

Román Piña Chan

An Exemplary Archaeologist

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Dr. Román Piña Chan (born, 1920) died last April 10. But, who was he and why do we say his academic career was exemplary? Dr. Piña was one of Mexico's most prolific archeological researchers. He wrote innumerable books and articles describing his field work and effected studies on almost all of Mexico's cultural regions, but, above all, he contributed enormously to our knowledge about pre-Hispanic cultures. He was the last of a series of great Mexican archaeologists that began with Manuel Gamio in the 1920s and continued with Alfonso Caso and others like Eduardo Noguera in the following decades.

His contributions can be divided by regions and topics, but a common thread runs through all of them; they all complement each other and are connected to a broader,

more general idea. In the excavations he did in some parts of the Mexico Basin, among them Tlatilco and Tlapacoya, Piña Chan defined a cultural stage characterized by the adoption of forms of village life, settlements that may have been rudimentary technologically speaking, but with very broad social development that even allowed them to establish relations with other cultures, among them the Olmecs. He called this stage the preclassical horizon (1955), now also known as the formative period.

The preclassical cultures, like the Gulf cultures and the Olmecs, are topics that he wrote several works on. But his contributions do not stop there. He also did studies at sites like Chalcatzingo and Xochicalco in Morelos, and Jaina, Bonampak, Chichen Itzá, Uxmal and Palenque, among others in the Maya region. His exploration of the Teotenango site in the State of Mexico from 1970 to 1975 constituted one of the most important interdisciplinary studies in Mexican archaeology.

He also studied the cultures that settled in the West, the Huasteca area, Central Mexico and, of course, the Maya region. His knowledge of practically the entire Mesoamerican horizon allowed him to build what he called in one of his works "a vision of pre-Hispanic Mexico" (1967).

No less important than his excavations were his works as an ethno-historian. For Piña Chan, research was unfinished and had no value if the scientists did not compare its results with documentary sources: archaeology with a historic tradition. His hypotheses in this field were polemical. For example, he created a controversy when he posited the Maya culture's influence on the Toltecs (1972), a hypothesis that contradicts the idea that the highland cultures were disseminated throughout the Southeast during the post-classical period.

Another of his proposals fixed the origin of Tamoanchán (a mythical paradise, the birthplace of the gods). In a 1997 lecture, he said, "So many years after having developed this

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hypothesis, today I would only change the title to 'Xochicalco, a Historical Tamoanchán.' I would also correct the place in which the cult of Quetzalcóatl originated to 'the place where a special form of the cult of Quetzalcóatl developed.' I believe the rest is still valid."

An unfortunate accident in 1984 while excavating in Beccán, Campeche, left him without the use of his legs. It halted his field work, but did not stop him from continuing his research and making brilliant contributions. Although he no longer went to the sites himself, until a few months ago he did direct a research project in Oaxaca through one of his students. He continued to be a prolific writer: a little over a year ago he published a new book about the Cacaxtla paintings, and at the time of his death, he was preparing other works that will now remain unfinished.

Despite his health, Piña Chan never stopped teaching. For many, his classes were determinant in their training, and he acted as thesis advisor to many students. From its beginnings almost six years ago, he encouraged the publication

Actualidades Arqueológicas (Current Archaeology), a magazine published by archaeology students all over the country. He was its honorary president. Every year, a group of students organize a symposium in his honor; this year will be the sixth, the first he will miss. His presentation was to be about the Tingambato, Michoacán, archaeological site, one that he excavated.

Piña Chan was an experienced excavator and an outstanding theoretician; many of his proposals continue to be valid today, while others continue to cause debate. He did not write only for academia, however; he also published materials for the general public, museum guides, pamphlets and guides to archaeological sites. But, his most outstanding characteristic, one that made him an exemplary teacher, was his modesty: the cordiality with which he and his wife welcomed students into their home, the patience he displayed when a topic was not understood, his passion for teaching and his immeasurable love for his profession, archaeology. **MM**