

# Comalcalco

## Ancient City of Brick and Stucco

Lorenzo Ochoa\*



**T**abasco is the point furthest to the Northwest that Mayan cultural remains can be found: monumental architecture using the false arch or Mayan vault; the ball game; poly-

chromatic ceramics; inscriptions on stelas and altars; and knowledge of writing, mathematics, astronomy and the calendar. Many cities, large and small, from the coast to the foot of the mountains and from the Chontalpa to the river region, developed from the first centuries of the Christian era on: Comalcalco, El Tortuguero, Santa Elena, Pomoná, Reforma, Revancha, El Arenal, Jonuta, San Claudio and several others. These

---

\* Researcher at the UNAM Institute for Anthropological Research.

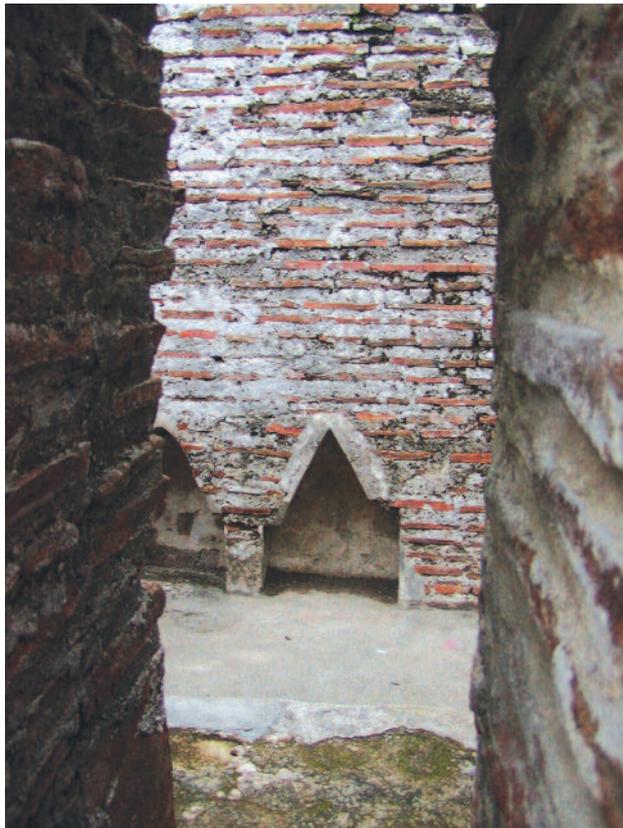
Photos reproduced by permission of the National Institute of Anthropology and History, Conaculta-<sup>INAH</sup>-Mex.



Petra Reynoso

Captive, southeast corner, Temple I.

Now we know a little more about the history of that ancient city that the Chontals built with brick, covered in stucco and later abandoned.



Rebeca Perales/Jacobo Mugarte

Comalcalco reveals its secrets little by little.

cities show the achievements of Tabasco's Maya-Chontal people. Despite their outstanding knowledge and culture, no one has recognized their fundamental contribution to the foundation and development of Palenque, the regional capital of one of the most important autonomous states of the Mayan lowlands.

At the height of the development of Mayan culture, wars between cities were very common; this was the case of Tabasco as well. During one of these wars, between the armies of Comalcalco and Tortuguero in December of A.D. 649, Balam Ahau, the ruler of Tortuguero, captured and sacrificed Ox Balam, the sovereign of Comalcalco, which surrendered to the victors. As befitting his rank, the remains of Ox Balam were returned to his home city. This version of historical events comes from the interpretation by Marc Uwe Zender of the inscriptions on bone, shell and manta ray bones found in offerings placed together with the ancient king's remains and recovered in 1998 by Ricardo Armijo from temples in Comalcalco's North Plaza.<sup>1</sup>

Comalcalco has revealed its history and secrets little by little. Until not long ago, it was famous for its bricks, decorated using different techniques, described in most detail in the catalogue written by Luis F. Álvarez, Guadalupe Landa and José Luis Romero.<sup>2</sup> The only other information we had were a few dates from the eighth century and their emblem glyph, carved on three clay tablets made known by José Luis Romero in 1990.<sup>3</sup>

According to Zender, Armijo and Judith Gallegos, other inscriptions describe how, in the late eighth century, a "temple guardian," the "Lord of Fire," called Ah Pakal Tan celebrated rituals in honor of the god Chaak for 12 years. He was praying for an end to the long droughts that may have punished the Mayan lowlands and, as I have submitted in other places, may have been one of the causes of the Mayan civilization's collapse.

Now we know a little more about the history of that ancient city that the Chontals built with brick, covered in stucco and later abandoned. Comalcalco would remain there, buried under the weight of the centuries and oblivion until the

late nineteenth century, when it began to be visited by travelers and researchers.

#### COMALCALCO'S PLACE IN MAYAN ARCHAEOLOGY

After the collapse of the Mayan culture, many of Palenque's inhabitants emigrated; some settled on the coastal plain and the San Pedro and San Pablo Basin, from Jonuta to Comalcalco. In those lowlands prey to flooding, the Chontal constructions were made of brick, as a substitute for stone, unavailable in the region. The most widely known city made of brick is Comalcalco, which began to be visited after Desiré Charnay published *Les Anciennes Villes du Nouveau Monde* (The Ancient Cities of the New World) in 1885. About the same time, another visitor, Captain Pedro Pablo Romero went there, commissioned in the Columbus Expedition headed up by Francisco del Paso y Troncoso on the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America. However, little is known about this visit; Romero added nothing important in his report to what Charnay had written, but he was the first Mexican to visit the city for archaeological reasons. He did not even mention if he had visited the site before (a possibility, since he was originally from the town of Comalcalco).

The real role this city plays in Mayan archaeology would only be recognized when the first of the two volumes of *Tribes and Temples* was published in 1926-1927, a seminal work for anyone interested in the history, scenery, archaeology and customs of early twentieth-century Tabasco. This work was the result of the expedition led in 1925 by Frans Blom and Oliver la Farge, sponsored by Tulane University.<sup>4</sup> Later, in the 1950s, Gordon F. Ekholm, from the New York Museum of Natural History, worked there; in the 1960s, George Andrews, from the University of Oregon, did his research there, as did Román Piña Chan from Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History. Finally, Ponciano Salazar Ortigón worked the site until his death. In the early 1990s, Ricardo Armijo took charge of the research into the ancient city.



Rebeca Perales/Jacobo Mugarte

Stucco decoration, Temple VII.

Chontal constructions were made of brick, as a substitute for stone, unavailable in the region. The most widely known city of brick is Comalcalco.



Petra Reynoso

East view of Temple I.

## CITY OF BRICK AND STUCCO

Although Comalcalco was settled long before, the city grew to a large size after the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. and reached its political, cultural and commercial height around A.D. 500. Its golden age would then last until the eighth and ninth centuries. Two clay tablets found by Ponciano Salazar in Temple I have inscriptions, one of the city's emblem glyph and another saying that an important personage died in the year 846. Unfortunately, because we do not know the context in which these tablets were found, we cannot add more information. The impressively monumental Temple I closes off the extreme western end of the North Plaza of one of Comalcalco's most important architectural complexes. A chapel built of perishable materials crowned the building in the last period that the area was inhabited. A broad stairway rising 20 meters above the level of the plaza provides access to the chapel. As with other buildings, the Chontals modeled the stucco with absolute mastery. Human and fantastic figures that today can barely be discerned are depicted carrying out rituals of human sacrifice on the southeast corner. Temples II and III flank the northern and southern corners of Temple I. Several buildings are aligned with these temples from west to east, although some have only been partially explored. It was in Temple III and Temples

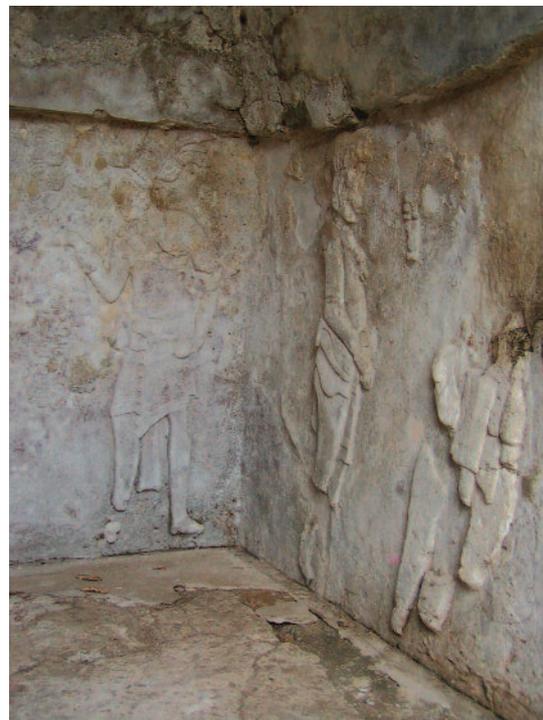
II and IIA where Ricardo Armijo recovered several dozen objects carved in bone, shell and manta ray bone from clay urns that were part of funeral offerings.

Apart from these buildings, the Great Acropolis includes the palace, extended by its two long, narrow galleries. A little lower, slightly to the southwest of the palace, is a tomb, described by Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge in the first volume of *Tribes and Temples*. In 1925, when they discovered it, it still had clear remains of red and several figures modeled in stucco decorating its walls: they noted each one's position, clothing and ornaments, including pectorals and bracelets. Finally, they traced the head of figure seven because they thought it one of the most exquisite examples of Mayan art they had ever seen. In general, they considered the tomb's stucco figures masterfully and very freely done, as had never before been seen in Mayan art. Today, only a few traces remain of this great stucco work.

Lower down, toward the Great Acropolis's northwestern edge are Temples VI and VII. Temple VI is only about 2.8 meters high, with a base



View of the palace.



Stucco figures inside the Palace.

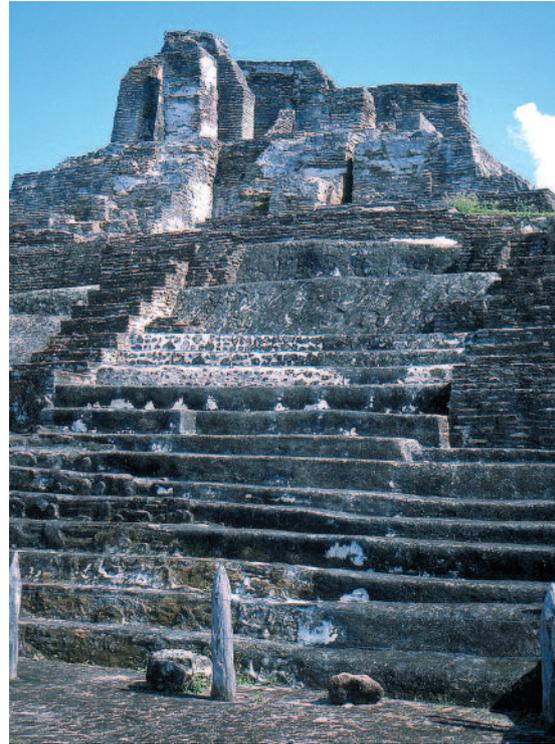
Rebeca Perales/Jacobo Mugante

Rebeca Perales/Jacobo Mugante



Petra Reynoso

Kinich Ahau mosaic, Temple VI.



Petra Reynoso

South side of the Great Acropolis.

Comalcalco grew to a large size after the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. Its golden age would then last until the eighth and ninth centuries.

of three superimposed earth-filled tiers, covered with a layer of stucco, with a stairway at the center. On top is the temple, made up of two rectangular rooms divided by a wall and with pilasters gracing the entrance. Walls, vault and pilasters were made of stucco-covered brick. Román Piña Chan dubbed this the “mosaic basement,” since on the front of it, modeled in stucco, is an extraordinary face of the sun god, Kinich Ahau. Researchers recovered a human head modeled in stucco representing a bearded personage with a scarred face (a characteristic of individuals of high social rank among the Mayan elite) from the rubble. On the building’s west side is Temple VII. On its south side, a series of richly ornamented, seated human figures also modeled in stucco are depicted. The city was at its height.

At that time, merchants from central Veracruz visited Comalcalco and other urban centers of Tabasco’s coastal plain. Later, groups of Nahuatl origin from central Mexico arrived and settled in a place the Spanish later named Provincia de Cimatanes. So, when the Spanish conquered the region in the sixteenth century, the Cimatecs, who exercised important economic influence in the entire region, had taken refuge in the abandoned city. By then, the political-economic importance

of Comalcalco and the Chontals was a thing of the past. No one remembered the city’s original name. No one remembered the wars that it waged against the river region city, Tortuguero, in the eighth century, or the rituals that centuries before the priests had to perform to invoke rain during the great droughts that punished the area. The years of splendor of the ancient city of brick and stucco, a city that covered more than six square kilometers, had been buried by time. Temples, tombs, palaces, plazas: all these would fall captive to the jungle. ■■■

---

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ricardo Armijo, Miriam Gallegos and Marc Uwe Zender, “Urnas funerarias, textos históricos y ofrendas en Comalcalco,” *Los investigadores de la cultura maya*, vol. 8 (II) (Campeche, Campeche: Universidad Autónoma de Campeche, 2000), pp. 313-323; and Ricardo Armijo, “Comalcalco. La antigua ciudad maya de ladrillo,” *Arqueología Mexicana*, vol. 11, no. 61 (Mexico City: Editorial Raíces, 2003), pp. 30-37.
- <sup>2</sup> Luis F. Álvarez, Guadalupe Landa and José Luis Romero, *Los ladrillos de Comalcalco* (Villahermosa, Tabasco: Gobierno del Estado de Tabasco, 1990).
- <sup>3</sup> José Luis Romero, “Tres tablillas de barro con inscripciones glíficas de Comalcalco, Tabasco,” *Tierra y agua. La antropología en Tabasco*, no. 1 (Villahermosa, Tabasco: Gobierno del Estado de Tabasco, 1990), pp. 7-14.
- <sup>4</sup> Both volumes were published by Tulane University.