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Book Reviews

Tiesler, Vera and Cucina, Andrea (eds.) (2006) *Janaab' Pakal of Palenque: Reconstructing the Life and Death of a Maya Ruler*, The University of Arizona Press (Tucson), xiii + 219 pp. \$55.00 hbk.

The extraordinary discovery in 1952 of the tomb of a seventh-century king under the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque, Mexico, focused scholarly attention for the first time on the lives of individual historical figures of the Classic Maya civilization (c.AD 250–1000). The body was encased in a massive limestone sarcophagus whose lid and sides were sculpted with the images and names of the dead king and his ancestors. Twenty years later, the hieroglyphic inscriptions at Palenque were finally read, providing biographical sketches for its royal dynasty. The ruler in the sarcophagus was identified as K'inich Janaab' Pakal, who was born in AD 603 and died 80 years later. Maya scholars thus had direct biological, epigraphic and iconographic details about this powerful individual.

Unfortunately, the information from the different sources was incompatible, causing a major controversy that took on nationalistic overtones. The Mexican physical anthropologists who analysed the skeleton in situ in the 1950s declared that at death the individual was 40–50 years old, not 80. Furthermore, Pakal's images seemed to show he suffered from club foot and polydactily, health conditions that were not evident on his skeleton. The controversy over Pakal's age at death loomed large in Maya studies because it cast doubt on epigraphic readings, fueling a rift between the 'objective science' of archaeologists and the interpretations of art historians and epigraphers. Since that time, however, epigraphic studies have gained credibility and doubt has shifted to the conclusions of the anthropologists, especially as new techniques for age estimation have appeared in the interim.

For this volume to have resolved that long-standing debate – which it does – alone would be a significant achievement, but the contributors go further in examining the physical evidence of Pakal and other Maya royalty to shed light on the lives and deaths of ordinary Maya people as well. The chapters, authored by an international group of biological anthropologists and epigraphers, resulted from a symposium at the 2003 Society for American Archaeology meeting organised by Tiesler and Cucina, biological anthropologists at the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán. They first appeared in *Janaab' Pakal de Palenque: vida y muerte de un gobernante maya* (2004, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán), which has colour photos lacking in this English edition. Tiesler and Cucina's collaborative project was stimulated by a re-analysis of Pakal's remains in 1999 as well as the discovery of the mysterious 'Red Queen' entombed within a temple adjacent to that of Pakal.

Importantly, multiple lines of investigation drew as much information as possible from the skeletal evidence at Palenque and also from royal tombs at Yaxchilan,

Mexico. These included different techniques to determine chronological age estimation (which confirmed Pakal's advanced age), taphonomic and paleopathological evaluations, metrical and morphological data, post-mortem treatment, and information on diet and possible foreign affiliations. Some minor controversies were also resolved. DNA results indicate the Red Queen was not Pakal's mother who ruled before him, as once thought, but was likely his wife. Examination of the secondary interments found with Pakal and the Red Queen revealed evidence of violent deaths, some coincident with heart removal, indicating that these individuals were sacrificial attendants. Other issues remain open-ended. The degree to which portraiture at Palenque corresponded to physical features of the skeletons was argued negatively for Pakal, yet the identification of the Red Queen as his wife was based in part on her depictions. The parallel examination of epigraphic and skeletal information from Yaxchilan yielded a lack of correspondence. Two important kings were found to have died decades younger than the age at death determined from hieroglyphic inscriptions, leading to the conclusion that their birth dates had been backdated, the same scenario once postulated for Pakal at Palenque.

Although this suite of analyses provided direct information only on the individuals closely examined, the results were placed within a larger paleodemographic context at Palenque using data from an additional 170 skeletons to create general profiles of mortality and health status. Not surprisingly, Maya rulers were healthier and lived longer than the average commoners, although Pakal's extreme longevity was atypical. A comparison of biographic profiles of Classic Maya rulers drawn from epigraphic sources examined the relationship between life expectancy and length of reign, revealing the average age at accession (28.43 years) was greater than the average life expectancy for commoners. These results indicate a bias in the epigraphic data (and Maya politics) favouring long-lived individuals who had successfully garnered the wherewithal to erect monuments with their biographies.

The volume is written in two technical languages, those of biological anthropologists and of Maya specialists. Nevertheless, the important questions and conclusions are well articulated, such that the significance of this volume to Maya studies and to comparable bioarchaeological examinations of life and death in the ancient world should be obvious to any interested reader.

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Sandstrom, Alan, R. and García Valencia, E. Hugo (eds.) (2005) *Native Peoples of the Gulf Coast of Mexico*, University of Arizona Press (Arizona), x + 335 pp. \$50 pbk.

This comprehensive study on Mesoamerica claims that the inhabitants of the Gulf Coast are unique and distinct from other Mexican peoples. The authors focus on aspects of geography, settlement patterns, social organisation, demography, belief systems, acculturation, subsistence strategies and housing in order to prove this hypothesis. Noteworthy aspects of the study are the succinct and relevant sub-themes within each