

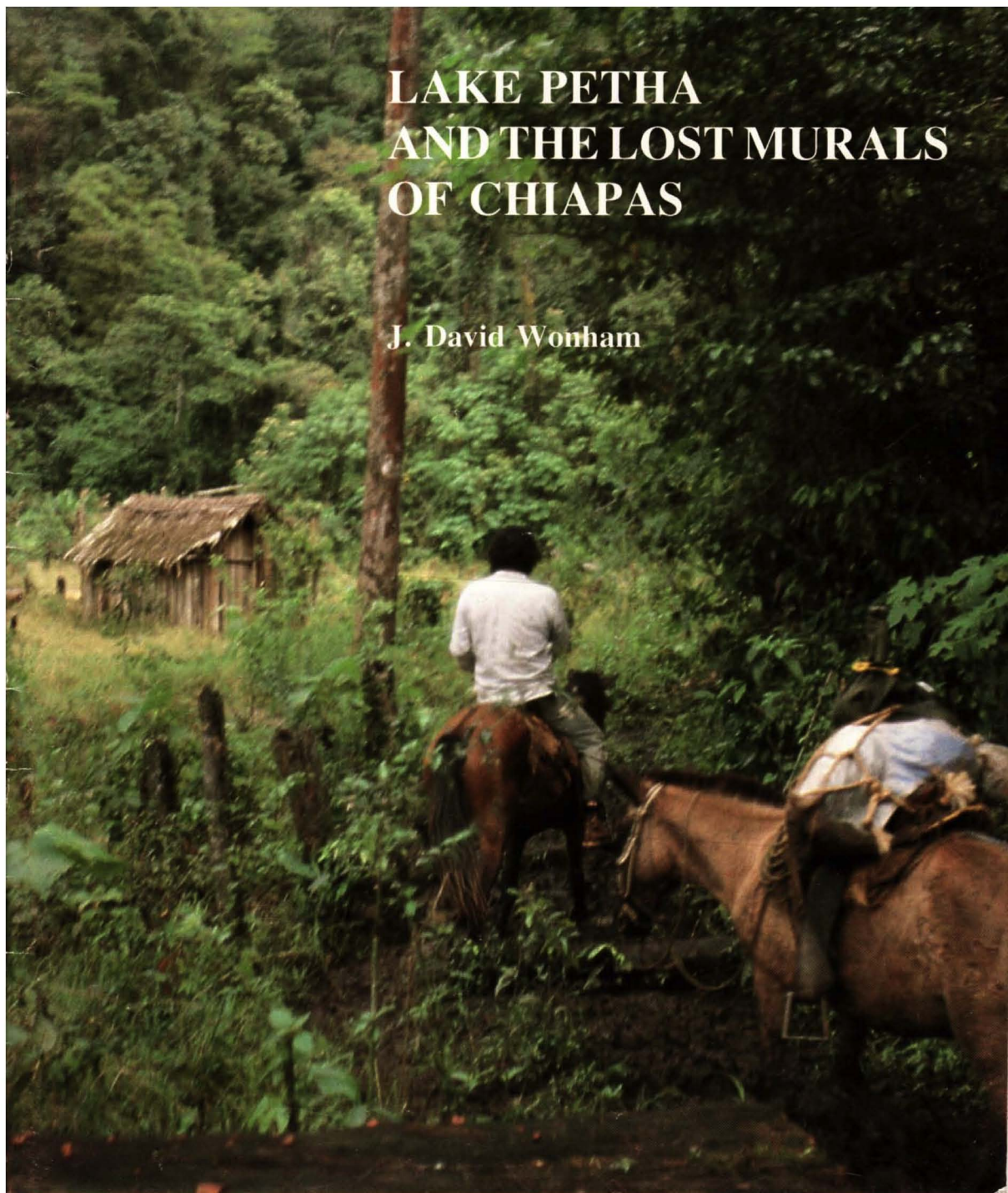


PRE-COLUMBIAN ART RESEARCH INSTITUTE

MONOGRAPH 2

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J. David Wonham





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Lake Pethá and the Lost Murals of Chiapas

J. DAVID WONHAM

Historical Aspects

"On the 27th of August [1898] I was able to start from La Reforma with my men and mules . . . [for the exclusive purpose of rediscovering the long since forgotten Lake of Pethá]. . . .

(Here follows the account of a gruelling journey by mule and on foot.)

"On the morning of September 3d . . . descending the last declivity, suddenly a silvery expanse of water gleamed between the dark branches of the trees. A few steps further down, the path ended at the waters of the Lake of Pethá

(They set up camp on the edge of the lake.)

"On September 5th we undertook a thorough exploration of the lake in all directions

"Returning from the southwest arm [of Lake Pethá], we skirted the southern shore and inlets on that side, and came to an exceedingly beautiful southern passage, which led back to the main or large eastern basin. Along this passage – on our left as we passed through – we again saw great cliffs rising perpendicularly from the water. These we also investigated in the hope of finding pictorial representations, and to our great joy we discovered three separate large pictures." (Maler 1901:22-30)

There he found "a drawing . . . executed in bold black lines . . . of the jaws of a monster . . . in the act of swallowing a man head foremost (Fig. 4a) . . . a diminutive man (Fig. 5b) . . . large red hands (Fig. 5b) . . . the sole of [a] foot . . . an overturned pot . . . (and) several more red hands" (Maler 1901:30-31).

So wrote Teobert Maler, the Austrian born explorer, in the memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University reporting the explorations of 1898-1900.

A description of the lake, "estimated as six or seven kilometers in entire length" and apparently "deep enough for steamships," follows in his account which details a large eastern basin (2 km in diameter), northern and southern passages, a smaller western basin, with northwesterly and southwesterly arms, a southern bay off the main basin and two waterfalls as well as sketches of details of the "Roca de las Pinturas," where he saw the paintings on the cliff.

Preliminary Research

In attempting to locate Lake Pethá we first examined Maler's map of 1900 reproduced in the account of his explorations mentioned above.

The map in Fig. 1 shows Lake Pethá situated just north of Latitude 17 and about 7.5 degrees east of Mexico City. The map in Fig. 2a shows the Chocohá River area. Fig. 2b is the same map with the Greenwich meridians added, showing Lake Pethá at 17°05' North and 91°43' West. In Fig. 2c, present roads and railroads have been added to the map, as well as modern town names.

From Maler's description, the key to finding the lake must depend on its relationship to the Chocollá river, and it became immediately obvious that the course of the Chocollá in Maler's map is incorrectly depicted, since the river in fact runs in a southeasterly direction, not south and then in a southwesterly direction. Because Maler had covered the trip across the Chocollá to Lake Pethá and was aware of the distance between the two, we corrected the position of the river and moved the lake with it (see Fig. 2d). Reference to a modern road map (Fig. 2e) shows lakes in this area, but none that have the characteristic shape of the Maler Pethá.

The map in Fig. 2f presents the Defense Mapping Agency view of the area, again showing lakes, but none of the right shape. Fig. 2g is the 1940 revision of the Blom-Ricketson 1924 map, showing lakes of Pethá and Pelhá, but neither is near the position described, nor is the rather simple depiction of the lake shapes helpful in identifying that described by Maler.

At this stage we wondered how much reliance could be placed on Maler's description of the lake, and, in view of the problems that he was having with the Peabody Museum, whether he had not been overly fanciful in his description.

We considered it a waste of time to look for further maps since the area is obviously difficult to survey, and, because of this, probably even the latest maps would be inaccurate.

Modern technology came to the rescue in the form of E.R.O.S. (Earth Resources Observation Systems, in South Dakota).

Satellite and other available photographs of the area were sought giving centrepoint (17°05'N, 91°35'W) and corner points, which define the area of search, time of the year (July-Sept.), quality rating of image and acceptable maximum cloud cover.

We received back a computer print-out showing available pictures from LandSats 1, 2 and 3; aerial photography is not available for areas outside the U.S. The print-outs gave details of date, area, quality of image, cloud coverage, scale, etc., and, of seven available images, four covered exactly the centrepoint sought, after plotting coordinates. Two were selected as being most likely to show the lake at the right season of the year.

Because we were looking for water (black from above) in a jungle surrounding (green), we ordered black-and-white negatives taken in the green end of the spectrum to get maximum contrast. These cost \$10.00 each.

The 2.2" negatives were returned and were blown up to large photographs. One had too much cloud cover in the desired area, but the other showed quite clearly Maler's Lake Pethá (Fig. 2h). This lake is the correct shape and size, and in exactly the position we projected when correction of the course of the Chocollá River was undertaken (see Fig. 2d).

Two maps (Figs. 2e and 2f) depict Lake Pethá as two small lakes, probably because the connecting arms are narrow and lie between tall cliffs. Unless photographed from directly above, these would not be seen.

The 1940 archaeological map (Fig. 2g) needs no comment; it is totally inaccurate in this area.

We now knew that Lake Pethá would, according to the road map (Fig. 2e) be some 85 km from Palenque on the road to Bonampak.

Because Maler described a Lacandón settlement on Lake Pethá, it appeared a foregone conclusion that there would be a road connecting the lake with the modern road, a conclusion which did not materialize; Lake Pethá has been "lost" at least twice now.

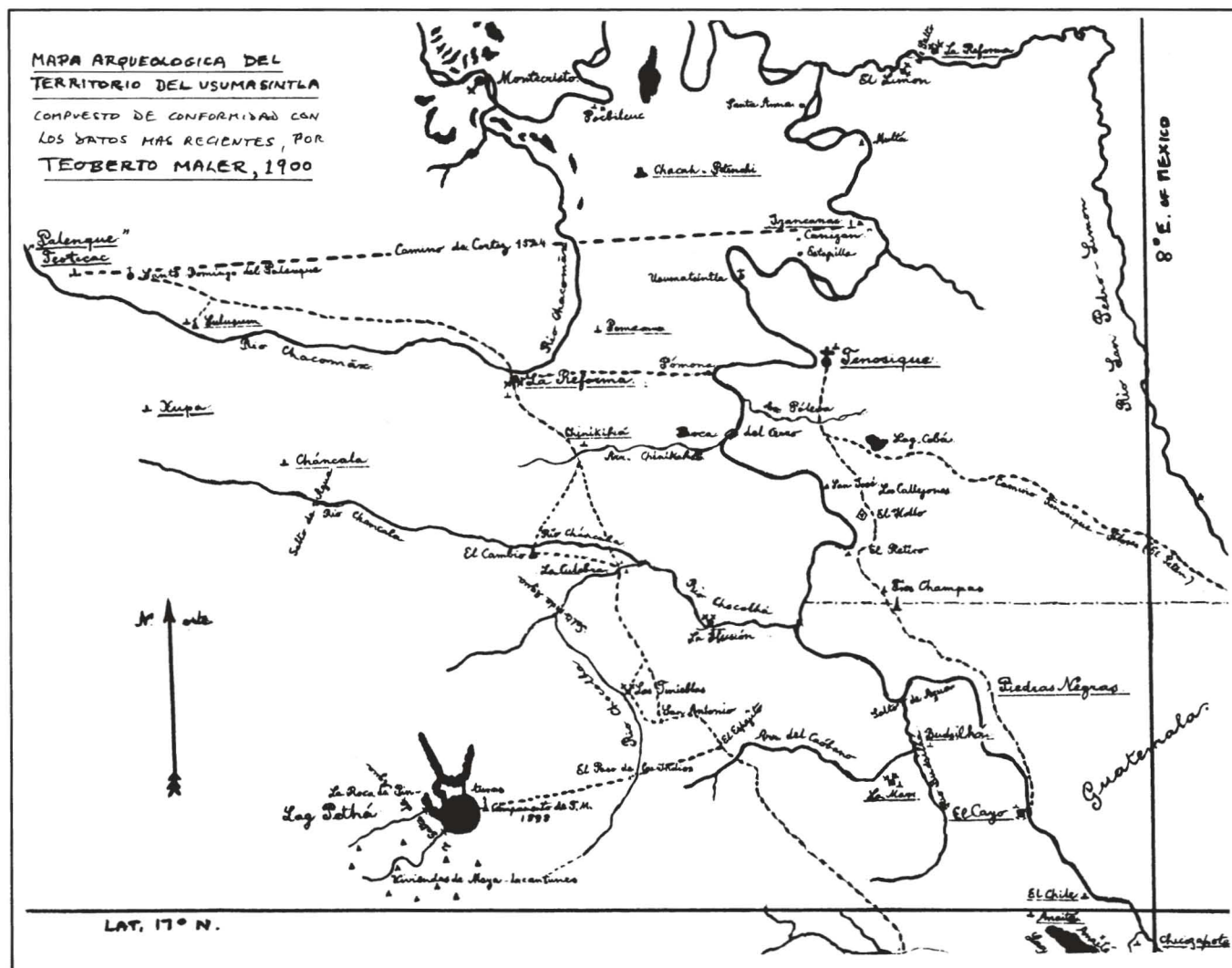


Fig. 1 Maler's map (from Maler 1901).

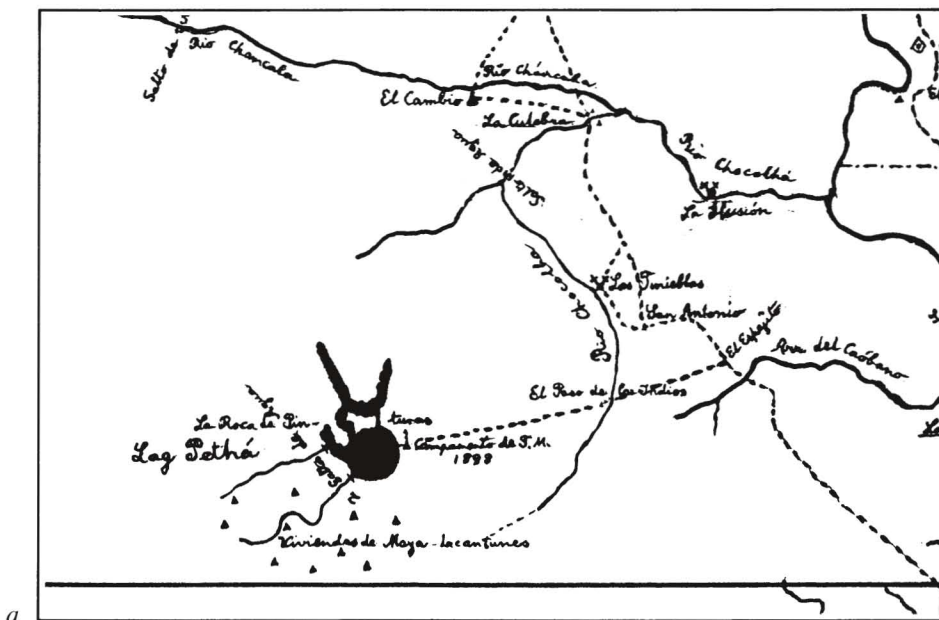


Fig. 2 (a) Detail of Maler's map;

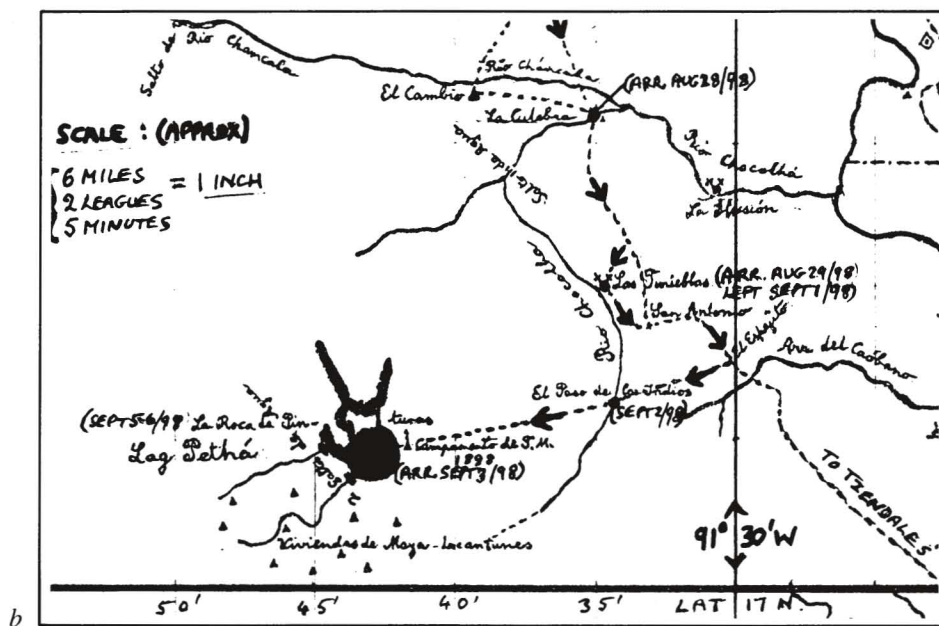


Fig. 2 (b) Maler's map with Greenwich coordinates;

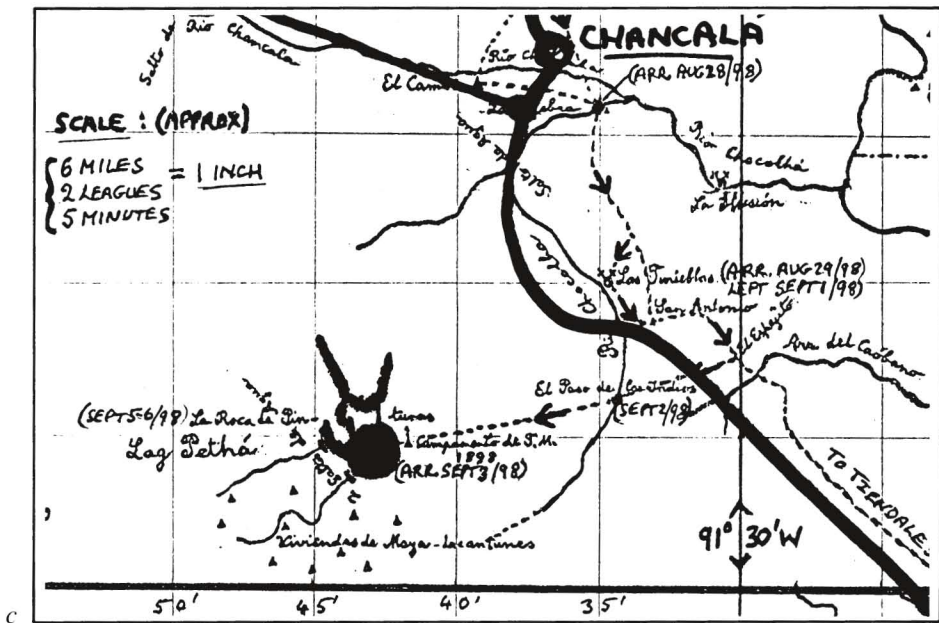


Fig. 2 (c) Map 2b with roads added;

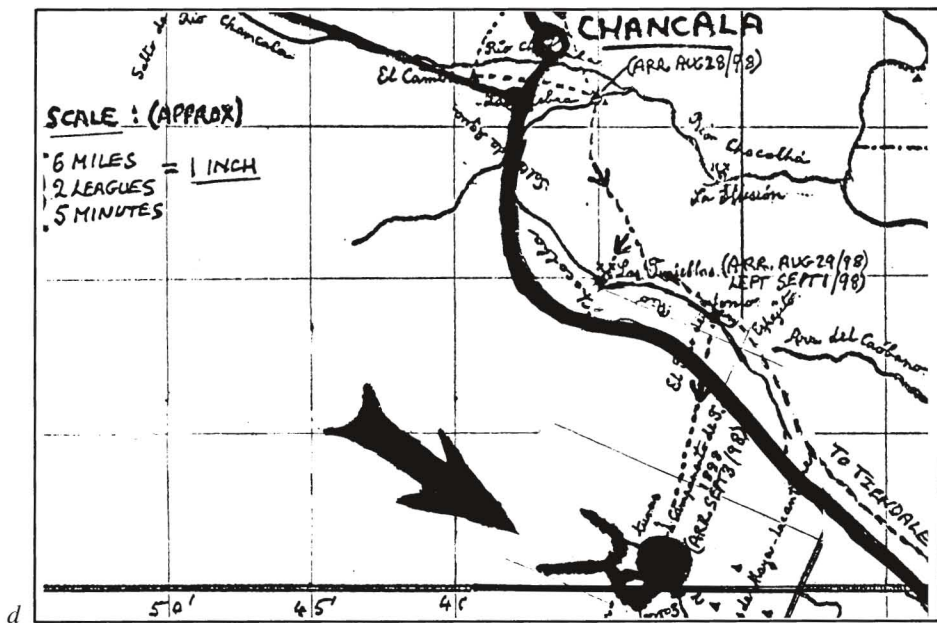


Fig. 2 (d) Correction of river course and, hence, Lake Pethá position;

The Expedition

The expedition started from Windsor, Ontario, Canada, via Mérida, to Palenque. Participants were the author and Jerry S. Woloschuk, a friend and frequent companion on trips to Mexico. We were aware that others were looking for Lake Pethá. In fact, our guide of previous trips, Raul Mendoza, had been involved in an earlier unsuccessful expedition. Because of Raul's knowledge of the local customs and conditions, though he did not have the benefit of our preliminary research, we telephoned him in Villahermosa and arranged to meet him in Palenque with appropriate equipment for going to the lake and a stay in the jungle if necessary.

We brought an inflatable boat from Canada and some other equipment which made us look like a minor military invasion to the Mexican Customs and Immigration in Mérida.

Transportation

With obvious and oblivious disregard for likely conditions in the field, the expedition engaged the services of a late model Volkswagen Beetle in Mérida from a rental company, whose anonymity will preserve our chance of hiring a car from them again. This conveyed us in comfort to Palenque, where our guide met us as planned.

Equipment

Inflatable boat, cameras, machetes, shovel, two hammocks, a length of rope, a few cans of food and some soft drinks, and warm clothing were our mainstays. These, with the expeditionary members (now including the guide) barely fit into the vehicle.

The Trip

We left Palenque early on February 22, 1982. The first 45 kilometers were on paved and semipaved road from Palenque to where the road merges near Chancalá, (km "zero").

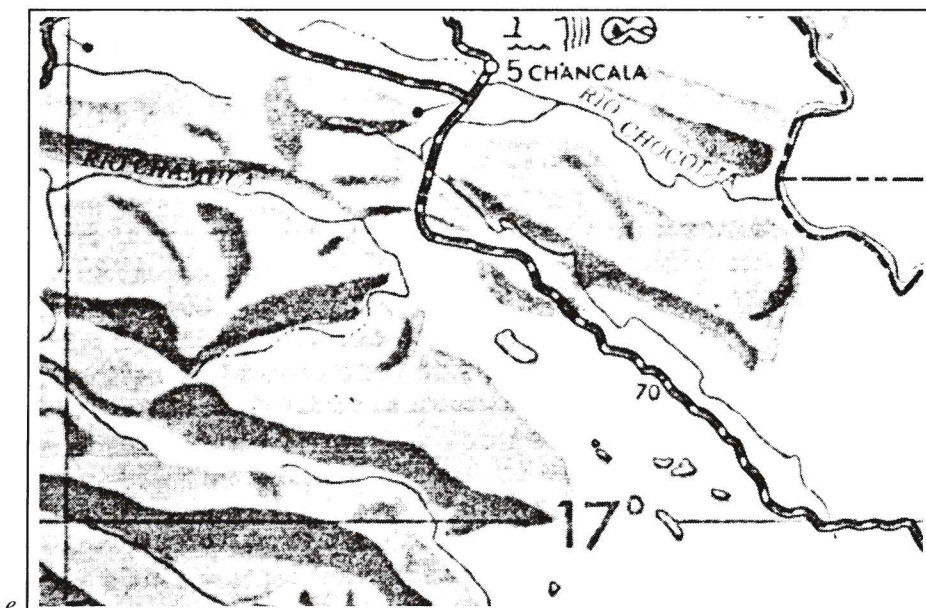


Fig. 2 (e) Road map;

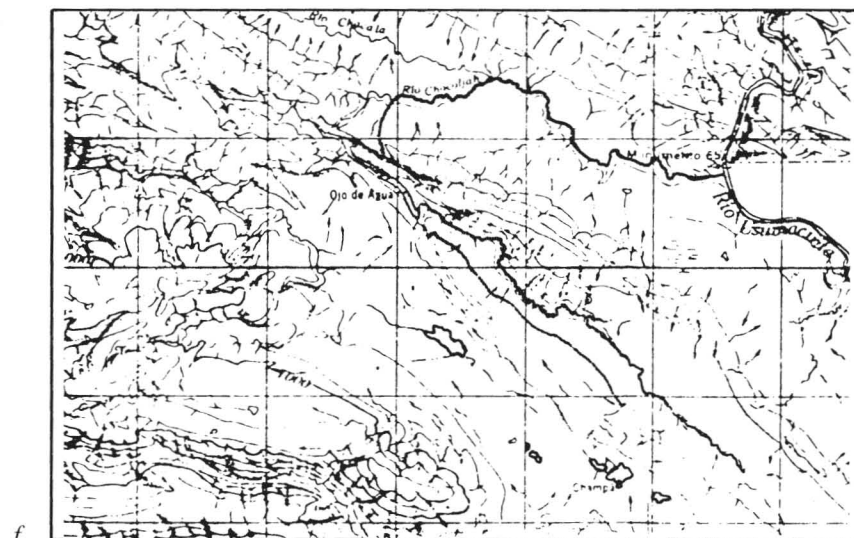


Fig. 2 (f) Topographical map;

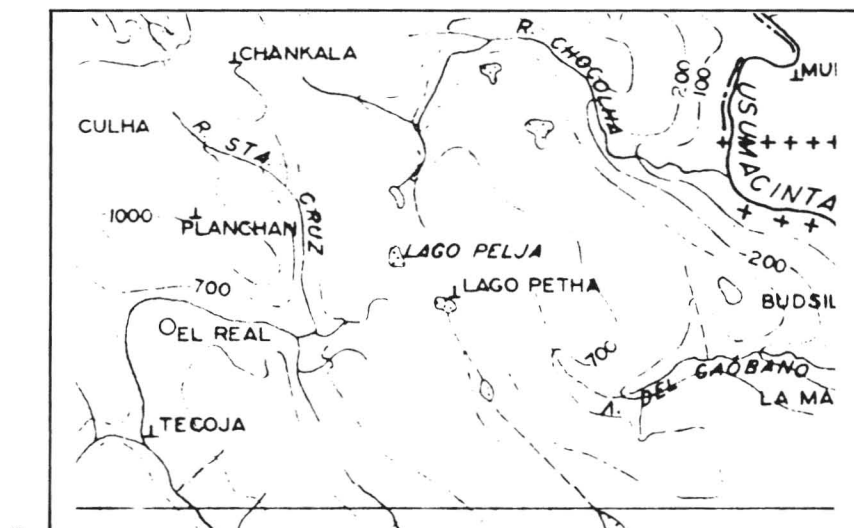


Fig. 2 (g) Blom-Ricketson map;

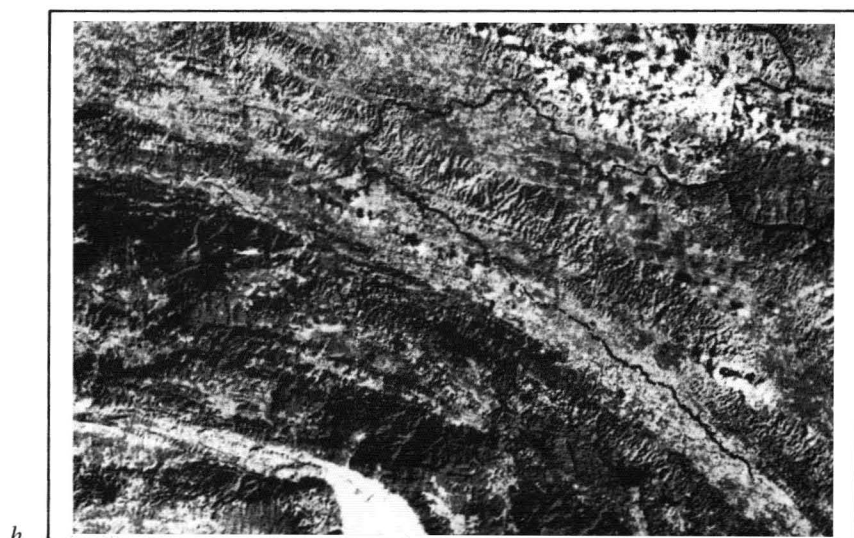


Fig. 2 (h) Satellite photograph.

According to the road map, Lacanha lies 70 km to the southeast, and, from experience with other parts of this map, all distances were given accurately.

As mentioned above, we assumed that even though we did not know the modern name of the lake, there should be a turning off about 40 km on the right hand side which should lead to the lake and a town or village.

The road was bad, with a very primitive surface, potholes, subsidences, mud, water and scattered large rocks. Our loaded vehicle barely managed to overcome these obstacles with its low suspension.

At about 35 km we started placing markers at possible turnoffs, to return to if nothing more definite appeared. We asked everyone we could for information but got very conflicting opinions.

Km 39 and km 45 had paths, but these were unsuitable for motorized travel, which we did not wish to give up in return for carrying both ourselves and supplies on foot.

At km 54 at the "Restaurante Bonampak" we were given some information (incorrect) about local lakes, so we pressed on.

At km 57 there was another narrow trail, and, though we thought we had gone far enough according to the map, the area was still mountainous, so we drove on further.

At km 64, we were informed that Lake Tintal was 5 km long and further down the road. At km 65, in Santo Domingo, we learned that Lake Tintal was 500 meters long, but that Lake Guineo and La Maroma were larger, and could be reached via the village of Sibal, the turnoff being 5 km further down the road.

At km 70 we found this turning, but as the map was obviously wrong in the distances in this area (or we would have been in Lacanha by this time) we continued past to Limonal, where the countryside was flattened out and we were obviously beyond the area of lakes.

We turned back at 3:30 p.m. and decided that the road to Sibal (7 km back) was the most attractive alternative, that we could travel by car on this, and, as we were told that there was housing and horses there, it seemed a good place in which to spend the night. We had taken seven hours to reach this turnoff from Palenque and hoped to obtain other transportation if the car had to be abandoned. In addition, the car would be safer than being left on the road.

Sibal is 11 km from the main road, but it took two hours and ten minutes to negotiate this road. We became completely immobilized, and fortunately six men and a boy, crossing nearby on the trail, were persuaded to help dig us out.

At 6:00 p.m. we arrived at a river whose bridge was washed out. Sibal lay on the other side of this.

Leaving the car, we took some of our equipment across the river, over a log, with the assistance of the inhabitants of Sibal, and sought out the Comisario, who unfortunately was away for the evening. His assistant, Dario Lopez Cruz, took us under his wing and told us that the village of Sibal, about twenty-five years old, was only recently connected to the main road by the road we had nearly failed to negotiate. They hoped for further improvement, including electricity, in the future.

Because we were not sure where we were, but knew that Lake Pethá should be generally in a northwesterly direction, we enquired, showing Maler's photographs of Lake Pethá and our other material and maps, as well as a picture of the glyph (Fig. 4a); we lay between Lake Sibal and Lake Guinéo, and the latter, we were informed, fitted the description. In addition, there was a painting, an "eagle", which had been seen by fishermen. There had not been a Lacandón settlement there for many years; Sibal is a Tzendal village.

What finally convinced us was that, when pointing toward the direction of Lake Guinéo, the compass showed due north. Lake Guinéo was indeed to prove to be Lake Pethá.

After a meal of tough local chicken, tortillas and soft drinks, we spent the night in hammocks with the rain beating on the corrugated tin roof above us.

On the morning of February 23, after negotiating with the Comisario, showing him our material and persuading him of our benign nature, we arranged to hire three horses, one mule and three men to take us the reputed 3 km to the lake. We loaded the mule and mounted the horses and two hours later, after traversing mud, jungle and milpas in intermittent pouring rain, we dismounted to continue the last one-half km on foot, down slippery terrain with wet leaves as its base, downhill to the lake, and we could hear a waterfall nearby.

Finally slithering down the last slope, we came to the edge of a lake, the trees reaching down right to the edge, and overhanging, so that the view of the lake was partly obscured and the launching of the rubber boat posed a problem.

Identification of the Lake

One lake really looks much like many others, so the positive identification of this lake as the Lake Pethá of Maler's description depended on finding "La Roca de Pinturas," the rock of paintings described above.

We were concerned also that the water level, high in September 1898 in the rainy season, might be considerably lower in February 1982 in the traditional dry season. Since the weather had been very wet this year, we hoped that the water level had not fallen too far to place the pictures out of our sight and reach.

Maler describes three "panels", and from his writings we derived a rough drawing (Fig. 3) of what to expect.

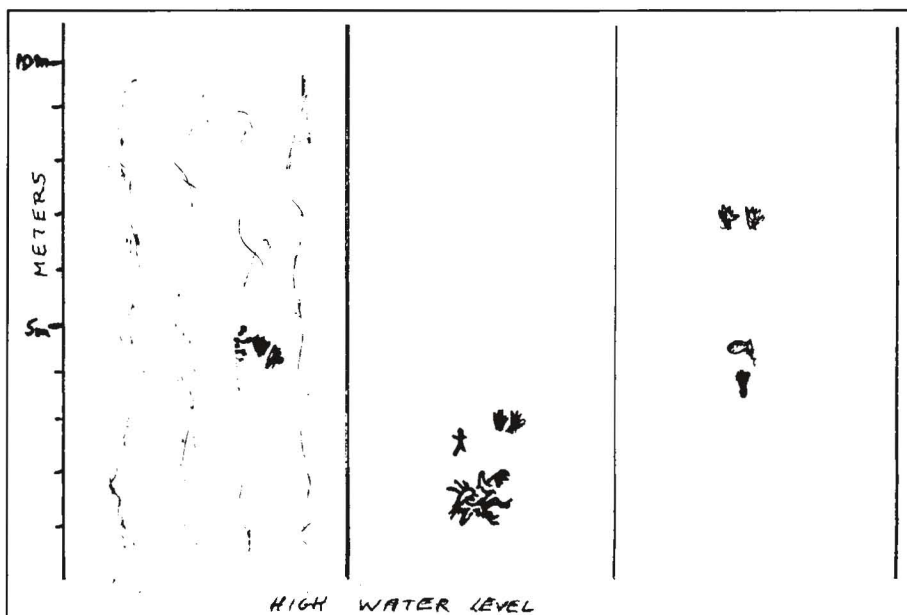


Fig. 3 Author's diagram of murals (as described by Maler).

The most obvious feature was the main glyph (Fig. 4a) which would provide definite proof if found. Also described were hands, a little man (Fig. 5b), sole of a foot and an overturned pot (Maler 1901:30-31).

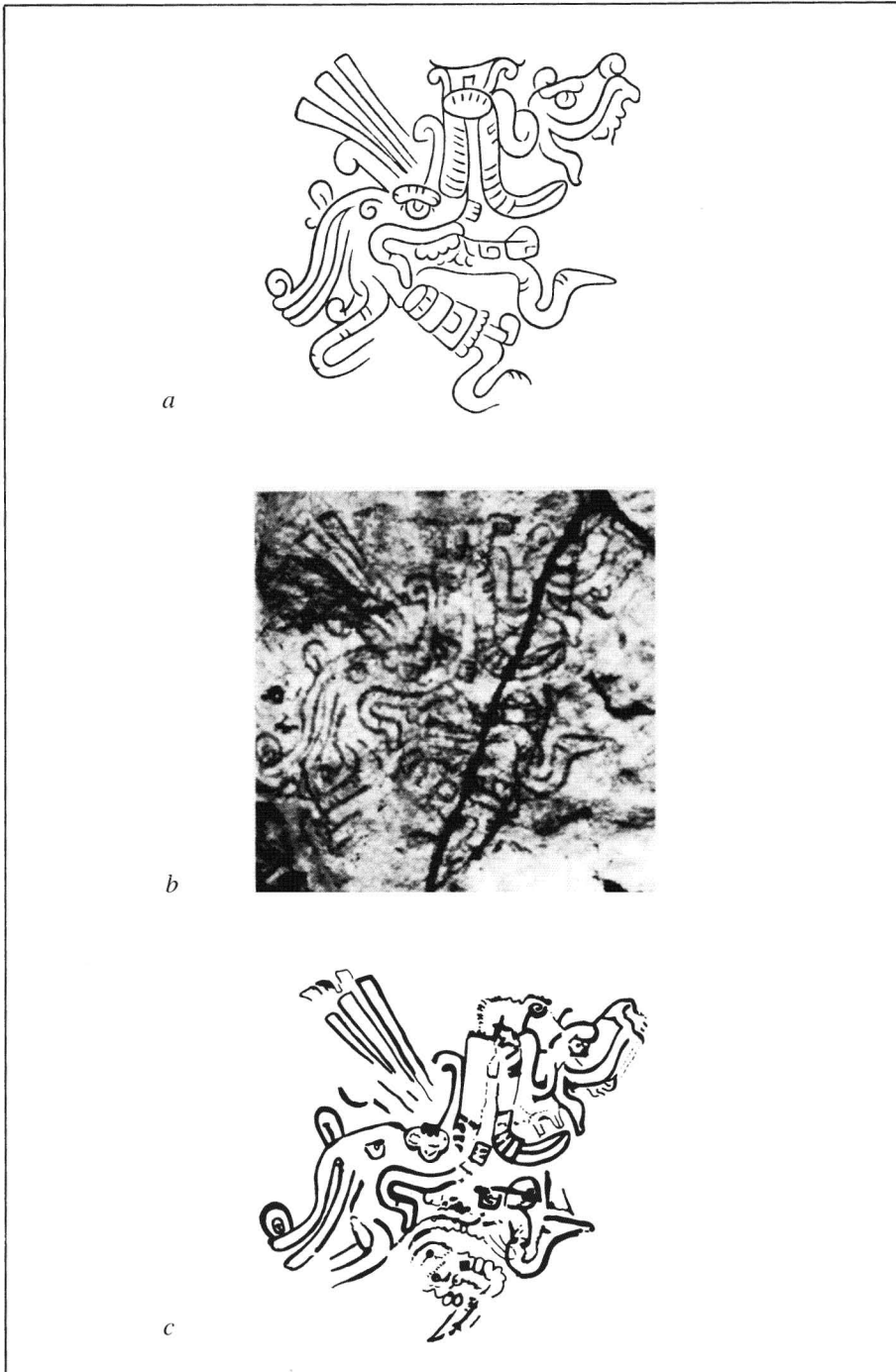


Fig. 4 (a) Maler's glyph; (b) Our glyph (photograph); (c) Roberto Bruce's glyph.

Exploration of the Lake

We had approached the lake from the south, and we were able to see a large expanse of water, presumably the main bowl of the lake. According to Maler, the cliff paintings were therefore north and west of us, and we would need a boat to cross the main bowl and find the south passage. On the north shore of this we hoped to find the paintings. The dense undergrowth and overhanging vegetation prevented any passage along the shoreline on foot, and indeed, even the inflation and launching of the boat was difficult; a platform had to be constructed across a small inlet, and the boat prepared and put in the water at this point. Our three local guides did this and we were on our way. At just after midday on Tuesday, February 23, 1982, the author and Jerry Woloschuk paddled across the lake where we could see some exposed cliffs, which we reached to find no signs of artifacts. We noted that, because of the amount of rainfall that season, the high water mark was only about 1.5 meters above the water level, which would, at least, render any paintings visible from the boat. Maler had actually traced the glyph (Fig. 4a) from the *cayuco* in which he had explored the lake.

Looking from these cliffs in a westerly direction, we saw a narrow inlet with high cliffs on its northern side (Fig. 6), and, realizing that this would be the southern passage, paddled toward it, avoiding submerged tree trunks and sharp rocks, a definite threat to a rubber boat.

Confronted by the cliffs which we felt had to be the object of our search, at first nothing seemed familiar. Suddenly Jerry perceived the glyph, the rock now deeply fissured, whose form (Fig. 4a) was, by now, engraved on our memories. Then the figure of the "little man" and the hands (Figs. 5a and 5c) were also identifiable, the former a little above the main glyph (Fig. 4b) on the central part of the cliffs and the latter above and to the left of it. There were other markings on the cliff, but none easily identifiable, especially on the east part of the cliff, since vegetation had overgrown it. In a rubber boat and with jagged rocks we were not willing to attempt to cut back the growth to reveal the underlying cliff.

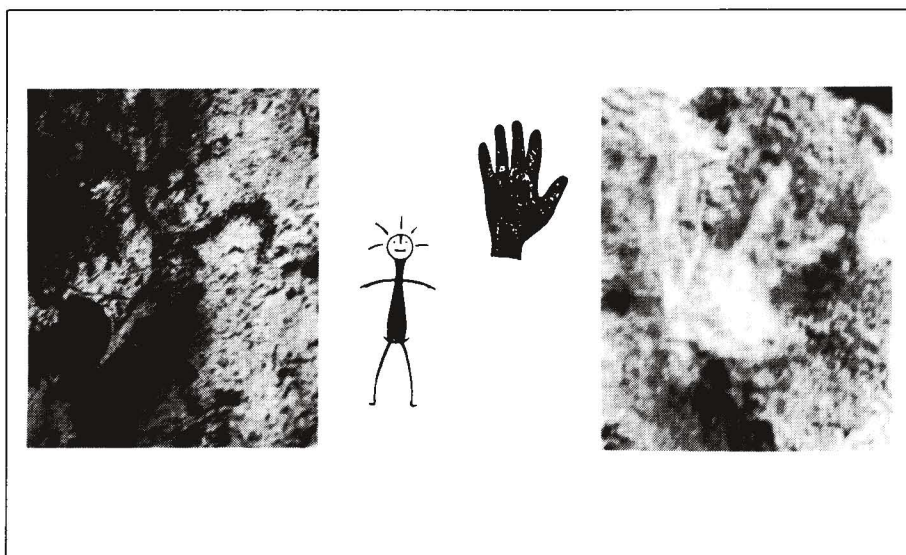


Fig. 5 (a) Our "Man"; (b) Maler's "Man and Hand"; (c) Our "Hand".

In fact, photography was done, alternating with paddling eastwards and being blown westwards, until we were satisfied that we had confirmed the identity of the lake as that called “Pethá” by Maler in 1898.

With the threat of rain, we paddled back against the wind to our launching site with a feeling of elation, which eased the slow progress of the aerodynamically inefficient boat.

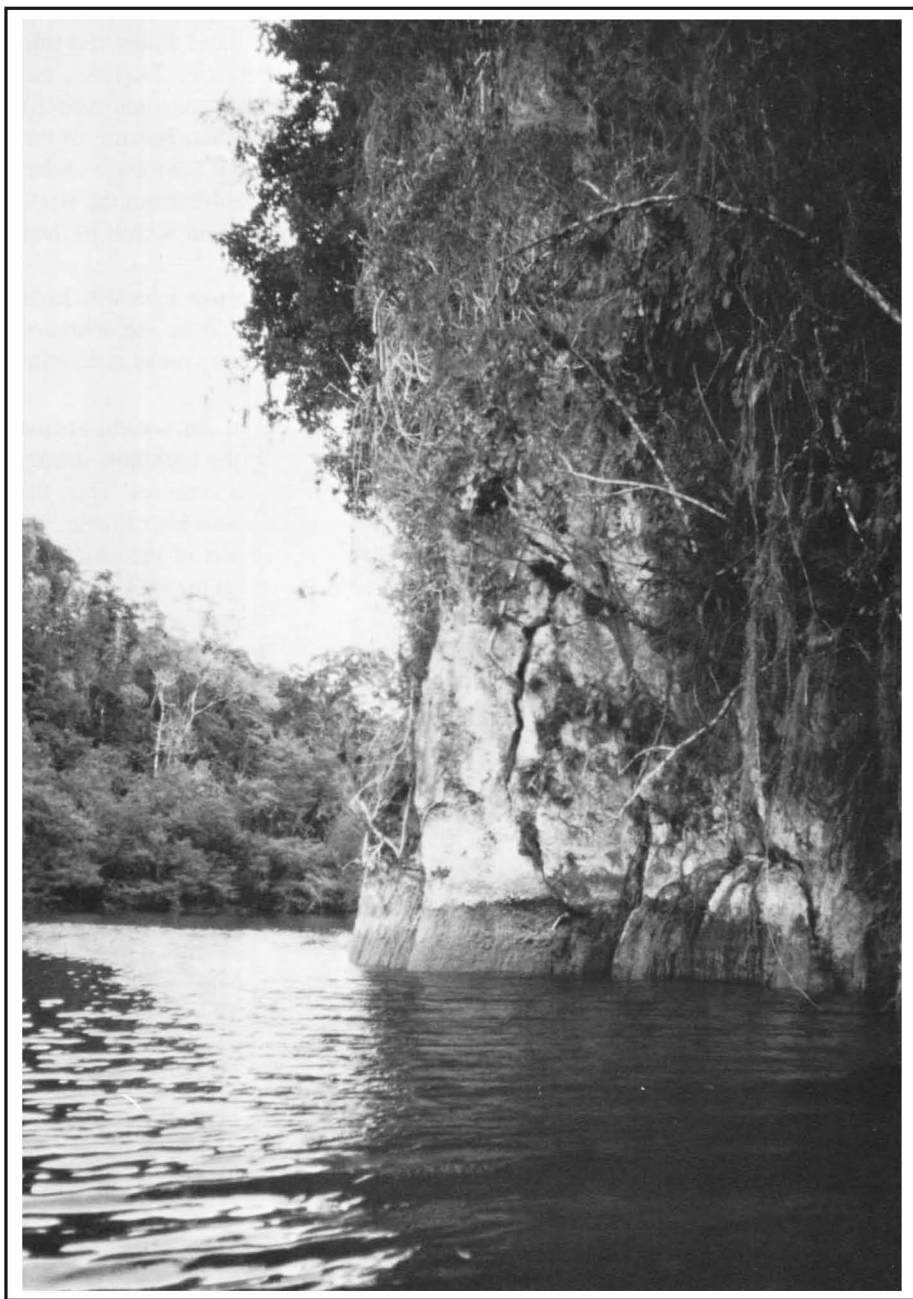


Fig. 6 Photograph of entrance to southern passage.

The Murals

Maler's description is as follows: (diagram Fig. 3)

The Left Panel

" . . . is composed of large, broad red stripes, which run high up on the cliff, mostly in vertical lines and form large scrolls here and there. There are also two white or light yellow hands recognizable on a red ground, and adjoining this there is also a series of black lines, which, however, have become very indistinct" (1901:31). These features are well seen in our photograph (Figs. 7 and 5c).

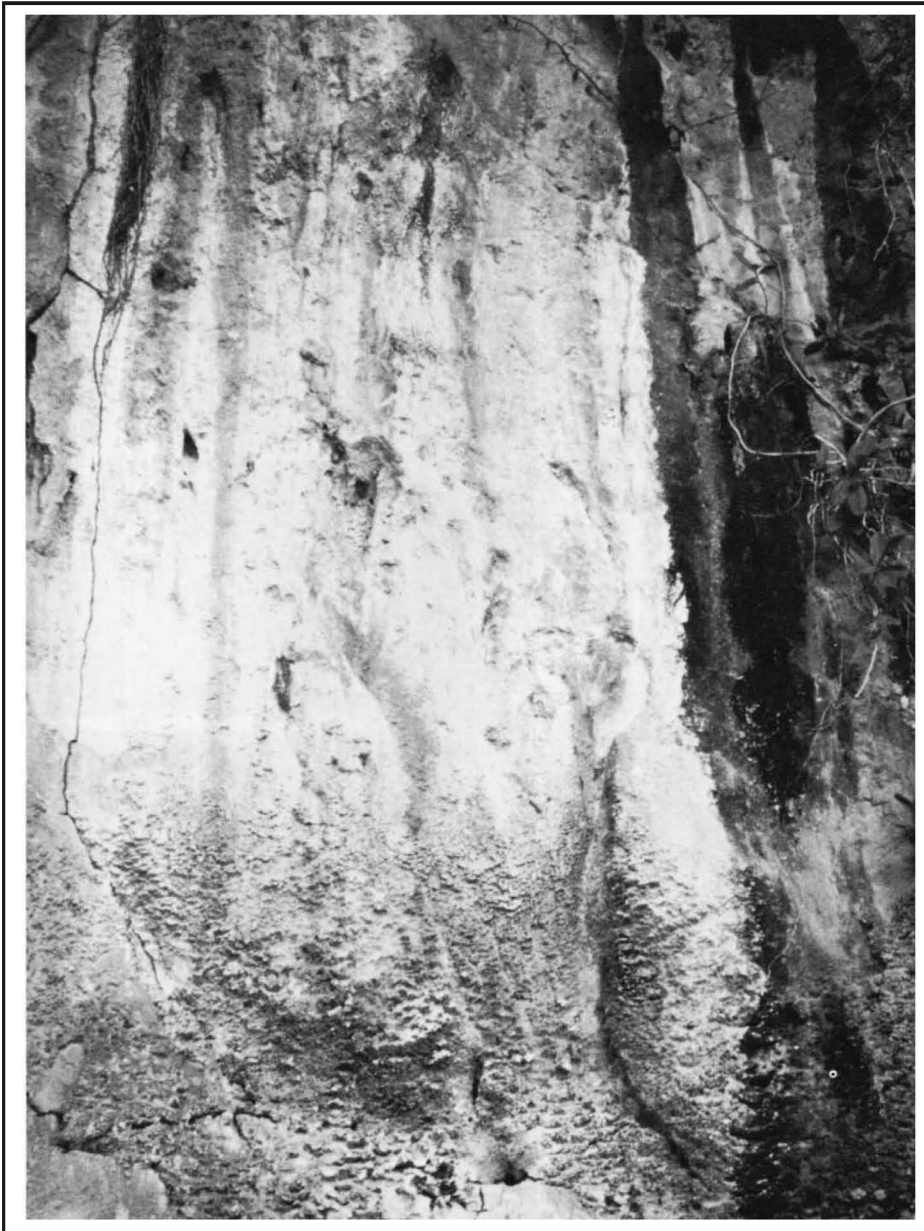


Fig. 7 Left panel of murals.

The Central Panel

“At a height of one and one-half metres above the surface of the water (in September) a drawing was visible executed in bold black lines, which I conceived to be the representation of the jaws of a monster (the eye was especially distinct) in the act of swallowing a man head foremost. On the right (from the beholder) a smaller grotesque face develops out of the upper scrollwork, and on the left or at the back of the head of the monster terminates in plumage (our Fig. 4a). The drawing is fifty-two centimetres high and fifty-seven wide. About one metre above this picture a diminutive man (about forty centimetres in height) is very crudely painted, also in black. Further up, a little to the right, are daubed large red hands (1901:30) (our Fig. 5b). Our photographs (Figs. 8, 4b, 5a) show these, though the hand is almost indiscernible beneath the vegetation.



Fig. 8 Central panel of murals.

The Right Panel

“ . . . in spite of the washing away by torrents of rain and the luxuriant vegetation, three and one-half metres above the surface of the water, we could discern the picture of a yellowish foot on a red ground (that is, a picture of the sole of the foot, with the toes pointing upward), and above this in red outlines on a yellowish ground an overturned pot (?) covered with red dots, from the lower edge of which project comblike droppings . . . There are several more red hands above the perforated pot and the foot at a distance of about seven metres above the surface of the water” (1901:30-31). Our photograph (Fig. 9) shows that this panel is almost totally overgrown, but some smudges of colour were visible to the naked eye at the time of the discovery.

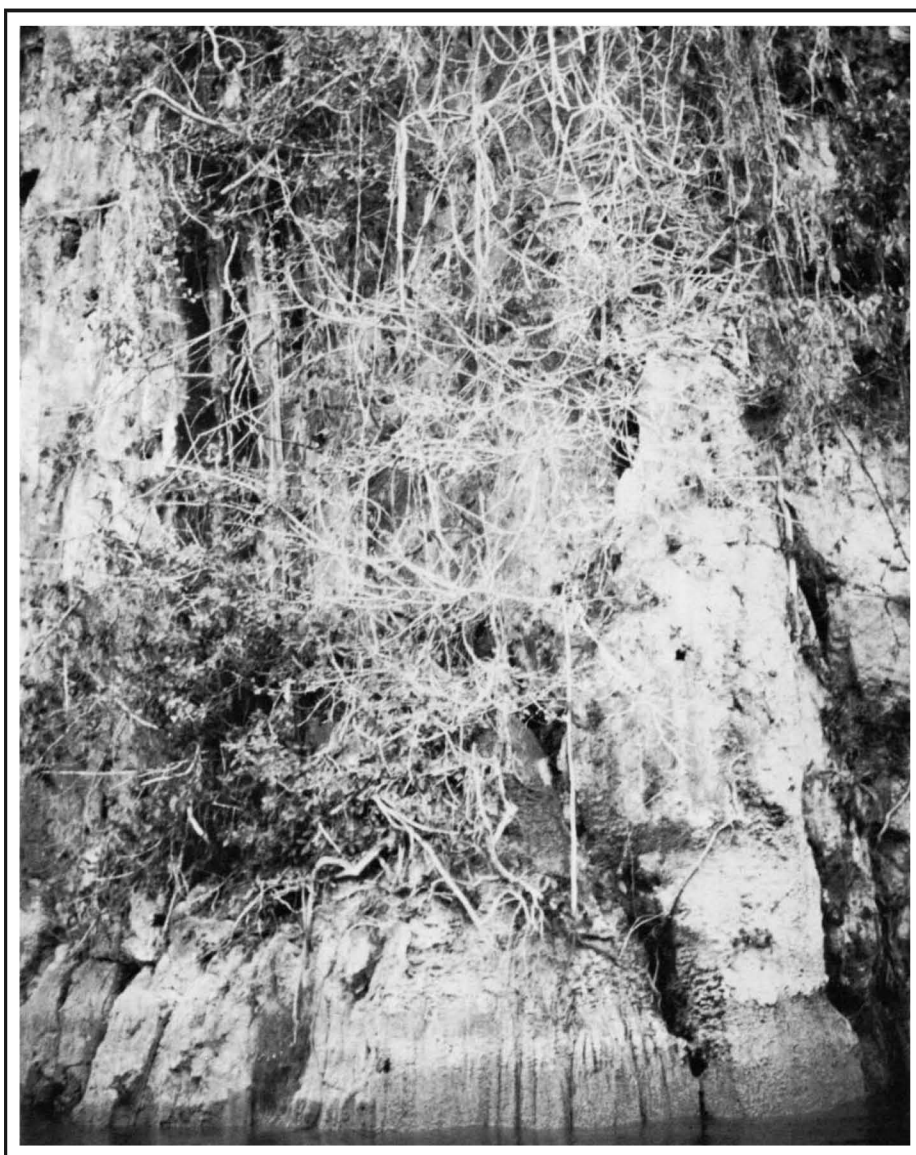


Fig. 9 Right panel of murals.

The Return

After another night in Sibal, the track to the main road was covered with less difficulty, as we obtained the services of the village truck to tow us over the worst parts. Apart from a tedious search for gas, our return to Palenque was uneventful.

Nomenclature

At this point we had identified Lake “Pethá” as being called Lake “Guinéo” by the locals. It was not until our visit to Palenque for the 1983 Mesa Redonda that we met Christian Räscht from the University of Hamburg, who had been living with the Lacandones and recognized the pictures of the glyph (Figs. 4a and 4b) and referred us to Roberto Bruce’s *Gramática del Lacandón*, where a glyph (Fig. 4c) is obviously the same (though drawn with less detail), and described as being on Lake Itzanohku (Itzanocú). Räscht had visited the glyph with Lacandones as part of a religious pilgrimage, but had no information as to its origins. Chan Kin had told Roberto Bruce that this was the God of Cold and Hail, but, in comparing this glyph with other (known) Lacandón paintings, Bruce (1968:145) concluded that the glyph “appears to be of an artistic style which is much more refined than the others.” Bruce (*ibid.*: 16) also notes that the “Pethá” group of Lacandones came from this area and concludes that the alternative name of “Pelhá” was an early transcription error.

Conclusion

Thus it was that we finally proved that Pethá is Itzanocú is Guinéo, a fact that we hope will be recorded in future maps to assist, together with more accurate cartography, in identifying this area for archaeologists and explorers alike.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank D. Niechcial for assistance in locating E.R.O.S. and other map sources; H. Barr for researching references to Lake Pethá; N. Schmidt for obtaining copies of Maler’s text and map; John M. Weeks for copy of the Blom-Ricketson map (1940 amplification); Merle Greene Robertson for her encouragement to publish our findings; Raul Mendoza for introducing us to many archaeological sites in southeast Mexico; and Jerry S. Woloschuk, without whose involvement I would have gotten lost and stayed lost.

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