

The power of the few



The quest for reconstructing Classic Maya noble history is becoming ever more popular in the academic community. Still, Maya biographic research is mainly warranted by the intricate written records on Maya courtly life provided by epigraphy.

In recent years, bioarchaeological research has increasingly provided direct evidence which adds to the written biographies of the Maya past, even though its contribution is still limited to the few kings and queens whose skeletal remains have been recovered and whose identity revealed. The cover photo for this issue of the *Journal of Anthropological Sciences* depicts the Temple of the Inscriptions in the ancient Maya site of Palenque, Chiapas. It harbors the mortal remains of K'inich Janaab' Pakal, one of the most famous Maya kings during the Classic period (A.D. 250-900).

Pakal's astounding sarcophagus tomb was re-opened in 1999 by a joint Mexican and international team led by Dr. Vera Tiesler. The motivation for this recent on-site investigation was twofold. Treatment of the remains was imperative to protect them and prevent further damage caused by the tropical climate that characterizes the chiapanecan jungle. The already badly preserved skeleton had substantially deteriorated after its discovery in 1952 by archaeologist Alberto Ruz. Secondly, an updated osteological analysis had to be undertaken, with the aim to shed light on several issues that had been under debate since the time of discovery. The main question was the age at death of the personage. An initial osteological inspection in 1952, that could not benefit from the pubic symphyses gone unnoticed under a thick and hard layer of cinnabar, had estimated Pakal's age at death in the fourth decade of life, founded on the reduced dental wear and lack of apparent degenerative processes. As it turned out twenty years later, the anthropological analysis was not in line with the glyphic readings, indicating that this king was born in A.D. 603 and died in A.D. 683 at the age of eighty. The age gap of forty years could hardly be justified even by biological variability. Two further topics under discussion concerned firstly the possibility that physical malformations might have affected the royal's well being and secondly that the multiple burial in front of the chamber was indeed a sacrificial deposit. Both issues are settled in this study in favor of the original appreciation. The recent anthropological investigation approached the age issue from different angles and used modern techniques not available in the '50s like bone histopaleopathology and histomorphology (S. Stout and M. Streeter), and the new Transition Analysis Method on the recovered pubic symphyses (J. Buikstra, G. Milner, and J. Boldsen). Jointly, the osteological results indicate that Pakal could hardly have died in his forties. However, not all the contributors of the edited volumes that resulted from this venture^{1,2} agreed with the results, resting their assumptions on demographic bases and calling into question the historical authenticity of propagandistic Maya inscriptions.

Beyond doubt, this volume does not just represent an updated study of a well known historical personage, but also introduces and discusses old and new issues of anthropological debate, traces new lines and caveats in regional investigation and offers some innovative approaches to biocultural or interdisciplinary reconstruction of Maya dynastic history that holds true also for most investigations of other past societies. No absolute truth should be expected in the recreations of past life histories from the material record. As the editors intend to underscore throughout the volume, even the most thorough and detailed investigation will eventually be rendered obsolete and limited as the state of the art advances and the frames of refer-

ences gradually shift, growing ever more complex. Progress may lead to enrichment through additional information and confirmation of the original panorama, or may in some cases, oblige to reconsider and reshape the previously held interpretations.

¹ Tiesler V. & Cucina A (eds) 2005. *Janaab' Pakal de Palenque: Vida y muerte de un gobernante maya*. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, Mexico City. (Spanish version)

² Tiesler V. & Cucina A (eds) 2006. *Janaab' Pakal of Palenque: Reconstructing the Life and Death of a Maya Ruler*. University of Arizona Press, Tucson. (English version).

Figure - Pakal tumbstone, redrawn by Mirna Sánchez, Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán.