

Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya

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Palenque: An Exemplary Maya Court

the view of Palenque, as seen from the court in the foreground leads to the Palace; the temple is built into the hill behind.

Shrouded by the dense foliage of a rich tropical rainforest and frequently bathed in mist and fog, the ruins of Palenque have long captured the imagination of visitors. The first great ancient Maya city to be rediscovered in the high canopy jungle during the 18th century, Palenque drew not only explorers but also artists, whose romantic lithographs portrayed the fallen temples and palaces as an exotic idyll (Fig. 57). The 1952 discovery of an extraordinary tomb at the site sealed a reputation for mystery that has endured to the present day. One suspects that Palenque was legendary even in its own time, with its abundance of water and waterfalls, steep valleys, relative remoteness, and, most important for our discussion here, an exceptional palace to house its royal court.



the artist Waldeck posed neoclassical figures in the foreground at Palenque, which he visited from

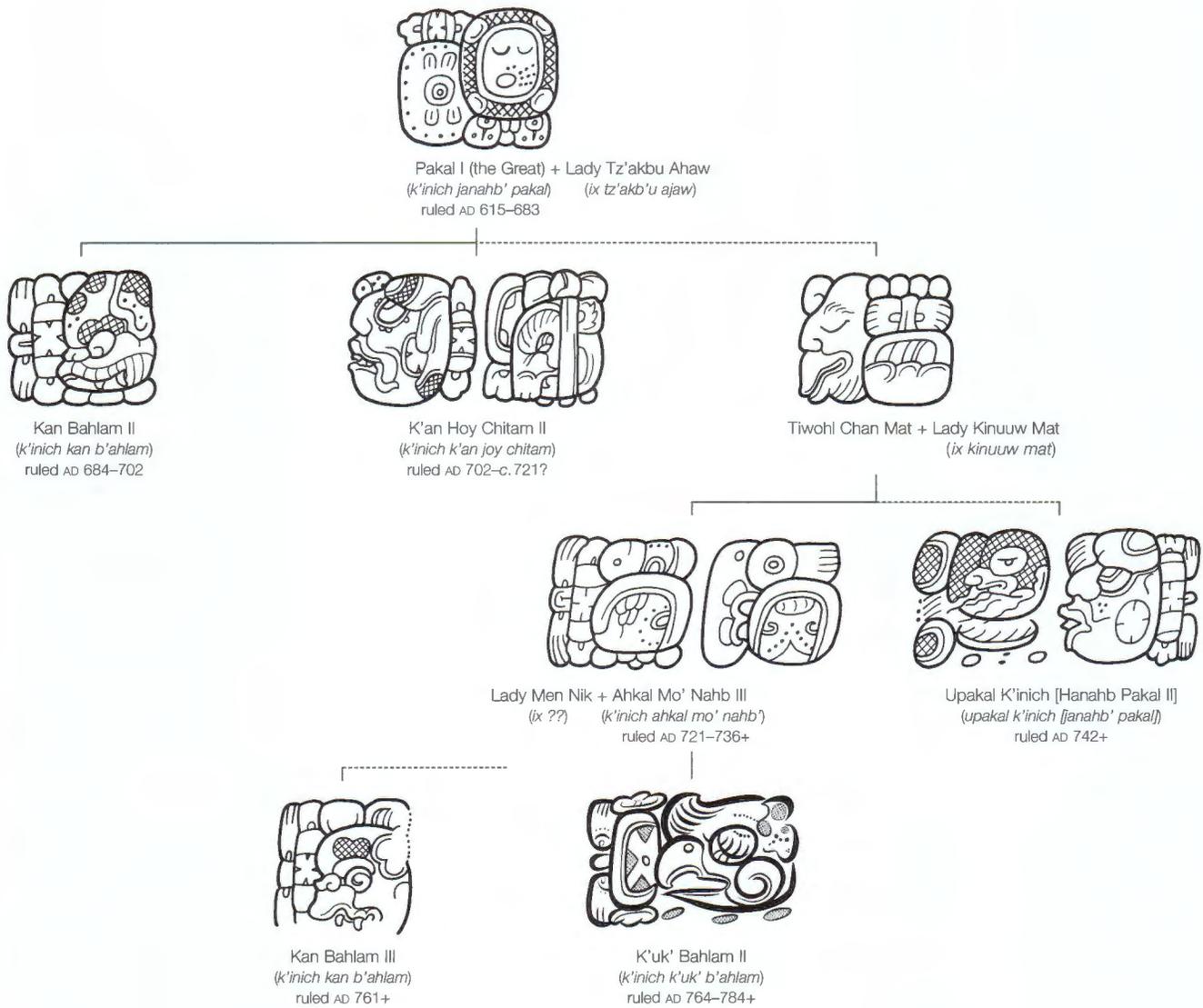


Fig. 58 The dynasty of Pakal: a family tree of rulers from AD 615 until c. 784.

Perhaps more than at any other Maya city, the physical spaces and social arrangements at Palenque demonstrate the ideals of courtly life. Even as the Palenque lords alternately triumphed and then fell prey to the ravages of warfare, they renewed the spaces that had long been the center of court culture. Both in the divine and worldly sphere, women played roles central to the success of the royal and noble families; at one point a queen even took the reins of rulership itself. Palenque kings and queens polished the legends that surrounded their history and promoted the ideals of sacred acts of four millennia before, seeing in them the template for actions in the 7th and 8th centuries; they recorded this charter in works of art that took key locations across the ceremonial heart of the city: in the Palace, the Temple of Inscriptions, the Cross Group, and in Temples 19 and 21.

On the one hand, the familiarity with works at Palenque in the 19th century led modern viewers to think that these works were characteristic of the Maya; on the other hand, the dramatic discovery of new works at the site during the past half-century disrupts any stable understanding of what really is characteristic even of Palenque. As Palenque's complex and often difficult inscriptions have yielded to decipherment, these texts have revealed that many of the works we associate with this sophisticated civilization came into being in the wake of warfare and dynastic struggle. Generation

after generation, Palenque artists invented new compositions and dramatic assemblages while they built on a substantial past and coped with a ruptured present.

Palenque artists matched an exacting eye for form with a profound understanding of their materials. The locally available dense, fine-grained limestone—probably the finest of ancient Mesoamerica—led them to create bas-reliefs abounding in crisply cut edges and buttery smooth surfaces. Their expertise in the making and manipulation of stucco plaster—slow-drying and flint-hard when set—gave them full expression in three dimensions as well. Traces of murals also suggest a once rich corpus of painting, including a bold calligraphic tradition that survives mostly in a late flowering of brush-influenced glyph carving. At the same time, they showed little interest in three-dimensional sculpture in stone, and the painting of cylinder vases, typically such a characteristic of Maya art, did not flourish at Palenque.

What made it possible for Palenque artists to excel in so many media—and yet seemingly exclude others? How was it that innovation could take place in every generation, probably exceeding any other Maya city in this regard? Did they respond to the works produced at other courts—say, Copan or Tonina—or were theirs the works that others responded to? Furthermore, what role did the political environment exert upon the artistic one? To answer these and other questions, we can now go behind the surface of Palenque's stunning artistic production to look at the court society that commissioned the art and the architecture, along with the larger social and political milieu in which artistic traditions developed. Despite the seemingly placid tone and calm demeanor of figures on works at Palenque, the texts on these sculptures reveal tension and dissonance, making it possible to read the works as political artifacts. The rulers of Palenque were deeply concerned with the supernatural origins of their kingdom, and, accordingly, they promulgated the family of gods who defined the city's identity. The story of these gods began in a distant 3309 BC with the account of a divine progenitor and three offspring who would be venerated as its patrons and tutelary gods. Archaeologically, little is known of Palenque's history before the mid-7th century AD; we only have retrospective accounts to fill in the blanks before that time. Anciently known as Lakamha', "Big Water," the site we call Palenque today probably became the seat of the dynasty only in the 6th century. From the beginning the larger Palenque kingdom was known as Baakal, or "Bone"—perhaps some allusion to its westerly place in the Maya world, the land where the sun dies each day.

A succession of rulers for whom we know little more than their names follows until the early 7th century.¹ What seems to have been a modestly successful dynasty came to an end in 611, when enemies from Calakmul attacked the city. Destruction and chaos reigned; enigmatic texts later lament that key rituals were *not* performed and lords and ladies were *lost*.²

The Palenque of Pakal

In the wake of all these traumas a 12-year-old boy took the throne. Today the most famous of all Maya kings, Pakal the Great (*k'inich janahb' pakal*)—*pakal* means "shield" in Mayan—had only a tenuous grasp on legitimacy at the outset of his reign. Although no one could have predicted it at the time, his accession was the first step toward stability after years of disruption. Pakal was not the son of a king—there may have been no male heirs—instead, he traced his royal pedigree through his mother, Lady Sak K'uk', "Resplendent Quetzal," and she enjoyed a prominent place during his reign. Pakal clearly had the troubles of the years before his accession to thank for his opportunity: were it not for the defeat of 611 and the extinction of the existing royal line by 612 we might never have heard of him. By the time Pakal died in 683, Palenque had become a key Maya city, not as large as Tikal or Calakmul, and not so old as Copan or Piedras Negras, but a place to be reckoned with nevertheless.

Pakal's early reign is poorly known. Of course he was just a boy at its onset, so presumably his honored parents played key roles in his administration. We know that he married, probably in 626, sired sons in 634 and 644, and a third in 648. But in 654 Calakmul attacked the city once again and it may have been at this point that monuments carrying Pakal's name were destroyed, leaving fragments that later generations would use as building blocks. Whatever the setbacks, Pakal overcame them.³

When Pakal hit his stride as a builder in the second half of the 7th century, he focused his attention first on the royal Palace (Fig. 59). He buried the existing complex within a higher platform, turning some chambers into dark and cool subterranean passageways that could be reached only by private stairways that opened into courtyards at the southern end of the Palace. On the new higher level he constructed a multi-chamber throne room, House E, completed in 654; it sheltered one of these stairways to the basement, making for hidden comings and goings from the throne room.

The form of House E acts as a conspicuous display of the king's relationship to his people. In what is a very rare element of architectural ornament, this building features an overhanging cornice of slates cut to imitate Maya thatch. The result is a stone building that emulates humble domestic architecture, and in so doing elevates peasant construction to state architecture. Stone architectural forms created by the Maya bear a relation with their wattle-and-daub antecedents, including the often-criticized corbel vault. Why, people often ask, did the Maya content themselves with this "false" arch when they could have invented something more stable? The answer is that the corbel vault is intended to replicate the perishable hip roof in stone. Pakal's architects took the mimesis of the domestic forms one step further with the stone thatched overhang, as if to state the relationship more explicitly.

Despite House E's exterior appearance, it offered enhanced interior space. Drawing upon the engineering knowledge that may have first been developed at Palenque, House E features two parallel corbel vaults. Although the single Maya vault is inherently unstable, with weight of roof and roofcomb pressing the outer walls out, the vault becomes much stronger in this configuration, in which the outward energy from the two vaults converges in a central, load-bearing wall. This greater stability is attested by the fact that many Palace buildings have stood nearly intact for almost 1,400 years. Pakal's successors would build higher and more dramatic vaults, but the pattern always depended on the parallel vaults that Pakal's program had put into perpetual view.

Pakal named House E the "White Skin House." Years later, when every building at Palenque would be painted red, it remained white, embellished only with painted flowers and symbols of preciousness that were repainted many times across the facade, recalling the many bouquets of flowers brought to court and the symbolic fragrance of its occupants. House E's exterior program made the building seem dressed in the kind of white robe worn by courtiers, their flowers in hand. Amidst all the red buildings, it remained startlingly different, even when later structures pressed in on it and captured the generous patios that had once framed both back and front (Fig. 8).

Pakal set up his principal throne room in House E, whose three large entryways open out onto a western court.⁴ The central one frames a throne backed with an unusual rounded relief, known as the Oval Palace Tablet. Mimicking the jaguar skin cushion that supported the king's back, the panel was carved with a scene of Pakal receiving a crown from his mother, Lady Sak K'uk'—freezing the moment of his inauguration and, when viewed through the open doorway, forever setting it upon the king's throne (Fig. 60). Although small in comparison to later Palenque sculptures, the Oval Palace Tablet was a revolutionary work, and like many striking achievements at the city, it seems to have been a homegrown invention. Here, for the first time anywhere in Maya art, was an intimate, indoor scene of accession, dependent in part on dramatic foreshortening for its effect, and carved on

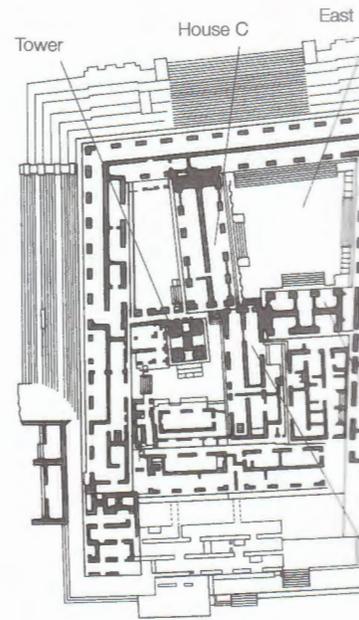


Fig. 59 Plan, Palenque Palace, c. AD 800. House E, in the center, was among the first buildings to go up on the new platform. House C and C formed spokes that were ultimately sunken into the platform enclosing colonnades. The tower was one of the earliest structures.



Fig. 60 Oval Palace Tablet and throne, House E, Palenque. Pakal's mother Lady Sak K'uk' presents a royal headdress. Copyright Merle Greene Robertson.

an unusually shaped interior panel that itself replicated a piece of furniture, the stuffed oval jaguar cushion. Neither figure on the Oval Palace Tablet occupies the center of the picture plane, another innovation. In pushing the figures to the sides, the sculpture places emphasis on the unwritten verb (for the text simply names the protagonists, Pakal and his mother) that is stated visually: the transferring of power is the act, even the subject, of this fresh and adventurous work. Little wonder that subsequent Palenque kings would revere it, adding layers of stucco ornament around it and citing it visually in their own sculptures.

In later years Pakal expanded his complex further, adding House C in 661 and House B at about the same time, the first structures to define a new East Court (Fig. 61a). They radiated from the north end of House E like spokes of a wheel (Fig. 8). From the back doorways of the House E, one could have slipped directly into House B, a building that originally featured a single, vast chamber, but was later subdivided as the Palace grew. Just as House E signals its relation to domestic Maya architecture, House B notes its affiliations by means of the now badly eroded woven mat design on its sloping roof. This motif appears to mark it as a *Popol Naah*, or “council house,” a space reserved for ranking members of local lineages, and whose advice might be sought by the king (or who might impose their will on him).⁵

House C was a reception hall of the kind so often shown in the Palace scenes painted on cylinder vases, including its large frontal stucco heads of gods on both the mansard roof and within the long, open chamber. The front steps form a reviewing stand, a hierarchical space of the kind employed in painted scenes to distinguish differing roles and statuses among courtiers and visitors. The steps themselves carry an inscription, a complex but rather laconic text that runs from tread to riser to tread. The narrative recasts Palenque’s perilous conflict with Calakmul into a more favorable light and must be read in conjunction with the sculptures of submissive lords that flank the stairway (Fig. 61a). Carved in a wraparound style characteristic of Tabasco, the figures have their identities drummed home three times: in the stairway text, in their own personal captions, and in the glyphic headdresses they wear. Evidently, they are all captives from sites on the Tabasco plain, where Palenque and Calakmul vied for political dominance and access to the region’s deep and fertile soils. Despite this self-acclamation, Pakal’s influence in Tabasco seems to have been in decline. In this light, the House C program seems like an elaborate gloss on the true situation.⁶

The House C steps lead down to a sunken patio of the East Court, the key Palace arena for royal receptions. Across this patio (Fig. 61b), House C faces a row of vastly oversized and humiliated

the Palenque Palace: a. View of
of the oversized captives that flank
site House C.



a



b



Fig. 62 The Palenque Palace, as seen from the Temple of Inscriptions. The fertile plain of Tabasco is visible in the distance.

carved figures who strike poses of submission at the base of House A. Probably reset from elsewhere at the site, the sculptures are worked of a variety of rough-grained limestone, varying from white to yellow to gray; the stone may even be imported, shipped to Palenque as part of some tribute arrangement or the booty of war. The figures kneel, press one arm across the chest, or nervously clutch a leg, unlike the submissive figures of House C, who maintain some dignity. One has his genitalia exposed in a mark of abject humiliation. No doubt designed to impress and intimidate visiting dignitaries, these elegant patios were likely—as at Bonampak (Plate 93)—to have been used for the presentation, torture, and execution of prisoners.

In the years to follow, this core group of Palace chambers would be surrounded and cut off from public view by a frame of colonnaded galleries (Fig. 62). Commanding stairways on north, west, and east facades provide attractive and seemingly open approaches to Palace chambers—but the effect is illusory. Long internal walls beyond the colonnade serve to enclose and protect the inner chambers, channeling human movement to a few easily guarded portals. The eastern gallery of House A provides an impressive gateway to the East Court: House A's soaring corbels are cut at right angles by a fabulous fluted Moorish (and corbel) arch, creating a cathedral-like interior space. No other Maya engineers ever approached these architectural feats.

Over time, not only did the Palenque Palace grow, but so also did the profile of the courtiers who attended it. Although they may well have shared communal space within the royal complex, such as House B, they had their own grand residences, many to the east of the Palace across the Otolum River. The new map of Palenque shows how such residences dominate most of the city's prime real estate—stretching downstream where the river by turns cascades and then forms deep iridescent pools.⁷ Some featured places of ritual cleansing, such as sweatbaths, as well as sleeping chambers, ancestral shrines, and courtyards for community gatherings. What may seem to be small and cramped spaces today would have been extended with awnings and large parasols. One multi-room palace set in the shadow of the Cross Group was dedicated either to a particular office or to a

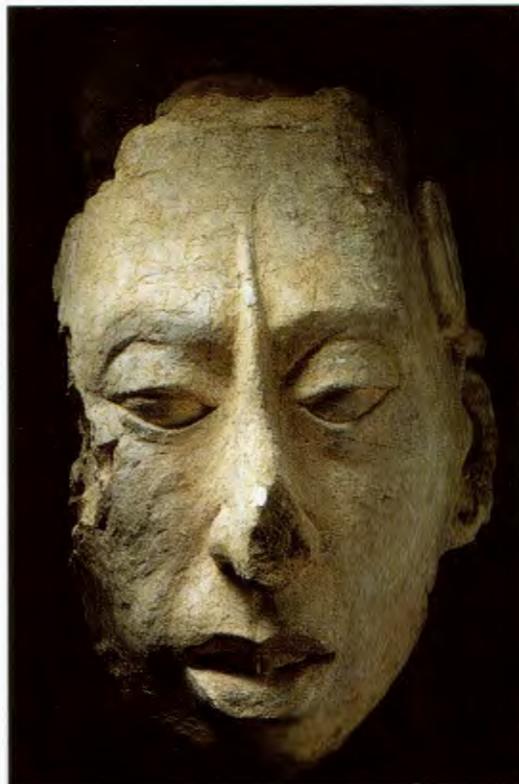
lineage that monopolized that office. Close to the royal Palace, but not too close, this residence's many private chambers would have served effectively as temporary quarters for visitors or for an expanding and possibly competitive lineage.

Although smaller and less elaborate than the king's abode, these minor palaces still contained artworks and inscriptions commissioned by their owners.⁸ Such works offer an especially revealing window on the wider court community and attest to the wealth of the inhabitants who lived just in the shadow of Pakal's own royal residence. Particularly characteristic are elaborate stands once used to support clay pots for the burning of incense, often called censer stands or *incensarios*. Whether of stucco, stone, or terracotta, these censer stands bear the portraits of deceased nobles and were presumably objects of ancestral veneration in household or lineage-based shrines. Carved from stone or shaped in stucco (Plate 122), their texts offer information on the offices held by this stratum of society and describe the rituals and historical celebrations within these lesser courts. An exceptionally handsome figure with a pensive face, detailed mustache, and striking blue paint once held a miniature burner within the headdress (Plate 128). Some works may well be portraits.

Personal portraiture that explored the nature of physiognomy—and possibly attendant issues of the mind behind the face—blossomed under Pakal, with modeled stucco becoming a favorite medium. Across the rest of the Maya world, kings projected impersonal images of youth and vigor, a formal idealism stripped of individuality. Portraits of Pakal, although still stylized, offer a profound move toward naturalism, projecting an innovative vision of Maya kingship, one defined as much by a personality as the institution itself. In many ways this shift can be seen as the logical conclusion of the centuries-long obsession with royal identity. Pakal's most famous likeness, a masterful head in stucco (Plate 113), was torn from some architectural context—part of a bust or full-sized figure on a building facade—and later wedged beneath his sarcophagus as an offering. Stucco frames that may once have surrounded such heads survive along an interior wall of House A in the Palace. A damaged

head of Kan Bahlam, c. AD 700. Kan Bahlam's
p makes him one of the most recognizable of

stand, Structure 15, Palenque. Although most
at feature human faces cannot be identified,
icts a youthful Kan Bahlam.



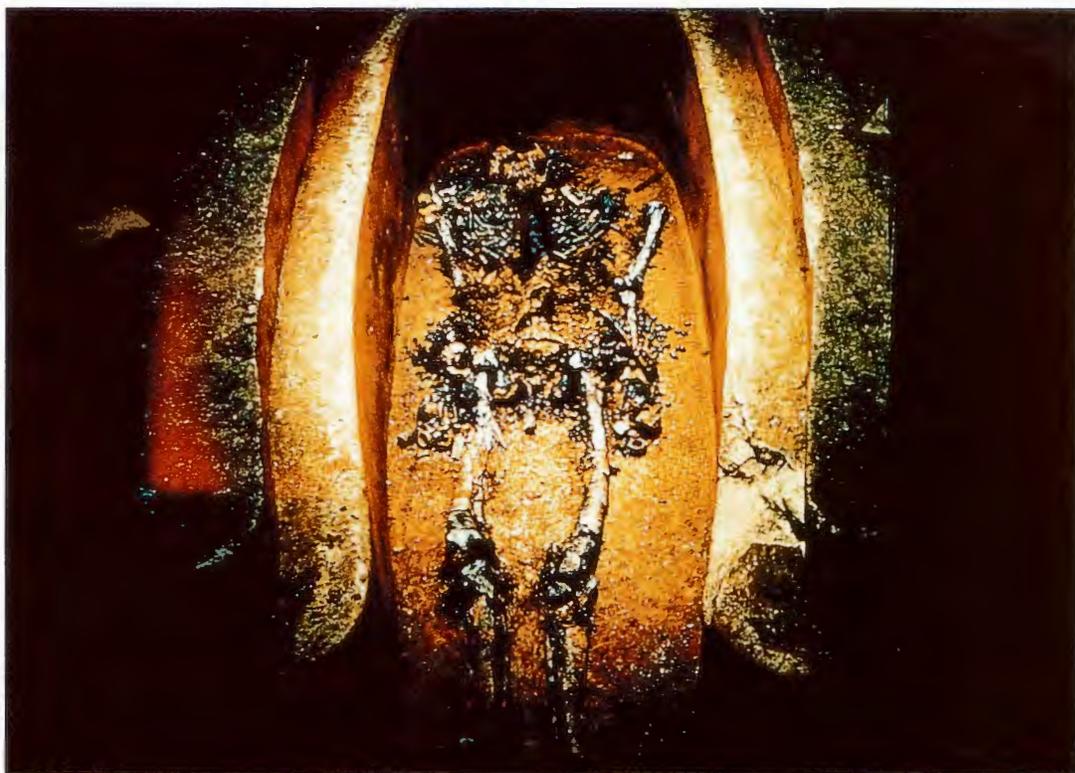


head of Pakal's eldest son Kan Bahlam—one of several retrieved from the rubble of Temple 14—reveals the later king with candor, featuring the protruding lower lip that seemingly violates a typical Maya canon for beauty (Fig. 63). Equally fine examples depict unidentified successors or leading nobles (Plate 114). These stucco heads never smile; the artist captures them in a deeply sober mood. Their eyes meet the viewer's, and one has the sense of intense human thought within these heads.

Pakal directed his greatest efforts at immortality toward his mammoth memorial pyramid, the Temple of Inscriptions, adjacent to the Palace (Fig. 65). Workers first carved a crypt into bedrock and set an immense sarcophagus in place before the pyramid began to rise; engineers designed an 80-ft. (25-m)-long internal stairway that would connect the funerary chamber to a vaulted shrine on the summit. At his death in 683, Pakal's funeral procession carried his body up the front steps of the temple and then down the internal stairs to his waiting sarcophagus, where they laid him into a womb-shaped cavity. When Mexican archaeologist Alberto Ruz Lhuillier⁹ opened the tomb in 1952 (Fig. 66), he found the skeleton of a tall man (about 5 ft. 8 in, a veritable giant among the Maya) adorned with several pounds of carved jade: most stunning among these jade offerings is a mosaic mask of jade, shell, and obsidian. Mexican scholars have recently reassembled the jade mask Pakal wore for death's odyssey: fresh and green, it transformed the old man into the youthful and perfect Maize God, while still capturing the essence of his appearance. Perhaps to preserve the body, his funerary attendants anointed his body with cinnabar, and they left a ball of it by his head. Assistants then slid the great sarcophagus lid into place, sealing Pakal's tomb for 1,269 years.

One funerary attendant then placed Pakal's ceremonial belt with jade celts atop the sarcophagus (Plate 133) while a mason connected a hole in the sarcophagus to what archaeologists have called the psychoduct, or spirit tube, a hollow stone channel that runs along the interior stairs, finally issuing into air at top, through a stucco pier, conducting Pakal's spirit or soul to air and fresh air to the sarcophagus. The trapezoidal slab used to close the chamber was then set in place and sealed up with

Fig. 65 Temple of Inscriptions, Palenque. The cutaway reveals the tomb deep within the pyramid, which is reached by a long staircase from a rear chamber at the top of the pyramid.



sarcophagus, Temple of Inscriptions, Palenque.
The stone slab (Fig. 67) had been moved aside,
and you could see the remains of a single, tall human

sarcophagus lid, Temple of Inscriptions, Palenque.
The lid's sarcophagus depicts the king in a state
of rebirth, as he emerges from the jaws of death in
the form of a tree. The king's features of the Maize God, the Sun God,
and the Jaguar God are visible. Photographed by
Merle Greene Robertson 1967.

plaster, and the entire space was finally sanctified with the blood offering of five sacrificial victims just outside the door. Laborers with tumplines hauled load after load of rubble up the front steps of the temple and slowly sealed the staircase for what was to be eternity. It took Ruz four years to remove the rubble once again.

Within what is an assemblage of mystery and drama, the most extraordinary single work of art in the Temple of Inscriptions is the sarcophagus lid itself (Fig. 67), now a symbol that has transcended Palenque to become an image of modern Mexico, woven into rugs and printed on curtains. Exquisitely drawn and mapped onto the stone, the carving of the lid, sides, and base is nevertheless hasty and unfinished, with tool marks and outline painting readily visible. Perhaps Pakal died unexpectedly, although given his age, that seems unlikely, or perhaps the final carving was held off until his death in 683. On the surface of the sarcophagus, Pakal appears both as the Maize God and as K'awiil, in the moment of rebirth from the Underworld. In his posture of rapturous recline, Pakal also issues forth a great tree from his body, as if to show that by this act the world once again is centered. It also shows Palenque to be the center of that world. On the sides of the sarcophagus, Pakal's ancestors emerge from cracks in the earth, reborn with Pakal. They, too, become trees, and each is an edible fruit: cacao, guava, avocado, and nance among them.

The Next Generation

Pakal's eldest son, Kan Bahlam II, "Snake Jaguar" (*kinich kan bahlam*), inherited the kingdom at the age of 48. He was already an old man in 7th-century terms, and we do not know how he spent his youth or his manhood up until this time. With his arched nose, protruding lower jaw and lip, and six-toed feet, his is the most recognizable likeness at Palenque, as easily identified in three-dimensions in stucco or ceramic as in stone bas-relief (Figs. 63, 64). Perhaps galvanized by a desire to escape the long shadow of Pakal, Kan Bahlam achieved significant political and military success. Although



the father may have been the master of kingly rhetoric, the son established the regional dominance that befitted such posturing.¹⁰ Yet Kan Bahlam also established a new program at Palenque, one that quickly distinguished son from father.

In 692, less than a decade after his accession, Kan Bahlam dedicated his major architectural complex, three major temples known today as the Cross Group. Each Cross building features aspects of a standard program, including a “shrine within a shrine,” inset into the rear chamber of the building (Fig. 68). Each interior shrine houses a large carved panel: events in supernatural time on the left of the panel link to historical events on the right, with moments in Kan Bahlam’s life likened to those of the deep past. On each panel Kan Bahlam appears in two guises: one his adult self, and the other, as a child; his two selves flank a different central image in each chamber, one the eponymous “cross,” in fact, a World Tree.¹¹ Each shrine is also named as the ritual sweatbath (literally “oven,” *pib naah*) where one of Palenque’s three patron deities was born. In these texts, Kan Bahlam and his astrologers emphasize a night in 690 when the planets Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars came into close conjunction with the Moon—an event woven into the mythic fabric of the Palenque state. The same date is recorded on a jade pectoral, an item of royal regalia once worn by the king and later cast into the great well or *cenote* of Chichen Itza, far to the north (Plate 118).

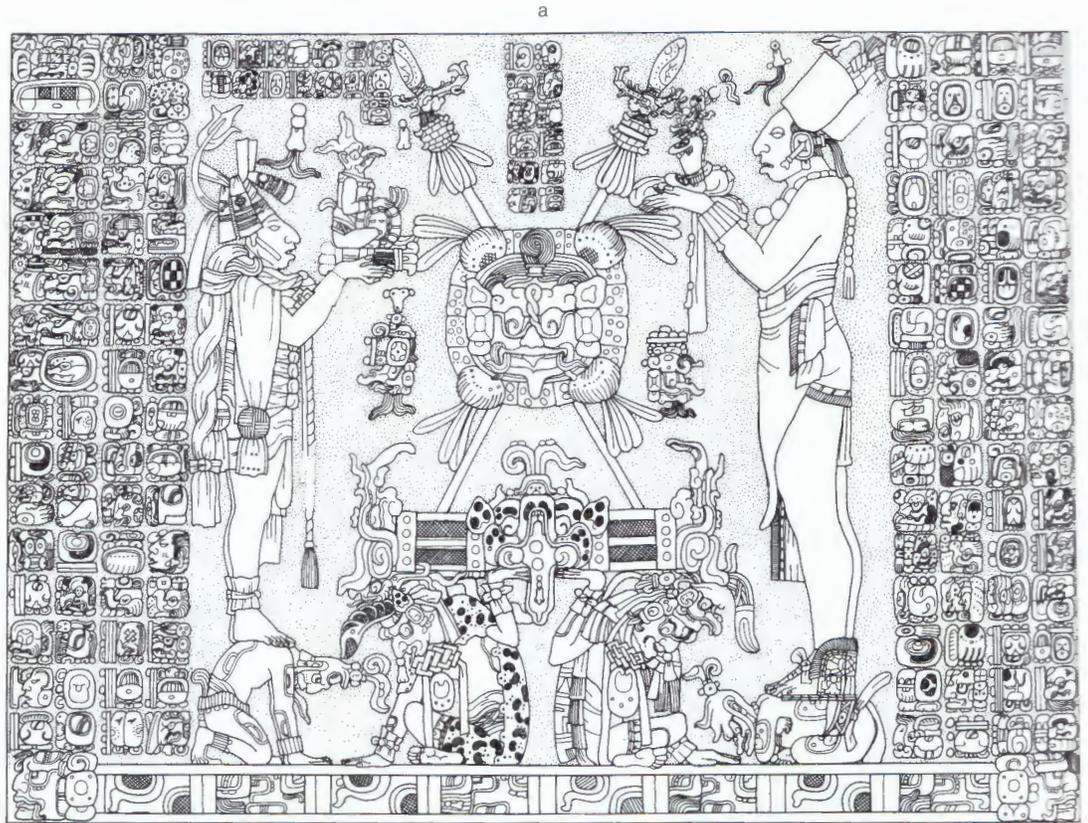
In the texts of the Cross Group, Kan Bahlam recapitulated the successes of his decade-old regime. In the Temple of the Sun, he emphasized his military prowess, beginning with his defeat of Palenque’s great rival in the mountainous south, Tonina, a subject also addressed on a recently discovered panel from Temple 17. At the Temple of the Cross, Kan Bahlam oversaw the installation of Palenque’s one and only carved stela. Given the emphasis on two-dimensional carving at the site, it is something of a shock to see this fully three-dimensional stonework—otherwise unknown at Palenque but highly characteristic of Tonina, from which it may have been sent as a gift, or executed by sculptors from that city in tribute.

During this period of Kan Bahlam’s reign ceramic production burgeoned, particularly in the form of terracotta censer stands (Plates 123–126) or censers—usually the elaborately modeled stands for incense burners more rarely made in stone and stucco. Over 100 of these fragile clay sculptures were buried as offerings on the stepped levels of the Cross Group temples, many of which have been carefully re-assembled by archaeologists and conservators (p. 253). Readily available red clay made mass production possible, and artists pursued subtle differences for a standard group of sun deities, particularly the Jaguar God of the Underworld, the solar aspect at night and the god of fire. A few pieces even show the distinctive face of the king himself (Fig. 64). Others portray unknown individuals: the central parting to their hair may indicate that some depict women (Plate 123).¹²

Perhaps distracted by the vast building project at home, Palenque fell prey to military setbacks at the hands of a resurgent Tonina, beginning almost as soon as the Cross Group was completed in 692 (Plates 100, 104).¹³ Nonetheless it was only after Kan Bahlam’s death in 702 and the succession of his brother K’an Hoy Chitam II, “Precious Tied Peccary” (*k’inich k’an joy chitam*) that Palenque’s fortunes took a serious turn for the worse. A truly aged man for his time at 57, K’an Hoy Chitam proved an energetic builder. He expanded the Palace by adding the northern gallery, known today as House AD. This created a grand new public facade, offering vistas onto the vast plain stretching out toward the Gulf of Mexico. At its center was set a huge throne, its back a carved panel of exquisite workmanship now known as the Palace Tablet. Another fine monument, showing K’an Hoy Chitam in the guise of the storm god Chaak and flanked by his parents, demonstrates once again the importance of Pakal to his descendants (p. 244; Fig. 77; Plate 117).

But K’an Hoy Chitam was not to have a peaceful dotage. In a disastrous reversal of fortune, Tonina forces took the old king captive and presumably marched him back to their highland capital

The Cross Group, Palenque. Each temple shares common features: a. A large carved panel on which is of Kan Bahlam proffer deity effigies or bloodletters and image. This example is the tablet from the Temple of the Cross; b. A shrine that houses the panel, itself decorated with sculpted motifs. Illustrated here is the interior of the Cross; c. An enclosing sanctuary atop a pyramid platform. The best preserved of these is the Temple of the Sun shown here.



b



c

in 711. Although stripped of all but his royal diadem and necklace, he was rendered at Tonina in a sympathetic sculpture and given an unmistakably noble air despite his physical abjection (Plate 101). Characterized by a strong and subtle line, and worked in a two-dimensional format, the stone may have been carved by Palenque artists. Although K'an Hoy Chitam's capture was once thought to be the prelude to his execution or extended imprisonment, today there is good reason to believe that he returned to Palenque to rule once more, with his last mention falling as late as 720.¹⁴ In other cases of this kind the precondition to release was future subservience to the victors, accompanied by regular levies of tribute or perhaps one crippling ransom demand. Long after the king had returned to Palenque, he remained the subject of the Tonina panel, and the work may have been featured in a stairway assemblage.

Recovery and New Heights

K'an Hoy Chitam died within the year and in 721 Ahkal Mo' Nahb III, "Turtle Macaw Sea" (*k'inich ahkal mo' nahb*) took his place on the Palenque throne. The offspring of Pakal's third, non-ruling son, the new king was a nephew of his two predecessors and thus a grandson of Pakal. Long thought to be a period of little real distinction, Ahkal Mo' Nahb's tenure has been elevated by recent finds to something of a pinnacle for sculptural art at Palenque. Excavations in two of his most important buildings, Temples 19 and 21, have revealed astonishing works in both stone and stucco, opening a whole new vista on Ahkal Mo' Nahb's life and times. Such works betray his primary concerns: the justification of his own position and the delicate balance struck between himself and the local nobility. He was also unusually concerned with establishing the place of his heir, Upakal K'inich, "Shield of the Sun God"—quite possibly his brother, rather than a son—attempting to repeat the fraternal succession of Kan Bahlam and K'an Hoy Chitam. These sets of brothers may have sought to emulate supernatural pairings, like the great Hero Twins and certain Palenque patron gods with fraternal relationships.

Subsidiary lords are portrayed in the earliest of Ahkal Mo' Nahb's works, in scenes whose heightened complexity—with multi-figure compositions in which the king engages with his principal nobles rather than family members—implies new political arrangements. In all likelihood, this regime placed greater reliance on courtiers who needed to be variously rewarded or appeased, as exemplified by the fabulous platform discovered within Temple 19 (Figs. 72, 92, 93). Commissioned in 736, the Temple 19 scene shows Ahkal Mo' Nahb surrounded by his lords, arrayed in orderly rows to his left and right, yet at the same time seemingly ready to crush him from opposing directions. The inscriptions belabor various mythic episodes integral to Palenque's self-perception, as if to enlist supernatural as well as pragmatic political support (pp. 261–264).

A single vertical stone panel, the front facing of a massive pier in Temple 19 may be the most exquisite stone carving known from the ancient New World (Fig. 69). The standing king presses one of his hands into that of a subordinate, while another assistant adjusts the giant supernatural bird mouth—an elaborate costume—within which the king stands. The carving resonates with unresolved erotic tension; eyes do not connect, yet the bodies all press closely together and exchange intimate touches. On the side of the same pier, a flanking polychrome stucco scene gives a side view of the same costume—although this time it is Upakal K'inich who appears in the gaping maw of the supernatural bird (Fig. 70). The scale of this program is very large, evidence that the economic wherewithal for such works was still available to the king and his court.

In a startling discovery in 2002, within Temple 21, archaeologists found a companion platform to the one in Temple 19, carved in the same style and celebrating the same date (Plate 129). This time the center is given over to an unmistakable portrait of Pakal, at this point a long-dead forebear. His

Fig. 69 Detail, panel, Tablet from Temple 19. An attendant lord kneels beside his lord. Although badly broken at the time of discovery, this panel displays unsurpassed level of finish.





panel, Temple 19, Palenque. Here Upakal
r to Ahkal Mo' Nahb, is depicted in a
panel. Although the panel was found fallen
o over 3,000 fragments, the patient work
and restorers has led to its nearly
ion.

caption explains that he is impersonating a legendary king, one who supposedly ruled in a remote 252 BC.¹⁵ Here Ahkal Mo' Nahb both evokes the great patriarch of the city in his quest for legitimization and neatly ties this to Palenque rulers of the ancient past. To the left of the enthroned Pakal, but looking away, as if disengaged, is the portrait of Ahkal Mo' Nahb himself and to the right that of Upakal K'inich. Ahkal Mo' Nahb was only six when Pakal died and we can see this representation as contrived in its depiction of three full-grown adults. At the same time, we see the role that ancestors play in the lives of the living—death had a radically different currency than it does for the modern world. Flanking these lords, in turn, are two pudgy kneeling characters dressed in jaguar suits and holding bouquets of feathers and paper. Despite their bestial appearance, the titles they carry identify them as humans who impersonate supernatural felines.

We lack any date for Ahkal Mo' Nahb's death, though he was duly succeeded by Upakal K'inich (who adopted the name of Pakal on his accession) by at least 742.¹⁶ The new king created at least one carved panel for the Palace, although today it survives only in fragmentary form. There also seems to have been a Kan Bahlam III, to judge from his supervision of a Pomoná king's installation in 751, but no enduring trace at Palenque itself has yet come to light.¹⁷ A record of a further defeat at the hands of Tonina at about this time may be an important clue to this poorly documented era.

The declining fortunes of Palenque's kings were reflected in the very fabric of the royal court. Unable to commission any major expansion of the Palace, they instead met the rising demand for space by filling the interior courtyards with new buildings, and turning the elegant layout of old into a confused warren. Even the striking and unusual Tower—itsself a feat of engineering attesting to the tradition of yore—imposed itself upon the old House E courtyard (Fig. 59). From the Tower's summit, Palenque's elite could look out on the great plain stretching all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. Once the major source of their wealth and power, these northern neighbors would have been viewed much more as the source of potential attack by the mid-8th century.

A brilliant final chapter in Palenque's courtly art was written by a son of Ahkal Mo' Nahb called K'uk' Bahlam II, "Quetzal Jaguar" (*k'inich k'uk' b'ahlam*) (Plate 127). Crowned king in 764, he was still in power two decades later, when he celebrated his *katun* anniversary—the Maya 20-year period—with a magnificent group of artworks. For this occasion, a small atelier of carvers—or perhaps a single master—designed a throne assemblage for the old House E courtyard, built right into the base of the Tower.¹⁸ Although of diminutive scale, the incised workmanship was of exceptional quality, with the carver transferring many of the conventions of brush painting—a carefully weighted, whiplash line—to his stone "page." The Creation Tablet, once the throne back, presents a mythic narrative (Plate 121). Within quatrefoil cartouches—supernatural caves and windows onto another world—we see two deities, one a version of the rain god, Chaak. Each sits on a hieroglyph; the same two glyphs appear as the names of personified stones on the legs that supported the seat (Plates 119, 120). Like Pakal's Oval Palace Tablet, the assemblage developed an internal dialogue, making it animated and self-referential.

Probably once the seat of this throne assemblage, the Tablet of 96 Glyphs has tiny holes drilled through the slab's edges, so that a jaguar pelt cushion could have been tied securely over it. Listing most kings from Pakal onward, the Tablet of 96 Glyphs poised the lord who sat on it as the inheritor of all Palenque (Fig. 71). Even as Palenque lords struggled to retain order, they kept Pakal ever in mind, whether in texts of the time or as they went about their daily lives, where his works, particularly the Temple of Inscriptions, remained at the center of the ceremonial precinct. By consolidating artistic energy into a single, self-contained grouping, the Palenque artist—or perhaps the Palenque king—understood that on a small scale the city's penchant for innovation and imagination could be brilliantly fulfilled even in times of stress.





96 Glyphs. This finely incised work, K'uk' Bahlam c. 784, recalls his ancestry, kal. Tiny holes at the edges of the stone fashion, perhaps a stuffed jaguar pelt, was nel which probably functioned as the seat

These dynamic works, exploring new themes and styles, pointed not to the past but to the future. Yet there was precious little future to be had for this great wave of Maya civilization. Save for a blackware vase incised with the accession date of final, none-too-great Pakal III, in 799, these are the very last creations of Palenque's artisan culture. A rising tide of disintegration—which would see not just Palenque but scores of other cities tipped first into social collapse and then full abandonment—soon extinguished the once vivid flame of Palenque creativity. From the crumbled, tree-choked vestiges of the city, modern researchers seek to retrieve its glorious past, to bring at least some of its one-time magnificence to light, and to color its faded textures with the personalities who brought it into being.