NO PREP

Palenque and King Pakal

A Royal Tomb Inside a Pyramid

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Palenque and King Pakal: A Royal Tomb Inside a Pyramid

The City in the Cloud Forest

Palenque rises from the foothills of the Chiapas highlands in southern Mexico, its towers and temples emerging from a landscape of steep hills, waterfalls, and forest so dense that the city was essentially invisible to the outside world until the late 18th century. Sitting at the edge where the Maya lowlands meet the mountains, Palenque received enough rainfall to power a network of aqueducts — the only ancient Maya

Name: **Period:** **Date:**

Palenque and King Pakal: A Royal Tomb Inside a Pyramid

The City in the Cloud Forest

Palenque rises from the foothills of the Chiapas highlands in southern Mexico, its towers and temples emerging from a landscape of steep hills, waterfalls, and forest so dense that the city was essentially invisible to the outside world until the late 18th century. Sitting at the edge where the Maya lowlands meet the mountains, Palenque received enough rainfall to power a network of aqueducts, the only ancient Maya city known to have built a pressurized water supply system. Streams were channeled underground through stone conduits, and at one point the city's main stream ran beneath the Palace complex, creating a kind of early plumbing. The city flourished primarily during the Classic period, reaching its height under a dynasty that produced some of the most brilliant rulers in Maya history. At its peak in the 7th century CE, Palenque controlled a significant territory in the western Maya region and was an intellectual and artistic center whose sculptors and scribes produced work of extraordinary refinement. The stucco relief carvings at Palenque are considered the finest in the ancient Americas: fluid, naturalistic, and full of subtle emotional expression that feels remarkably modern.

King Pakal: The Man in the Tomb

Pakal the Great ruled Palenque from 615 CE to 683 CE, an astonishing 68 years on the throne. He came to power at age 12 and died at 80, leaving behind a transformed city. Under his reign, the Palace complex was substantially expanded, a royal residential tower was built, and the city's distinctive architectural style was developed. But Pakal's most enduring legacy is the Temple of Inscriptions (the stepped pyramid that served as his mortuary monument and, it would turn out, as his tomb). Pakal's inscriptions are among the most extensive in the Maya world. The Temple of Inscriptions itself contains three panels of hieroglyphic text with

approximately 620 glyphs that record the history of the Palenque dynasty stretching back centuries. Pakal used these texts to legitimize his dynasty (which had come to power through an unusual line of succession that included his mother, Lady Zak-Kuk, as regent) by connecting his lineage to mythological ancestors and cosmic forces.

Alberto Ruz's Discovery

In 1949, Mexican archaeologist Alberto Ruz Lhuillier was working inside the Temple of Inscriptions when he noticed something unusual about the floor of the top chamber: one of the stone slabs had a double row of finger holes along its edge, as if designed to be lifted. Ruz had the slab raised and found a rubble-filled staircase descending into the pyramid's core. It would take four field seasons to clear the rubble by hand, working down and then back up in a U-shaped tunnel that descended to the pyramid's base. In June 1952, Ruz entered the burial chamber. He later described it as a space 'out of a fairy tale,' filled with stalactites and stalagmites that had grown over the centuries on the stone surfaces, with painted reliefs of figures emerging from the walls and a massive carved sarcophagus filling most of the room. The sarcophagus lid, a limestone slab nearly four meters long and weighing some five tons, bore one of the most elaborate carvings in Maya art.

The Sarcophagus Lid and the Astronaut Theory

The carved lid of Pakal's sarcophagus shows a man positioned against what appears to be a complex mechanical apparatus — with what looks like a cross-shaped cosmic tree above him and a serpent and skeletal jaw below. When Erich von Daniken reproduced the carving in his 1968 bestseller 'Chariots of the Gods,' he claimed the figure was clearly an astronaut in a rocket ship, with foot pedals, a breathing apparatus, and engine exhaust below. The 'ancient astronaut' interpretation became one of the most persistently popular pseudoarchaeological claims of the 20th century. Maya epigraphers have read the sarcophagus lid in exhaustive detail, and it depicts something quite different: Pakal at the moment of death, descending into Xibalba (the underworld) along the World Tree — a vertical axis connecting the underworld, earth, and heavens in Maya cosmology. Every element that Von Daniken identified as mechanical equipment is a well-documented Maya religious symbol: the 'foot pedals' are serpent heads, the 'breathing apparatus' is a jade tree, the 'exhaust' is skeletal jaws of the earth monster. The claim that Pakal was an

astronaut reflects a pattern of assuming ancient people were incapable of complex symbolic art and must have needed alien assistance — a deeply disrespectful reading of one of the masterpieces of ancient art.

The Jade Death Mask and Tomb Contents

Inside the sarcophagus, Pakal's skeleton wore a jade mosaic death mask assembled from more than 200 pieces of jade. His body had been adorned with jade jewelry — necklaces, bracelets, rings, ear ornaments — and a jade sphere had been placed in each hand and in his mouth. In Maya belief, jade was associated with water, corn, and the life force itself. Dressing the dead in jade was a statement about royal power and about the soul's journey through the underworld and expected resurrection. Outside the sarcophagus, the burial chamber contained additional offerings and the remains of five or six individuals who were apparently sacrificed at the time of the burial — young people whose bodies were placed in the stairwell leading to the chamber. A psychoduct — a stone tube running from the burial chamber up through the pyramid to the temple above — may have been designed to allow the dead king's spirit to communicate with the world of the living, or to receive offerings sent down from the temple floor.

Key Information: Palenque and Pakal's Tomb

Detail	Information
Location	Chiapas, Mexico (foothills of highland Chiapas; western Maya region)
Pakal's Reign	615 CE – 683 CE; 68 years; came to power at age 12, died at 80
Discovery	Alberto Ruz Lhuillier; found hidden staircase 1949; entered tomb June 1952
Sarcophagus Lid	Nearly 4 meters long; depicts Pakal descending World Tree into underworld
Jade Death Mask	200+ pieces of jade; jade also placed in hands and mouth
Psychoduct	Stone tube from burial chamber to temple above, possibly for spirit communication

Detail	Information
Temple Inscriptions	~620 glyphs recording Palenque dynasty history; used for dynastic legitimacy
Pseudoscience Issue	Von Daniken's 1968 'astronaut' misidentification still circulates in popular media

Case Study: Ruz at the Door

Alberto Ruz had been clearing rubble for four years. He had started with a promising staircase and a crew of workers passing limestone chunks up hand over hand, season after season, the descending passage growing longer and then curving back up and then down again in the shape of a fishhook buried inside the pyramid. The workers had a name for it by the third season: el tunel del loco — the crazy man's tunnel. On June 15, 1952, Ruz stood at the bottom of the cleared passage, his lamp throwing shadows across a triangular stone doorway sealed with a massive rubble plug. He had dreamed about what was beyond it. Probably an altar. Possibly a cache of offerings. Common finds in Maya pyramids. His crew removed the plug stone. Ruz stood at the entrance and lifted his lamp. The beam caught a stalactite, then another, then the wall, then the sarcophagus. He stood very still for a long moment. Behind him, a young worker asked: 'Don Alberto, what is it?' Ruz turned around. His face, the worker said later, looked like a man who had stopped believing the world worked the way he thought it did. 'Come and see,' was all he said.

1. The case study emphasizes the four years of painstaking work before the discovery. How does this contrast with popular images of archaeology as treasure hunting, and what does it reveal about what archaeological fieldwork actually requires?

2. Using both the case study and the reading, explain what made Pakal's tomb significant as an archaeological discovery. What did it reveal that had not been previously understood about Maya pyramids?

Multiple Choice

1. What did Alberto Ruz notice in 1949 that led to the discovery of Pakal's tomb?

a) A carved serpent head pointing downward toward a hidden chamber

b) A psychoduct tube visible from outside the pyramid base

c) LiDAR data showing a very large underground void beneath the entire Temple of Inscriptions

d) A stone floor slab with a double row of finger holes suggesting it was meant to be lifted

2. What does the sarcophagus lid of Pakal actually depict, according to Maya epigraphers?

a) A battle scene showing Pakal's military victories over rival city-states

b) Pakal at the moment of death, descending the World Tree into the underworld

c) Pakal in a spaceship, as ancient astronaut theorists have correctly identified

d) The creation story of the Maya cosmos, with Pakal as the sun god

3. What was the likely purpose of the psychoduct connecting Pakal's burial chamber to the temple above?

a) To allow priests to lower food offerings to the dead king's body

b) To provide fresh air for workers clearing the burial chamber during the construction

c) To drain water away from the burial chamber during the rainy season

d) To allow the dead king's spirit to communicate with the living or receive offerings

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Pakal	A) A stone tube running from Pakal's burial chamber to the temple above, possibly for spirit communication
2. ___ Sarcophagus	B) A green stone precious to the Maya, associated with water, corn, and royal power
3. ___ Psychoduct	C) A vertical axis in Maya cosmology connecting the underworld, earth, and heavens
4. ___ World Tree	D) A stone coffin; Pakal's was nearly four meters long with an elaborately carved lid
5. ___ Jade	E) The ruler of Palenque from 615 to 683 CE whose tomb was discovered inside the Temple of Inscriptions

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Pakal ruled Palenque for 68 years, coming to power at age _____ and dying at age 80.

2. The jade death mask found on Pakal's face was assembled from more than _____ pieces of jade.

3. In his 1968 book, Erich Von Daniken falsely claimed that the figure on Pakal's sarcophagus lid was an _____ in a spaceship.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain why the 'ancient astronaut' interpretation of Pakal's sarcophagus lid is considered disrespectful to the Maya people and their artistic achievements, beyond just being factually wrong.

2. What was the significance of jade in Maya burial practices, and what does the quantity and placement of jade in Pakal's tomb tell us about his status and the beliefs of his civilization?

3. How did Pakal use the Temple of Inscriptions' carved texts to strengthen his political legitimacy? Why would a ruler need to use the past — including mythological ancestors — to justify his present authority?