

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT TULUM AND TANACH, QUINTANA ROO,
MEXICO: A PROGRESS REPORT OF THE 1974 SEASON

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Supported by The National Geographic Society, The Center for Pre-Columbian Studies of Dumbarton Oaks, and The Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, the third season of The Quintana Roo Mural Project continued its recording of extant mural painting in the Tulum-Tancah region, located on the Central East Coast of the Yucatan Peninsula. The 1974 Season, which extended from February-June, included the beginnings of an intensive and extensive archaeological study of the site of Tancah, located four kilometers north of Tulum. This took the form of intensive excavations of Tancah Structure 44, its platform and associated structures. The initial purpose of the Tancah investigations was to test the validity of the sensitive chronological implications of mural painting. The most significant result of the excavations this season is the definition of the Early Classic Period to the Colonial Period at Tancah on the basis of architecture and its ceramic associations.

Tulum Murals. Chief project artist Felipe Davalos G. completed his recording of the mural painting decorating Structure 16 at Tulum, also known as the Temple of the Frescoes. The west wall and its north wall extension as well as isolated fragments of other walls have been carefully studied and recorded. This represents over one half of the original painted design associated with the inner Temple of the Frescoes. Virtually all of the extant murals painted on Structure 16 have now been recorded and the final renderings based on the field sketches are currently being made.

A major problem in the recording of the Temple of the Frescoes murals is the copious overpainting made by Miguel Angel Fernandez's restoration program at Tulum during 1937. Davalos was confronted not only with the usual problems of walls faded by time and the natural elements, but also with the added problem of having to distinguish original Maya painting from the overpainting of the restorer Fernandez. Davalos's final result is more complex and richer than what one sees of Fernandez's restoration. We believe that Davalos's version accurately renders the original painting and will stand as the definitive recording of these remarkable wall paintings.

An interesting iconographic discovery regarding the Structure 16 murals resulted from Davalos' work. The system of twisted cords enframing the figures shown on the walls of Structure 16 emerges from the open mouth of an earth monster and terminates with a diving god shown at the exact center of the composition. That the twisted cords enframe scenes of the underworld and sky as well as the earth is confirmed by this discovery.

Project artist Kees Grootenboer applied his talent to the task of recording

the surviving pieces of the murals associated with Structure 1-Sub at Tulum. Enough of the fragments from this relatively early building at Tulum have now been recorded to show conclusively that this Tulum painting is related in style and iconography to the painting from Structure B-12 at Tancah. This, along with architectural evidence, makes us more convinced that B-12 at Tancah and 1-Sub at Tulum are contemporary (Miller 1973a). Grootenboer also recorded the black line on blue ground murals decorating the columns of Structure 1 at Tulum before they were stuccoed over, painted red, and altered into serpent columns at a later period. We believe these painted columns to represent a transitional period at Tulum between that of Structure 1-Sub paintings and those associated with Structures 5 and 16.

The Tanach Cenote Cave. The rock carvings associated with the Tancah Cenote Cave have now been completely recorded by Kees Grootenboer. Project time and funds were devoted to this remarkable cave for several reasons. Principal among them is the fact that the style and iconography of parts of the cave carvings are remarkably similar to like representations found carved in caves of highland Mexico, particularly to those found in the basin of Mexico (Cook de Leonard 1955: Fig. 8; Miller 1973b). Another reason for our interest in the cave is the unusual fact that, unlike most cenote caves on the East Coast with evidence of pre-Columbian worship, the Tancah cave contains salt water and therefore could not have been revered by the Maya because the cave produced a source of drinking water. We discovered that the cave is connected to the sea (about 700m to the east by an underground tunnel). The water in the cave is subject to the same tides as the sea. We also noticed that the orientation of the cave is due north-south with its open mouth facing upward towards the east. Its dark watery depth is to the west. We believe this directional orientation to be significant and related to the iconography of the carvings.

Most striking among the motifs of the cave is a crudely carved full Lamat glyph which can be seen as representing the heliacal rising of Venus in the eastern sky. The carving of the Lamat glyph is on the east wall.

In the course of our investigations of the Tancah Cenote cave, it became apparent that the depth of the water is at places quite great. We believe that it is probable that offerings were thrown into the water. Plans are currently being made to organize a properly supervised diving team equipped to cope with the formidable task of systematically exploring a lightless underground body of water. We believe that recovery of objects thrown into the cenote will enable us to be more specific about its period of use and will indicate to us more about the significance of the cave to the Maya.

Tancah Structure 44. Operating under an archaeological concession granted by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, we excavated a complex of Postclassic buildings, one of which is a range type structure decorated with mural paintings rendered in the style and iconography of the Codex Madrid. This building, previously referred to as Tancah Structure X (Miller 1973b), is designated as Tancah Structure 44.

With the help of three workers, three and one half months of intensive excavation of Structure 44 and its associated buildings and subplatform have produced an architectural construction sequence (based on ceramic lots sealed beneath platform floors) extending from the first part of the Early Classic Period to the Colonial Period.

The construction sequence beneath Structure 44 begins with a possible Formative Period platform. It is a small, low, two tiered platform built directly upon the limestone bedrock. The platform was thickly stuccoed and painted red. Because the platform was damaged by the Early Classic Maya in the course of subsequent building stages, we were unable to collect any sealed ceramic lots associated with this platform.

Just above the possible Formative Period platform lies an immense Early Classic platform associated with six burials containing a total of seven whole vessels dating from the early part of the Early Classic Period. One of these vessels is a basal flanged bowl which is probably related to Tixcacal Orange Polychrome. A similar vessel found at Dzibilchaltun is Early Tzakol or Early Piim in the Dzibilchaltun sequence (Andrews V: personal communication).

A subsequent Late Classic platform which covers the Early Classic platform has also been identified. This, on the basis of sealed ceramic lots and four whole vessels from three burials found between the Early Classic floor and the Late Classic floor. One vessel from a multiple burial intrusive into our Late Classic platform floor is an example of Puuc Slate Ware. The type is Chumayel Red on Slate (Andrews V: personal communication). Another vessel from the Late Classic architectural context is an example of Puuc Red Ware, and it is a good example of Teabo Red, Teabo Variety (Andrews V: personal communication). At Dzibilchaltun the curved vertical fluting evident on the Puuc Red vessel is a Pure Florescent marker; there is a 90% chance that this vessel from Tancah is post 10.0 or equivalent to Copo 2 (Andrews V: personal communication). Associated also with the multiple burial producing the Chumayel Red on Slate is a high curved bowl. It is Puuc Red Ware with a black interior slip and chevrons and lines on red on the exterior. This vessel probably dates to Copo 2 in the Dzibilchaltun sequence, i.e., certainly after A.D. 700 and probably after A.D. 830 (Andrews V: personal communication).

Two subsequent phases within the Postclassic Period have been tentatively defined at Tancah on the basis of the chronological implications of platform floors, architectural style and mural painting style, and ceramics associated with architecture. We believe that we now have convincing evidence to demonstrate that Tancah Structure 44 represents a phase within the Postclassic Period which predates the phase of major architectural activity at Tulum.

Evidence of Post Conquest occupation was found in front of Structure 44 in the form of a head of a horse crudely carved out of coralline limestone and a Spanish Olive Ware sherd worked as a sinker. These objects were both found on the surface of the latest occupation floor.

Jade Burial Goods. Several objects carved out of jade were encountered associated with three burials during the excavation of the earlier platform beneath Tancah Structure 44. Two of these burials were intrusive into the Early Classic platform; one of them was intrusive into the Late Classic platform.

The jade from the Early Classic burials proved to be the most interesting. One of these produced a single cheerio-shaped apple green jade bead about 11.5 mm in diameter. The most spectacular jade offering came from a secondary burial sealed in a oval shaped crypt which was intrusive into the Early Classic platform.

This burial contained a carved blue green jade, an apple green jade bead, a complete Early Classic bowl with a kill hole and a stone of unworked chert. The skeleton, as with all our burials, was in a very poor state of preservation. Sexing was impossible but from the bone fragments it was evident that the skeleton was that of a mature adult.

The apple green jade bead measures 21.5 mm by 15.5 mm by 13 mm while the carved blue green jade measures 44.5 mm wide by 54 mm high by 16 mm. The carved jade is perforated through its upper width rendering it a pendant jewel to be worn around the neck. The carving represents a face. Superimposed upon the face carved in low relief are incisions representing eyes and eyebrows and a mouth. These are later incisions probably made just before the piece was entered (c. 450 A.D.). It is probable that the crude later incisions were made by people who had no tradition for carving jade, i. e., the Early Classic Maya of Tancah.

There is a vague Olmec quality to the style of the piece, although it appears to be more Costa Rican, but not Olmec/Costa Rican (Elizabeth P. Benson: personal communication).

A Late Classic multiple burial containing two Puuc Slate vessels was associated with two cheerio-type beads made of green serpentine. One measures 11 mm in diameter and the other 7 mm in diameter.

Other Burial Goods. An extraordinarily finely polished piece of pyrite was found in association with one of our Early Classic burials. It measures 25x20x4 mm. The pyrite probably formed part of a mosaic plaque of the types described by Kidder, Jennings, and Shook (1946: 126-133) from Kaminajuyu during the Early Classic Period. We also found part of a worked Spondylus shell of local Caribbean variety associated with one of our Late Classic burials.

Virtually all of the burials we encountered included a sting ray spine. These are readily available all along the East Coast of the Peninsula. Most of these were in very poor states of preservation. All of our Early Classic burials exhibited a feature which can be regarded as an offering from the sea. These are small marine mollusks

filling the inside of the upside down pot, usually placed over the skull.

Ceramic Study. Most of the whole vessels from burials found this season have been illustrated by Felipe Davalos. The major task of analysing 250 sherd lots collected from the Structure 44 excavations is currently being carried out. The sherd lots contain ceramics from the Formative Period to the Colonial Period. Currently, the 1974 collections are being compared with those of Sanders made in 1954. Lots are being numbered consecutively using the Carnegie-M.A.R.I. system. The Tancah type collection will be kept in the ceramic bodega of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología in Merida. The collection begins with the designation Q-510.

Obsidian. Twenty-one partially broken blades of obsidian were found in the excavations of Tancah Structure 44. These blades were found in all levels but are far more frequent in the final occupation levels. There are two types: a dull streaky grey and a grey which has a slight pinkish hue. Plans are being made to have the obsidian analysed for its place of origin.

Manos and Metates. Six manos and five metates were found on the final occupation levels of the Structure 44 complex. There are two types of manos: simple cylinders carved out of limestone rock and simple cylinders carved out of coral. There are also two types of metates: limestone rectangles with a trough-like depression on one side and limestone rectangles which are slightly concave on one side. Judging from the archaeological contexts of the manos and metates found, we believe that the limestone manos and trough worked limestone rectangles are contemporary with the erection of the standing architecture of Structure 44 and that the coral manos and slightly concave rectangular metates are colonial. These kitchen tools as well as the abundance of utility wares found certainly suggest that Structure 44 was a residence.

Animal Bones. Numerous animal bones were found in the Structure 44 excavations. Deer and parrot fish were commonly found. The parrot fish bones and the tremendous number of notched sinkers made out of small sherds suggest that fishing was a major food gathering activity of the Tancah Maya. Species identification of all our animal bones is planned.

Stucco and Mortar Samples. Four separate floors corresponding to Formative, Early Classic, Late Classic and Postclassic building platforms in the Structure 44 complex were collected during the course of the 1974 season. It is possible to determine with the naked eye that all four floors are different from each other in thickness and density. We plan to have the stucco floor samples analysed to determine the degree to which Maya mortar techniques change in time. If such change can be scientifically detected, systematic collections of mortars may provide a means of measuring time.

Consolidation. The consolidation of Structure 44 was carried out with the cooperation and logistic support of the Centro Regional del Sureste, Instituto Nacional de Antropología

e Historia. Thanks to the financial contribution of an anonymous donor we are able to do more than our legal responsibility. Preservation of the surviving mural painting by sealing Room 1 from sun and rain was uppermost in our consolidation priorities. With the valuable assistance of University of Toronto student Thomas Morgan and Master Mason Antonio Sierra along with three workers, we have rebuilt the root damaged walls associated with Room 1 and have stabilized the root damaged vault. An immense Mato Palo tree growing out of Structure 44 had to be removed and damaged masonry replaced and consolidated. The upper facade of Structure 44 was rebuilt on the basis of in situ masonry. The terracing in front of Structure 44 was consolidated. In addition, we stabilized the stones forming the base of the small temple shrine facing Structure 44. We believe that our consolidation program at Tancah contributes to a public understanding of Maya archaeology.

Area Map. A map of the structures forming part of Tancah not included in Lothrop (1924) or Sanders (1960) was begun by Anthony P. Andrews during part of June and July. Preliminary survey of the western most area of the site of Tancah reveals a dense system of house mounds and low walls (possibly garden plot walls). This area extends 5 kilometers further west than the western most extension of Sander's 1960 map and has a north-south extension of six kilometers.

Andrews is preparing a map showing the relation of the site of Tancah with the new coastal highway. His map will also include the location of the Tancah cenote cave and four standing buildings to the west of Structure 44 omitted from Sander's 1960 map.

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