



Maya Exploration Center
Education Through Exploration

Periodic Interview Series: Dr. Robert Rands
Interviewed by Alonso Mendez, November 2003

ALONSO MENDEZ: *Robert, it's a great pleasure to have you in Palenque once again. I have a lot of fairly technical questions to ask. But let me start with something personal. What inspired you to begin studying the Maya?*



DR. RANDS: I'll begin by sharing a short anecdote, which shows when I should have begun studying the Maya but did not. When I was a junior in high school I had a history professor who knew more about me than I knew about myself. He loaned me a Reader's Digest Condensed book set at the time of the Spanish Conquest. It included some Maya, but was mainly about the Aztec, and I was fascinated by it. However, I

did not have enough perspective, or sense, to realize that this was something I wanted to continue. Between high school and college I became aware of anthropological archaeology. Now that's a broad field with an early concentration on the Americas—Inca, Aztec, Maya, Olmec. But why the Maya? I suppose Stephens and Catherwood had something to do with it. I liked the fact that, through such people as Bishop Landa, there was a connection between ethnohistory and archaeology. But if ethnohistory had been the overriding reason, my interest probably would've been Aztec, but it wasn't. I very much liked some aspects of Maya art. I liked Olmec art, too. In those days I was as interested in the Olmec, who were just beginning to be known, as in the Maya. But my general interest in Mesoamerica became more and more Maya-oriented. It is difficult, at least in a few words, to say why. It became the Maya partly by accident. I don't like the way my career has developed, because it concentrated too much on the Maya. I think we need to look at Mesoamerica as a whole. And within the Maya field, as it happened, my career focused on Palenque, to the detriment of some of my other Mayan interests.

Dr. Robert Rands

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ALONSO: *Much of your work began during the formative period when we were just discovering the Maya. You could have studied sculpture or architecture...*

DR. RANDS: I studied sculpture. That was my first Maya interest.

ALONSO: *Why did you choose ceramics as your field?*

DR. RANDS: I was a doctoral candidate at Columbia University. At that time Alberto Ruz was working at Palenque and the opportunity came for me to work with him. Everybody was studying different things and nobody was doing anything with pottery. I had paid attention to pottery, but not with the intention of being a ceramics specialist. However, here was

Palenque, a wonderful place—I love Palenque—and it was wide open in terms of ceramics. I wouldn't be duplicating what somebody else was doing. And that is the reason I focused on ceramics and had to become a ceramics specialist.

ALONSO: *Can you tell us some of the highlights of your experience working with Alberto Ruz?*

DR. RANDS: First I need to explain why I had the opportunity of working at Palenque, because essentially it was, as one would expect, and properly, a Mexican operation. However, there was a great deal of funding from the United States; to be specific, from Nelson Rockefeller through the Institute of Andean Research. That funding, in the early years of Ruz's work, made a tremendous difference. It would not have been possible for Ruz to have done his work if he were supported merely by Mexico. Each year the Institute of Andean Research allotted a thousand dollars for somebody to visit Palenque. My Mesoamerica professor at Columbia was secretary of the Institute of Andean Research. He and I got along well, and he suggested the possibility of my going to Palenque. That was wonderful. But I realized that to work with ceramics was more than I, alone, could do. So I made the stipulation that my wife come with me. Now, that caused some problems, because the Mexican reaction was, "Why should you have your wife and we don't?" I needed her to wash pottery, to see that it was carefully segregated, to visit excavations being carried out by Ruz and his assistants while I was doing excavations of my own. So there was a long negotiation between the United States, the Institute of Andean Research, and INAH [The National Institute of Anthropology and History] in Mexico. Eventually my wife and I came from Yucatán to Palenque, we met Alberto Ruz, and he told us that the lawyer from INAH was coming down the following week. As it turned out the lawyer from INAH gave the okay.

To begin with, there was the old camp. The houses had metal rather than thatch roofs and it was hot, and Barbara and I stayed in the pueblo. The workmen picked us up in the morning, took us to the ruins, returned us in the afternoon. When the new camp was completed, Barbara and I moved and we spent all our days there. This gives a little

bit of the tone of what it was like in the beginning.

I want to say that my own relationship with Ruz was very, very good. He was cooperative. He had his priorities. In my reports to him, I tried to address those things that he was most interested in rather than other aspects of ceramics. As time went on the relationship became greater. After he discovered the tomb of Pakal, he gave lectures at colleges and universities in the United States, and when I was teaching at The University of Mississippi he and his family stayed at our home. In general, we had an extremely good relationship, and he was a person whom I admired. At times we disagreed, which always happens in a relationship. But mostly, *muy simpatico*.

ALONSO: *Let's get a little deeper into the work that you've done. When you developed the ceramic sequence of Palenque, you named the different phases by the rivers at the site. Do those rivers have a specific connection to the locations and the chronology of Palenque?*

DR. RANDS: In one case: the Picota phase. I had made an excavation close to the Picota arroyo that was my best definition of the Picota ceramic phase. So there was a definite connection. For the most part, it's arbitrary. However, it is no accident that the Otolum arroyo, which flows through the center of Palenque, is used to designate pottery such as that from the Temple of the Inscriptions.

ALONSO: *Moises Morales has told me an account of how you began your survey of Palenque and the ceramics. He describes it as one that began in the Plaza and grew out in concentric circles to cover a vast terrain. Can you give us an idea of how much terrain your survey covers?*

DR. RANDS: First of all, the concept of concentric circles is new to me. It wasn't like that; it was more random. But in essence, what Moi says is correct. Most of the early work was done close to the central area, which had not been cleared of forest. There was a lot of forest then. More and more I moved out into the remote parts of Palenque, and beyond Palenque, to sites as far away as the Usumacinta River, as far away as Chinikiha.

You might ask why I was doing it. Well, I was doing it because there were so many unanswered questions at Palenque. Palenque ceramics are so different from those in most of the Maya area, and I thought that by looking at some of the nearby sites I would have more in the way of things to compare. Yes, I did get more samples, although I must say that sites very close to Palenque tend to be small and tend not to have long occupations. For good stratigraphy, deep stratigraphy, I had to move further away.

I was also interested in the problem of frontiers. You know, "frontier" is a word that assumes its definition. But what is a frontier? It's relative. I had two possibilities in mind. One is that Palenque had a long-term sustaining area, an area of close interaction with strong centralization toward the main site, and maybe I would reach a place farther away that's no longer so centralized. However, in order to find the boundary, if there is such a thing, you need to go on the other side of the boundary, otherwise you don't know it's a boundary. So that extended the survey farther away from Palenque. Was there a sharp boundary, or a reasonably sharp boundary? Yes, but that varied in time. What periods of time are we talking about? Here we get involved in the chronology of other

sites.

In addition to that, moving away from the center to outlying parts of Palenque uncovered differences that occurred at the same periods of time. I was, and am, continually impressed by the fact that the pottery we can place in the same time period is so different from one part of Palenque to another. More and more I wondered why. Were different sites providing either clay or finished pottery to Palenque, and if so, what did Palenque give in return? And why all these differences within Palenque? In a recent paper,¹ Ron Bishop and I speculate that this might be because there were different lineages at Palenque and the workshops that supplied pottery for one lineage were different from the workshops that supplied pottery to another lineage. Speculation. A slippery issue. Impossible to determine. But more and more I am close to being convinced that the diversity is due to different workshops located in different areas, and if one workshop is so different from the other, it makes sense that it could have been because it was a different lineage, or in some way the social organization was such that it would permit and encourage a lineage to do things differently from another lineage. I'm not simply talking about royal lineages. I'm talking about all the lineages with special preferences as well as those that constituted the nobility.

Then there's the whole problem of production and the circulation of goods after production. It is for those reasons that I began the use of chemistry and other specialized techniques which have become so significant. If it had not been for those problems, chemistry would have had something important to offer, but not nearly as much. It's a matter of problem orientation.

ALONSO: You mentioned that there are a lot of differences between the ceramics found at Palenque and those found at other major sites. What are some of those key differences?

DR. RANDS: First of all, at Palenque, unlike most Maya sites, the pottery surfaces are highly weathered, and since archaeologists pay a great deal of attention to surface finish, if you don't have much in the way of surface finish, it's like having your arms tied behind your back. Secondly, Palenque is located pretty far west in the Maya area, far away from major centers in the Petén where the types were first established, Uaxactun, Tikal, and so forth. So far away that it is not surprising that there were differences. At Palenque, little attention was given to painting and polychrome pottery, but great importance to incising, *patillage*, and modeling. We see tremendous developments in the modeling of *incensarios* and figurines.

You might wonder why I am so confident in talking about polychrome pottery being unimportant in Palenque, considering the heavy weathering and erosion that occur on the surfaces, and to that extent it does make the quantification of color combinations very difficult. However, enough is preserved that I am confident of what I say.

¹ Rands, Robert L. and Ronald L. Bishop, "The Dish-Plate Tradition at Palenque: Continuity and Change," in *Patterns and Process: A Festschrift in Honor of Dr. Edward V. Sayre*, edited by Lambertus van Zelst. Suitland, Maryland: Smithsonian Center for Materials Research and Education, 2003.

ALONSO: *We were curious about the decorative motifs at Palenque. Were there any motifs that lasted, perhaps from the Preclassic all the way through the Terminal Classic?*

DR. RANDS: No, not that I know of. The earliest motif that continues is the monkey, which appears in early Middle-Classic times, what we call the Cascada phase. The monkey was not too important then, but later on, toward the end of the Classic sequence, monkey motifs became more prevalent. Most of the specialized motifs date from the Murcielagos and Balunte periods; that is, from 750 to 800 A.D. Among those motifs are quatrefoil, four-petaled designs, floral designs, fish—naturalistic designs. Human beings don't appear much on Palenque ceramics compared to most Maya pottery. That is one way in which, again, Palenque is different.

ALONSO: *When you were working in Palenque, did you see any ethnographic evidence of a continuation of the ceramic tradition?*

DR. RANDS: Yes. First I'll point to something that may affect pottery manufacture and production in an indirect way but is still important. And that is fertility of soil for farming. The farmers in Palenque much preferred to work in the sierras than on their *ejido* lands in the plains. Less fertility in the plains, more fertility in the limestone-rich soils of the sierras. The soils of the plains, which stretch from here to the Gulf of Mexico, are swampy and have a lot of clay in them. People who lived on the plains probably did not do a great deal of farming. They don't now; they raise cattle. And oil has become the dominant economy. Farming has never been important on the plains, except along rivers like the Usumacinta where fresh sediment washes down each year. If you find people living in an area that is poor for farming but has clays in it, that area is probably a good place to manufacture pottery. And in so far as Palenque, in the sierras, was interacting with people living down below, pots from down below were moving into Palenque. Or people from Palenque were making trips to the lower *planos* in order to secure clay for pottery manufacture. We find that most of the decorated pottery—with important exceptions—is made from the clays down below, not from the clays in the sierras.

ALONSO: *Was there any pottery production going on while you were working in Palenque?*

DR. RANDS: When I was here in 1957, pottery was still being made by people at the base of the sierras. There was an artist working for Ruz who liked modeling clay. It was not the sort of clay that you tend to get in the sierras.

ALONSO: *Speaking of clay types, how are you using modern techniques in your analysis of ceramics?*

DR. RANDS: I will mention two that I think to be especially important: first, neutron activation analysis of the paste of the clay, to see if the clays or what was added to the clays are the same or different at various sites and from different parts of Palenque; secondly, the study of the materials present in very small amounts within the pottery as a residue.

ALONSO: *Can you give us an example of those materials?*

DR. RANDS: Food! The trouble with both neutron activation and the study of residual materials in the pottery container is that it's easier to talk about than it is to realize. The general tendency is for someone like Ron Bishop, at the Smithsonian, to make a study of some of the pottery and to write it up as an appendix, but there is little or no relationship between what Ron has to say and what others have to say. If an archaeologist says here are pots "a", "b", "c", "d", "e", Ron take that into consideration and sees whether pots "a", "b", "c", "d", and "e" are similar in chemical composition. On that level there's interaction. But there has not been real investigation. Why? Because archaeologists tend to be turned off if they don't know what to do with the findings.

When it comes to residual materials within the container, one of the people advocating testing said he wished that archaeologists would not wash their pottery, because washing tears away information that would be of use in terms of residual materials. However, if the pottery were not washed, the archaeologists would not be able to say much about it. They would not be able to draw a profile of it, would not be able to see what the decoration was, and would not be able to date it. So, to do what the specialists are suggesting would be contrary to what we do and need to do in archaeology. Now maybe some sort of sampling could be used, some portions of a sherd not being washed. That is a possibility, but again, the potentials have not been reached.

ALONSO: *Would you talk about what has driven you all these years to do your research and, if you could do it all over again, what, if anything, would you do differently?*

DR. RANDS: Let me answer in terms of doing samples. In the survey from sites around Palenque I probably attempted to investigate too many. It probably would have been better if I had investigated fewer and had done more intensive work at some of them and therefore have more in the way of stratigraphy. I don't know. But there is one way that I can question what I did.

Let's use excavations at Palenque as another example. There's one excavation in particular that I'm thinking about, number 69, a good excavation, with good stratigraphy, where you move from a higher deposit to a lower deposit. It is located north-northwest of the Temple of the Count. The new road runs over that site. Okay, it's pretty much buried. At the north end of that two-by-four excavation, we found a considerable amount of pottery that had unusually good stratigraphy, not perfect, but enough so that what I should have done instead of investigating somewhere else was to have extended that excavation to get more information. What do you find in an Otolum site at the time of Pakal? We have the stucco floor, with separate ceramic material, late above and early below. But all of the pottery recovered there was dishes, the sorts of things you would eat with, not the sorts of things that you would use in the kitchen. We have materials that relate to service but not to the preparation of food. Somewhere nearby there must've been a kitchen. If I had it to do over again, I think that, rather than digging somewhere else at Palenque, I would have extended that north end so as to try to include the kitchen and thereby add a more complete picture of the Otolum phase.

ALONSO: *What's driven you to continue? You have one of the longest careers of anyone*

in this field.

DR. RANDS: The problems that I originally raised were such that in order to answer them I needed to use a number of techniques, physical techniques, which normally are not used in archaeology. This takes time. I could have sent them some samplings and said fine, they have enough information, I'll publish it, and go somewhere else. However, I was so interested in the questions I raised that I wasn't satisfied with the initial results, as a set of unsatisfactory conclusions. Besides, I wanted to find relationships between Palenque and other sites. And I still do. I have some idea about the relationships, but not as close as I would like to have. For these reasons I have been like a dog with the bone in regard to Palenque and the surrounding area.

I have tried to find out more, but the time has come in my life where I have better control of the data. The primary goal now is to finish the comprehensive monograph that deals not only with Palenque, but also with other sites and their interaction, or lack of interaction, as seen in the ceramics of Palenque. I've written a lot of notes on things that have been quantified, so I'm not starting out from scratch. But there is still a lot to put together and to write, and that's driving me.

ALONSO: *I want to ask a fun question. Where, in your opinion, is the most likely site for Kan Balam's tomb?*

DR. RANDS: The Temple of the Cross. In order to test this hypothesis, extensive work needs to be done, not the small amount of work that has recovered burials and small tombs around the edge, but penetration deep into the sub-structure. That would require destroying much material. But penetration—I'm thinking from the stairwell—could be reconstructed. A lot in this country has been reconstructed; there'd be nothing new about that.

ALONSO: *Finally, what is your fondest memory of your work here in Palenque?*

DR. RANDS: Again, I'd like to answer, not in terms of one, but in terms of a few. In one excavation I found an effigy of a nauhayaca snake. It looked so fierce, so realistic, that I dreamed about it that night. Now I normally do not dream about what I find. I think about it, yes, dream about it, no. Obviously it made an impression on me.

Being the fondest memory, I'd rather turn to people. I will first of all mention Merle Greene, who was working as an artist for me at the ruins. I was her introduction to Palenque. Right at the beginning it was very much our little core—Merle, Moises Morales, Mario Leon, plus Alberto Ruz. Again, I want to say that my relationship with Ruz was very good. And I especially want to acknowledge the chief of my excavation crew. His name is Pancho Cortes. He died a couple of years ago from a heart attack. He was a friend, very helpful to me, and one whose friendship I value.

Interviewer Alonso Mendez is a Research Associate at Maya Exploration Center. He has a background in Art and Art History. His interest in the Palenque Ceramic Sequence relates directly to the work he does recreating ceramic artifacts from the ruins.