

Maya Rise and Fall

The Maya: Glory and Ruin



Saga of a civilization in three parts: The rise, the monumental splendor, and the collapse.

By Guy Gugliotta

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The doomed splendor of the Maya unfolded against the backdrop of the rain forests of southern Mexico and Central America. Here, Classic Maya civilization reached improbable heights. To chart a culture whose Preclassic roots reach back 3,000 years, we begin with new evidence suggesting that the arrival of a warlord from central Mexico ushered in an age of magnificence and masterpieces such as the death mask of Palenque's King Pakal. But empires rise only to fall. We conclude with the cascade of catastrophe—natural and man-made—that precipitated the Classic Maya collapse, leaving nature to reclaim the grandeur.

THE RISE

The Kingmaker

The stranger arrived as the dry season began to harden the jungle paths, allowing armies to pass. Flanked by his warriors, he marched into the Maya city of Waka, past temples and markets and across broad plazas. Its citizens must have gaped, impressed not just by the show of force but also by the men's extravagant feathered headdresses, javelins, and mirrored shields—the regalia of a distant imperial city.

Ancient inscriptions give the date as January 8, 378, and the stranger's name as Fire Is Born. He arrived in Waka, in present-day Guatemala, as an envoy from a great power in the highlands of Mexico. In the coming decades, his name would appear on monuments all across the territory of the Maya, the jungle civilization of Mesoamerica. And in his wake, the Maya reached an apogee that lasted five centuries.

The Maya have always been an enigma. Decades ago the glories of their ruined cities and their beautiful but undeciphered script had many researchers imagining a gentle society of priests and scribes. As epigraphers finally learned to read the Maya glyphs, a darker picture emerged, of warring dynasties, court rivalries, and palaces put to the torch. Maya history became a tapestry of precise dates and vividly named personages.

But deep mysteries remained, among them what spurred the Maya's final leap toward greatness. Around the time Fire Is Born's fame was spreading, a wave of change swept the Maya world. What had been a collection of inward-looking city-states expanded their ties with their neighbors and other cultures and reached the heights of artistic achievement that define the Classic Maya period.

New clues, unearthed from overgrown ruins and teased from newly deciphered texts, point to Fire Is Born as a central figure in this transformation. Though fragmentary, the evidence that has emerged over the past decade suggests that this mysterious outsider remade the political leadership of the Maya world. Mixing diplomacy and force, he forged alliances, installed new dynasties, and spread the influence of the distant city-state he represented, the great metropolis of Teotihuacan near present-day Mexico City.

Scholars disagree about the nature of his legacy—whether he ushered in a lasting era of foreign domination or catalyzed homegrown change. It is also possible that the Maya were already destined for greatness, and Fire Is Born just picked a lucky time to visit. But there is no question that his arrival marked a turning point. "I don't know if Fire Is Born invented the new system," says Nikolai Grube of the University of Bonn, "but he was there at the beginning."

Even before Fire is Born, the Maya had risen to unlikely heights in a harsh land. Today, the lowlands of southern Mexico and Guatemala's Petén region yield little beyond bare subsistence to their inhabitants. "A high civilization," says Vanderbilt University Maya scholar Arthur Demarest, "had no business being there."

The setting of ancient Waka, now known as El Perú, is probably much as it was when the first Maya arrived, in perhaps 1000 B.C.—a dense rain forest where scarlet macaws, toucans, and vultures nest in towering tropical hardwoods. Spider monkeys swing from branches and vines, and howler monkeys bellow in the distance. When it rains in the Petén, mosquitoes swarm in such clouds that today's Maya have to drive them away with greasy smoke from torches burning cohune palm nuts. In the dry season, the heat bakes the swampy *bajos*, or bottomlands, the rivers fall, and drought threatens. It is a land of machetes and mud, serpents and sweat, and cats—most notably *balam*, the jaguar, lord of the jungle.

The earliest arrivals probably had no choice—overcrowding elsewhere may have forced them into this forbidding environment. But once there, they mastered its challenges. Settling near rivers, lakes, and swamps, they learned to maximize the thin soil's productivity. They cleared the forest for maize, squash, and other crops by

slashing and burning, much as today's Maya do, then re-enriched the land by alternating crops and letting fields lie fallow.

As populations grew, they adopted more intensive methods of cultivation—composting, terracing, irrigation. They filled in swamps to create fields and carried silt and muck from bottomlands to fertilize enclosed gardens. Artificial ponds yielded fish, and corrals held deer and other game flushed from the forest. The ancient Maya ultimately coaxed enough sustenance from the meager land for several million people, many times more than now live in the region.

Over the centuries, as the Maya learned to prosper in the rain forest, the settlements grew into city-states, and the culture became ever more refined. The Maya built elegant multiroom palaces with vaulted ceilings; their temples rose hundreds of feet toward the heavens. Ceramics, murals, and sculpture displayed their distinctive artistic style, intricate and colorful. Though they used neither the wheel nor metal tools, they developed a complete hieroglyphic writing system and grasped the concept of zero, adopting it for everyday calculations. They also had a 365-day year and were sophisticated enough to make leap-year-like corrections. They regularly observed the stars, predicted solar eclipses, and angled their ceremonial buildings so that they faced sunrise or sunset at particular times of year.

Mediating between the heavens and earth were the Maya kings—the *kuhul ajaw*, or holy lords, who derived their power from the gods. They functioned both as shamans, interpreting religion and ideology, and rulers who led their subjects in peace and war. Demarest and others have described the Maya centers as "theater states" in which the *kuhul ajaw* conducted elaborate public rituals to give metaphysical meaning to movements of the heavens, changes of the calendar, and the royal succession.

Behind the cloak of ritual, the Maya cities acted like states everywhere, making alliances, fighting wars, and trading for goods over territory that ultimately stretched from what is today southern Mexico through the Petén to the Caribbean coast of Honduras. Well-worn trails and stucco-paved causeways crisscrossed the forest, and canoes plied the rivers. But until Fire Is Born arrived, the Maya remained politically fragmented, the city-states charting their own courses in the jungle.

By 378 Waka was a prestigious center, boasting four main plazas, hundreds of buildings, temple mounds up to 300 feet (90 meters) tall, ceremonial palaces clad in painted stucco, and courtyards graced with carved limestone altars and monuments. A trading power, it occupied a strategic location on the San Pedro River, which flowed westward from the heart of the Petén. Its market was filled with Maya foodstuffs such as maize, beans, chilies, and avocados, along with chicle harvested from saponilla trees to make glue, and latex from rubber trees to make balls for ceremonial games. Exotic goods found their way to Waka as well. Jade for sculpture and jewelry and quetzal feathers for costumes came from the mountains to the south, and obsidian for weapons and pyrite for mirrors from the Mexican plateau to the west, the domain of Teotihuacan.

A sprawling metropolis of 100,000 people or more—perhaps the largest city in the world at the time—Teotihuacan left no records that epigraphers have been able to decipher. But its motives in dispatching Fire Is Born to the Maya region seem clear. Waka sat on a promontory overlooking a tributary of the San Pedro with a protected harbor, excellent for berthing large canoes. "It was a perfect staging area" for military

action, notes Southern Methodist University archaeologist David Freidel, co-director of excavations at Waka. Which may be precisely what Fire Is Born had in mind.

Waka appears to have been key to the envoy's mission: to bring the entire central Petén into Teotihuacan's orbit, through persuasion if possible, force if necessary. His principal target was Tikal, a kingdom 50 miles (80 kilometers) east of Waka. Tikal was the most influential city-state in the central Petén. Bring Tikal into the fold, and the other cities would follow.

Fire Is Born's soldiers were probably shock troops, designed principally to display his bona fides and demonstrate good faith. He needed reinforcements, and he had come to Waka to get them. In return, he could offer the goodwill of his patron, a mysterious ruler known from inscriptions as Spear-thrower Owl, probably a highland king, perhaps even the lord of Teotihuacan.

Waka's ruler, Sun-faced Jaguar, apparently welcomed Fire Is Born. Based on hints in texts from Waka and other sources, Freidel, project co-director Héctor Escobedo, and epigrapher Stanley Guenter suggest that the two rulers cemented their alliance by building a fire shrine to house the sacred flame of Teotihuacan.

Along with moral support, Fire Is Born probably secured troops. His expeditionary force likely carried the spear-throwers and javelins typical of Teotihuacan and wore backshields covered with glittery pyrite, perhaps meant to dazzle the enemy when the soldiers spun around to hurl their weapons. Now warriors from the Petén, equipped with stone axes and short stabbing spears, swelled their ranks. As armor, many wore cotton vests stuffed with rock salt. Eleven hundred years later, the Spanish conquistadores shed their own metal armor in the sweltering rain forest in favor of these Maya "flak jackets."

The military expedition most likely set out for Tikal in war canoes, heading east, up the San Pedro River. Reaching the headwaters, the soldiers disembarked and marched either along the river or on the canyon rim overlooking it.

Garrisons probably dotted the route. News of the advancing column must have reached Tikal, and somewhere along the stretch of riverbank and roadway, perhaps at a break in the cliffs about 16 miles (26 kilometers) from the city, Tikal's army tried to stop Fire Is Born's advance. Inscribed slabs, called stelae, later erected at Tikal suggest that the defenders were routed. Fire Is Born's forces continued their march on the city. By January 16, 378—barely a week after his arrival in Waka—the conqueror was in Tikal.

The date is noted on Tikal's now famous Stela 31, which yielded early clues to Fire Is Born's importance when David Stuart of the University of Texas at Austin deciphered it in 2000. The second passage on the stela records what happened after the city fell: Tikal's king, Great Jaguar Paw, died that very day, probably at the hands of the vanquishers.

Fire Is Born appears to have dropped whatever pretense he had assumed as a goodwill ambassador. His forces destroyed most of Tikal's existing monuments—stelae put in place by 14 earlier rulers of Tikal. A new era had begun, and later monuments celebrated the victors. Stela 31, erected long after the conquest, describes Fire Is Born as *Ochkin Kaloomte*, or Lord of the West, probably referring to his origins in Teotihuacan. Some Maya experts have also suggested another meaning:

that Fire Is Born represented a faction that had fled to the west—to Teotihuacan—after a coup d'état by Great Jaguar Paw's father years earlier and had now returned to power.

It apparently took Fire Is Born some time to pacify Tikal and its environs. But a year after his arrival, Tikal's monuments record that he presided over the ascension of a new, foreign king. Inscriptions identify him as the son of Spear-thrower Owl, Fire Is Born's patron in Teotihuacan. According to Stela 31, the new king was less than 20 years old, so Fire Is Born probably became Tikal's regent. He was certainly the city's *de facto* overlord.

In the years that followed the conquest, Tikal itself went on the offensive, expanding its reach across the Maya region. Fire Is Born appears to have masterminded the campaign, or at least inspired it. References to him have been identified in cities as distant as Palenque, more than 150 miles (240 kilometers) to the northwest. But the most poignant testimony to his empire-building comes from Uaxactún, just 12 miles (19 kilometers) from Tikal. There a mural shows a Maya nobleman giving homage to a warrior in Teotihuacan regalia—perhaps one of Fire Is Born's troops. A stela depicting a similar warrior guards a tomb where archaeologists found the remains of two women, one pregnant, a child, and an infant. Freidel and others have concluded that these were the remains of Uaxactún's royal family, slain by Tikal's forces. The king, presumably, was taken to Tikal and sacrificed there.

Decades after the arrival of Fire Is Born and long after he must have died, the aggressive rulers of Tikal continued to invoke Fire Is Born and his patron state, Teotihuacan. In 426, Tikal took over Copán, 170 miles (274 kilometers) to the south in present-day Honduras, and crowned its own king, Kinich Yax Kuk Mo, who became the founder of a new dynasty. A posthumous portrait shows him wearing a costume typical of central Mexico—a reference to Teotihuacan—and like Fire Is Born, he bore the title Lord of the West.

Some Mayanists believe that Tikal was acting as a vassal state for Teotihuacan, expanding its dominion throughout the Maya lowlands, with Fire Is Born acting as a kind of military governor. Others see him less as a conqueror and more as a catalyst who spurred Tikal to expand its own power and influence.

His fate is a mystery. There is no known record of his death, and no evidence that he ever ruled a Maya kingdom. But his prestige lived on. The Waka stela recording his arrival there wasn't erected until a generation later, indicating that even a long-ago visit from the great Fire Is Born was a matter of civic pride.

The Maya were never the same after him. Later rulers transformed Tikal into what Nikolai Grube, and Simon Martin of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, have described as a Maya superpower. And in both religion and art, the Classic Maya began to embrace foreign motifs and themes, adding sophistication and cosmopolitan exuberance to an already flourishing culture.

Soon another political development fed this cultural flowering. In the sixth century, the *kan* (meaning "snake") lords of Calakmul, a city just north of the Petén, began their own expansion. In time Calakmul came to challenge Tikal, and the rivalry split the Maya world. Like the 20th century Cold War, this contest spurred heights of achievement even as it sowed tension and strife. But unlike our own, the Maya Cold War ended in catastrophe.

THE COLLAPSE

Fatal Rivalries

One day in the year 800, the peaceful Maya city of Cancuen reaped the whirlwind. King Kan Maax must have known that trouble was coming, for he had tried to build makeshift breastworks at the approaches to his 200-room palace. He didn't finish in time.

The attackers quickly overran the outskirts of the city and streamed into Cancuen's ritual heart. The speed of the attack is obvious even today. Unfinished construction projects lay in tumbled heaps. Half-carved stone monuments littered the pathways. Pots and bowls were strewn about the palace kitchen.

The invaders took 31 hostages. The jewels and ornaments found with their remains marked them as nobles, perhaps members of Kan Maax's extended family or royal guests from stricken cities elsewhere. The captives included women and children; two of the women were pregnant.

All were led to the ceremonial courtyard of the palace and systematically executed. The killers wielded spears and axes, impaling or decapitating their victims. They laid the corpses in the palace's cistern. Roughly 30 feet (nine meters) long and 10 feet (three meters) deep, it was lined with red stucco and fed by an underground spring. The bodies, accompanied by ceremonial garments and precious ornaments, fit easily. Kan Maax and his queen were not spared. They were buried a hundred yards (90 meters) away in two feet (0.6 meters) of construction fill intended for remodeling the palace. The king still wore his elaborate ceremonial headdress and a mother-of-pearl necklace identifying him as Holy Lord of Cancuen.

No one knows who the killers were or what they sought. Booty apparently did not interest them. Some 3,600 pieces of jade, including several jade boulders, were left untouched; household goods in the palace and ceramics in Cancuén's giant kitchen were undisturbed. But to archaeologists who have dug up the evidence over the past several years, the invaders' message is clear. By depositing the bodies in the cistern, "they poisoned the well," says Vanderbilt University archaeologist Arthur Demarest. They also chipped the faces from all the carved likenesses on Cancuén's stone monuments and pushed them over, facedown. "The site," says Demarest, "was ritually killed."

CANCUÉN WAS ONE OF the last major dominoes to fall in the Pasión River Valley, part of the ancient Maya heartland in present-day Guatemala. Many other cities had already met similarly decisive ends, and throughout the southern lowlands of Mesoamerica, what came to be known as the collapse of the Classic Maya was well under way. The civilization that had dominated the region for 500 years was sliding into a prolonged, irrevocable decline.

While warfare obliterated some vibrant city-states, others simply faded. The *kuhul ajaw*, or holy lords, who had celebrated their every deed in murals, sculpture, and architecture, no longer commissioned new works. Public displays of hieroglyphic writing became scarce, and dates in the Long Count calendar system all but disappeared from monuments. Population fell drastically. Nobles abandoned palaces and squatters moved in, lit cook fires in the old throne rooms, and built lean-tos next to crumbling walls. And then even the squatters left, and the jungle reclaimed what remained.

Elsewhere in the Petén lowlands of Guatemala and in southern Mexico, the collapse took longer. Even as Cancuén fell, rulers of the great city-state of Tikal in the northern Petén were building ceremonial structures. But 30 years later Tikal's population began to drop precipitously as well. Its last dated monument was inscribed in 869. By 1000, the Classic Maya had ceased to exist.

The question has fascinated scholars and the public since 19th-century explorers began discovering "lost cities" in the Petén: How could one of the ancient world's great civilizations simply dissolve?

Early speculation centered on sudden catastrophe, perhaps volcanism or an earthquake or a deadly hurricane. Or perhaps it was a mysterious disease, untraceable today—something like the Black Death in medieval Europe or the smallpox that wiped out Native American populations at the dawn of the colonial age. Modern researchers have discarded these one-event theories, however, because the collapse extended over at least 200 years. "There isn't any single factor that everybody agrees on," says Southern Illinois University's Prudence M. Rice.

Scholars have looked instead at combinations of afflictions in different parts of the Maya world, including overpopulation, environmental damage, famine, and drought. "You come away feeling that anything that can go wrong did," says Rice.

They have also focused on the one thing that appears to have happened everywhere during the prolonged decline: As resources grew scarce, the *kuhul ajaw* lost their divine luster, and, with it, the confidence of their subjects, both noble and commoner. Instability and desperation in turn fueled more destructive wars. What had been ritualized contests fought for glory or captives turned into spasms of savagery like the one that obliterated Cancuén. Says Simon Martin of the University of Pennsylvania Museum: "The system broke down and ran out of control."

For more than a millennium, the Maya had entrusted their religious and temporal well-being to their god-kings. These leaders displayed their might and majesty in lavish rituals and pageants, in opulent art and architecture, and in written records of their triumphs, inscribed on stone, murals, and ceramics.

The system prospered—indeed, its excesses created the artistic achievements and learning that defined the Maya as one of the ancient world's great cultures—as long as the land could satisfy people's basic needs. This was easy at first when cities were small and resources relatively plentiful, but over time, growing populations, an expanding nobility, and rivalry between the city-states strained the limits of the environment.

Today the Petén, geographically the largest province in Guatemala, has a population of 367,000, living in isolated towns scattered through a forested wilderness. In the eighth century, by some estimates, ten million people lived in the Maya lowlands. The landscape was an almost unbroken fabric of intensely cultivated farms, gardens, and villages, linked by a web of trails and paved causeways connecting monumental city-states.

Maya farmers were well schooled in sophisticated techniques designed to get maximum production from delicate tropical soils. But beginning in the ninth century, studies of lake-bed sediments show, a series of prolonged droughts struck the Maya world, hitting especially hard in cities like Tikal, which depended on rain both for

drinking water and to reinvigorate the swampland *bajos* where farmers grew their crops. River ports like Cancuén might have escaped water shortages, but across much of the Maya region the lake-bed sediments also show ancient layers of eroded soil, testimony to deforestation and overuse of the land.

When bad times came, there was little the *kuhul ajaw* could do to help their people. Monoculture farming—growing one staple food crop that could be accumulated and stored for hard times or for trade—could not be sustained in the rain forest. Instead, each city-state produced small quantities of many different food items, such as maize, beans, squash, and cacao. There was enough, at least at first, to feed the kingdom, but little left over.

Meanwhile, Maya society was growing dangerously top heavy. Over time, elite polygamy and intermarriage among royal families swelled the ruling class. The lords demanded jade, shells, feathers from the exotic quetzal bird, fancy ceramics, and other expensive ceremonial accoutrements to affirm their status in the Maya cosmos. A king who could not meet the requirements of his relatives risked alienating them.

The traditional rivalry among states only made matters worse. The *kuhul ajaw* strove to outdo their neighbors, building bigger temples and more elegant palaces and staging more elaborate public pageants. All of this required more labor, which required larger populations and, perhaps, more wars to exact tribute in forced labor from fallen enemies. Overtaxed, the Maya political system began to falter.

The greatest rivalry of all helped propel the Classic Maya to their peak—and then tore their world apart. Beginning in the fifth century, the city-state of Tikal, probably bolstered by an alliance with the great Mexican highland state of Teotihuacan, expanded its influence, enlisting allies and vassal states in a swath southward through the Pasién River Valley to Copán in what is now Honduras. A century later a challenger arose: The northern city-state of Calakmul, in what is now the Mexican lowlands of Campeche, forged an alliance of city-states throughout the Petén, north to the Yucatán and east to what is now Belize. The two great alliances faced off in a rivalry that lasted more than 130 years.

This period marked the golden age of Classic Maya civilization. The *kuhul ajaw* were in full flower in these two great alliances, competing in art and monuments as well as in frequent but limited wars. Calakmul defeated Tikal in a major battle in 562 but destroyed neither the city nor its population. Eventually Tikal rebounded and defeated Calakmul, subsequently building many of its most spectacular monuments.

Simon Martin, with Nikolai Grube of the University of Bonn, compares the Tikal-Calakmul rivalry to the superpower struggle of the 20th century, when the U.S. and the Soviet Union competed to outdo each other in fields ranging from weaponry to space travel. With neither side ever able to gain the upper hand, the Cold War arguably brought stability, and so did the standoff in the Maya world. "There was a certain degree of destruction" because of the rivalry, says Guatemalan archaeologist Héctor Escobedo. "But there was also equilibrium."

It did not last. Martin suggests the balance may have been intrinsically unstable, like the competition among the city-states of ancient Greece, or the nervous grappling between North and South in the United States prior to the Civil War. Or perhaps an overstressed environment finally caught up with the proud Maya powers, bringing a

new edge of desperation to their rivalry. Either way, the unraveling began at the small garrison state of Dos Pilas, near the Pasión River downstream of Cancuén.

In 630 Tikal, trying to reassert a presence along Pasión River trade routes increasingly dominated by Calakmul, expanded an existing outpost near two large springs—*pilas*, in Spanish. The site had little else to recommend it. Dos Pilas grew no crops and sold nothing. Scholars call it a "predator state" that depended on tribute from the surrounding countryside. War, for Dos Pilas, was not only a ritual to glorify kings and appease gods. War was what Dos Pilas did to survive.

The kingdom's history of violence and duplicity began when Tikal installed one of its princes, Balaj Chan Kawiil, as Dos Pilas's ruler in 635. The garrison slapped together a fancy-looking capital for the young prince, using carved facades to mask loose and unstable construction fill. But in 658 Calakmul overran Dos Pilas and drove Balaj Chan Kawiil into exile.

We know the next chapter thanks to a thunderstorm that toppled a tree at Dos Pilas six years ago, exposing a carved stairway hidden beneath its roots. Inscriptions on the stairway reveal that Balaj Chan Kawiil returned two years after his exile—but as a Calakmul surrogate. Dos Pilas's turncoat king helped Calakmul cement its control over the Pasión Valley during the next two decades. Then Calakmul delivered fateful news. Its rulers ordered Balaj Chan Kawiil to fight his brother in Tikal itself.

In 679 he attacked his native city. "Mountains of skulls were piled up, and blood flowed," the stairway records. Balaj Chan Kawiil triumphed, and his brother died in the battle. The victory brought Calakmul to apogee and transformed Dos Pilas into the overlord of the Petexbatún, the southwestern part of the Petén.

Tikal survived, rebuilt, and less than 20 years later attacked and defeated Calakmul. Stucco sculpture at Tikal's central acropolis depicts a Calakmul noble awaiting sacrifice. It was a defeat from which Calakmul never fully recovered, but Tikal itself was never the same after the wars finally concluded. "Even though Tikal wins in the end," says the University of Pennsylvania's Robert Sharer, "it's never in shape to control everything."

What happened next is not entirely clear. Calakmul's power was broken, yet its allies, including Dos Pilas, continued to battle Tikal in Calakmul's name. Dos Pilas consolidated its hegemony in the Petexbatún through alliances and war. Its rulers commissioned new monuments and built a second capital.

But in 761 Dos Pilas's luck ran out. Former allies and vassals conquered the city and sent its ruler into exile. Dos Pilas would never be resettled, and with its obliteration the Maya world crossed a divide. Instead of reestablishing order, wars would create greater disorder; instead of one ruler emerging triumphant from a decisive battle, each conflict simply created more pretenders. Victories, instead of inspiring new monuments and temples, were transient and, increasingly, unremarked. Defeats spurred desperate citizens to rip apart their ceremonial buildings, using the stones and fill to build redoubts in hopes of staving off future invaders. Cities no longer rebuilt and rebounded. They simply ceased to exist.

Smaller states tried to assert themselves in the spreading chaos, but none could. Instead, the warring states sought temporary advantage in a land of dwindling resources. The commoners probably hid, fled, or died.

For a time, fleeing nobles could find refuge in Cancuén, a quiet port at the headwaters of the Pasión River. Even as downriver cities sank into chaos during the eighth century, Cancuén prospered by trading luxury items and providing sumptuous lodgings for elite visitors. The architect of this golden age was King Taj Chan Ahk, who came to power in 757 at the age of 15. Cancuén had a long history as a strategic trading post, but Taj Chan Ahk transformed the city into a stunning ceremonial center. Its heart was a 270,000-square-foot (25,000 square meters), three-story royal palace with vaulted ceilings and 11 courtyards, made of solid limestone and elegantly placed on a riverside promontory. It was a perfect stage for a Maya god-king, and Taj Chan Ahk was master of the role, even as it was dying out elsewhere.

There is no evidence that Taj Chan Ahk ever fought a war or even won a battle. Instead he managed to dominate the upper Pasión Valley for nearly 40 years by coaxing advantage through patronage and alliances. An altar monument at Cancuén dated 790 shows him in action, engaged in a ceremonial ball game with an unknown noble, perhaps to celebrate a treaty or a state visit.

Taj Chan Ahk died in 795 and was succeeded by his son Kan Maax, who sought to trump his father by expanding the palace. But pomp and ritual—the old trappings of kingship—could no longer hold the Maya universe together. Within five years the spreading chaos had reached the gates of the city. In one terrible day its glory winked out, another light extinguished in the world of the Classic Maya.

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2007/08/maya-rise-fall/gugliotta-text/01-10>