

# ICOMOS

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON MONUMENTS AND SITES  
CONSEIL INTERNATIONAL DES MONUMENTS ET DES SITES  
CONSEJO INTERNACIONAL DE MONUMENTOS Y SITIOS  
МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ СОВЕТ ПО ВОПРОСАМ ПАМЯТНИКОВ И ДОСТОПРИМЕЧАТЕЛЬНЫХ МЕСТ  
WORLD HERITAGE LIST N° 411

## A) IDENTIFICATION

Nomination : The pre-Hispanic city and National Park of Palenque

Location : State of Chiapas

State Party : Mexico

Date : December 2, 1986

## B) ICOMOS RECOMMENDATION

That the cultural property be included on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria I, II, III and IV.

## C) JUSTIFICATION

In 1979, in its evaluation of the archaeological site of Tikal, ICOMOS emphasized that the extraordinary contribution of the Maya cultures needed to be recognized through a series of nominations to the World Heritage List, and cited Palenque as the most obvious example.

The outstanding features of the Mayan civilization include its long duration (it first appeared in the 4th century A.D. and went into decline around the 9th century, though it survived in various forms up until the Spanish conquest), the magnitude of their territorial domination (the area involved includes parts of five countries : Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Belize and Mexico), and the dispersion of its political structures (a myriad of religious centres in an "empire" which, unlike that of Teotihuacan, had no centralized power). This resulted in and is illustrated by the prodigious diversity of a fascinating monumental art style. The very original forms were both powerful and refined, and caused great admiration among the conquistadores.

Located at the heart of a tropical jungle, the ruins of Palenque represent only the central area of a vast city whose total area was approximately 8 square kilometers. The layout of the site is incredible. Artificial terracing changed the natural topography of the site which is between the rugged foothills of the Chiapas to the south-southeast and the lowlands to the north by creating a whole hierarchy of volumes and spaces where platforms and structures are organized in harmonious balance. The Otulum, a tributary of the Usumacinta, was channelled into an ingenious 50-meter long corbelled vaulted-roof canal, and crosses the city. In the Maya dialect, Otulum means "fortified houses", perhaps an allusion to the city whose ancient name was not retained and whose history has only been partially revealed by archaeological work.

Palenque, as the Spanish called it, was established between the 3rd and the 5th centuries. The principal monuments were built between 500 and 700, when the city was at its peak. Towards the end of the 10th century, coastal peoples from the Gulf of Mexico region invaded and caused its downfall and abandonment.

The dominant element in the central cleared area is the Palacio. Erected at different periods on an immense artificial knoll shaped like a truncated pyramid, the various buildings are set around four courts. Rising above the others is a three-level structure located at the southwest corner; this is a sort of watch tower or astronomical observatory and is a unique example in Mayan architecture.

The Palacio ensemble is balanced by the even larger Temple of Inscriptions. Set atop a stepped pyramid located below the Palacio, it was built over a funerary crypt that was explored in 1952.

In the distance can be seen other magnificent temple-pyramids, which are half hidden by vegetation. To the southeast are the Temples of the Sun, the Cross and the Foliated Cross, and to the north rises the Temple of the Count (the absurd name refers to an archaeologist, Baron Jean-Frédéric Waldeck, who lived there in the 19th century). Numerous buildings are scattered between these two zones. They have been identified and sometimes explored; more rarely, they have been enhanced after having been excavated. The first such maintenance work on the monuments at Palenque was in fact not undertaken until around 1940.

ICOMOS, having decided not to establish even a succinct inventory of the buildings and visible remains at the heart of a 1772 hectare park, shall confine itself to enumerating certain of the reasons that favor the inscription of Palenque on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria I, II, III and IV.

- Criterion I. Palenque is an incomparable achievement of Mayan art. The structures are characterized by a fineness and a lightness which resulted from the new construction techniques and drainage methods that were developed in order to reduce the thickness of the walls. The expanded interior space, multiple openings, and the use of galleries give the architecture a rare elegance, richly decorated with sculptures and stucco of a type never previously seen.

- Criterion II. The influence exerted by Palenque was considerable throughout the basin of the Usumacinta, extending even as far away as Comalcalco, on the western border of the Mayan cultural zone.

- Criterion III. Palenque bears a unique testimony to the mythology and the rites of the Mayas, notably in the incredible number of sculpted reliefs on interior walls of the palaces and temples.

- Criterion IV. Older than the ensemble at Tikal, whose major monuments were constructed a hundred years later, the group of ceremonial buildings at Palenque is an outstanding example of a Mayan sanctuary at the middle of the Classic period.

ICOMOS, April 1987