

Cresterías of Palenque

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One's first visit to Palenque is an assault on the senses — the green backdrop of the rain-forest and its pungent smells, the elegant and gracious proportions of the principal buildings and their deceptive scale, the richness of the stucco and the vivid traces of color everywhere, but most, perhaps, the bold but harmonious roof combs. Only two of these survive with any degree of completeness but they crown their buildings and they add the final touch of grace to each.



Fig. 1 Rural thatched houses, El Carmen, Puebla.

Imprecisely called “roof combs” in English, they must more accurately be thought of as *cresterías* — crests or crowns. What are *cresterías*, and what function did they serve? We may never know absolutely because they are often the first parts of temples to be destroyed by weathering and root action. But they had to have been of considerable importance to the iconography of the building they crowned. It is to be hoped that this paper might stir some thought toward this very important architectural feature.

When Cortez first encountered cities in Mesoamerica, he and his men found the stone temple architecture to be curious — very different from Castile, with small dark interior spaces, massive walls and impressive exterior spaces. But as for the domestic architecture that the conquistadors encountered, it must have seemed very familiar to them in fact. To look at

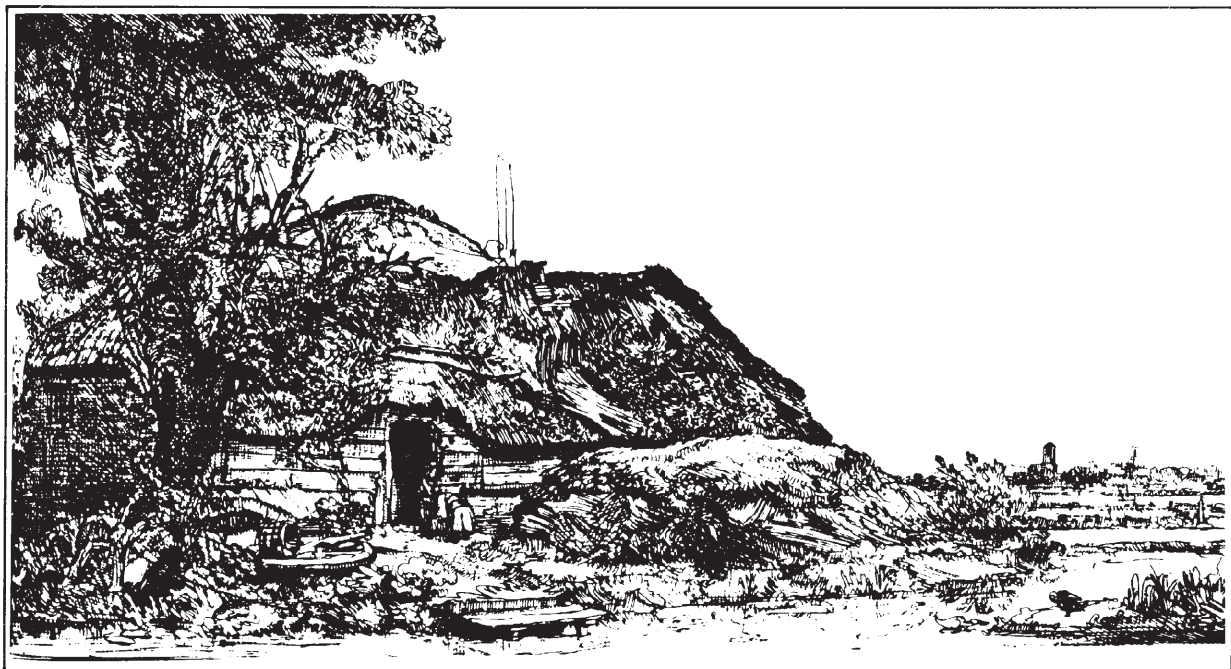


Fig. 2 Rembrandt etching, "Cottage with a Large Tree", 1641.



Fig. 3 Maya thatched house, northern Yucatán.



Fig. 4 Reconstructed thatched temple, Edzná, Campeche.

contemporary thatch farmhouses and barns, say along the road from Cardenas to Comalcalco, is to look at the same sort of dwellings and barns that moved Rembrandt to sketch their equivalents in Holland in the mid-seventeenth century.

At a certain level, thatch architecture the world over is similar. It is usually constructed of light materials — often the sides of such structures are woven or are of wattle and daub construction. The thatch keeps the interior warm and dry in cold rainy weather and cool in hot weather. It is easily replaced. It allows smoke to pass through without the necessity of a chimney. Its main drawback is that it can harbor bugs and rodents. From every evidence the Maya hut (one of my favorite structures in all of the world) has changed little in several thousand years. It has been the sacred center of Maya existence. It was the first temple — the house of the gods. Today at San Juan Chamula, according to Thor Anderson (personal communication), houses are constructed with a beam called a “feather beam” and at the crown of the roof are three bundles of thatch called the “three lizards.” The Maya hut is echoed in later stone architecture. In fact, a number of Maya temples were thatched structures on earthen mounds, sometimes faced with stone, like the restored structure to the south of the palace at Edzná.

Much ancient stone architecture derives directly from wood or other perishable materials, and we can see the original structural elements frozen in stone to become decorative architectural elements. Two obvious ancient examples are the Greek temple and early *stupa* fences and *toranas* of India. Imhotep, the genius who designed the first pyramid and the incredible funerary compound of Zoser at Saqqara, is the earliest true architect with an historical name. His *Heb-Sed* court is surrounded by dummy buildings, all copies of structures made of perishable materials, which have been fossilized for all time with details rendered beautifully in imperishable stone: opened doors frozen against walls, their hinges and sockets, log ceilings, peg wedges, and bound reed construction — all translated lovingly and respectfully into polished beige limestone structures of uncanny and timeless beauty. No wonder Imhotep was deified!



Fig. 5 Torana and stupa at Sanchi, India, 2nd century B.C. Photograph by Seymour Koenig.

Egyptian architecture remained remarkably conservative and stable for nearly three thousand years. Even in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt one finds papyrus bundle and lotus bud columns and the cavetto cornice — a translation into stone of the tops of woven palm frond walls still used in rural Egypt



Fig. 6 Opened door with hinges and sockets modeled into a limestone structure in the Heb-Sed court of Zoser at Saqqara, Egypt, circa 2750 B.C.



Fig. 7 Tikal, Temple I. Photograph by Jörn Bramann.

today.

In the Maya world many architectural forms remained conservative. The narrow corbals of Tikal temples reflect an ultra-conservatism. The very structures on the tops of the pyramids are stone translations of Maya thatch huts. The Maya often abut one hut with another — the rear one serving as the hearth area — and this is plainly visible at Tikal. At Palenque we find several innovative architectural developments during the brilliant reign of Pacal. Whether Pacal was served by some visionary genius, like Imhotep, or a series of exceptional minds, or whether he himself was the visionary one, we shall probably never know. But the buildings which were erected during his reign, from El Olvidado to the Temple of the Inscriptions, develop step by step wider and more adventurous corbels, the hip-roof style so characteristic of Palenque, and probably the very special type of *cresterías* that graced the architecture of the city. The two surviving *cresterías* were built by his son, Chan-Bahlum, who carried the architectural style developed by his father to even greater refinement.

What were *cresterías* and how did they develop? From representations of early Mesoamerican architecture we can surmise that from ancient times, possibly as early as the Olmec, the temple or sanctuary was set apart from the house or the dwelling by a crest or emblem of some sort at the peak of the roof thatch, which also possibly served the function of attracting the deity or the spirit to its terrestrial home.

Possibly the earliest known depiction of a temple in Mesoamerica is a blurred painting on a stalagmite deep in the cave of Juxtlahuaca, Guerrero. It appears to be a long structure with a barrel-shaped roof surmounted by a crest. The dating of Mezcala stones remains in question, but many representations of temples show that some, at least, had *cresterías*. A curious clay temple



Fig. 8 Partly obliterated Olmec drawing on a stalagmite deep in Juxtlahuaca cave, which may represent a long structure with a crest or roof comb. Photograph by Carlo T. E. Gay.



Fig. 9 Mezcala greenstone temple model with a roof comb. Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Milton Arno Leof.

model from Amapa, Nayarit, depicts a thatched temple atop a pyramid with a curious lantern-like finial.

But it is at Teotihuacan that we find sound graphic evidence of *cresterías* which seem to have been made of perishable materials — for only a few decorative stone merlons have actually been found. Various depictions seem to indicate very elaborate structures crowning the roofs of temples. The depictions seem to show feathers or feather-like motifs, possibly made of wood or reeds. As Laurette Séjourné reconstructs these palace temples they appear to have had remarkably elaborate superstructures. What was their symbolism?

I hypothesize that the motifs chosen for each structure plainly described the function and dedication of that building in an iconography understood by everyone. In the same way that the *braseros* of Teotihuacan and the urns of the Zapotecs displayed appropriate symbolic elements identified with the patron deities of the deceased, to whom the vessels were dedicated, the iconographic elements displayed on the *cresterías* informed the populace of the precise use of the building. In the same way the headdresses of Maya rulers and the badges they wear indicate their affinities, rank, and activity, according to Dicey Taylor (personal communication). The later Aztec twin temples dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca are so distinctive as to stand out immediately to the modern viewer even slightly aware of Aztec iconography through their comparative sizes and distinctive roof design.

In a number of disparate architectural styles, periods, and places one can see this same concept employed. New Guinea ceremonial houses, the painted and carved facades of northwest coast Indian houses, the pediment sculptures of Greek temples, the tympanum of a Romanesque



Fig. 10 Clay model of a temple with a lantern-like finial, from Amapa, Nayarit. *Pre-Columbian Architecture of Mesoamerica*, by Heyden and Gendrop, plate 60.

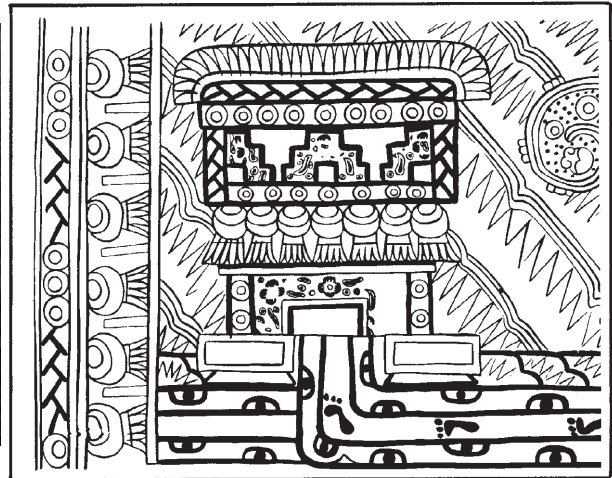


Fig. 11 Representation of a temple from a mural at Tetitla, Teotihuacan. *Arquitectura y Pintura en Teotihuacan*, by Laurette Séjourné, figure 55.

church, or the *torana* of an early Indian *stupa* all announce very clearly the specific use of the building. Very early the Japanese had formalized symbolic architectural roof elements, such as the five *katsuogi* on the peak of the roof of the west treasure house of the Ise shrine, which was designed before 685 A.D.

Having looked about for parallels in architecture of other times and places, how can we relate this to Maya *cresterías*? Possibly the earliest remains of Maya roof sculpture are figures modeled of mud, excavated in tumbled, half-melted condition in an Early Classic temple at Kaminaljuyu'. The massive *cresterías* of the great temples of Tikal, though of Late Classic date, probably reflect the conservatism of a long tradition. They are constructed with vast corbelled hollows inside them to lighten the load and to save materials. Greatly eroded by the action of tree roots, it is hard to reconstruct their precise iconography. At Rio Bec we find palace-like buildings with twin roof crests. Those on Temple B have tenons which in 1912 still held large fragments of human figures modeled in stucco on them. At Uxmal and on the arch at Labná curious step-pyramidal type of *crestería* also shows traces of stucco figures held on with tenons. The range of pyramidal honeycomb *cresterías* at Uxmal looked like a dovecote to early visitors. The temple at Labna' still has the lower torso and legs of a figure attached to its tenon. Hochob's curious *crestería* sports twenty-six loincloth-wearing male figures in what might be reminiscent to us of a circus act. Chicanna, Group D and Multunchik are so ravaged by the forest that they cannot be read at all. But in the Usumacinta region — especially at Yaxchilan and Palenque, the *crestería* reached heights of elegance, delicacy, and great beauty.

These Usumacinta *cresterías* have openwork staging or armatures on which figures and stucco decoration are applied with sumptuously rich detail. Temple 6 at Yaxchilán is

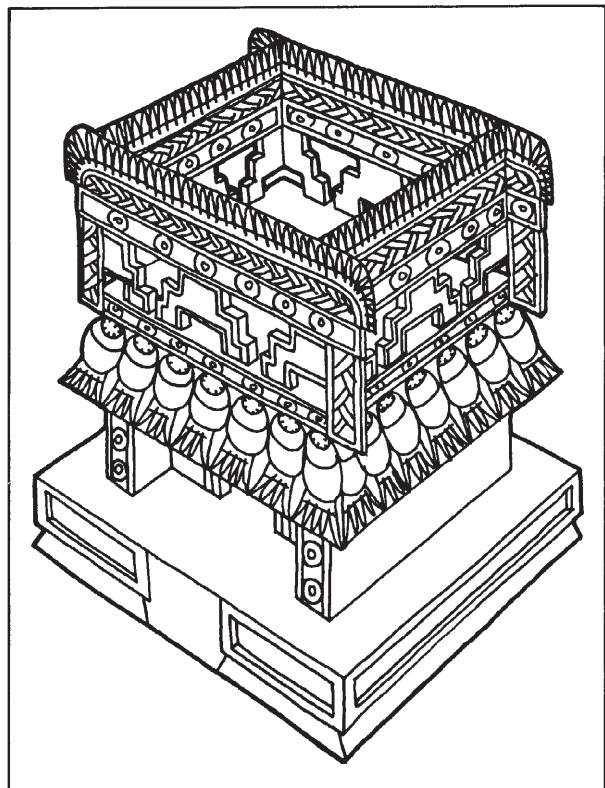


Fig. 12 Isometric reconstruction of a Teotihuacan temple. *Arquitectura y Pintura en Teotihuacan*, by Laurette Séjourné, figure 55.



Fig. 13 Abelam, New Guinea, ceremonial house. Photograph by Anthony Forge.



Fig. 14 The screen board of Chief Shakes' house, circa 1840. Drawing by Miguel Covarrubias.

a monument which is easily accessible — one can readily walk into the interior to study its construction. The interior is carefully finished with stucco which is smoothly worked — a detail which would have gone unnoticed from the outside. The interior, at least, has survived the ravages of twelve hundred years of untended existence in the rainforest. The most spectacular temple at Yaxchilán is Temple 33. Its impressive *cresterías* features a huge seated figure — probably of the lord Bird Jaguar — in the center. All that remains of what was probably a splendid sculpture is a giant armature. Three niches on the roof below also contain sockets and the remnants of figures of seated lords. The whole roof structure, including the back, is alive with traces of rich stucco work and lively color.

A unique limestone sculptural fragment in the collection of Josué Saenz depicting three seated figures in conversation may have been the *crestería* of a small temple or a sanctuary, or it might possibly be the back of a large throne or bench.

What certainly must have been the most



Fig. 15 Ise Shrine, West Treasure House with five katsugi on the roof peak. Photograph by Yoshio Watanabe.



Fig. 16 Detail of the crestería of Temple 33 at Yaxchilán, Fig. 18 Interior of the crestería of the Temple of the Cross of Palenque showing the remains of a giant seated figure — probably of Palenque. Photograph by Linda Schele. Bird Jaguar.



Fig. 17 Cresteria of the Temple of the Cross of Palenque. Photograph by Hugh Johnston.

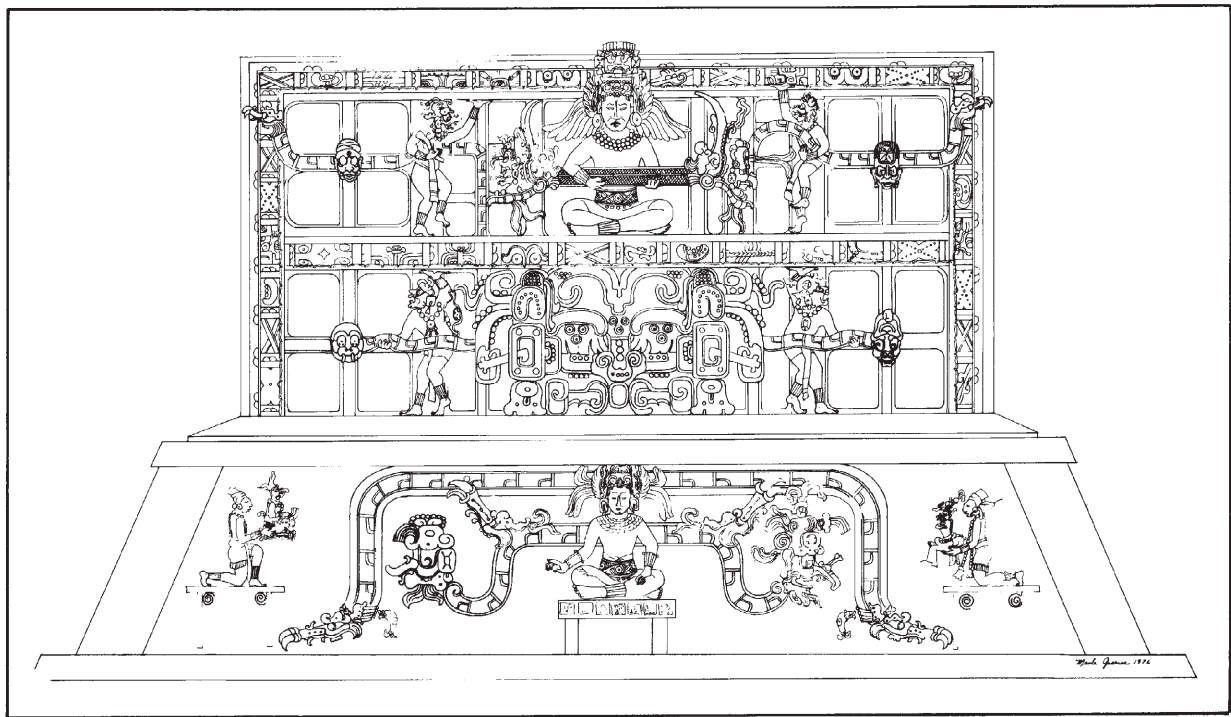


Fig. 19 Reconstruction of the cresterías of the Temple of the Sun. Drawing by Merle Greene Robertson.

graceful of all the genre are the remains of the *crestería* of Palenque. For the most part the roof combs of Palenque have collapsed into rubble, leaving a few roots to show that they existed. Desiré Charnay made an attempt to reconstruct the appearance of House C of the Palace group in 1887 with charming lack of comprehension.

The best preserved *crestería* at Palenque crowns the Temple of the Cross, in spite of the fact that the façade of the building has slumped away. Its interior is in good condition. It is coated with finished stucco and contains within it a sort of stairway for its own maintenance with an opening at the top. The fragments of stucco decoration on the exterior might appear to be too sparse to give clues to its iconography. But Merle Greene Robertson, using a 1000 millimeter lens, has captured details and fragments not visible to the naked eye. By comparing these with magnified enlargements of the remarkable glass plate photographs taken by Maudslay in 1890 one can salvage a surprising amount of information. Details and sections indicate what figures must have been in what places and these in turn may be interpreted through the rigidly observed iconography repeated throughout Palenque. When the façade of the pyramid is excavated the earth will certainly yield more of the original stucco which should help confirm such a reconstruction.

The iconography of the roof comb of the Temple of the Sun, my favorite building in Mesoamerica, has already been tentatively reconstructed from recent photographs and Maudslay blowups, by Merle Greene Robertson. Even though much of the stucco material which had cascaded down from the temple over the centuries has been misplaced, some survives in the *bodega*.

All of the three principal buildings of the Cross Group iconographically completely define the varied aspects of Chan Bahlum's divine rulership — each building being devoted to specific responsibilities and legitimacies. Therefore I posit that the *cresterías* should have reflected those aspects publicly, for all to see, while the more sacred sanctuaries might have stated them more specifically and privately for the benefit of the family, the priesthood, and the gods.

This very specific function of the *cresterías* of Palenque should not indicate that all roof combs elsewhere served the same function indicated Beatriz de la Fuente (personal communication) (with the possible exception of Temple 33 at Yaxchilán). Palenque for all intents

and purposes lacks stelae. The temples, themselves, and their tablets provided the same function in a richer way. It is interesting to note that in the Palace the only principal building which lacks even a trace of a roof comb is House E — the house of coronations - and probably the earliest major building in the Palace complex. It is our loss not to have any *cresteras* from the time of Pacal the Great.

Although the complete iconographic message of Palenque *cresteras* must remain speculative at present, their very skeletal remains still awe us with that grace of proportion and elegance which sets Palenque apart from all other Maya sites — if not all sites in the world.