

---

# Historical Notes on the Discovery of the Ruins, The Founding of the Town, and the Origin and Significance of the Name of Palenque

ARNULFO HARDY GONZALEZ, M.D.  
(translated by J. Kathryn Josserand)

A consideration of the discovery of Palenque has been an obligatory theme for investigators who have taken on the task of clarifying the historical past of this great cultural legacy of the Maya civilization. One early historian, Manuel Larráinzar, mentions in his “Historia de Chiapa y Guatemala” (a chapter in his five-volume study, 1875–1878) that the ruins of Palenque were discovered in 1740 by the priest of Palenque and Tumbalá, Don Antonio Solís. But the majority of the early sources attributed the discovery of the ruins of Palenque to the canon of Chiapas, Ramón Ordoñez y Aguiar.

In 1773, Ordoñez sent a letter to the president of the Real Audiencia (Royal High Court) of Guatemala, to whose jurisdiction Chiapas belonged, stating that he “had knowledge of a town in ruins”; this constitutes the first official notice we have of Palenque. But the research of Beatriz de la Fuente indicates that “Ordoñez never had the opportunity to know Palenque personally, [and] all his information was given to him by his uncle, Antonio de Solís” (de la Fuente 1968:15).

Furthermore, much earlier than the earliest historical mention of the ruins of Palenque, during the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century, there was another person whose activities are important to the clarification of this historical overview of Palenque: Fray Pedro Lorenzo de la Nada.

## The Founding of Palenque

In the year 1560, at the invitation of Fray Domingo de Azcona, Fray Pedro Lorenzo de la Nada came to the royal capital (today San Cristóbal de las Casas) from San Estéban de Salamanca (Spain), to work in the Indian towns. In 1561, he began his missionary work by learning the Tzotzil and Tzeltal languages. By 1564, he had resettled the Pochutla Indians in the town of Ocosingo and had similarly resettled in Yaxalum (today Yajalón) the Tzeltal Indians who previously lived in Ocot. Those who lived to the north of Ocosingo were resettled in the town of Bachajón. He also collected the dispersed Chol

Indians and settled them into the towns of Tumbalá and Tila, and it was in these last towns that he “became enamored of the sonorous sound of the Chol language” (de Vos 1980:24). Fray Pedro Lorenzo de la Nada was probably the first missionary to approach the Chol Indians in their own language, and he also became familiar with their life and culture, as well as their history. It is his commentary on the history of the Chols that states that they themselves “mention some abandoned temples and palaces at the foot of the range of hills which borders the plain of Tabasco, near the River Chacamáx” (de Vos 1980:24–25).

Later on, Fray Pedro Lorenzo learned of the Lacandón Indians and soon made a trip to Lacantún to invite them to join in the peace which had been established with their allies, the Pochutecs, the Tzeltals, and the Chols. But the Lacandóns categorically rejected his offer,

so Fray Pedro walked towards the north of the Lacandón Jungle, where he discovered many Chol families still living in small hamlets according to their ancient customs. These families he gently invited to leave their huts in order to follow him to a new town which he had prepared for them near the River Chacamáx, at the foot of a range of hills where some ruins of singular beauty were situated. With the Indians who accepted his invitation, Fray Pedro founded, by the year 1567, the town of Palenque, giving homage with this name to the ancient “palenque”-[“fenced site, fortified place, walled city”] whose vestiges he had encountered at a short distance from the new site. [de Vos 1980:34]

Thus, Fray Pedro not only founded the town of Palenque, but so named the town because of the nearby ruins. That is, he knew of the ruins almost 200 years before the “discovery” of Palenque according to the early historians cited above.

## The Bells of Palenque

Between the years of 1567 and 1573, Fray Pedro Lorenzo made two trips to Spain to arrange for the legal foundation of the town of Palenque; almost certainly on his last



Fig. 1 Palenque Bell.

trip he brought the three bells (large, medium, and small) that he presented to the Palenque Chol community as a symbol of the founding of their town; the three bells carry the date 1573. During the present century, these bells began to appear in important historical documents. In an article by Augusto Molina, entitled “Palenque—The Archaeological City Today,” there is a photo of the town church, taken in 1904 by an expedition of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, in which the bells can be seen, even though the photo was not taken for this purpose (Molina 1978:2).

In 1923, Franz Blom undertook an expedition to Palenque, and in his report on this expedition he also published a photograph of the church bell tower, in which the three bells can again be seen (Blom 1923:15). In 1934, when the National Institute of Anthropology and History took charge of the ruins of Palenque, Miguel Angel Fernández, the archaeologist in charge of the explorations there, made reference in the part of his report touching on the town of Palenque to the fact that one of the bells carries the date of 1573 (García Moll 1985:116). In 1980, Jan de Vos published a photograph of the largest of the bells of Palenque in his book on Fray Pedro (de Vos 1980:89). In 1984, I took a photograph of this same bell, which was published on the cover of my



Fig. 2 Palenque Bell.

monograph *Palenque: Pasado y Presente* (Hardy 1985). In 1985, this bell was given to a community within the municipality of Palenque; it was later retrieved (although in two pieces), and today can be found newly sheltered in the town church.

Now, what is the importance of the bells? First, they are objects that require protection because of their historical significance; second, they are intimately related to the discovery of the ruins of Palenque; and third, the one bell remaining serves as indisputable testimony about the founding date of the town of Palenque.

#### The Origin of the Name “Palenque”

With regard to the origin and significance of the name of Palenque, various investigators have already undertaken to write about this theme. Some assert an Indian origin for the name, but the truth is, the word *palenque* is purely Spanish, and means, according to Spanish language dictionaries, “palisade or stockade of wood.”

In the field reports of Miguel Angel Fernández, published by Roberto García Moll in his book *Palenque 1926–1945* (1985), Fernández referred to the word *palenque* as being of Spanish origin and meaning “palisade, that is, an area surrounded by wooden stakes”; he com-

mented that “the natives of the area referred to Palenque by the name of Otolum.” Further along he stated that “Waldeck writes it Ototiun, ‘house of stone,’ derived from the native words *otote* and *tunich*” (García Moll 1985:22).

“Gho Chan” and “Na Chan” are other names for Palenque, invented by the canon Ramón Ordoñez y Aguiar in his report “Historia del Cielo y de la Tierra,” as a result of his supposed discovery of the ruins (Becerra 1980:133). Later visitors, like Dupaix in 1807, Stephens in 1840, and Mahler in 1877, agree that the Spanish word *palenque* means “fortified place” (cited in Becerra 1980:243). Jan de Vos brought to light an important document from 1629, in which the word *palenque* is used in the sense of “a fenced site, a fortified place, a walled city” (de Vos 1980:81), referring to a ruin near Ocosingo.

The historian Vicente Piñeda invented a Sendal (Tzeltal) etymology for the word *palenque*; he proposed that the correct word was Japalenque, which he translates as “Is that a priest?” Furthermore, he believed that Otolum is an alteration of Jotulum, which he translates as “excavated land.” The Palenque historian Domingo Lacroix interpreted *palenque* as a Chol word with the following composition: *pal*, “son”; *en*, “of” or “where”; and *quej*, “deer”; that is, “the land of the sons of the deer.” We insist that the name Palenque has a Spanish origin. Where, then, can these meanings have come from?

Otulum or Otolum is the name of the most important

stream that begins in the ruins of Palenque. This name is a word of Chol origin whose parts mean: *otot*, “house”; *tul*, “strong”; *lum*, “land”—that is, “strong house land” or “fortified place” (Becerra 1980:243). Given this explanation, there is clearly a very close relation between the Spanish name “Palenque” and the Chol name “Otolum” or “Otulum,” since both words have the same meaning. Becerra remarked that “whoever gave the Spanish name of Palenque [to the town] penetrated the secret of the Chol name [of the ruins], and this could not have been done without the help of those same Indians” (1980:251).

In conclusion, there was only one person in the early history of Palenque who had knowledge, first, of the language of the Indians, and, second, of the ruins (because they are referred to in the name given to the town), and who was a speaker of Spanish (since the word *palenque* is of Spanish origin). The material presented here shows that it was Fray Pedro Lorenzo de la Nada, who, besides having discovered the ruins, knew the “secret” of their Chol name. Looking for a Spanish word that would have a meaning similar to that of the Chol word, he “baptized” the town he founded with the Chol Indians with the name “Palenque.” The great Maya city also came to be known by this name, and it was possibly originally called by the Chol equivalent, “Otolum” or “Otulum,” a name still used today to refer to the most important stream that rises in the ruins of Palenque.