



Figure 1. Detail of the Temple XXI monument: the face of Pakal. Photo: Jorge Pérez de Lara.

Maya Archaeology Reports

## The Discovery of the Temple XXI Monument at Palenque: The Kingdom of Baakal During the Reign of K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb

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It was toward the end of August in 2002 that one of the most significant artistic works of the Maya Classic period was discovered in Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico. This consisted of a limestone monolith, its edge incised with glyphs, and a masterfully sculptured tablet (Figure 1). Together these had once decorated a throne in Temple XXI, a building located in the Southern Acropolis, the architectural complex to the south of the Cross Group, the most important ceremonial area of the ancient city (Figure 2).

Many years earlier, in 1955, the archaeologist Víctor Segovia had cut a trench through Temple XXI and found a fragment of hieroglyphic inscription that had been placed in a small cavity precisely in the center of the structure (Ruz Lhuillier 1958a:146) (Figure 3). No one could have imagined that this tiny fragment formed part of the seat of a throne that remained to be discovered half a century later.

It all began in June, 2002, when the Proyecto Arqueológico Palenque (PAP) of Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), directed by the senior author, began the excavation of Temple XXI. The vaults and a good part of the walls had fallen down. Large trees were growing inside the ruined temple, jeopardizing the stability of the architecture that remained standing. The vegetation was removed and the rubble gradually cleared. Thus, little by little, the remains of an ancient and once sumptuous Maya temple were brought to light. Of modest dimensions (9 by 23 meters), it was still noteworthy for its excellent construction technique. The foundation was made up of large and well-cut blocks of stone, while the sanctuary would have boasted tall, spacious vaults, with an entryway located in the northern facade. As the work advanced, various fragments of tablets appeared, including some which turned out to belong to the Tablet of the Warriors in nearby Temple XVII.



Figure 5. Operations at Temple XXI in 2002: (top row from left) the broken panel in pieces as it was uncovered on the temple floor in front of the throne; the discovery site viewed between two of the pillars that once supported the building's roof; clearing outside the rear of the building to the south; (bottom row) Gabriela Mazón Figueroa and Constantino Armendáriz Ballesteros, restoration experts of the Proyecto Arqueológico Palenque, turn the panel fragments to reveal the carved surface.

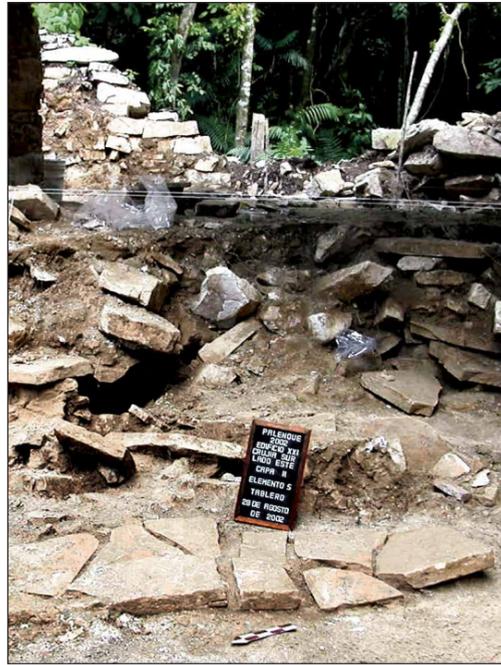




Figure 6. Discovery of the Temple XXI monument: (top) front of Temple XXI during operations in 2002; (bottom) first fragment of the monument encountered.

a masonry platform could be discerned, and on top of it a fragment of a monolithic slab, the front edge of which was decorated with finely carved glyphs. This was the Initial Series date corresponding to the fragment of inscription discovered by Segovia fifty years earlier.

The excavation began to proceed more cautiously, given the possibility of finding the rest of the inscription (Figures 5 and 6). Upon removing the rubble it was determined that the platform was in fact a throne. At the same time more fragments of the slab were encountered, some of which also had glyphic texts on one edge. This stone block had served as the seat of the throne itself.

Two days later, on August 29, the rubble was removed from the front of the platform. And here, as suspected based on an earlier discovery in Temple XIX (Stuart 2005), the limestone panel that had once decorated the platform's front was encountered, broken into eleven large pieces (Figure 7). One fragment was slightly inclined, and in exploring the underside the presence of sculptural relief was detected, in the form of hieroglyphs painted an intense red. The suspicion was confirmed: this was clearly a tablet of large dimensions, carved in low relief.

The excavation became even more painstaking. Turning over the fragments brought to light segments of glyphic text and the faces, bodies, and costumes of human figures and—even more surprising—supernatural beings as well. In spite of the dirt adhering to the relief, it was possible to appreciate the carving strokes—strong and precise but at the same time delicate—of a great Palenque sculptor.

Transported to the restoration laboratory, the fragments of the seat and the tablet began to be assembled. More than ninety percent of the tablet was restored to its original dimensions: 2.28 m by 60 cm by 7 cm in thickness. In addition to its artistic merit, the throne has proved to be a highly valuable source of archaeological and historical information.

The reading order of the inscription begins on the edge of the seat and continues on the tablet. The text was originally comprised of 144 glyph blocks, of which 116 remain. It records five passages or episodes, but some have suffered the loss of various glyph blocks. Fortunately we can reconstruct the related events since they are also recorded on two other monuments commissioned by K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb III (ruled AD 721-736->): the west side of the platform from Temple XIX and the stucco tablet from the same building. David Stuart has published a definitive study of the monuments of Temple XIX (Stuart 2005), and this article takes up many of his interpretations.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Readers interested in an extensive discussion of the glyphic texts and iconography of the Temple XXI monument are directed to Bernal Romero 2006.

#### The Initial Episode: K'inich K'an Joy Chitam and Xib Muut

The first episode occurred on 9.13.17.9.0 3 Ajaw 3 Yaxk'in (June 14, 709). This was related in some way to a supernatural entity possibly named Xib Muut (Stuart 2005:35-36). The following glyph block has been lost but can be reconstructed as the glyphic expression U-NAAH-?-Ie, where the question mark stands for an undeciphered logogram of a "fishing bird." The protagonist of this enigmatic action was the Palenque ruler K'inich K'an Joy Chitam II (ruled 702-720->).

The text then mentions a place named as the *okob*, "entrance," of one U Suutz' Icham Ajaw. An *okob* was perhaps a type of underground chamber, such as the ones found in Temples XIX, XXa, and XXI itself (see caption to Figure 7). The first passage also states that future Palenque ruler Upakal K'inich was present at the action of K'inich K'an Joy Chitam, and that both undertook two rituals (of an unknown nature) in honor of the gods GI and Unen K'awiil (GII). Upakal K'inich was first recognized as a prince of Palenque based on the discovery of the stucco pier in Temple XIX (Bernal Romero 2002a, 2002b).

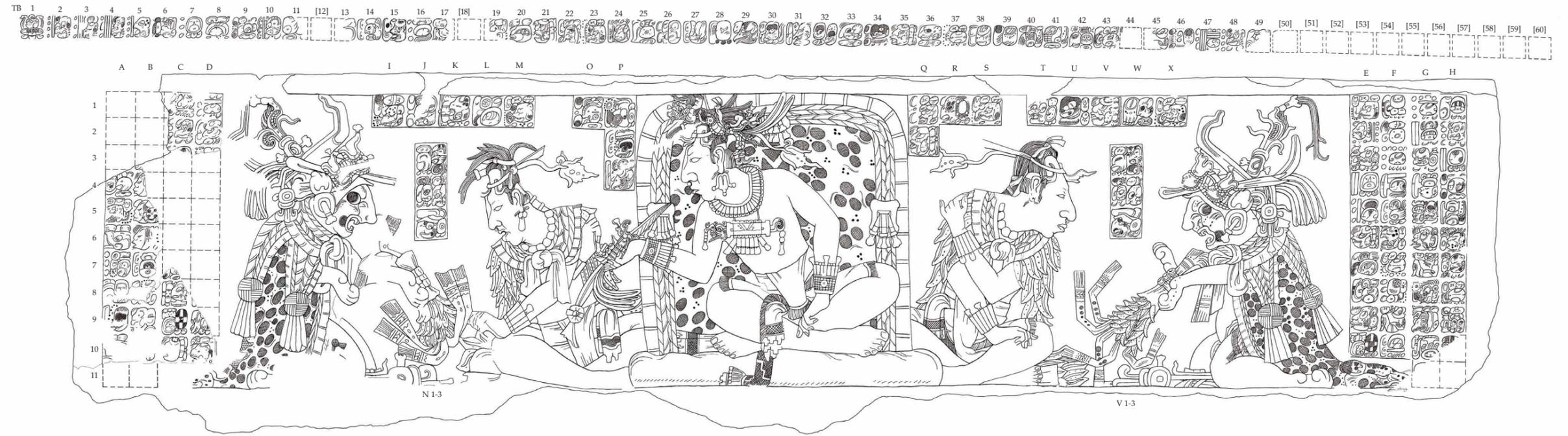
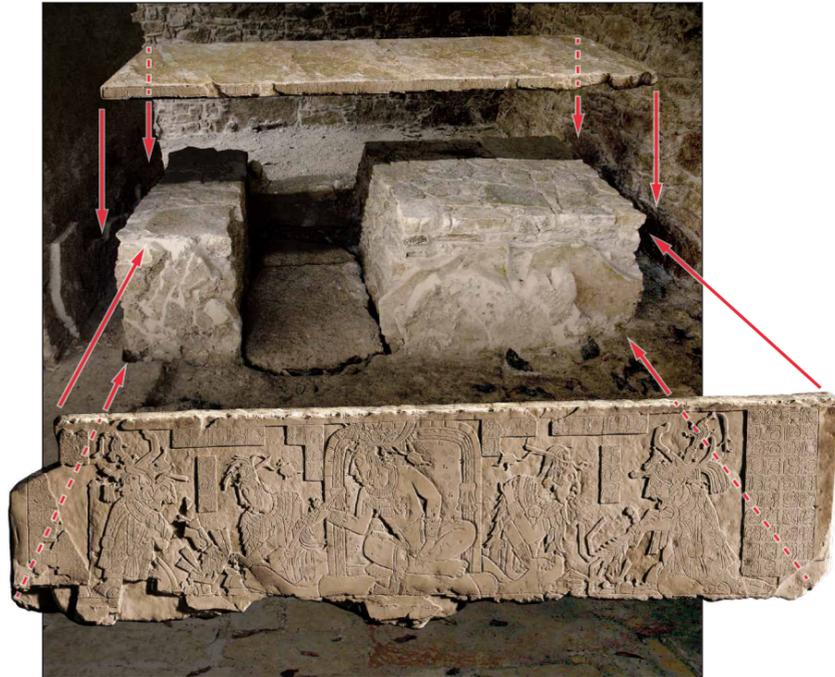
#### Dedication of a Temple in Honor of the God GI

The second episode has suffered from the loss of the first glyph blocks. It records the *och-k'ahk'*, "fire-entering" or dedication, of a building consecrated to the god GI, an event that occurred on 9.15.2.7.16 9 Kib 19 K'ayab (January 10, 734). This action was performed by K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb, the ruler of Palenque at the time. David Stuart (2005:99-102) has convincingly demonstrated that this "house" of GI was Temple XIX.

The passage concludes with an informative parentage statement for K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb. It records that his mother, Lady Kinuw Mat, came from Ux Te' K'uh, a polity linked to Palenque and apparently located to the west, near Tortuguero. Lady Tz'akbu Ajaw, the wife of Palenque's most famous ruler K'inich Janaab Pakal (ruled 615-683), also came from Ux Te' K'uh. The text goes on to state the relationship of K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb to Tiwohl Chan Mat. That this third son of K'inich Janaab Pakal was the father of K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb is known from the texts of Temple XVIII.

#### Dedication of the Temples of Unen K'awiil and GIII

While the third passage has also been damaged, its vestiges suggest that it recorded the dedication of two structures consecrated to the deities Unen K'awiil and GIII, ceremonies that occurred on 9.15.4.15.17 6 Kaban 5 Yaxk'in (June 9, 736). The temple of Unen K'awiil, the name of which includes the word for "bones" and possibly also "skull" (see Stuart 2005:104-105), may have been Temple XXa, the building adjacent to Temple XX, the



**Figure 7.** The Temple XXI monument and its context: (below left) the carved limestone panel as it was uncovered lies in eleven pieces on the temple floor in front of the platform to which it was originally attached; (below right) with the fallen vault stones cleared away, the platform can be observed in the southeast corner of the structure's rear gallery; (above) the carved panel originally graced the west face of the platform, while the limestone slab which sat on the platform's top was inscribed with glyphs on its western edge. The gap in the platform itself permitted archaeologists to investigate a subterranean chamber beneath the platform that contained abundant remains of carbon and ash, as well as an earthenware vessel with traces of burning. The chamber must have remained open during dedication ceremonies for the building before being permanently sealed with the seat of the throne. Drawing of monument: Constantino Armendáriz Ballesteros/PAP; photo: Jorge Pérez de Lara.

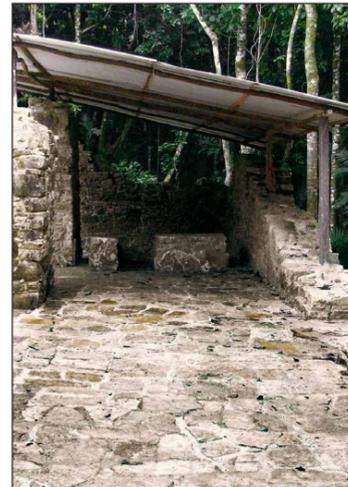




Figure 8. The main text of the Temple XXI monument is read from top to bottom in columns two glyphs wide. The third glyph pair in the right column reads *Ch'a-?, K'uul Baakal Ajaw*. Photo: Jorge Pérez de Lara.

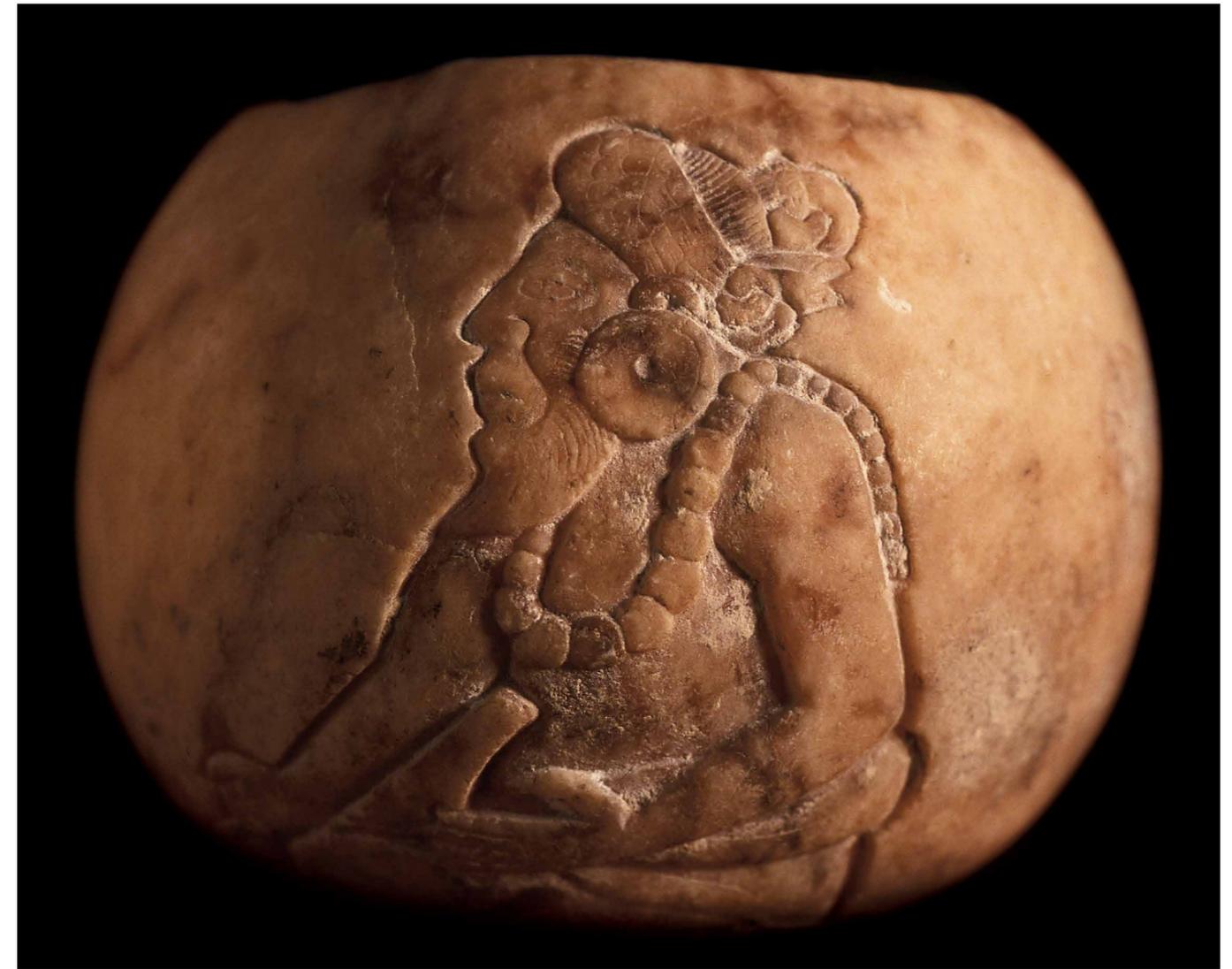


Figure 9. Carved travertine vessel, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C. Photo: Simon Martin.

most important funerary structure of the Southern Acropolis.

The inscription states that the building of GIII was named *K'inich O'-Kan Naah*, "The House of the Resplendent 'O'-bird'-Serpent" (see Stuart 2005:105, n. 38). This building can be identified as Temple XXI itself. As we will see, *K'inich O'-Kan* was a spiritual co-essence, or *way*, of GIII.

The temples of the two gods in the Southern Acropolis are situated at different altitudes. Temple XIX, associated with GI, is found at the highest point, because this deity has celestial connotations; Temple XXa, related to Unen K'awiil, is at an intermediate level, given that his connotations are terrestrial;

while Temple XXI, associated with GIII, is found on the lowest level, representing the underworld. This scheme of different altitudes can also be observed in the temples of these gods found in the Group of the Cross: the Temple of the Cross (GI), the Temple of the Foliated Cross (Unen K'awiil), and the Temple of the Sun (GIII) (Stuart 2006b:88-91).

#### Celebration of the Period Ending in Honor of the Palenque Triad

The fourth passage indicates that *K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb* celebrated the Period Ending of 9.15.5.0.0 10 Ajaw 8 Ch'en (July



Figure 10. K'inich Janaab Pakal enthroned on the Temple XXI monument. Photo: Jorge Pérez de Lara.

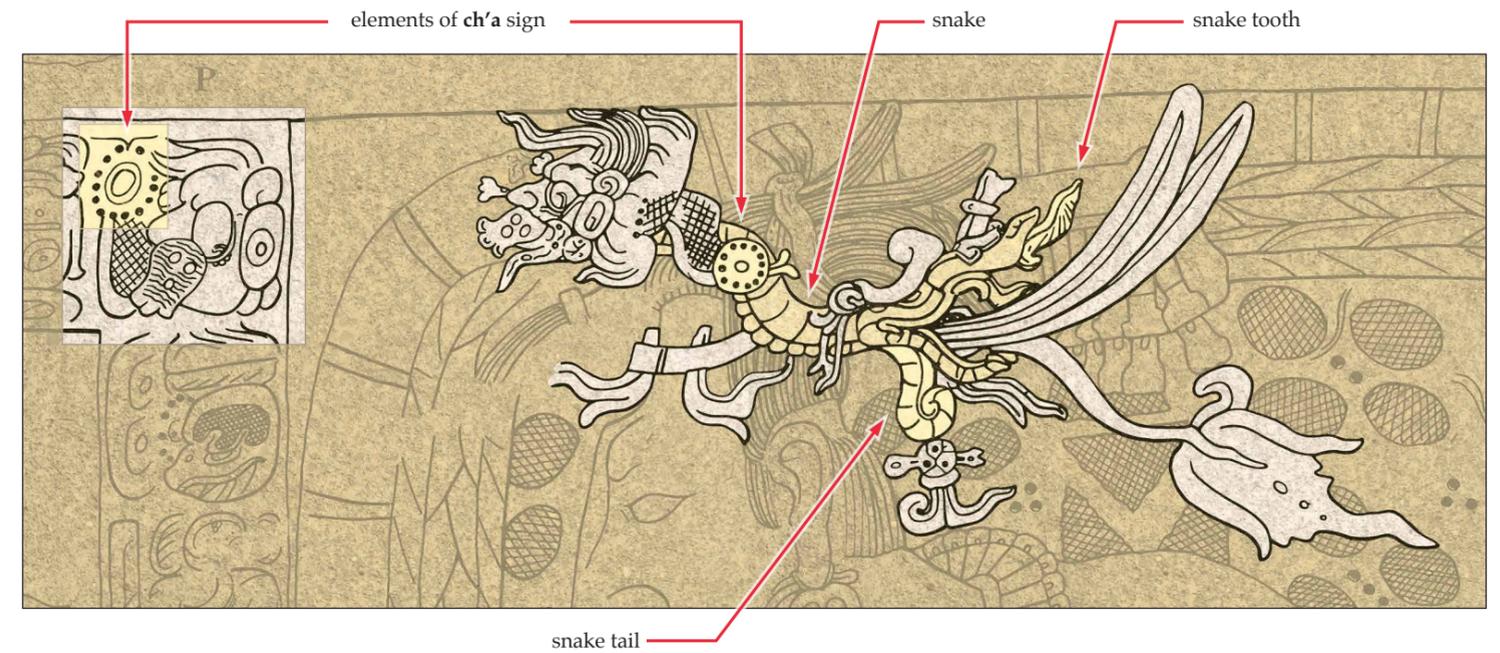


Figure 11. Details of Pakal's portrait (see facing page): (top) diadem expressing the glyphic name Ch'a-? U Kokan Chan; (bottom) stingray spine decorated with "Perforator God."

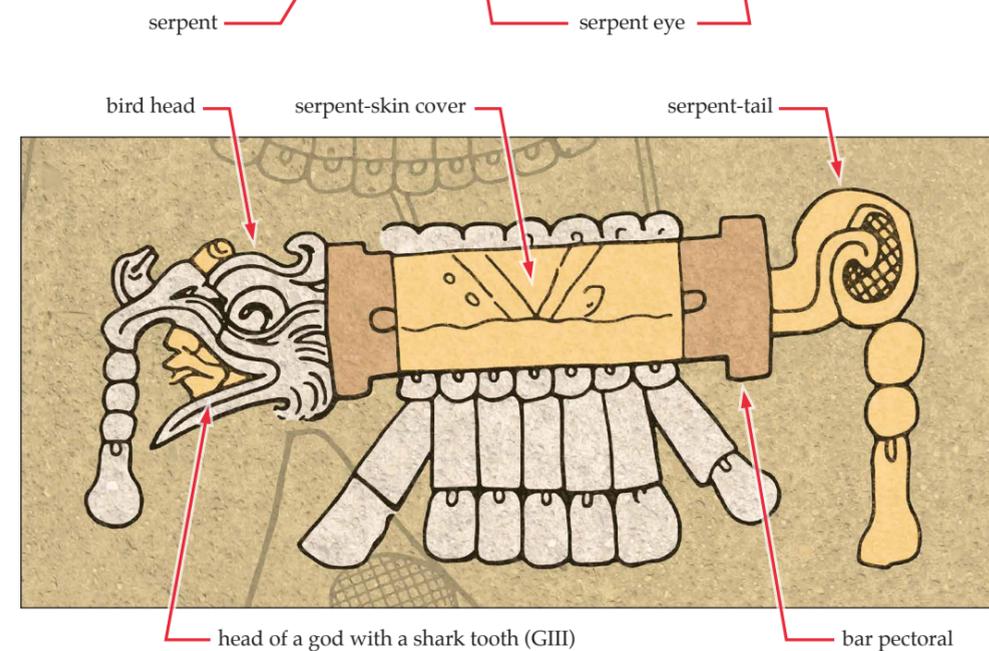
22, 736), when he "tied the stone" of this period. He did this "in the presence" of incensarios related to the three patron deities of Palenque, which suggests that the ceremony included the burning of incense. It is quite possible that the ruler also offered his blood and that this was burned together with aromatic resins. This rite probably marked the opening of the temples of the acropolis in a public ceremony.

#### A Vision of the Origins of Palenque

The fifth passage carries the narrative 998 years into the past and records an event that occurred on 7.5.3.10.17 10 Kaban 5 Muwan (July 21, 252 BC). On this day images of the gods GI and Unen K'awiil were placed inside a temple for the first time. The protagonist of this ceremony, identified as a *K'uhul Baikal Ajaw*, "Divine Lord of Palenque," carries the same undeciphered name as the Palenque ruler known in the literature as Casper (ruled AD 435-487). A carved travertine vessel in the collection of Dumbarton Oaks (Figure 9) has been taken to be a portrait of this Casper from the Early Classic period (AD 250-600), but we suggest that it is more likely to depict his predecessor from the Late Preclassic (400 BC – AD 250). Since the first part of this royal name is clearly the syllable *ch'a*, we will refer to him as Lord Ch'a-? in our subsequent discussion.

#### The Scene and its Figures

The tablet depicts five figures. In the center, seated on a throne of jaguar skin, is K'inich Janaab Pakal (Figure 10), who holds a stingray spine decorated with the image of the "Perforator God" (whose diagnostic feature is three knots of textile on the forehead) (Figure 11 bottom).



**Figure 12.** Pakal's pectoral (bottom of this page) is covered with serpent skin. A bird's head emerges from one end of the pectoral, while the tail of a serpent emerges from the other. This combination of bird and serpent elements must represent K'inich O'-Kan, the resplendent bird-serpent after which Temple XXI is named, and the god in its open beak must be Temple XXI's owner, GIII. Vessel K758 (facing page) confirms the identification, since it shows the same owl-like bird, from the beak of which emerges the head of GIII (top of this page). Photograph K758 © Justin Kerr.

Accordingly, the caption text identifying Pakal indicates that he is the personification of an entity merging the identity of Lord Ch'a-? with *Ukokan Kan*, "Stingray Spine of the Serpent." Particularly given the possibility that the initial ch'a syllable of Lord Ch'a-?'s name is an underspelling of *ch'aa*j, "incense," we suggest that the combined entity was conceived of as the founder of the cult of patron deities of Palenque and an ancient instigator of autosacrifice and offerings of incense mixed with blood. In order to reinforce the association with this legendary ruler, Pakal wears a diadem that by means of its iconography expresses the glyphic name Ch'a-? Ukokan Chan (Figure 11 top).

In addition, Pakal sports a pectoral covered with serpent skin, from one end of which emerges the head of a bird, and from the other the tail of a serpent (Figure 12 bottom right). This is undoubtedly a representation of K'inich O'-Kan, the resplendent bird-serpent who gives Temple XXI its name. The god in its open beak must be Temple XXI's owner, GIII. Vessel K758<sup>2</sup> (Figure 12 left) confirms the identification, since it shows the same

<sup>2</sup> This "K-number" designates a vessel in Justin Kerr's Maya ceramic database at [www.mayavase.com](http://www.mayavase.com).

owl-like bird, from the beak of which emerges the head of GIII (Figure 12 top right).

Pakal offers the stingray spine to K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb, Divine Lord of Palenque, whose associated caption indicates that his childhood name was Okib (Figure 13). This appellative seems to have been typical of the Palenque sublineage that resided in Ux Te' K'uh, the origin place of K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb's mother; there is every indication that she transmitted it to her son.

K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb sports a feather cape and a simple water lily diadem. He faces a supernatural being who wears a cape of jaguar skin and a headdress with three "Jester Gods," surmounted by a maize plant. The creature's head is that of a rat, but its claws are those of a feline. The caption text gives its name, the meaning of which is difficult to determine, although the component CH'OH, "rat," must allude to the rodent aspect of this strange supernatural being.

The name is accompanied by the 'banded-bird' title that may identify attendant lords in charge of ritual objects and implements (Stuart 2005:115, 133-136). It is possible that here it involves an officiant of a religious cult transformed into a kind of co-essence or *wahy*. This figure holds a bunch of feathers and textile bands, tied with three knots, which indicates that it is an object related in some way to blood sacrifice.

At the opposite end of the scene we find Upakal K'inich, the principal heir (*baah ch'ok*) in line to become Divine Lord of Palenque (Figure 14). We do not know when he took the throne, but we can say that in 742 he was already the reigning king, as indicated by a passage of the K'an Tok Tablet (Bernal Romero 2002b). Upon his accession, he took the name Upakal



Figure 13. K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb (right) and a supernatural being. Photo: Jorge Pérez de Lara.



K'inich Janaab Pakal, adopting in this way the name of his famous grandfather.

Like his older brother, Upakal K'inich wears a feather cape and a water lily diadem. The supernatural facing him can be identified by its name caption as another representation of the one confronting K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb. He too offers a device made up of feathers and textile bands. Martha Cuevas (personal communication 2003) has pointed out the related iconography of vessel K1440, which depicts a figure wearing a feather cape who bows while a similar device is passed over his head (Figure 15). It is possible that the scene illustrates a pre-accession ritual: another scene on the vessel shows the same figure seated on a throne.

It is difficult to determine the date of the ceremony depicted on the Temple XXI tablet. The text does not speak of any ritual in which Pakal participated with his grandsons. Since K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb is known to have been five years old when Pakal died in 683, it seems that Pakal returned from the underworld to interact with his living descendants.

The principle iconographic theme of the scene is the offering of sacrificial blood, and for this reason Pakal appears to personify the legendary ruler Ch'a-? Ukokan Chan. It is possible that the scene depicts an autosacrificial ritual that took place on 9.15.5.0.0 10 Ajaw 8 Ch'en, with an incensing in honor of these two ancestors. Another option is that it took place on 9.15.4.15.17 6 Kaban 15 Yaxk'in, when Temple XXI, the House of K'inich O'-Kan, was dedicated. The depiction of the O'-Kan bird on Pakal's pectoral might support this possibility. However, the problem remains open to future interpretations.

**Figure 14.** Upakal K'inich and a supernatural being. Photo: Jorge Pérez de Lara.



Figure 15. Also known as the Vase of the 88 Glyphs, K1440 in Justin Kerr's numbering system at [www.mayavase.com](http://www.mayavase.com) is one of the most fascinating of all Maya ceramics. Its text is a positive gold mine for

epigraphers and linguists (as well as a continuing mystery in many regards), but it is the iconography that concerns us here. As can be appreciated in the rollout view, there are four scenes. In the one

detailed, the young lord on the left wears a water lily diadem and a feather cape just like K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb and U'pakal K'inich on the Temple XXI monument (see Figures 13 and 14). And compare as

well the regalia and implements of the the attendant figures on the ceramic with the supernatural figures on the Temple XXI monument. Photograph K1440 © Justin Kerr.

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