Magnificent Mayan Queens

Native Women of Power and Vision
Maya Preclassic to Late Classic Periods

Leonide Martin
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Leonide Martin
Maya Visions
Lenniem07@yahoo.com
www.mistsofpalenque.com

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She stood on the highest platform of the stepped pyramid, heart beating rapidly. Steep narrow stairs ascended from the plaza floor over a hundred feet below. She had climbed slowly, placing her feet sideways on the short steps, balancing a soaring headdress of waving macaw and quetzal feathers with jangling jade beads, careful to keep balance. Golden rays of the setting sun sliced across the plaza to frame her in dazzling halos; silence fell over the jungle as drumbeats resounded throughout the stone complex of her city. Did her heart race from the effort, or the thrill of her first ceremony as ruler?

Thousands of her people gathered at the base of the pyramid, filling the wide plaza. Trumpeters held long wooden horns resting on
platforms of adjacent pyramids; they blasted deep-throated tones announcing the ritual was to begin. Smoke from a myriad of incense burners set along pyramid steps spiraled upward in the still, heavy air. The pungent woody scent of copal incense filled her nose, making her feel light-headed. No time for weakness: she steadied her body and set her intention.

All eyes were fixed upon her. From behind, she sensed the penetrating gazes of the priesthood and elite nobles, waiting, wondering. She was the first woman to become ruler of her city. She was young and untried. This was her moment—to excel or to fail. As the drumming and trumpets ceased, she suddenly raised both arms into the air and, in a clear strong voice, chanted the ruler's covenant with the people:

"Listen! Real people, Forest people. 
Yeja! Halich Winik, Ke'che Winik.

So say my words, before Sky, before Earth. 
Kacha k'u ri nu tzij, chuwach Kaj, chuwach Ulew.

May Sky and Earth be with you. 
Kajulew chik'ojek ukt ta.

Now you are under the power of my weapon, under the power of my shield.
Ta mi xatzaq k'ut chupam ral nu ch'ab', chupam ral nu pakal'.

And my strength sanctifies you." 
Ruk'nu kowil tzik-ta.
These words could have been spoken by Yohl Ik’nal, the first Mayan woman clearly documented to have ruled in her own right. She ascended to the throne of Palenque (Lakam Ha) in 583 CE at the age of about thirty-three. She ruled successfully for over twenty years, bringing peace and prosperity to her city and region. The subsequent ruling lineage of Palenque descended through Yohl Ik’nal, who was grandmother of the famous Mayan king, K’inich Janaab Pakal who brought their city to heights of creativity and power. The discovery of his rich burial deep inside the Temple of the Inscriptions, in a huge elaborately carved sarcophagus, replete with jade and precious stones and filled with tomb offerings, has been compared to King Tut of Egypt.

The importance of women in Maya society is being highlighted by ongoing archaeological discoveries. Excavations have recorded nearly two dozen tombs of royal women, and advances in deciphering the complex Maya hieroglyphs show their diverse roles. In particular, women of the royal courts played significant roles by solidifying alliances between kingdoms through marriages. Mayan queens were often ambassadors for their kingdoms, and acted as trusted advisors to rulers, both their husbands and sons. A number of royal women became rulers of kingdoms in their own right. Some became warrior queens, depicted in full battle dress standing on top of bound captives, a typical portrayal used for warrior kings.

These women of power and vision shaped the destinies of their people. The idea of queens in the Americas may be startling, but indeed in the most advanced civilizations of the Western Hemisphere, native women attained the highest positions of their societies.

The Mayan civilization was America’s most accomplished ancient culture, attested by their scientific knowledge, understanding of
calendars, and monumental building skills. The Mayas had a number of women rulers, called *K’uhul Ixik* (Holy Lady). Several ruled independently, others ruled for young sons or after their husbands died. Royal succession was not patrilineal among the Mayas, though they preferred descent through the male side. Several dynasties were disrupted when royal women ascended to thrones, setting up a new ruling lineage.

The most important factor in rulership was purity of lineage, tracing back to the founder of the dynasty. At times this meant a ruler's daughter was the choice for succession, as with England's Queen Elizabeth II who assumed the throne to continue the Windsor dynasty, after her father King George V died without male heirs. These queens' husbands were royal consorts, but not actual rulers.

Women had respected roles in Maya society, many with visionary or prophetic powers. They were skilled artisans, respected counselors, priestesses and healers, keepers of the hearth, and elite women performed important rituals.

Following a largely chronological time line, the history of these Magnificent Mayan Queens is described here, based on current information from research and archaeological discoveries.

**Appearance of a Mayan Queen**

What Mayanists have learned during nearly 200 years studying this culture comes mostly from carvings and paintings found on monuments and buildings. Another good source includes ceramics and incised artifacts, often placed beside their owners at burial. The written record is sparse; only four books called codices have survived out of untold thousands. The Maya scribes used wooden or quill pens to draw the intricate glyphs and figures that comprise their written
language. With plant and animal pigments, the scribes wrote in bark-paper accordion fold codices. The exotic drawings and otherworldly characters inscribed in codices were believed by early Spanish friars to portray aspects of the Devil. The Spaniards set upon a mission to collect and destroy all Maya books they could find. Precious codices holding millennia of wisdom, science, and spirituality were burned ruthlessly along with figurines and effigies of great religious importance to the Mayas.

Much of what was learned about Mayan queens came from study of monuments, called stelae that were carved with figures and hieroglyphs. These "standing stones" often were eight or nine feet tall and might have carvings on several sides. For years the meanings of figures and glyphs eluded Mayanists, until the code was broken in the 1980s. Now about 85% of Mayan writing can be interpreted.

Stelae and lintels, panels and frescoes revealed that these imposing figures were Mayan rulers and their wives and heirs. The message in the glyphs extolled the victories and accomplishments of these rulers, or traced their ancestry to proclaim their legitimate inheritance. At first Mayanists thought all the figures were male,
because Mayan gender cannot be distinguished by facial characteristics. The costume worn by rulers did not at once reveal a masculine or feminine style; it was "transgendered" in that the costume contained elements associated with both the male Maize God and female Moon Goddess.

This costume was an ambiguous ceremonial garment—a beaded net skirt along with an elaborate feathered and decorated headdress. The figure held symbols of power or rulership, such as an axe and shield, or effigy of lineage Gods. Most figures stood in frontal pose, feet spread, with face turned to profile.

Mayan king (left) and queen (right) in typical pose. Stelae from Yaxchilan and Waka'
Gradually researchers identified subtle differences between males and females, especially after they could better read the hieroglyphs. The beaded net skirt on men was shorter and closer fitting to emphasize the male form. The skirt of women was longer, falling below the knee and camouflaging the female figure. Males often had bare chests under their heavy neck collars and belts with symbolic decorations. Women's chests were covered, often by a beaded net cape and neck collars. Both wore headdresses full of symbols.

While women held important positions in Maya society from the start, there is recent evidence of a dramatic shift in roles of royal women in the central lowlands at the beginning of the 7th Century. Matrilineal descent appears to have become more important at that time, denoting change in complex kinship and inheritance systems.

**Early Queens and Dynastic Overturn at Tikal**

Tikal was one of the largest, most important Mayan cities in the central lowlands of Guatemala. Mayas settled there around 900 BCE and built the site of Tikal in the early first century CE. There are over 3,000 buildings in the city central area; the highest pyramid is 230 ft. tall (Temple IV). Though located in a rain forest with rich soil and surrounded by swamps, it had no source of ground water and had to build 10 reservoirs. Intensive farming using sophisticated techniques supported a population of 120,000. Tikal flourished between 200-850 CE and was the dominant city in its region for generations.
A curious event happened in 378 CE that puzzled archaeologists for years. They found evidence of a presence from central Mexico, the vast empire of Teotihuacan. Building styles and warfare techniques changed to reflect Teotihuacan influences. Apparently there was a change of dynasty after what became termed the "Entrada." Mayan queens played a key role in this shift of power.

An enigmatic queen named Une Bahlam appears on Tikal Stela 31. She did a katun-ending ceremony in 317 CE. To perform this 20-year cycle calendar ritual, she had to be someone of highest position. And, she is mentioned alone on the stela; no male name appears, though the stone monument is quite damaged. The ruler after her acceded in 320 CE and was from a different Tikal family. This suggests that her family was overthrown, though there is no direct evidence.

Une Bahlam's name with the title of ruler was found on a ceramic shard in a Tikal residential complex connected with Teotihuacan. It is possible that this queen escaped to find refuge at the central Mexico empire based on some events that happened about 60 years later. In 378 CE a Teotihuacan warrior named Siyah K'ak "arrived" at Tikal, after the "Entrada." This empire's forces gathered at Waka' near Tikal, and from there staged an invasion in which the Tikal dynasty was overthrown. The son of Spearthrower Owl, ruler of Teotihuacan, was put on the throne and married the daughter of deposed Tikal ruler Ch'ak Toh Ich'aak I. This event was commemorated 128 years later when Tikal king Siyah Chan K'awiil carved a monument naming Une Bahlam and Spearthrower Owl as his ancestors.

One theory proposes that Une Bahlam's daughter or granddaughter married into the ruling family of Teotihuacan, and engineered the 378 invasion to set her great-grandson, the rightful heir in her view, back on the throne of Tikal.
Lady of Tikal was another Tikal queen who was co-ruler with Kaloomte' Bahlam. She is thought the daughter of Tikal's 18th ruler, Chak Toh Ich'aak II, and became queen at age 6. She did not rule in her own right, and Kaloomte' Bahlam, possibly from Teotihuacan, was regent and later her consort. They ruled for 16 years (511-517 CE). Though her name has not been clearly deciphered, it resembles that of a Tikal patron goddess and has been translated as Ix K’inch (right).

The Queens of Palenque

The first Mayan queen clearly documented to have ruled in her own right was Yohl Ik'nal of Palenque. This famous Maya site located in Chiapas, Mexico sits on a narrow ridge of the Sierra Madre mountains overlooking wide plains that stretch to the Gulf of Mexico. It was the dominant city of its region from 250-900 CE, with a population of 20,000. Now a major tourist destination, Palenque holds magnificent pyramids, temples, palaces, and residential complexes with a unique, airy and harmonious building style. Considered to have the finest of Maya architecture, sculptures, roofcombs and bas-relief carvings, Palenque's style is elegant with cursive glyphs and realistic portraits.

It is known for engineering marvels: aqueducts, underground water channels, indoor toilets, fountains, bridges. Set in a tropical rain forest, crossed by several small rivers that flow into major waterways across the plains, Palenque's surroundings are dramatic and picturesque with waterfalls, cascades, caves, abundant lush foliage, and multitudes of forest animals and birds.
In 1952 the first burial of a king inside a pyramid was discovered in Palenque. The tomb of K'inich Janaab Pakal riveted the archaeological world; the magnificent sarcophagus with exuberantly carved lid and sides was fitted snugly into an underground crypt whose walls were populated by ancestors and Gods. Many other royal burials inside pyramids and temples have been found in other locales since this landmark discovery.

Palenque was brought to the world's attention much earlier by American author John Lloyd Stephens and British artist Frederick Catherwood in their travel books, *Incidents of Travel*. The first volume published in 1841 included Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan. Catherwood's exacting measurements and mesmerizing drawings were among the first accurate reproductions of Maya architecture and sculpture.
Yohl Ik'nal was the first Mayan queen clearly documented to have ruled in her own right. She acceded in 583 CE and ruled for 22 years. Her accession was a break from tradition, as previous rulers had all been males, usually in direct descent. Her father Kan Bahlam had no male heirs, and rather than letting rulership transfer to another family of royal blood, he managed to convince nobles to accept his daughter to continue his dynasty. She married and had two children, but her husband was a royal consort and never became a ruler (denoted by the term K’uhul Ahau). There is a parallel situation with Queen Elizabeth II of England, who inherited the crown from her father. Her husband is a royal consort, not a king.

This first women ruler had to prove herself to the ambitious and contentious nobles of her city, and must have been quite formidable. She led her city through an enemy attack and was able to repel the invaders. Perhaps she had visionary powers, as Maya rulers were trained in shamanic techniques and entered trance states to communicate with deities and ancestors. During her reign, the city expanded as she had many complexes built. She created a time of peace and prosperity, and was highly honored in subsequent generations. She was the grandmother of famous ruler Pakal, and he acknowledged her as an important ancestor by carving her image on the side of his sarcophagus (right).

Sak K’uk was the second woman ruler at Palenque, the daughter of Yohl Ik’nal. Her brother acceded before her but apparently was a weak leader. During his reign Palenque was attacked by their arch-enemy Kalakmul and dealt a devastating blow; both he and their father were killed. Sak K'uk is surrounded by controversy; some
experts believe she was never an actual ruler, and may have been confused with another ruler called Muwaan Mat.

The attack destroyed Palenque's most sacred shrine, which held their portal to the Gods. Temples were defaced and crops burned; the city was in dire straits without leadership. Although Sak K'uk was married to a Palenque noble, apparently he did not become ruler. Sak K'uk assumed the throne during these turbulent times, and ruled for three years (612-615 CE) until her son Pakal reached age twelve. He acceded in 615 CE, but certainly she acted as regent and advisor for several more years.

The circumstances in which Sak K'uk became ruler are unclear, especially the confounding of her name with Muwaan Mat, the Primordial Mother Goddess and mother of the Palenque Triad patron Gods. It has been suggested that Sak K'uk assumed the mantle of the Goddess to legitimize her rule. Since the shrine had been destroyed and it was not possible for rulers to fulfill obligations to the Gods properly, Muwaan Mat undertook these responsibilities in the Upperworld, while Sak K'uk acted as her representative in the Middleworld, carrying out parallel rituals. It became the mission of her son Pakal to restore the city's spiritual charter during his reign.
**Tz'aakb'u Ahau** was the queen following Sak K'uk. She was the wife of Pakal, who ruled from 615-683 CE. Tz'aakb'u Ahau was born in a nearby city, probably Tortuguero, with pristine royal bloodlines tracing back to the founder of Palenque. Little is known about her early life; there is some epigraphic and monumental data after her marriage to Pakal in 626 CE. She continued the lineage by bearing three or four sons; two became rulers after Pakal's death.

In 1994 archaeological excavation into a small pyramid adjoining Pakal's immense mortuary pyramid revealed a hidden chamber enclosing a crypt and rich burial. Inside was a skeleton completely permeated with red cinnabar (mercuric oxide), used by Mayas as a preservative for royal interments. Once it was determined the skeleton was female, archaeologists coined a nickname: The Red Queen. For over a decade, experts could not determine which royal woman was buried in the tomb. Candidates included Pakal's grandmother, mother, wife, and daughter-in-law. With advances in technology, strontium isotopes studies of teeth and DNA analysis showed that the woman was not in Pakal's family, leading to the conclusion that she was his wife.

Her name, Tz'aakb'u Ahau, is translated as "Accumulator of Lords" or "Lady of the Succession" and was bestowed after she became queen. Her personal name is not known. She died before Pakal, and it is believed that her image is carved on a pier of the temple atop his burial pyramid (left). Several inscriptions mention her as "from Toktan," the legendary place of origin for the Palenque dynasty.
She died in 672 CE, so they were married for 46 years. During that time Pakal undertook impressive building programs, moving the city's center and creating most of the structures now visible at Palenque. Creativity, science and arts flourished; the city became a magnet and drew visitors from far distances. Dominance over the region was extended, with several battles against Kalakmul and its allies. It is reasonable to assume that Tz'aakb'u Ahau had significant input into these processes. Most intriguing, though, is how she might have assisted Pakal to restore the city's religious charter.

It took 60 years for the religious charter of Palenque to be reconstructed. Muwaan Mat/Sak K'uk had performed a restricted period-end ceremony for the 9th Katun (20-year period) in 612 CE. Pakal did his first ceremony at the end of the 10th Katun (632 CE) in which he started the rebirth process for Gods of Earth and Sky. At the 11th Katun (652 CE) the Sky Gods descended to reseat themselves and receive adornments. Only by the 12th Katun (672 CE) had the process matured so that all the Gods could completely descend, seat themselves, receive proper gifts and adornments. Inscriptions note that Pakal had satisfied the patrons of the time period and was juntun, beloved of the Gods.

The maturing of the *Wakah Chan Te'*'s, Jeweled Sky Tree, was central to this process. This metaphysical tree was the portal for Gods to descend and interact with humans, and had been located in the sacred shrine destroyed by the Kalakmul attack. Pakal's mandate was to resurrect the sacred tree portal, in order to restore the spiritual charter. How does a ruler recreate, resurrect a mystical portal?
Nothing carved in hieroglyphs or portrayed on panels gives information about how Pakal might have done this. Here the writer of historical fiction must draw on knowledge of Maya spirituality with a large dose of imagination. In my story, Tz'aakb'u Ahau played a key role, using sexual alchemy with Pakal to harness the power of creative life force. In their ritual joining they used this sexual alchemy to "conceive and give birth" to the sacred tree.

**K'inuuw Mat** was the daughter-in-law of Pakal, a royal woman from another city in the Palenque polity. She married Pakal's youngest son Tiwol Chan Mat, who died at age 33 and never ascended the throne. After Pakal's death, his oldest son Kan Bahlam II became ruler for 18 years, followed by the second son Kan Joy Chitam II on the throne for 19 years. Neither of these rulers had surviving sons, so succession passed to Pakal's grandson by the youngest son and K'inuuw Mat: Ahkal Mo' Nab III ascended in 721 CE at the age of forty-three.
Very little is known about K'inuuw Mat. She is depicted on a tablet from Temple XIX seated beside her son, offering him an icon symbolizing royal lineage. On the other side the ruler's father Tiwol Chan Mat holds up the drum-major hat of rulership. Both parents of the ruler were deceased, but typical of Palenque panels that emphasized dynastic descent, they appear as youthful people. K'inuuw Mat's name glyph appears on the inscribed hieroglyphs.

Writing her story as the fourth queen in my *Mists of Palenque* series was challenging due the dearth of information. Since considerable data about the lives of Kan Bahlam and Kan Joy Chitam exist, it was useful to draw from these records for material. In my story, K'inuuw Mat had an intense relationship with Kan Bahlam and collaborated with him in his creative efforts developing complex new calendars, an elite code language (Zuyua), and conceptualizing the striking archaeological complex he built called The Cross Group. This group of three pyramids facing across a plaza embodies Mayan cosmological beliefs and contains hieroglyphic panels recording their creation mythology.

**The Earliest Warrior Queens**

The earliest example of a warrior queen found so far dates to 623 CE at Coba, Quintana Roo, Mexico. This expansive city has the largest network of stone causeways, called *sacbeob*, in the ancient Mayan world. It contains many carved monuments, freestanding *stelae* that record important events and ceremonies during the Late Classic Period (600-900 CE). Coba is close to the Caribbean and is surrounded by two lagoons. The area was occupied by a sizeable agricultural settlement in the 1st Century CE, with a population of 50,000 or more at its height. The city was set up with multiple residential areas of around 15 houses in clusters, connected by elevated sacbeob. Its tallest pyramid is 138 feet high. Coba remained
an important site after its apex, building new temples until at least the 14th century, possibly until the Spanish arrived.

The Macanox group contains four stelae that portray royal women standing above vanquished enemies. The front panel of Stela 4 (left) records the date 623 CE and depicts a warrior queen standing on two kneeling captives. It is the tallest stela in Coba, standing 6 ft. 8 inches, its upper part and sides covered with hieroglyphs. The main figure wears a long, full net skirt that falls below the knees. Although both kings and queens wore skirts falling below the knees at Coba, the women's skirts were always fuller than those of men.

The warrior queen holds a double-headed serpent bar, symbol of command over forces of earth and sky, a typical artifact in ruler's portraits. One named captive kneels near her right foot; she stands on the other two. Captives are bound and wear only a loincloth and simple headband, showing they were stripped of their noble finery. The other stelae in this group are more eroded. Another warrior queen is depicted on Stela 29, located in a different complex. It is badly broken and deteriorated, but enough remains to identify a female ruler standing over two seated captives. Text on the back uses the female prefix Ix with name glyphs suggesting Chan Nal. The stela is not part of a pair, indicating independent rule by this queen.

Five stelae have been found in Coba with warrior queen portraits, dedicated between 623-682 CE. Very little is known about these
queens. On two of these stelae, the male counterpart of the queen appears on the other side; the other three commemorate the reign of only the queen. From the hieroglyphs that can be read, two queen's names appear: Stela 29 and Stela 2 name **Ix Chen Nal** as ruler who celebrated two period endings; Stela 1 represents **Ix K'awiil Ek'** as a remarkable warrior queen.

Not far from Coba, warrior queens were portrayed around the same time at **Kalakmul**, located in southern Campeche, Mexico near the Guatemala border. Kalakmul was one of the largest and most powerful ancient Maya cities, a major power in the Petén Basin. The *Ka'an* or Snake Kingdom oversaw a large domain during most of the Classic Period, governing cities more than 90 miles away. Its chief city Kalakmul had 50,000 population and over 6,750 structures, the largest a pyramid 148 feet high, among the tallest built by the Mayas. The city site was covered with monumental buildings and dense residential complexes, spreading over more than seven miles.

Throughout the Classic Period, Kalakmul and Tikal had an intense rivalry and power shifted between them several times. Each city collected allies from nearby regions and multiple battles were fought involving warriors from several cities. Kalakmul formed alliances by sending royal daughters to marry into local lineages, leaving a legacy of warrior queens.

More than 117 stelae have been found at Kalakmul, making it prolific in producing these monuments. Of these, three stelae depict royal women standing on hapless warriors, placed in highly visible locations within the central plaza. Stela 28 is noteworthy for being well-preserved and containing the earliest portrait of a woman, dedicated in 623 CE, the same period-ending as seen at Coba. Its companion Stela 29 depicts a king standing on a captive. The queen is identified by an Ix name glyph, though her additional name glyphs
are illegible. She wears a long wide net skirt, holds a serpent bar and wears a tall feather headdress. Below her feet a captive lies face down, his naked twisted body holding up the platform on which she stands.

Stela 9 dedicated in 672 CE has an unidentified queen, thought to be either the mother or wife of ruler Yuknoom Yich’aak Kak, depicted on the back. She wears the traditional beaded net skirt with belt of sea motifs. Hieroglyphic text on the back panel use the verb "he/she was captured" and archaeologists believe this refers not to the queen, but to another woman who was captured by the queen. Other glyphs indicate that the captive was a woman. Stela 9 thus depicts the unique occurrence of a queen capturing another high-ranking noblewoman during war.

Stela 116 also dedicated in 672 CE shows a woman wearing a long net skirt standing over a single captive. Her right hand at her side
makes the "scattering" gesture, typical of rulers sowing seeds of prosperity. This queen's name is not known, but she is thought to be the wife of Yuknoom Yich'aak Kak who is portrayed on companion Stela 115.

A very tall stela, standing over 11 feet but quite weathered, shows a queen wearing a long net skirt with a beaded fringe. Stela 23 portrays the queen and Stela 24 shows her husband, ruler Yuknoom Took K'awiil, both standing on bound captives. The front panel shows the date to be 702, but little other information is still legible.

These stela from Cakalmul are compositions depicting both male and female rulers, a common convention at the site between 623-731 CE. Although the royal couple on the first and oldest pair of stelae is unidentified, the succeeding stelae portray well-known rulers of Ka'an polity.
The Spread of Warrior Queens Through the Petén

The Petén district encompasses a large region of relative lowlands in northern Guatemala and southeastern Mexico. By 100 BCE this region already had well-established Maya cities; such Preclassic sites as El Mirador, Nakbé, Naachtun, and San Bartolo. Petén became the heartland of Maya Classic civilization (200-900 CE), home to several million people at its height and one of the most densely populated areas of the world at the time. It had thousands of cities constructed of stone and stucco with tall pyramids, wide plazas, extensive residential complexes, and a network of raised plaster walkways (sacbeob) linking cities through tropical jungles. Extensive agriculture and water management systems were created to sustain the population, until a combination of environmental overuse and climate changes, mostly droughts, caused this great civilization to collapse and abandon their cities.

Both Tikal and Kalakmul, the "superpowers" of the Classic Period, are located in the Petén district. Tikal had ties with Palenque and Copan; Kalakmul spread its web to influence a number of cities. Petén region is in center of map below.
The hieroglyphic inscriptions from a panel thought to be from the site of **Sak Nikte' (La Corona)** record the arrival of three royal women from the Ka'an kingdom of Kalakmul to this small city in the Petén. The first woman arrived in 520 CE, the second in 679 CE, and the last in 721 CE. Imagery on the relief carving shows the earliest and final queens arriving at Sak Nikte' on battle palanquins. **Ix Naah Ek** the first Ka'an queen is on a palanquin formed by a large standing jaguar; the final queen **Ix Ti'** is on one crowned by a watery serpent. Glyphs on the panel identify the woman and refer to their husbands, with parallel parentage statements that name both their fathers and mothers, royal couples from the Ka'an polity.

**Waka' (El Perú)** was a mid-size city located about 37 miles west of Tikal, an ally of this great power for 300 years. It was the site of the Teotihuacan "Entrada" in 378 CE, which led to a change of dynasty in Tikal. In the late 7th Century Waka' switched alliance to Kalakmul. The sister of Yuknoom Yich'aak Kak, ruler of Kalakmul, was sent to Waka' to marry its king K'inich Bahlam, with whom she co-ruled for 20 years (672-692 CE). On Stela 34 this queen, **Ix K'abel** is named as an **Ix Kaloomte'**, the term for Supreme Warrior. She was considered a military ruler of this region, and governed it for her Ka'an/Snake Dynasty family.

Ix K'abel wearing long net skirt and holding shield and axe of warrior. Stela 34, Waka' (El Perú)
The city called **Naranjo** by archaeologists occupied a key position between the powerful kingdoms of Tikal, Caracol, and Kalakmul. Located 31 miles east of Tikal, it was occupied from 500 BCE to 950 CE. Initially allied with Tikal, it came under the influence of Kalakmul in the mid-500s CE. There were several disruptions in dynastic rule; Naranjo suffered attacks by Caracol in 626 CE and was retaken by Kalakmul a few years later. Naranjo defeated Caracol in the 680s and put it in hiatus.

Forty stelae, a lintel and hieroglyphic stairway add to our knowledge of its complex political affairs, triumphs and defeats. Two stelae depict women standing on unfortunate captives. Stela 24 records two important dates: its dedication in 702 CE, and an earlier date in 682 CE when a queen arrived from Dos Pilas to Naranjo. **Ix Wak Chanil Ahau**, daughter of Bahlaj Chan K'awiil of Dos Pilas, "arrived at Naranjo" as a ruling queen and established a new dynasty. The previous two rulers' names are unknown; "arrival" is used by the Mayas to signify overthrow of the seated dynasty.

Ix Wak Chanil Ahau is portrayed on Stela 24 (left) with the typical long beaded net skirt cradling symbols of power, wearing a large plumed headdress featuring war symbols. Beneath her a vanquished enemy cowers, named as a lord from Ucanal. The glyph following her name confirms her eminent status as kaloomte'. She ruled for 59 years, commissioned monuments, performed calendar rituals, and conducted military campaigns. Her son, born after she became queen, was denoted as nominal ruler at age five. No mention is made of his father, which
gives evidence that the local royal patriline was disrupted.

Stela 29 at Naranjo also depicts Ix Wak Chanil Ahau celebrating an ox-tun ending date in 714 CE, fifteen years after she arrived. She is also standing on captives, emphasizing what a powerful ruler she was. She ruled both independently and as co-regent with her son.

At the Late Classic city Naachtun, located about 30 miles southwest of Kalakmul, Stela 18 portrays an unnamed queen standing on a Kalakmul captive. This sizeable city had defensive walls surrounding its main structures, with 47 stelae discovered to date. Only one, Stela 18, portrays a warrior queen as part of a royal pair, her partner being shown on Stela 19. These paired stelae are located at the apex of a long east-west plaza lined with other stelae, denoting the significance of the royal couple. The buildings in this sector of the site were constructed in Central Yucatecan architectural style, suggesting a strong influence from the north during the late 7th and early 8th centuries.

The inscriptions on Stelae 18 and 19 are poorly preserved, although date glyphs are present. Recent examination has proposed dates in the early 8th century, toward the end of Maya high civilization. Stela 18 is a colossal 14.8 feet high with carvings on front and sides, but the back is bare. It appears to be the last stela erected depicting queens and their captives.

**Queens of the River City Citadel**

The striking city Yaxchilan is situated atop steep cliffs rising from the banks of the Usumacinta River, largest waterway in the region. Located in a tight horseshoe curve of the river, the city's high ridges provide excellent defenses. Yaxchilan was the dominant power along the Usumacinta River and overpowered its nearby neighbors,
including Bonampak. It had a long rivalry with Tikal, Palenque, and Piedras Negras, and was an ally of Kalakmul. Impressive structures are spread across the high terrace with temples and palaces bordering a large plaza. Well-preserved sculptured stone lintels set above doorways of main structures, and numerous stelae contain hieroglyphic texts describing the dynastic history of the city. In these monuments, several queens are portrayed in exquisite detail, though only one appears as a warrior queen.

**Ix Ik' Skull** is portrayed on Stela 35, a small but exceptionally well-preserved monument. She was the mother of Yaxchilan's greatest ruler, Yaxun Bahlam (Bird Jaguar IV), and came to the city from Kakalmul around 700 CE. Although a secondary wife of ruler Itzamnaaj Bahlam II (Shield Jaguar II), she was very influential and ruled for ten years (745-752 CE) until her son was old enough to take the throne. During this time a struggle for succession took place, because the ruler's first wife, Ix K'abal Xooc had a son who should have succeeded. Possibly he was captured by Dos Pilas in 745, as there were ongoing conflicts between the cities.
In keeping with the warrior queen tradition of Ka'an dynasty women from Kalakmul, Ik’ Skull is named with the kaloomte’ title in hieroglyphic text on Stela 10. She appears to have carried out her family's ambitions to spread control across the Petén, maneuvering to get her son placed on the Yaxchilan throne instead of the local lineage heir.

**Ix K’abal Xooc** was a prominent and politically powerful woman, primary wife of Yaxchilan ruler Itzamnaaj Bahlam II. It was through her lineage that he ascended to the throne in 681 CE. She belonged to the long-reigning family of local royalty. Apparently the matriline was very important; her sister Ix Pakal was wife of prior ruler Yaxun Bahlam (Bird Jaguar III) and was the mother of her husband, making K’abal Xooc both the wife and aunt of Itzamnaaj Bahlam II.

Portraits of royal women taking part in social, political, and ritual roles abound at Yaxchilan. Several lintels depicting women in blood-letting rituals are considered masterpieces of Maya art. On Lintel 24, K’abal Xooc is shown drawing a rope studded with obsidian shards through her tongue, with droplets of blood falling onto paper strips held in a woven basket. Placed in a censer with copal, the bark paper strips burned and released pungent incense that curled upward, forming the Vision Serpent from whose mouth the head of an ancestor or God appeared to give guidance. This ritual invoked favor of the Gods to bring the king victory in battle. Her
husband holds a torch during the ritual. Lintel 25 shows the results of
the ritual: the dynastic founder emerging from the serpent's mouth
attired as a War God.

Ix K'abal Xooc must have wielded considerable influence on her
husband and the politics of Yaxchilan. She is named in hieroglyphic
texts twice with the title kaloomte' although not portrayed standing
on captives. The text appears on Lintel 24 (681 CE) and Lintel 25 (709
CE) on a series of panels from Structure 23. She survived her husband
by six years and remained a prestigious figure, making it likely that
she had borne at least one male heir. But, no record exists at
Yaxchilan to attest this.

The 10 year lapse between the death of Itzamnaaj Bahlam II and the
accession of his son Yaxun Bahlam IV raises the question of turmoil, a
period called the "Interregnum" by archaeologists. A new king of
Yaxchilan is named on a panel at Piedras Negras, called Yoaat Bahlam
II who supposedly reigned through part of that time, under that city's
tutelage. It is possible that this foe of Yaxchilan achieved dominance
for a while and oversaw seating of this ruler, while the records at
Yaxchilan were expunged to remove any mention of him. Might this
have been the work of Ix K'abal Xooc?

Another exquisite lintel shows **Ix Wak Tun**, second wife of K'abal
Xooc's son, ruler Yaxun Bahlam IV. Lintel 15 is in a nearly pristine
state with traces of red paint remaining on the background
areas. Ix Wak Tun holds blood-letting implements in a basket,
including a stingray spine, rope, and bloodied paper. She gazes
upward in a trance as the Vision Serpent rises from a bowl containing burning papers, fixated on the deity head emerging from the serpent's jaws. Her beautifully embroidered cape shows the wealth of her city.

**Shifting Roles of Mayan Queens**

At the beginning of the 7th Century the roles of royal women in the Petén and other parts of the central lowlands shifted dramatically. Visibility of women in the historic records increased after 623 CE, as new ideas of descent and inheritance spread. Queens were depicted conducting rituals, dedicating stelae, capturing prisoners, and dressed in the typical transgendered costume of rulers that mingles symbols of the Maize God and the Moon Goddess. Queens actually ruled independently, took part in battles, and captured enemies indicating that the role of warrior queens was identical to that of warrior kings.

Whether queens actually donned woven armor and entered battle cannot be determined, although their presence at the battlefield is feasible. Maya kings may have participated minimally in actual fighting, too. However, public imagery of both queens and kings that portrays them as warriors, names them with warrior titles such as kaloomte', and shows them standing triumphantly over captives strongly conveys their authority and sends messages of power and social order. These queen portraits and accompanying text reveal the shifting nature of power relations between the sexes, and demonstrate new power wielded by women during the Late Classic.

Maya experts have linked this newly acquired power to the influence of the Ka'an dynasty which emerged at that time. Researchers think that the Ka'an dynasty moved from the northern to the central lowlands to occupy Kalakmul, residing from 623-736 CE. Ka'an spread
influence and established political alliances, often through marriages of Ka'an royal women with the local dynastic families. The source of the Ka'an approach may be traced to Coba in the northern lowlands, as this city has the earliest portrayals of warrior queens without male counterparts. The timing when warrior queens were depicted on stelae, use of the Ix Kaloomte' title, and appearance of female captives corresponds to the presence of Ka'an at Kalakmul. Researchers suggest that a Yucatecan lineage from Coba moved south and entered royal marriages with other ruling families in Petén. Earlier, other researchers had suggested the Ka'an dynasty emigrated from El Mirador in southern Petén after that great Preclassic city's collapse.

The unprecedented flourishing of royal women enacting martial roles occurred after Ka'an was established at Kalakmul. Prior to 623, any portrayal of queens on public monuments and art was extremely limited. Tikal offers examples of three queens, including one with kaloomte' title, between 439-527 CE. It is doubtful any ruled independently. Palenque provides numerous lovely portrayals of royal women involved in ceremonies and passing rulership symbols to their sons. The first was Ix Yohl Ik'nal who ruled independently from 583-604 CE. However, these panels were carved after her death. K'inich Janaab Pakal and his sons commissioned most of Palenque's monuments and art, starting in the mid-600s and depicting four important queens in the royal lineage.

The changes in royal women's roles after 623 denote a significant shift in women's political power. This could imply a preference for matrilineal descent brought first by Ka'an, and then spread throughout the central lowlands by its allies. When a ruler's mother is clearly identified, usually the identity of the father is either not given, or implied obliquely. This noting of matriline descent, termed "child of mother" in the glyphs, became more evident after Ka'an
women began marrying into other local lineages. At Yaxchilan, Yaxun Bahlam III promoted his matrilineal heritage on a series of monuments; his mother was Ix Ik' Skull of Ka'an polity. This emphasis on the ruler's mother is present in Palenque descent after Kan Bahlam II, who set his daughter Yohl Ik'nal on the throne. Pakal and his sons portray their mothers and wives prominently in public art.

Matrilineal heritage gained increasing importance in public art and monuments among many cities in the central lowlands and Petén from 623 to 761 CE. Prior to this, Maya society emphasized patrilineal descent, although it was not a strict observance. As the Classic Period drew toward a close, there was a reformation in kinship systems with more emphasis on the women. There is little doubt that the way descent is determined affects the gender roles of everyone in the society.

Other tantalizing glimpses of powerful Mayan queens indicate there is more to be discovered about these remarkable women. Many artifacts and monuments were looted and removed from the original sites, so their context in history is lost. Of interest, a panel from La Corona depicts a retrospective account of a queen named Ix Naah Ek' arriving on a battle palanquin in 520 CE at the city Sak Nikte'. This is the earliest recorded event that links a royal woman to warfare. In Piedras Negras, a queen from the site of Namaan, Ix K'atun Ahau gained unprecedented power. Her marriage to the local ruler in 686 CE was called by researchers "the most celebrated in Maya history," and she is portrayed on Stela 3 with her young daughter, apparently the heir. But, this daughter did not succeed after her father's death. Other little-known monuments in museums depict powerful yet still unidentified queens dressed in the Moon Goddess costume. Other monuments lie buried under tropical jungles or below mounds of rubble, waiting to be discovered, to reveal more secrets of the Magnificent Mayan Queens.
Jadeite Mask with Dade Diadem
Tomb of The Red Queen: Tz'aakb'u Ahau of Palenque

The Red Queen: Tz'aakb'u Ahau
Artist's Rendition Book Cover
Resources


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