The Apotheosis of Janaab’ Pakal: Science, History, and Religion at Classic Maya Palenque


Gerardo Aldana might have entitled this book "the Agency of Science at Palenque" in the sense that Maya science or, "astronumerology" as he terms it, was used as a proprietary tool by the ruling elite of Palenque. This is an interesting and complex hypothesis which he explores in great detail and with considerable success, despite problems with clarity and presentation avoidable with better editing, and greater intellectual distance from the source dissertation. His book, he explains "recovers a calendrically based language used in the construction of some of Palenque's most important texts" (xix).

The first section provides background on the standardized orthography of Mayan languages, which Aldana uses. While correct, such use still confuses those who know the old, less phonetic names. Two tables here list the "old" and "new" names of five Maya rulers and thirteen sites, followed by a brief introduction to calendrics, and the transcription of hieroglyphic script in the book.

The introduction opens by dismissing the many scholars who have associated astronomical events with specific dates in the Maya Calendar system known as the Long Count which records the number of days since creation, August 12, 3114 B.C. He argues that since there is not total agreement on the correlation between Christian and Maya calendars such associations are impossible. He does not note that all but a handful of scholars have been in agreement on the correlation for more than four decades, nor that the generally rejected variant correlation differs by only two days. Nevertheless, Aldana has achieved an enviable liberation
in deciding to ignore historic dates. Instead he concentrates on predictable solar, lunar and planetary cycles and their relationship to the Long Count

The first chapter, in presenting historical background for Palenque, considers and criticizes many well-known historical and epigraphic reconstructions presented at the Palenque Round Tables (1974-1993). These were the first and it is appropriate such initial interpretations be challenged. John Teeple who worked out the implications of the Long Count documentation of moon phases, and Floyd Lounsbury, linguist and mathematician, both escape criticism. In the 1970s Lounsbury noted Long Count dates in the Temple of the Cross were separated by synodic periods, “contrived intervals”, that involved multiples of the important numbers 9, 7, 13. (Lounsbury 1978:806,807). Such intervals and the 819 day cycle are the focus of Aldana’s book. He “developed an algorithm that generated the intervals between all pairs of dates in the three tablets in the Temple of the Inscriptions.” Eleven factors (calendric, planetary, lunar, 819 day cycles) were sought in the 7000 intervals generated. Once sifted for historical relevance fourteen pairs of dates contained them (Table 2.2). He contends these were not random (60,61).

Aldana has constructed an intriguing explanation for the invention, deployment and historical associations of the 819 day count. The Long Count dates from the Temple of the Inscriptions, above the Tomb of Pakal, have the earliest known contrived intervals (74). With a complex argument which relies on his controversial reading of glyphs on the eastern tablet (partly illegible), Aldana postulates the astronomerology involved in contrived intervals was created, at least in part, by three named scribes in the court of Pakal (Janaab’ Pakal) and his successor son K’an Bahlam. The purpose was to relegitimize and resanctify Palenque after its disastrous defeat by Calakmul (Kalak’mul) on the day 13 Ahaw 18 Mak 9.8.17.9.0 [11/24/610 A.D.Gregorian in generally accepted correlation].
Aldana names the 819 day count, which involves the four world directions and colors, *K'awiil-nal*, in reference to the four-sided ritual circuit and the emblematic personification of royal blood (109). His “*k’awiilian* astronomy” involves the association of the principal characters in the millennial *Popol Vuh* epic with deities invoked at Palenque, with astronomical bodies, and with Palenque rulers (ch. 6). The esoteric language of Palenque astronumerology he names *Zayuathan* after the secret knowledge of Colonial Maya priests (ch.7). Throughout, much of Aldana’s dense discussion of dynastic history is just as esoteric, intended for Maya initiates spawned by the Palenque Round Table meetings. Aldana ascribes the invention of the 819 day count to Palenque, from its first known written record. However, Robert Hall believes this cycle was a factor of the Epi-Omec Tuxtla Count, recorded on the “Tuxtla Statuette” (Gulf Coast, Mexico) in the second century A.D. (1997: 135, 189,190), and Saburo Sugiyama suggests it was a factor in the measurements of Teotihuacán’s layout, evident at the central point of the four directions at the same early period in Central Mexico.(1993:111).

There are production problems with this handsome compact book. Aldana’s drawings of glyphs seem to have a colored wash which obscures them in black and white. His drawn inscriptions are excerpts that lack identifying coordinates, so are difficult to locate within an inscription. In chapter 1, endnote numbers 13-18 are missing in the text, in chapter 2 endnote numbers 14-19 are misnumbered, and the book has many typos. References in the text and endnotes frequently lack page numbers. Orthographic guidelines are inconsistently followed; Maya names are untranslated and difficult to retain (eg. *Ahkal Mo’ Naab*, *K’an Joy Chitam*).

On the whole, the creative premises of this ambitious, often difficult, book present original interpretations that will be contested by specialists in the history of Palenque and Maya epigraphy while invigorating the study of this crucial site.


Clemency Coggins, Professor of Archaeology and of the History of Art, Boston University, has published on the Maya sites of Tikal, Guatemala, and Chichen Itza and Dzibilchaltun, Mexico; several papers consider the relationship between the Maya and Teotihuacan, and significance of the calendar in ancient Maya worldview.