

# The Architectural Backdrops of the Murals of Structure 1, Bonampak

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We fumble with the terms "palace" and "temple" for Maya architecture, but what do we mean? Those words may describe the format of a structure, but they generally fail to describe the kind of activities that took place in a palace such as the one at Palenque.<sup>1</sup> Most monumental art depicts anonymous backgrounds, vacant planes. Maya vases often show interiors, but, because most pots are known out of context and representations on them are often sketchy, pots are hard to read architecturally. There is rarely evidence for architecture beyond the constraints of a single room.

The greatest exception to this absence of clear architectural representation is Bonampak. In the three rooms of murals there, architecture is inhabited and used. Princes are presented to lords; rulers torture and sacrifice their captives. All is set

in place against architectural backdrops that show Maya playfulness and artistic conventions as well as the functional use of a city.

## Room 1

In Room 1, the first scene is marked by the parasols that rise from the ground level to frame the glyphic text and set off the upper east, south, and west walls (Fig. 1). The glyphic text underscores and unites the scene, subtly echoing the rhythm of the figures above: four large glyph blocks under the four white-mantled lords, many glyph blocks under the ten lords. The scene pivots around the porter with the child, the family directing from behind, the lords in front. As Caso first suggested, the presentation of the child and his probable installation as heir form the focus of the scene (cited in Villagra 1947:160-163).

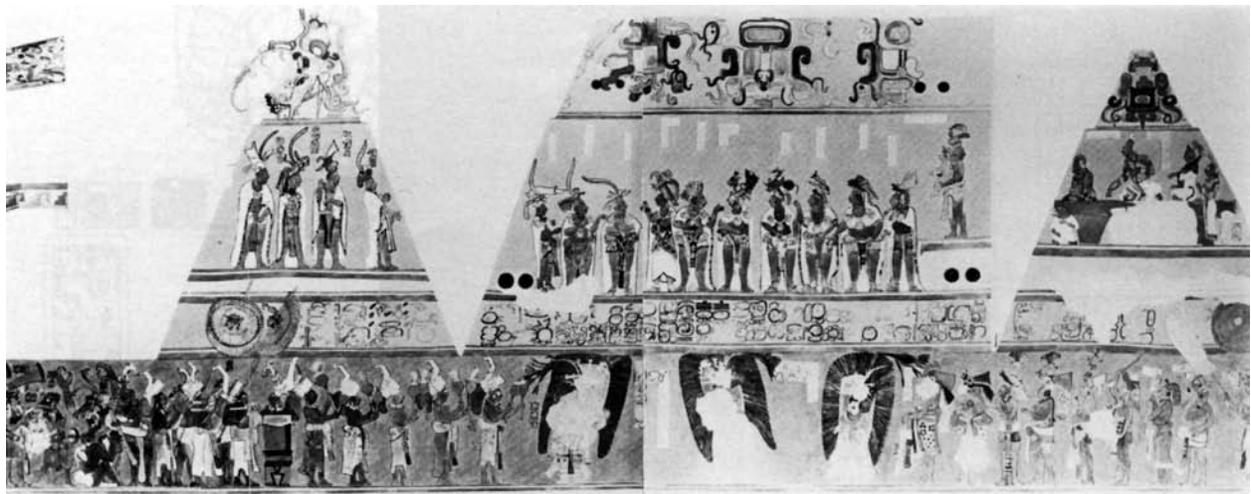


Fig. 1. Mural in Room 1, Structure 1, Bonampak.

1985 The Architectural Backdrops of the Murals of Structure 1, Bonampak. In *Fourth Palenque Round Table, 1980, Vol. VI*, edited by Merle Greene Robertson and Elizabeth P. Benson. Electronic version. San Francisco: Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute.

The child is undoubtedly the topic of the animated conversation among the ten lords on the south wall, but the depiction would be monotonous if they were shown on a flat surface, all facing the same way, looking at the child in a single file. As painted, the representation is ambiguous.

Few large groups were ever represented in Maya monumental art. One thinks immediately of Piedras Negras Lintel 3, where seven individuals sit in front of the throne and six or seven stand to the side (Fig. 2), or of Piedras Negras Stela 12, where twelve individuals are stacked in a pyramid (Maler 1901: pl. XXI). The earliest sculpture with large numbers of persons is Piedras Negras Lintel 12, a dull design of three bound figures facing the ruler, who stands with a single bound captive behind him. The artists of the later sculptures, Lintel 3 and Stela 12, worked to develop imaginative and naturalistic representations of large numbers of people. No other site even attempted such sculptural groupings. The development at Piedras Negras and Bonampak is reminiscent of the artistic struggle of Leonardo to work out a convincing arrangement of the twelve disciples in his *Last Supper*.

All Piedras Negras group scenes focus on a single individual. All attention moves to the ruler at the top of Stela 12. On Lintel 3, the figures all respond to the individual on the throne (Fig. 2). On the ground level in front of the throne, the person at the far left taps the waist of the one in front

of him, who, in turn, leans forward, his weight on his left hand. The individual naturalism of the grouping is closely comparable to the representation at Bonampak.

At first, the Bonampak scene seems spatially ambiguous. Figure 3a shows the literal architectural configuration depicted. But the porter with the child does not stand in a corner, away from the royal family; he undoubtedly stands directly in front of the throne, but possibly outside the enclosed palace room. The porter could not block the family portrait. The ten white-robed lords on the south wall all look at one another, rather than at the child or the ruler on the throne; they have no obvious focal point. Within the bounds of presenting all figures in profile in a coherent composition, there is no means of depicting the group looking at the throne. If we could rotate the south wall ninety degrees, however, we would find a more plausible orientation of the lords, now watching and discussing the presentation directly in front of them. The four lords on the upper east wall move as though they are about to step down to the same level as the ten on the south (Fig. 3b)

Viewing this presentation as occurring in front of the throne, with ten lords standing at a lower level, looking up, followed by four more lords about to join them, we find an architectural configuration that begins to suggest occupation of space. Thompson believed that the events depicted on the entire upper register took place outside on

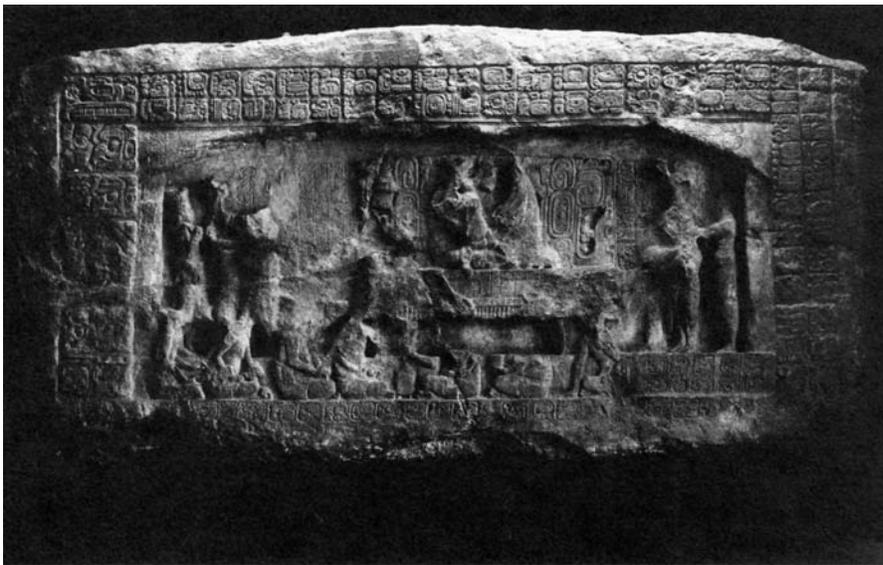


Fig. 2. Piedras Negras Lintel 3.

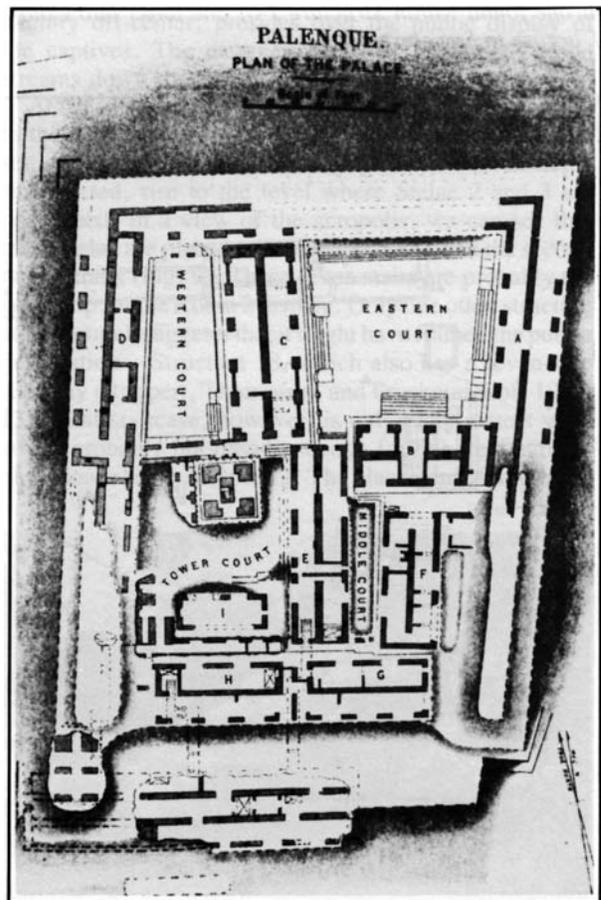
"one of those long and rather low platform structures prominent at most Maya sites, which did not support stone buildings" (Ruppert, Thompson, and Proskouriakoff 1955:49). The architectural configuration suggests more than Thompson saw, and I believe that known Maya architecture can be suggested as the location of this activity.

An examination of the orientation of thrones from the region may be instructive in determining an architectural locale. The throne depicted in the murals is long, about three meters, and is supported by wedge-shaped legs. Thrones with wedge-shaped legs are known only from the western Maya region. This type of throne has been found at Bonampak, Piedras Negras, and Yaxchilán along with other types of thrones and pedestals. Other wedge-leg thrones are depicted on the House C piers at Palenque, on Yaxchilán Lintel 57, on the Kimbell Museum wall panel, on the Museum of Primitive Art wall panel, on Piedras Negras Lintel 3 and Stelae 3 and 40, as well as

**Fig. 3.** Room 1, Bonampak: (a) literal configuration; (b) reconstructed orientation.



**Fig. 4.** Palenque, the Oval Palace Tablet, as drawn by Catherwood for the 1841 edition of Stephens' *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*. In the time of Stephens and Catherwood, the wall still bore a mark where the throne had been.



**Fig. 5.** Palenque, plan of the Palace. From the throne in front of the Oval Palace Tablet, one looks into the tower court.

twice in the Bonampak murals and on numerous painted vessels. Palenque has two thrones similar to the wedge-leg ones, but with straight legs.

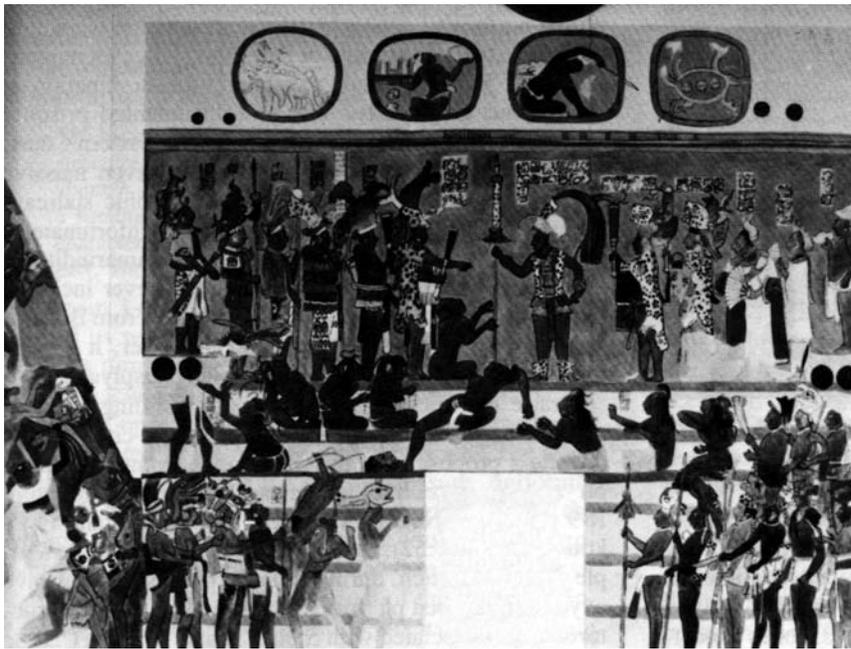
Of the known thrones, two had probably been moved. That thrones were forcibly removed from structures is clear from the treatment that had been accorded Piedras Negras Throne 1 (Satterthwaite 1935:23). Bonampak Throne 1 was found 15 meters from Structure 16, but it was not recognized as a throne. The "square altar" described by Ruppert was found broken. The top measured 1.05 by 1.6 meters, far too small for the scene portrayed in the murals (Ruppert, Thompson, and Proskouriakoff 1955:13). Other thrones suffered damage. Yaxchilán Throne 1 (Morley's Altar 16; Morley 1937-1938, V: p1. 178Ed) was found badly broken in the plaza in front of Structures 22 and 21. Only three thrones were found *in situ*: Palenque Throne 1, Piedras Negras Throne 1, and Yaxchilán Throne 2. The so-called Madrid relief is actually the leg of a throne, once in position under the Oval Palace Tablet of House E, Palenque (Fig. 4; H. Berlin 1965b). The location of the second



**Fig. 6.** Piedras Negras, plan of Court 1. From the throne found within Structure J-6, one looks into Court 1 across to Structure J-2.



**Fig. 7.** Map of Bonampak.



**Fig. 8.** Mural on north wall in Room 2, Structure 1, Bonampak.

Palenque throne in a subterranean chamber suggests that it too had been moved, possibly to protect it. Most of Piedras Negras Throne 1 was found smashed within Structure J-6, where the throne had been set in a niche. Yaxchilán Throne 2 was found inside Structure 6 by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia during the 1976 season at the site. No information is available about its placement.

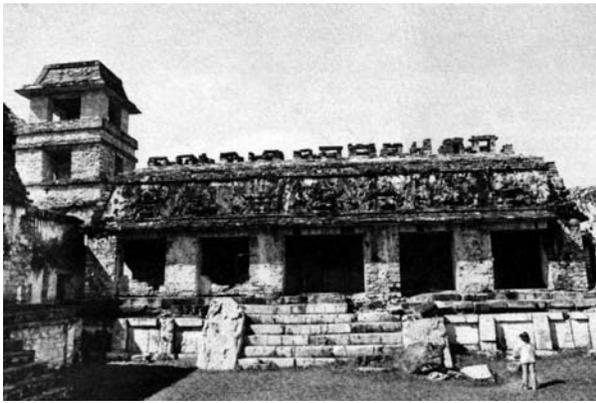
Piedras Negras Throne 1 was designed to fit into the niche of Structure J-6. The placement of Throne 1 at Palenque under the Oval Palace Tablet suggests a similar situation in a palace. Although thrones were often portable, many were designed for fixed, interior niches or sculptural arrange-

ments. Palenque and Piedras Negras give us the only good examples of the interior position of thrones. Both these thrones are oriented to look across courtyards into another palace (Figs. 5 and 6). At Palenque, a person seated on the throne of House E in front of the Oval Palace Tablet would have an unimpaired view west by southwest of the tower court and then of the westernmost wall and colonnade of the Palace. At Piedras Negras, the vista from Throne 1 would be southeast through the courtyard across to Structure J-2.

This may be the architectural configuration of Room 1. From a throne within a palace, the family watches as a child is presented to the crowd of fourteen lords. As in the representations on the



**Fig. 9.** The acropolis, Bonampak, looking south from the plaza.



**Fig. 10.** Hieroglyphic stairs of House C, the Eastern Court, Palenque.

piers of the Temple of the Inscriptions, the child is displayed from the front of the structure (Kubler 1969:13). The family is inside; the man carrying the child is outside. The ten lords stand in the courtyard; four others move from the structure across the courtyard.

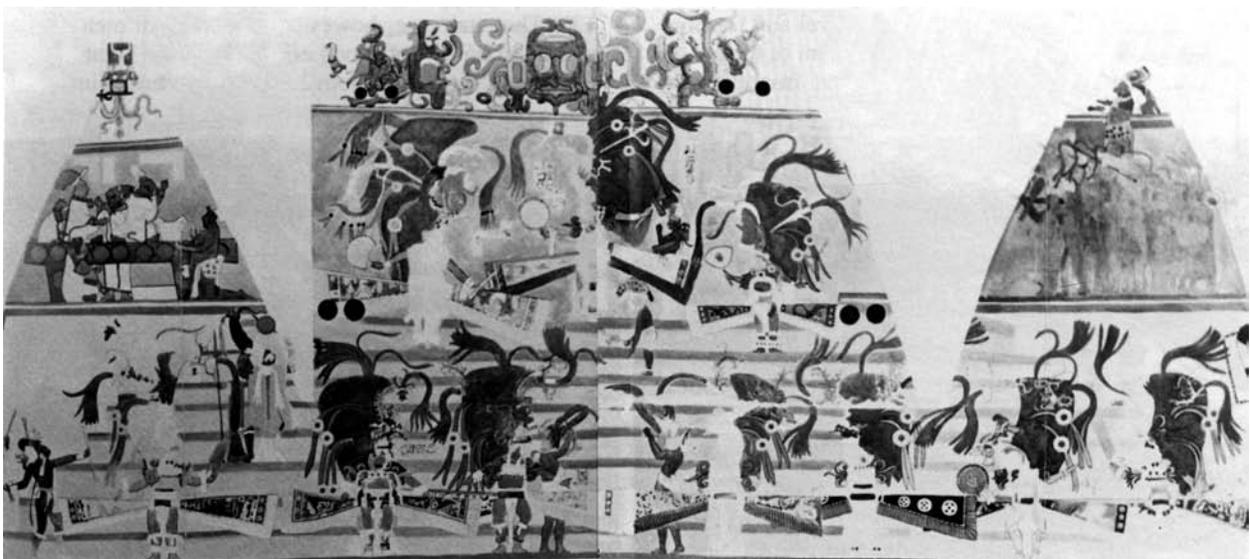
Unfortunately, the map of Bonampak shows no such configuration. The scene in Room 1 is probably not occurring at Bonampak (Fig. 7), for there are no courtyards, no structures with niches, no "palaces" in the formal sense of the word, neither on the Carnegie nor on the new INAH map. Nor does the Carnegie Institution of Washington map of Yaxchilán show a suitable structure (Morley 1937-1938, V: pl. 201). Yaxchilán has not been adequately mapped; undoubtedly, structures remain to be discovered and properly oriented.

But, even though the specific site of the Room 1 activities cannot be ascertained, it is possible to show at least one function of a structure like the Palace at Palenque. Interlocking courtyards provided the setting for certain dynastic events.

## Room 2

In Room 2 a completely different kind of architecture is depicted on the north wall (Fig. 8). Figures stand, sit, or sprawl across seven distinct steps. There is no outward variation to suggest pyramidal form, simply the plan of a monolithic staircase. The treads are broad enough for an individual to stand in profile or to sit cross-legged. Across the highest level and against the blue background are depicted thirteen individuals, including one pleading captive. At both ends of this level an individual stands on a yet higher platform, giving an upward curve to the arrangement of the persons on the top level and forming a counterpoint to the pyramidal arrangement of the naked captives. The Bonampak ruler, depicted frontally and slightly off-center, presides over the public display of the captives. The captives are being mutilated; blood streams down the arm of one.

At the south end of the main plaza at Bonampak, rising to the acropolis, the first tier of steps provides the likely setting for the scene in Room 2 (Fig. 7). Just seven steps, as depicted, rise to the level where Stelae 2 and 3 are positioned. In a view of the acropolis, we can see that these



**Fig. 11.** Mural in Room 3, Structure 1, Bonampak.

stelae are placed on low pylons that flank the second tier of stairs (Fig. 9). These seven stairs are probably the backdrop for the Room 2 display. Only one other structure at Bonampak suggests that it might have framed the public humiliation — Structure 18, which also has a seven-step stairway (Ruppert, Thompson, and Proskouriakoff 1955:13). That staircase, however, is only eight meters wide and is probably not broad enough for the great number of persons shown in Room 2. The placement of important buildings, such as Structure 1, at the south end of the plaza makes the seven-step stairway there a more likely choice. The treads of the acropolis are ninety centimeters deep; the stairs occupy fifteen meters in breadth; and the stairway is constructed of heavy, massive stones (*ibid.*). The depth of the treads is adequate for the seated figures; many Maya steps would not be. Although it seems unlikely that the paunchy conch blower and the warrior on the ends would stand on stela platforms, it is striking that the position of the stela platforms conforms exactly to the placement of small risers in the Room 2 representation. It is also possible that the Room 2 end risers simply mask the crossbeams which otherwise would visually sever the feet of the two end figures.

The heavy, massive stone used in the acropolis stairway is typical of the monolithic masonry of carved prisoner staircases at other sites: Yaxchilán, Palenque, Dos Pilas (Greene, Graham, and Rands 1972:202), Tamarindito, and Naranjo. The use of steps for displaying captives must have been widespread. At Bonampak, the painting on the north wall approaches the representation we would have were the Tamarindito or Dos Pilas staircases repopulated. At Palenque and Yaxchilán, the domination is spelled out glyphically. The best-documented prisoner staircase is that of the House C side of the Eastern Court, Palenque, which, as at Bonampak, had seven massive steps (Fig. 10). At Naranjo, the hieroglyphic staircase seems to have seven massive steps as well. Unfortunately, no map records the number of steps at Tamarindito or Dos Pilas, and at Yaxchilán no map has ever included more than the carved steps of Structure 44. From Bonampak to Palenque to the Petexbatun, however, it was

on the staircase that captives were publicly displayed.

I raise the question of the class of building used for public humiliation because Thompson had cited Satterthwaite's proposal that this Bonampak event took place on "a structure resembling the basal platform of Structure R-9 at Piedras Negras" (Ruppert, Thompson, and Proskouriakoff 1955:52). Structure R-9 is a free-standing temple pyramid, which, during its latest phases, did not have any seven-stepped platforms (Satterthwaite 1944). Structure R-9 is associated with Stelae 25 and 26, Late Classic monuments that are early for Piedras Negras. Although other structures at Piedras Negras might provide the proper background, Structure R-9 does not. The image represented at Bonampak is a staircase, not a pyramid.

### Room 3

In Room 3, the observer is surrounded by three walls of pyramid structure (Fig. 11). Rather than showing three-dimensional space as vanishing, the Bonampak convention approaches and engulfs the viewer by a convention for showing volume on a flat plane that parallels representations on painted pottery. Whereas the pottery design wraps the exterior of a continuous plane, the pyramid of Room 3 wraps the interior — it is as if we are inside a painted vessel.

Looking at the depiction, the eye flattens the scene. East and west wings recede to one plane with the south, and the representation is clearly a pyramid of eight levels. Thompson described the structure represented as follows:

The background of the scene is a pyramid or substructure, the original of which would have been about 3 m. high, which rises with eight steps to a summit without any structure on it, where the characters are silhouetted against a blue sky. (Ruppert, Thompson, and Proskouriakoff 1955:56)

If Room 3 represents reality, then the painter has surrounded us with an insignificant structure. A search of site maps turns up no three-meter-high structure west of the Usumacinta. The platform supporting Stela 2 and Altar L at Copán fits the

description. But need the building represented in Room 3 be drawn to scale? The scale that cannot be altered is the human measure, uniformly drawn at two-thirds throughout the murals. Were the setting a much grander pyramid, it could not be represented as such and still be populated in the manner of Room 3. The most important aspect of the pyramid representation may be its configuration, not its accurate scale in relationship to human beings.

The only structure at Bonampak that could form the background for Room 3 is Structure 3, now seen only as reconstructed by Raúl Pavón Abreu in the early 1960s. Neither the Carnegie Institution nor the current exploration by archaeologists of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia has found any evidence for the massive staircase Pavón built on the front of the structure. With the stairs removed, the structure becomes an eight-layered pyramid. Although the proportion of human to structure is skewed, the internal scale of height and width of the structure seems to be correct.

With our paucity of painted or sculptured architectural representations, we may not be able to discern schematic and naturalistically representative architecture. The complicated and flamboyant ceremony of Room 3 could conceivably take place on the pyramid at Bonampak, the procession wending from the plaza, the deformed characters with the drummer on a litter perhaps on an adjoining level at the top of the flight of stairs above Stelae 2 and 3. In Room 3, the architecture is probably condensed to allow us to see both structure and participants in their most lucid manner.

### Conclusion

The three rooms set the viewer in several locales. First, enclosed within the palace's intimate confines, a royal child is presented to a court of nobles while the royal family directs. There is no evidence for this event having occurred at the site of Bonampak as known today. The scene of display on the north wall of Room 2 occurs outside, probably on the first flight of stairs running up the acropolis. Like other stairways used for the purpose of displaying captives, this one consists of seven tiers of massive stones. In Room 3, the

locus of activity shifts east, from the stairs to the pyramid. Here the scene is visible from the entire plaza. The torture of captives and their subsequent execution occur in the most public circumstances on the Bonampak acropolis, while the presentation of an heir takes place behind palace walls. The architectural representations in the Bonampak murals provide concrete evidence for the setting of particular events.

### Notes

Figs. 1, 8, and 11 are by Antonio Tejada, from Ruppert, Thompson, and Proskouriakoff 1955; fig. 7, surveyed and prepared by Ruppert and Stromsvik, is also from that publication. Fig. 2 is by Andrea Stone. Figs. 3, 6, and 9 are by the author. Fig. 4 is by Frederick Catherwood, from Stephens 1841. Fig. 5 is from Maudslay 1889-1902, IV: pl. 3. Fig. 10 is by Elizabeth P. Benson.

<sup>1</sup> Archaeology has testified to function in some circumstances, for example, the funereal function of the Temple of the Inscriptions, Palenque. Archaeology has also been used to document the residential function of the Central Acropolis, Tikal (Harrison 1970).

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