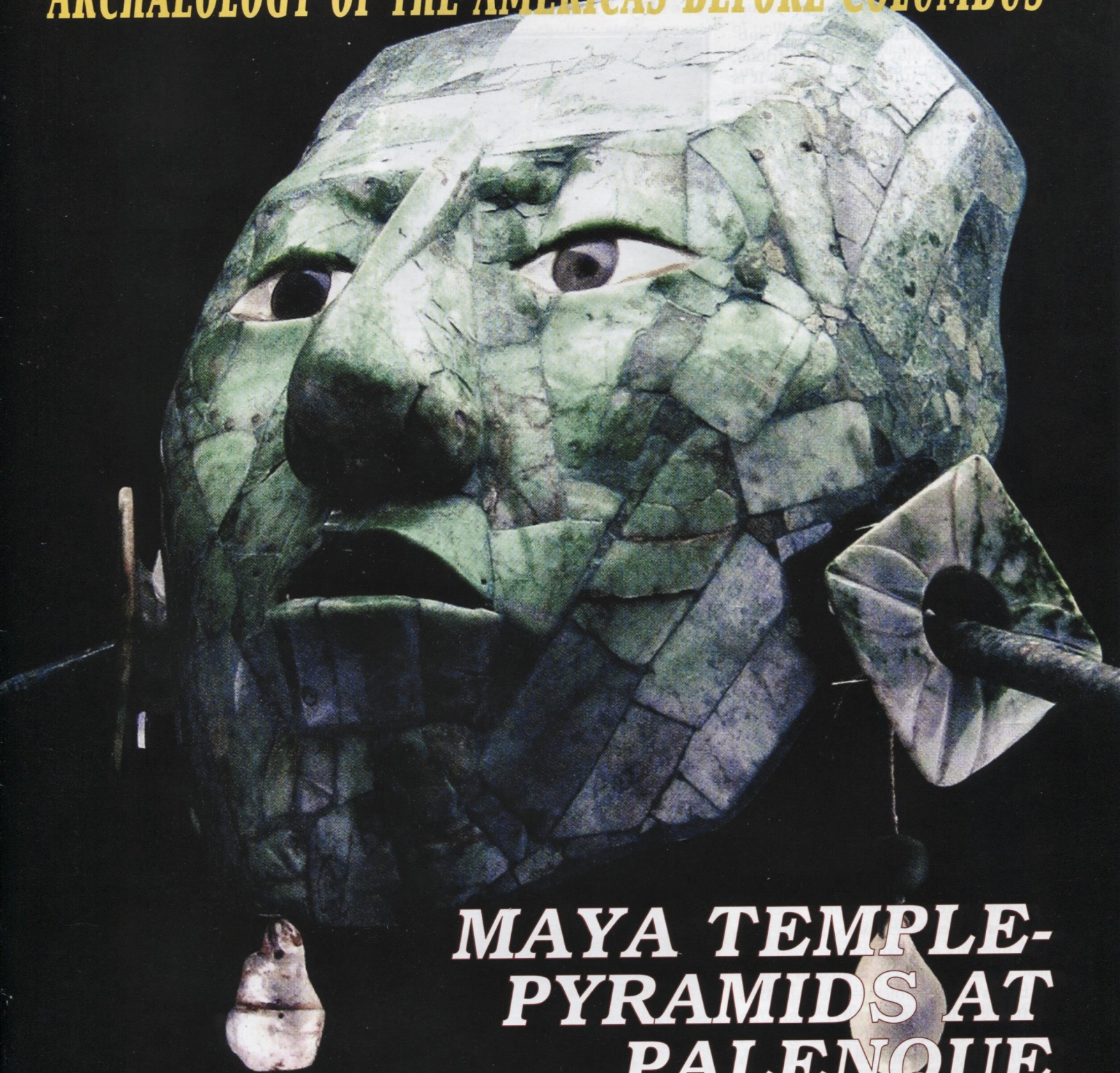


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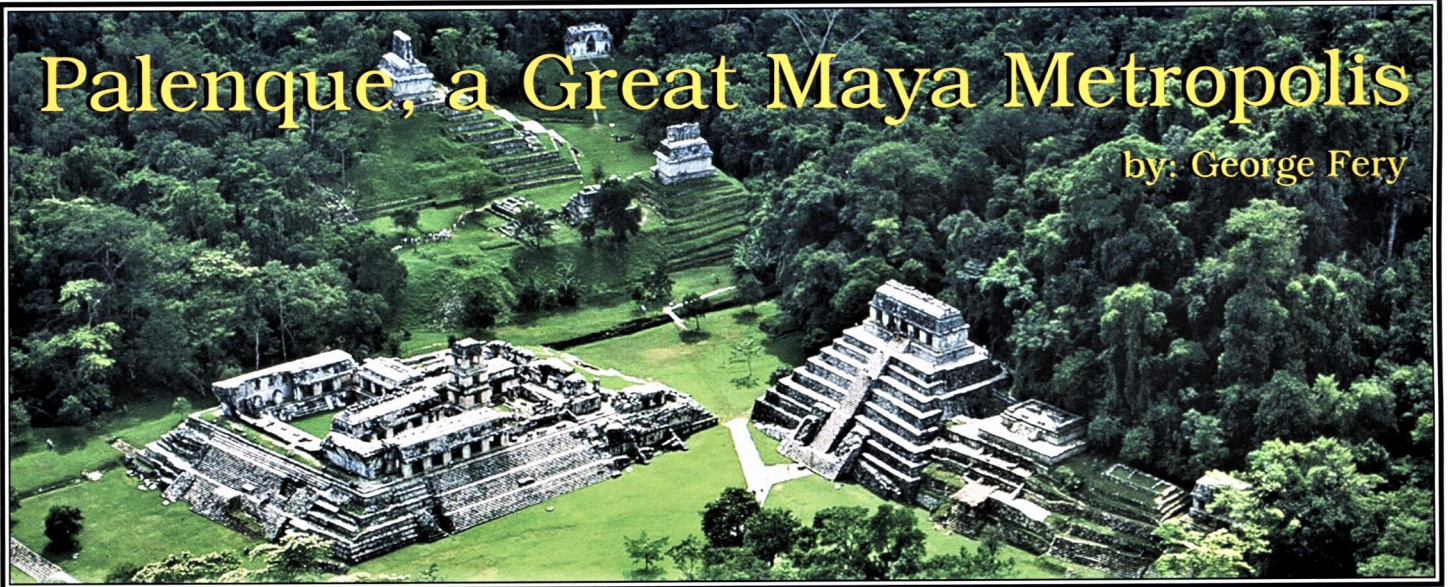
**MAYA TEMPLE-
PYRAMIDS AT
PALENQUE**



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Palenque, a Great Maya Metropolis

by: George Fery



Hidden in the verdant hills of the Sierra Chapanecca in the beautiful state of Chiapas, in southern Mexico (photo above, central Palenque courtesy history.com), is the ancient capital of the B'aakak kingdom (b'aak = bone). Its ancient name is Lakamha' in Maya-Yucatec language. The town is today called by its Spanish name, Santo Domingo de Palenque, founded by the Dominican Friar Pedro Lorenzo de la Nada in 1567. Remains of impressive Maya temple-pyramids and palaces abound in Mesoamerica and amaze visitors by their monumental architecture. Few are as striking as Palenque. This UNESCO World Heritage site, and its location within a jungle clad mountain range, is replete with springs, streams and falls, overlooking the plains of Tabasco. It also is a site where recent discoveries, thanks to new technologies, help archaeologists write a new chapter in the history of the ancient city.

The 1998-2000 Palenque Mapping Project (PMP) under Mexico's Instituto de Antropología e Historia (inah.gob.mx), and the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies (famsi.org), recorded and mapped 1481 structures at Palenque. The PMP covered 0.850Mi2/2.2Km2 of the jungle shrouded plateau. The area referred to as "Central Palenque" open to visitors, accounts for about thirty buildings and structures. All others are still shrouded under a dense tropical rain forest. During the Classic period, 250-950, the urban population at its peak, may have reached 9,500 souls (Baluntè Phase, 750-850; Barnhart, 2001:94 – years AD/CE). Early morning, when nature awakes and the mist from the rain forest slowly lifts, the welcoming calls of howler monkeys and the songs of



The Palace

tropical birds greet visitors. As ancient time seems to dissolve into present day one wonders, who lived here?

Palenque's name means "stockade" in Spanish, a possible translation of the Maya-Ch'ol word otulún, for fenced or fortified place. Its pre-Columbian name Lakamha' translates as "big waters", and probably came from the 56 springs and 9 rivers that come out from the upper slopes of the Yemal K'uk' Lakam Wiz, the "great mountain of the descending quetzal", that overlooks the city. Water is a central theme in Maya and other cultures' mythologies, because it is perceived as the mother of all life-forms. The city numerous springs and streams, falling through ravines and over great natural stair-steps, underline its importance as a sacred place. From the end of the 5th to the mid-9th century, Lakamha' then was an important metropolis, and a major regional player in politics, the arts, archi-

itecture and trade. The 7th century saw the birth and death of one of the greatest mid-Classic Period Maya Lord, K'inich' Janahab' Pakal, (603-683).

His title, like that of the lords before and after him, K'uhul B'aakal Ajaw, translates as "Sacred Lord of the B'aakal Kingdom", that underline the commanding secular- religious functions of Maya rulers. His 68-year reign (615-683), was one of the longest in Maya history. Pakal inherited the kingdom at the young age of 12 but actually ruled on July 26, 615 at 23. During the interregnum, his mother, Sak K'uk' Ahaw, governed as regent, not as lord of the realm. The reason she was not elevated to lordship may be due to the fact that her husband, Kan Ix Mo', Pakal's father, was not from Palenque's nobility, but from Ux Te'Kúh'.

Pakal's wife, Ix Tzak B'u Ahaw, was also from Ux Te Kuh'. The site was tentatively identified as El Retiro in



Tabasco; it controlled the western flank of Palenque's kingdom. Ux Te'Kuh' is the city where Pakal's family took refuge, when Palenque was burned twice in 599 and 611 by Calakmul proxies, the powerful K'an (serpent) kingdom of southwest Yucatán. Ix Tzak B'u Ahaw married Pakal in Palenque on March 26, 626, and had three sons: Kan Bahlam (635), Kan Joy Chitam (644) and Tiwohl Chan Mat (648). Ix Tzak B'u Ahaw died on November 13, 672. Her resting place is Temple XIII, referred to as the "Temple of the Red Queen", for the large amount of hematite, a red pigment iron oxide, found in her sarcophagus.

Palenque's Palace open to visitors, was the seat of power. Built on a massive irregular quadrangle, it was both a ceremonial and administrative building. Large stairways on four sides allowed access to the vaulted halls that ringed the quadrangle. The massive north stairway was ceremonial, while the south side was utilitarian. The whole complex is made up of a complicated system of vaulted buildings, lengthy halls and three courtyards.

All major buildings in the city were covered with plaster and painted red, an impressive display of power to visitors, except for the throne room, the Sak Nuk Naah, or "White Main House", now referred to as House.E, that was then the only building painted white.

In the middle of the Palace complex is a tower that on its third floor, holds an altar built of limestone mixed with a large quantity of seashells from the Caribbean and the Pacific. The altar may have been dedicated to ceremonies linked to the Primordial Sea, a conjecture supported by marine fossils often found in the limestone of the mountain range.

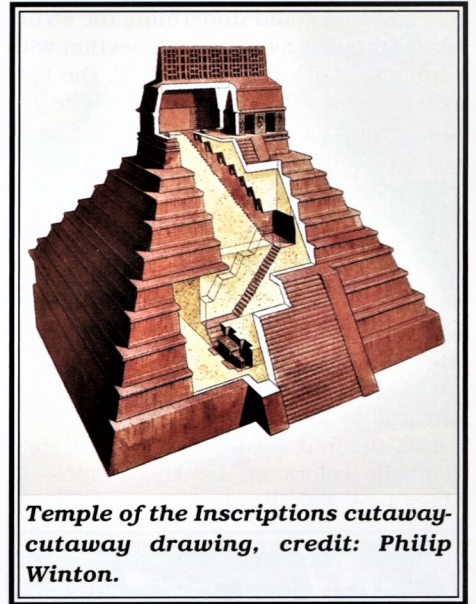
On the Palace's east side runs the Otolum River, its banks walled up as an aqueduct, a key part of the important and elaborate water management system of the city. The man-made diversion of the

Otolum's waters to flow close and parallel to the Palace's east side allowed for water management, while the aqueduct reaffirmed the age-old control and domination of culture over nature. The palace was mainly used for administrative and ceremonial purposes by the ruler, members of the nobility with bureaucratic functions, scribes and high priests, and for formal state reception of ambassadors and important visitors.

The history of the city is tumultuous, with frequent wars and great and not-so-great ahau, or lords at its head (ahau translates as "he of the powerful voice"). Ix Yohl Ik'nal Ahau, daughter of K'inich Kan Bahlam.1st, was the only woman elevated to K'uhul B'aakal Ahau or Sacred Lord of the B'aakal kingdom (her date of birth is unknown). Her reign (583-604), was plagued by hostility from within and without. Regional antagonism was fueled by two enemies for different but complementary reasons. The first came from Tortuguero, a city located in the northern plains of Tabasco, whose leaders claimed the title of K'uhul B'aakal Ahaw that Palenque rightly demanded as its historic right. A deep-seated enmity between Tortuguero and Palenque fed their antagonism for years.

The second came from Calakmul, which fought Palenque over control of trade routes and the Usumacinta river, a major waterway. A proxy of Calakmul, Toniná was only 41Mi/80Km from Palenque, in today's Ocosingo valley. Their antagonism remained a thorn in Palenque's side through murderous wars, up to its collapse in 900-950.

There may have been another reason for such lasting enmity with the K'an kingdom. Palenque traded and probably had political contacts, with the powerful metropolis of central Mexico, Teotihuacán. This great city spread its influence far and wide, all the way south to



Kaminal Juyú, and Tikal in today's Guatemala. Calakmul perceived Palenque as a Mexican proxy in the Maya heartland, which would help explain such persistent and violent antagonism.

In 659, Pakal got his revenge against the K'an kingdom, as may be seen in the West Court of the Palace and House.C. The six carved limestone monoliths show six sahal (state officials) taken in battles. They are shown bound and ready for execution, facing the carved steps across the courtyard at House.A with glyphs that recounts Palenque's defeat and burning in 599 and 611.

The Temple of the Inscriptions is Pakal final resting place. It is considered the most important sanctuary ever built in the Americas. Its name comes from three large hieroglyphic panels found on the walls of the sanctuary atop the pyramid. In the past, it was known as the "Temple of the Laws" because of the limestone panels covered with 617-glyphs that narrate Pakal's achievements and his place in the context of eternity. The temple-pyramid had an exceptional "roof crest", now lost to time.

The temple also had a narrow man-made waterway running under its foundation that leads to an underground spring, the mythological gate to Xibalba, the underworld in Maya-K'ich'è. The discovery in July 2016, by a team of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), of a 3.3ft/1mt square canal of dressed stones, is believed to be 70ft/20mts long. Pakal's sarcophagus was built directly over this underground canal that pre-dates the construction of the crypt. Could the waterway be a structural feature to control waters coming down from the hill at the back of the tem-

ple, and that could undermine the structure? Or is it a symbolic connection with running water, the way *chu'lel'*, the holy soul force of the universe, travels to the underworld? Further investigations will clarify this intriguing feature.

The crypt, now closed to the public for its preservation, can only be accessed from the temple that sits on top of the pyramid. Cutaway drawings show the pyramid's stairways from the temple at level nine down to the crypt, to Xibalba the "place of fright", or underworld. The "voyage" down the pyramid is integral to each step associated with death, the four cardinal points and their symbolic colors in the Maya cross. In Maya lore, Pakal's *chu'lel'* his spirit or

soul, was first brought up the pyramid to the temple. After rituals and incantations, his body was carried down the three sets of stairs to the door of the crypt, following the path of the Sun. It is on the threshold of the crypt, that Pakal *chu'lel'* transitioned to the next world from a divine king to that of a celestial ancestor.

The eight-level funerary pyramid plus the temple on top as the ninth level, was planned and designed by Pakal. Its foundations were built and the sarcophagus and slab set about five years before Pakal's death in 683. When the temple-pyramid was completed, by his son and heir K'inich K'an Bahlam (635-702), a narrow conduit, the Tz'at Nakan, or "Serpent of the Wise Ones" was built in. In 1949 it was called a psychoduct by the renowned Mexican archaeologist Alberto Ruz Lhuillier (1906-1979), who discovered the stairwell and the crypt. It connects from the bottom the sarcophagus to the temple above and was the conduit through which Pakal and the priests were believed to communicate. In other words, the feature also found in similar structures such as Temple XVIII, meant that the individual was still "socially alive" after death, with the prerogatives attached to his spiritual powers, and thus affirms the inheritance of resources and the right to rule for descendants.

Nine life-size fine stucco figures are set on the walls of the crypt, the B'olon Eht Naah or "House of the Nine Companions" as it was then called. Surrounding the sarcophagus, the nine warriors assumed to have been Pakal's guardians, that warded off malevolent forces when his body was carried down the steps of the pyramid to the crypt. The

nine figures now stand guard for a god in eternity.

Five persons, the so called "companions" were sacrificed upon Pakal's burial to attend and serve the ahau in the afterlife. The practice was customary in ancient cultures of the Old and New Worlds for prominent individuals. Three of the "companions" have been identified as two males and one female in their late teens or early twenties (the two others could not be sexed, due to the deterioration of the remains). They were dismembered and the remains buried in a shallow stone cavity in front of the now open massive limestone triangular door, that sealed the entrance of the crypt in 690.

The sarcophagus lid is unique in the archaeological record of the New World, for its size, exquisite iconography and mythological scene. To understand the complex mythological significance of the lid it is to be read vertically, from bottom (south) to top (north), not from side to side as it is often shown. The cramped quarters of the crypt did not allow space for visitors, since it was meant that no one could ever see the sarcophagus and read its full imagery, once the massive triangular door was sealed in 690. The message was there for its own sake to exist in the afterlife, not to ever be read by the living.

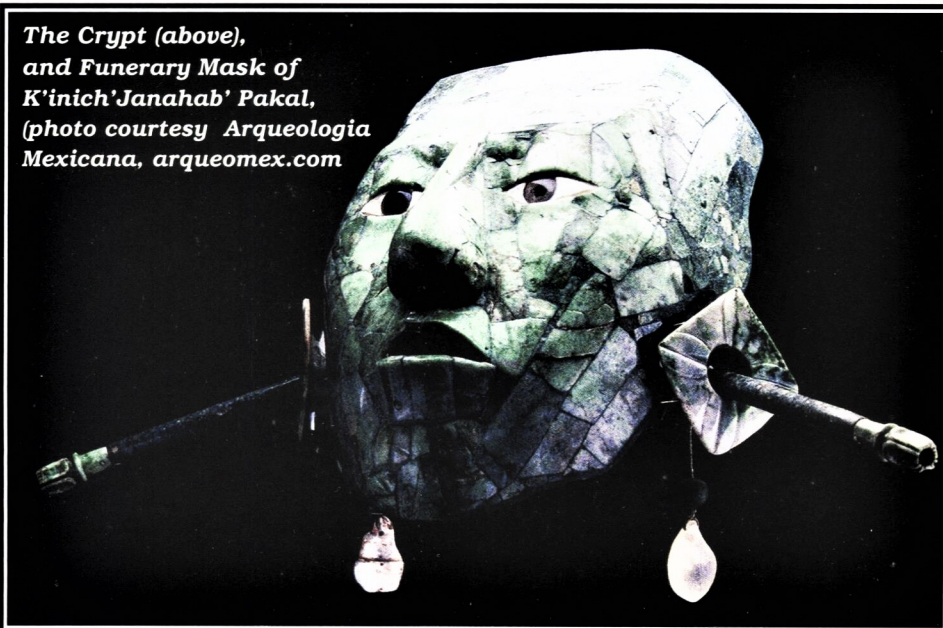
The iconography shows Pakal rising (not falling) from the depths of Xibalba, the "other" world, to be reborn as Hunal Ye, the Maize God, an allegorical voyage from death to life. He is completing the voyage on the *sacbe*, the "white road" that started when his body left the Palace. For scholars, Pakal is shown falling into the underworld. His posture however, indicate that he is coming out of Xibalba since the underworld allegory is depicted at his back, while he is looking up at Itzam Yeh, the Great Cosmic Macaw (the Milky Way, aka the Cosmic River). He is shown facing his future in the "other-world" as a god heading north, away from the infernal east-west cycle of eternal return.

Pakal is shown already half out of the mandibles of the mythological Sak B'aak Naah Chapat, the "White Bone Serpent's" mandibles, forced open by the gods, freeing him from the cycles of mortal life. He is reaching toward eternal life as Hunal Ye to ensure his people the sacred corn of their daily sustenance.

At the heart of Palenque is the triadic Cross Group complex, made up of the Temple of the Cross-I, the Temple of the Foliated Cross-II and the Temple of the Sun-III. They are accessible but, for



The Crypt (above), and Funerary Mask of K'inich'Janahab' Pakal, (photo courtesy Arqueologia Mexicana, arqueomex.com)



their preservation, their sanctuaries are closed to the public. The view of central Palenque from atop the Temple of the Cross is spectacular. The group is collectively referred to as Palenque's Divine Triad, for the tri-partite conception of the kingdom's world space: I-transmission of power from ancestors and deities; II-control of the dual productive-destructive powers of nature for daily sustenance, and III-royal military power to defend and expand the kingdom.

Each temple is home to a god, named by Johan Henrich Berlin in 1963 as God.I, God.II and God.III. They are the special patron gods of Palenque, and the only place in the Maya world where they appear together. Maya mythology recount their birth in K'an-Hub-Matawil, a few days apart. This birth place is where existence, time and space were initiated at the beginning of time. In each temple is a large, finely carved limestone panel, that relate the story of Pakal's son, K'inich' K'an Bahlam', and his accession to the throne in 684. He is shown in the act of transferring lordship powers to himself, witnessed by K'awiil (God.K), the manikin scepter of royal power, and a representation of his father, together with dedications to the gods of the Divine Triad

Ballcourts are among the most important structures in Mesoamerican and other Mexican cities, for both ritual and secular games. Palenque's ballcourt size seems insignificant compared to those of other Classic Period cities. It is significantly located at the center of central Palenque. Appearances may be deceiving, but size does not necessarily reflect a lesser function. Were mapped by the PMP 1481 structures, but no other ballcourt was found. It is exceptional given the secular and religious importance of the city and its large population at the time. But what significance did ballcourts play in the lives of ancient Maya polities?

In the Maya sacred book the Popol Vuh, we learn that the gods fashioned man's substance from maize dough, that it also his daily sustenance. This duality underlines again the traditional perception of two simultaneous worlds, the visible and invisible, at the core of common beliefs, religious rituals and daily living.

An important feature of Maya and other Mexican ancient cities, was the ballcourt called Tlaltchli in Nahuatl. Palenque with one court is not unique, but most cities had two or more, while El Tajin had 21 and Cantona 27. The universal use of games, through space and



Temple of the Cross

time, for secular and ritual reasons, underline the same need for maintaining peace and balance within and between societies, and between this world and the "other world". Essential to ritual games, and to a certain extent secular games as well, was the need to keep in check latent antagonism between factions of the same polity, as well as between polities, and their respective beliefs.

Games were the last peaceful attempt before resorting to conflict or war. Ballcourts therefore, were important instruments in the use and projection of power, whether secular or ritual. Secular games served the same communal and cultural purposes as those taking place in our world today. They were also used for intra and inter-polity political balance of power.

In the North Group, a stucco frieze found at the base of the sub-structure in Temple.V is evidence of contact with central Mexico. It shows the figure of a man whose dress and adornment leaves

no doubt as to an Early Period contact with Teotihuacán. A goggled-eye warrior, armed with a spear thrower or atlatl in his left hand, is clearly Mexican and relates to Tlaloc, Toltec god of rain, thunder and war, probably of Teotihuacán origin.

Palenque's tropical environment provided an abundance of water and forest products, from fruit trees to soft and hard woods. Watered fields in the plains at the bottom of the mountain, allowed for two crops of maize and other produce a year. Cacao trees were planted in private and common gardens throughout the city; and still grows in the ruins today. Wildlife, from jaguar, wild turkeys, howler and spider monkeys, to forest deer to scarlet macaws was bountiful. This exceptionally luxurious environment enhances the elegance of the site, and its multiple falls and pools provide for a beautiful experience at the end of a day's visit to this great Maya metropolis. ■

References upon request



The Queen's Baths