

Palenque, the Eternal Portal to the Pre-Hispanic Past  
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Nestled between the coastal plain of Tabasco and the Sierra Norte de Chiapas, the [Palenque](#) region is one of the areas richest in pre-Columbian material culture and ecological resources in all of Mexico. It is home to Lakamha' (Big Water), the ancient pre-Hispanic city today known as [Palenque](#). From the fifth to eighth century it was the civic-religious core and political capital of the B'aakal (Bone) kingdom, the territory controlled by the dynasty of [Palenque](#) rulers that straddled an extension of at least 500km<sup>2</sup> between the Usumacinta and Tuliija rivers. From a small farming village in the Late Formative (Late Preclassic) period, Lakamha' would become one of the most prominent cities in the region in the Early Classic until it reached its maximum splendour in the Late Classic, when it brought more than a hundred smaller sites into its political fold. The importance of the ancient city in the region and beyond is reflected in its artistic, architectural, and religious magnificence that arose from hundreds of years of history, from 250 BC to AD 900, when it was finally abandoned.

Despite our greater understanding of this influential city as a result of years of work at the site, writing [Palenque](#)'s history is far from over. In fact, it seems to have no end, as each year multiple archaeological projects set out to fill the gaps in our knowledge of daily life, the dynamics of cultural interaction, and the processes of social and political integration. Furthermore, the pre-Hispanic past seems to be brought back to life in nearby indigenous communities, which also reap the benefits of the flow of tourists. Thousands of people are drawn to the archaeological site every year and today groups of different nationalities and beliefs converge on [Palenque](#) as the eternal portal offering the opportunity to experience the pre-Hispanic past, by reliving the worldview that once enabled the ancient society of [Palenque](#) to flourish. Therefore, writing about [Palenque](#) and the settlements that dot the Sierra Norte de Chiapas is a complex and enormous challenge. Consequently, this article offers an overview of the salient features of the ancient city, with an emphasis on subsistence systems, daily life, worldview as promoted by rulers, and the dynamics of contact between the groups that occupied the region.

## THE RISE AND FALL OF THE ANCIENT CITY

The genesis of [Palenque](#) has been tied to population migrations during the Formative period from the middle Usumacinta or from the Gulf of Mexico, although other scholars have suggested it may be linked to Middle and Late Preclassic migrations from the Mirador basin in the northern Peten region of Guatemala, where the earliest known Maya states, such as Nakbe and Mirador, arose. Sometime around 200 BC, Maya populations from the central and northern Peten region expanded their territory to the western lowlands in the area today known as Chiapas and Tabasco. [Palenque](#) might have been founded as the result of one of these migrations.

A clear understanding of the processes connected to the early settlement of [Palenque](#) has been elusive. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that before emerging as the most powerful political-religious centre in the region, In the Late Formative (ca. 300 BC-AD 150) [Palenque](#) was a small farming village that attracted settlers for the abundant water currents scattered throughout residential groupings in the steep foothills of the Sierra Norte de Chiapas. As time passed, these streams made it possible to supply the population with water channelled through a complex network of aqueducts to irrigate cultivated terraces and raised fields surrounding the site.

The Early Classic period (AD 150-600) witnessed the unification of groups dispersed throughout the region. At this time the [Palenque](#) lineage was founded and settlement began to gradually configure a regional political and religious centre. K'uk B'alam I (Quetzal-Jaguar) rose to power in

AD 431 and was the founder of the dynasty. Recent excavations in Temple 20, one of the oldest structures at the site, suggest that the foundations of the funerary customs of [Palenque](#) royalty were established at this time. These practices included the use of mural painting, the representation of the nine lords of the underworld who kept vigil over the body of the deceased, accompanied by grave goods and lavish offerings deposited in pottery vessels, which formed a pattern repeated in the Late Classic in the Temple of the Inscriptions crypt, where K'inich Janahb' Pakal was buried. During this earlier period, evidence supports the existence of a complex trade network between the city and a region that must have spread between the Usumacinta and Grijalva rivers to the Gulf Coast of Mexico and the Caribbean. [Palenque](#) imported considerable quantities of materials from the sea vis-a-vis land and river routes, in addition to obsidian, jade, hematite, and pyrite from various faraway sources in the Maya lowlands. This scenario is based on materials from burials in Temples 20 and 18 and the Templo Olvidado (Forgotten Temple), dated to the Early Classic.

Then in the Late Classic (AD 600-900) [Palenque](#) became the preeminent settlement in the region. By this time the ancient city had a well-defined civic-ceremonial centre and a palace complex, where administrative, political, and ritual activities were conducted. Several residential groups arranged in terraces beside bodies of water were built around the core of the site. Some of these displayed greater complexity than others; they incorporated sleeping chambers and two-storey rooms, patios, open-air courtyards, temple-type buildings, kitchens, restroom facilities, steam baths, sanctuaries and altars, constructed on different terrace levels, such as Group B, the Bats Group, and Temple 22. Activities connected to everyday life and domestic production that interwove social, economic, artistic, and religious life were carried out in these complexes.

Starting in AD 850 [Palenque](#), just as other civic-ceremonial centres in the Maya lowlands, saw its former political power wane until it was finally abandoned. Although the causes underlying its decline are unknown, perhaps factors such as warfare, drought, and depletion of farmlands may have together contributed to the deterioration of the institutions responsible for ruling the population, provoking social discontent and population dispersal via migrations. Archaeological evidence from Temple 19 seems to support the idea of social unrest among the masses against ruling groups and reveals some hints about the city's abandonment and destruction. The final phase of occupation of this building dates to the end of the Late Classic, when the structure was vandalised in pre-Hispanic times: architectural remains and furnishings within the structure were dismantled and set on fire, including portraits of the ruler Ahkal Mo' Nahb III and his court. Similar events might have occurred at different spots in [Palenque](#), which set in motion its partial destruction and gradual abandonment in late AD 900, marking the end of one of the most remarkable and powerful cities in the Maya lowlands.

## DAILY LIFE, SUBSISTENCE, AND WORLDVIEW

The rise of [Palenque](#) as one of the foremost political entities in the northwest Maya lowlands was in part the result of the organisation of a highly elaborate system of production and social reproduction, based on the control and exploitation of the region's ecological resources. In addition to supplying families that were concentrated in the great city, they served as a starting point for the organisation of religious life. It is probably not by chance that water and aquatic creatures figure prominently in the centre's ritual iconography. In that sense, the rainforest and aquatic environment made it possible to satisfy basic subsistence needs at the same time that it served as the source of inspiration for the [Palenque](#) worldview. Diverse tree species were exploited for construction, such as the vampire palm (*Calyptrogyne ghiesbreghtiana*) to roof humble dwellings, the sapodilla (*Manilkara zapota*) to hew lintels for buildings, or the fruit of the bread nut tree (*Brosimum alicastrum*), consumed as a source of protein. Wood from various species was also used as fuel and to make tools. Immense quantities of wood and limestone were needed to produce lime to plaster buildings and to create complex sculptural programs with stucco modelled in bas relief.

The people exploited a broad range of local fauna as food, to manufacture implements, and for personal adornment. In construction fill and middens, archaeologists commonly found bone remains of mojarra or bay snook (*Petenia splendida*, *Cichlasoma meeki*), pejelagarto or tropical gar (*Lepisosteus tropicus*), catfish (*Ictalurus meridionalis*, *Rhamdia guatemalensis*), and common snook (*Centropomus undecimalis*), species that can be caught in rivers. For other prey that provided meat, the ancient people of [Palenque](#) also trapped a wide variety of freshwater and land turtles, including the Central American river turtle (*Dermatemys mawii*), mud turtles (*Kinosternon* sp.), Mexican giant musk turtle (*Staurotypus triporcatus*), furrowed wood turtle (*Rhinoclemmys areolata*), and the red-eared slider (*Pseudemys scripta*). As for birds, archaeological evidence makes it possible to reconstruct the capture and consumption of the common bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*), ocellated turkey (*Meleagris ocellata*), and great curassow (*Crax rubra*). Mammals were also consumed, including the white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), manatee (*Trichechus manatus*), dog (*Canis familiaris*), collared peccary (*Dicotyles tajacu*), and armadillo (*Dasypus novemcinctus*). Despite the importance of the exploitation of an extensive array of aquatic flora and fauna, subsistence primarily focused on maize agriculture, supplemented by legumes such as beans, as well as squash. Intensive cultivation was carried out to augment food production with systems that included making terraces on the foothills of the sierra and raised fields near the Michal River.

[Palenque](#)'s social life featured high and low social levels, which were in turn subdivided into segments, such as the nobility, artisans, artists, farmers, and slaves. At the top of the hierarchy was the ajaw or lord, who claimed descent from royal lineages, legitimated by means of complex power discourses in which the historical past and mythological times converged. When an individual ascended the throne, he assumed the title of k'inich ajaw (lord sun), k'uhul ajaw (sacred lord), and kalomte' (unifier of lords or lord of lords). These titles were flaunted to set themselves apart from the elite, which could attain the rank of ajaw. Rulers were responsible for the well-being of the community, the continuity of agricultural cycles, a variety of architectural works, forging alliances, waging war against other political-territorial entities, and especially for maintaining cosmic order by performing rituals related to the solar and lunar calendars. Epigraphic and iconographic evidence suggests that at [Palenque](#) the rulers sought to emphasize their supreme and divine origin by linking themselves directly with the triad of mythical gods of creation, as well as with other deities associated with the three terrestrial realms: the aquatic world or underworld, the land, and the sky. With this they attempted to reaffirm the dynasty's divine provenance. Rulers and priests conducted numerous rituals and large-scale ceremonies in plazas and buildings in order to be seen venerating the gods and winning their favour.

The decipherment of hieroglyphs carved on limestone panels has enabled epigraphists to reconstruct the sequence of [Palenque](#) rulers, which spans approximately 370 years starting with the foundation of the dynasty (AD 431-799), but not from the initial occupation of the site. The first ruler, who has been recognised as the founder of the [Palenque](#) dynasty, is K'uk B'alam (Quetzal-Jaguar) and the last identified ruler is Janahb' Pakal III. A step below the ruling family stood the nobility, whose members were also organised into lineages and who performed diverse governmental functions. Some of the titles held by these individuals began to appear in the second half of the Late Classic, such as ajaw nahb'at and nahb'at ch'okfor religious specialists, aj k'uhun for scribes, yajaw k'ahk for warrior chiefs, and sajal for provincial rulers in the region. Other nobles played an important role in the political hierarchy and occupied the title of ajaw; they lacked political or religious positions, but they possessed riches and power within their communities. Peasants, unspecialised workers, and slaves occupied the lowest ranks of society.

When it comes to worldview, [Palenque](#), as well as other Maya cities, was planned and conceived as a key symbol in the cosmos. While it occupied a strategic position for the city's defence as well as for the political and economic control of the region, its location on the mountain, in proximity to

caves and rushing streams, had mythological implications. In that way, [Palenque](#) was the centre of reproduction of the four cardinal points of the universe and a central axis that unified the cosmic levels of the sky, the earth, and the underworld. It is for this reason that the ancient inhabitants of the city personified and deified the surrounding landscape, conceptually relating these natural elements with the dwelling place of the gods, the ancestors, and supernatural beings.

Communication between the earth and the cosmos was materialised through rituals, which often alluded to [Palenque](#)'s three patron gods: the sky god (GI), K'awiil (GIi), and K'inich Ajaw Pakal (GIi). According to Maya myths, these three gods were the direct forebears of [Palenque](#)'s rulers, who were conceived by the first mother and the first father after the creation of the world in 2360 BC. The birth of the deity triad has been tied to a mythical place known as Matawil, the place where the [Palenque](#) gods came to earth for the first time. As for the origins of [Palenque](#), it has been pointed out that the place name Toktan is mentioned on inscriptions, but its physical location remains a mystery.

## NEIGHBOURING CITIES

Occupation at [Palenque](#) began in the Late Preclassic and before it rose to become the most powerful settlement in the region, it was contemporary with other sites in the Sierra Norte, such as Chinikiha, El Lacandon, Nututun, Miraflores, and El Retiro. In the Early Classic, [Palenque](#) spearheaded a process of centralisation, which attracted a considerable portion of the region's population. At the start of the Late Classic period, [Palenque](#) became part of supra-regional dynamic by establishing diplomatic ties with other kingdoms, such as that of [Copan](#) and [Tikal](#), with whom it remained on amicable terms. However, it entered in conflict with other political entities such as [Tonina](#), [Pomona](#), and Piedras Negras, as disputes arose over control of the lower Usumacinta River, until [Palenque](#) suffered its first defeat in battle to [Calakmul](#) in AD 579.

From AD 600 to 850 [Palenque](#) achieved its maximum splendour, reflected in a network of communication and trade with settlements within its kingdom and beyond. This remarkable growth has been attributed to K'inich Janahb' Pakal II, the city's greatest ruler. During his reign (AD 615-683), trade blossomed, construction proliferated, and many sites were incorporated into the city's political territorial sphere of influence.

In the Late Classic period, the centralised system that had prevailed until that time began to fail. However, [Palenque](#)'s supremacy as the preeminent and most influential civic-ceremonial centre in the region did not diminish, instead patterns of territorial occupation underwent a transformation. In the central and eastern areas together with the lands that sustained [Palenque](#), a process of population dispersal took place. The small number of civic-ceremonial centres in the region in the Early Classic and the first half of the Late Classic witnessed the establishment of new settlements, as well as the delimitation of the kingdom's boundaries in the vicinity of Chinikiha, toward-the east. However, this process of dispersion did not occur on the same timeline in other areas. In the west, recent research indicates that the region of Saito de Agua, covering the region between Santa Isabel and the Tulija River, was inhabited throughout the occupational sequence by scattered groups; the area served as a buffer zone and demarcated the border of the political-territorial entity headed by Tortuguero, [Palenque](#)'s rival and enemy in the struggle to control the lower Tulija Valley and the Grijalva River. Some sites allied with [Palenque](#) in the west included Ampliación Cerro Norte, Miraflores, El Retiro, Las Colmenas, Castulo Perez, El Michol, Santa Rita, and San Miguel; in fact, San Miguel controlled the junction of the Michol and Tulija rivers and served as a gateway affording [Palenque](#) access to the river to and from the west. Different settlement patterns in the interior of the region suggest that the B'aakal kingdom did not serve as a homogeneous political entity and that the regional capital, I.akarnha; maintained flexible, dynamic, and personalised political relations that had an impact on the heterogeneous nature of the territory under its control.

## FINAL COMMENTS

This brief overview of the site's and region's history offers a glimpse of the grandeur of one of the most prominent Classic period civic-religious centres in the northwest Maya lowlands. Bolstered by the surrounding ecological wealth, the first inhabitants founded the ruling dynasty, developed subsistence systems in the midst of the rainforest and aquatic environment, and created and sustained a complex worldview that focused on the origin of their rulers. At the time of its culmination, [Palenque](#) was the centre that attracted and concentrated the population in the heart of the ancient city; however, with time, major alliances were formed with various groups spread out between-the Usumacinta and Tullja rivers in order to establish new settlements and to create buffer and border zones and alliances that ensured the survival of the capital of the B'aakal kingdom. Sometime around AD 900, Lakamha'was abandoned for reasons not fully-known and the kingdom crumbled; its inhabitants apparently migrated to other lands and surely established settlements in the Terminal Classic and Postclassic. Today [Palenque](#) continues to be a wondrous site, each year attracting thousands of visitors from Mexico and abroad. A number of the exquisite works created by the courtly artists have travelled the world to continue a tradition that seems to have no end in sight. Without a doubt, [Palenque](#) today offers an eternal portal with the pre-Hispanic past, a device for the unification of Mexican identity, and a place where everyone can delight in the cultural heritage of all humanity.

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