

Janaab' Pakal of Palenque: Reconstructing the Life and Death of a Maya Ruler

Edited by Vera Tiesler and Andrea Cucina

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The mortal remains of K'inich Janaab' Pakal II (Lord of Palenque) occupy a unique place within the study of the ancient Maya. The discovery of his tomb and, of course, his famous sarcophagus lid in 1952 by Dr. Alberto Ruz Lhuillier is a much-lauded source of nationalistic pride. Pakal has become Mexican - a household name, a symbol of a glorious past and present. For Mayanists, Pakal is a point of departure into the exciting world of Maya iconography and epigraphy where warfare, politics and religion add flesh to very decomposed bones.

Despite the prominence and importance of this individual, very little could be definitively said about the body and thus the life of Pakal until recently. The original excavators of the tomb concluded that the body was that of a man in his early 40s with no visible pathological anomalies besides an intentionally deformed head. However, written records combined with iconographic analysis presented the dead Pakal as a man in his 80s with a clubbed foot and possibly extra toes. This discrepancy descended into a battle between Mexican anthropologists and foreign art historians/epigraphers. As the translation of textual sources are solid, the remaining key to understanding this legendary ruler were his mortal remains which remained interred deep inside the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque. The authors of the volume **Janaab' Pakal of Palenque: Reconstructing the Life and Death of a Maya Ruler** propose an updated appraisal of Pakal's skeleton.

With a history of such heated debate, it is reassuring to find that this volume contains the opinions of a diverse range of leading scholars. In fact, the editors make it clear that a multi-disciplinary, multi-national approach was one of their objectives. The chapters can be divided into roughly three categories: those concerning science, those concerning art and epigraphy, and those that place Pakal into the bigger picture of Maya longevity and kingship. In all chapters, results are stressed above explanations of methodology. Thus, the non-specialist reader can easily approach chapters on such complicated procedures as transition analysis and strontium isotope analysis. Those who wish to know more about such topics are presented with appendices and references. In a sense, the ability of all of these authors to get to the point makes for an enjoyable and remarkably quick read for Mayanists, archaeologists, and perhaps even the interested public.

A particular treat is the short chapter that revisits the controversy concerning Pakal's potential deformities authored by Arturo Romano. Romano was one of the original researchers to study Pakal's remains in the 1950s and through this chapter he responds to the various criticisms to his previous work by

using modern data to support his original assertion that Pakal's feet were not clubbed. The inclusion of Romano's work speaks to the editors desire to include all relevant expert opinion on the subject of Pakal's body despite past argument and continued difference of opinion.

This volume does not offer any definitive conclusions about Pakal but conclusions were not the goal. Indeed, the authors are quite clear about the limits of the interesting information that they have gathered. Their main goal was simply to shed more light on the issues surrounding this important and controversial ruler through modern techniques and collaboration and in this they succeed. Although an astute reader will note that there is still disagreement about the particulars of Pakal's life and death, even among the contributors to this volume, the information in this book allows one to come to one's own opinion on the matter and invites the reader to further the line of inquiry with new approaches to the lingering questions.