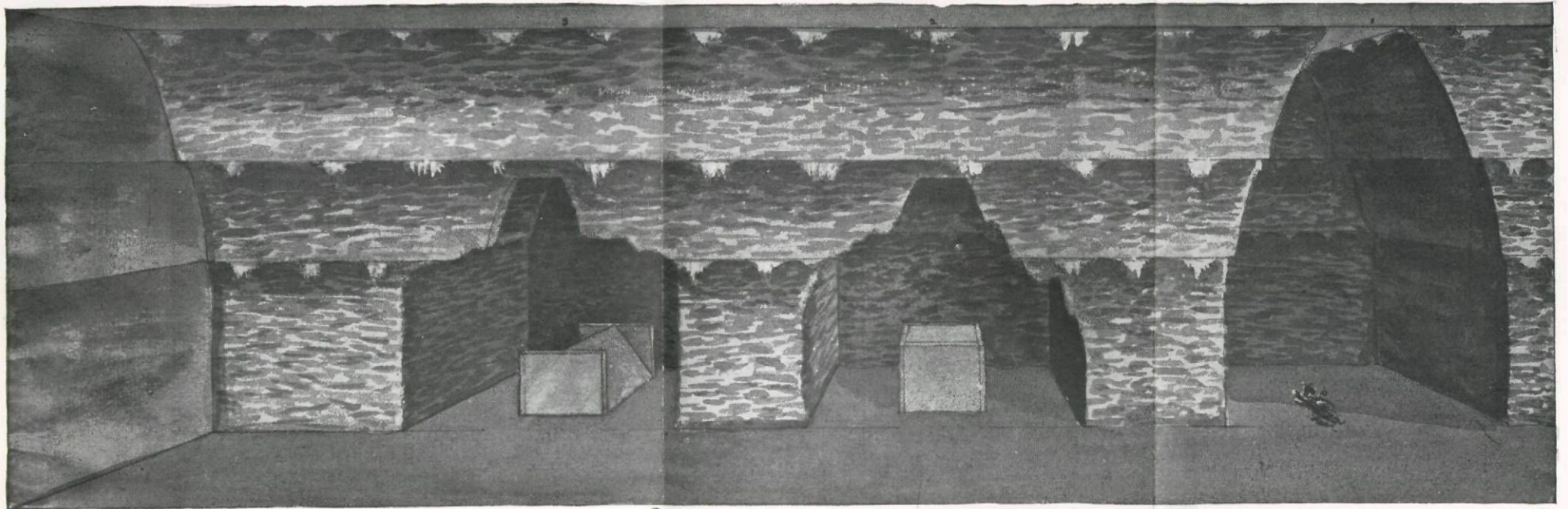
The visit to Palenque having been made simply for comparative study, it was, of course, impossible to undertake work requiring any great excavation.

As I have before stated, the walls and ceilings of tombs and chambers were covered with stalactites and lime coating. The floors were of hard stucco, colored an ochreous yellow by time and use. The deposit of lime and yellow dirt, *etc.*, had covered the floor to a depth of nine inches with a hard cement, adhering to the floor as if both were but one coherent mass. Perpetual humidity prevailed in this structure, which is subterraneous now, whatever it may have been originally.

What was the original shape of the mound I cannot say. One who has not visited the forests of Palenque cannot imagine the inextricable confusion of great roots, overturned tree-trunks, climbing vines, and decaying vegetation, that buries everything under a seething, gloomy, deceptive covering. One step forward may land one on a fallen column, and the next bury one waist-deep in the rotten trunk of a fallen forest giant among scorpions and biting ants. To clear off the covering of vegetation and vegetable mould would have been a serious task, that I could not undertake.

I think that on the summit of the mound covering the Chamber of the Dead was once a structure, but to ascertain what it was and make a perfected plan of the whole, will have to be a work of the future.

Never was time laid out to better advantage than was ours at Palenque. The indefatigable Prof. W. H. Holmes did the work of three men in his chosen line. We worked measuring, studying and noting by day, plotting, revising notes and comparing by night, resting just enough to keep us alive, relying on the future sea-trip to give us rest and restore us to good condition.



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