

**Modern Manipulation of a Maya Monument:
Pakal's Oval Tablet at Palenque**

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In 1786, king Charles III of Spain ordered one of his military officers, Antonio Del Rio, to survey an ancient site, which was then simply referred to as “Casas de Piedras (stone houses)” (Del Rio 1822:1) and is today known as Palenque in the Mexican state Chiapas. One of the monuments that Del Rio studied in the course of his surveying is known today as the Oval Tablet (Figure 1). This tablet is among the most well-known examples of ancient Maya art. Drawings, prints, and photographs of it have been reproduced dozens of times by various scholars over the past two centuries. Most of these depictions were published in books and intended to inform the reader of the tablet itself, as it functioned in ancient times.

The results of Del Rio’s expedition laid the foundation for the scholarly study by Westerners of Maya archaeology and art history. In this paper, I will focus on the first three published drawings of the tablet, created by explorer-archaeologists, such as Del Rio, who visited the site between 1786 and 1833. At this early stage in the history of Maya archaeology, the discipline had not yet been embraced by the academy. As such, formal master and pupil relationships were not present. However, explorer-archaeologists were certainly aware of and learning from their predecessors. I will also discuss how through these first three explorer-archaeologists the tablet was conceptually transformed from a functional piece of furniture within a specific architectural context into an isolated art object devoid of a practical purpose.

The first expedition, led by Antonio Del Rio, commenced in 1786. To assist him on the mission, Del Rio hired Guatemalan draftsman Ricardo Almendáriz to draw the architecture and antiquities at the site. Del Rio noted that when he arrived at Palenque, "the principal building, surrounded by copse wood and trees of large dimensions, in full foliage and closely interwoven, was completely concealed from view" (Del Rio 1822:2). In addition, Del Rio noted that the buildings were structurally damaged and in some cases had collapsed (Del Rio 1822:4). The

largest architectural complex, today known as the Palace, is comprised of multiple structures surrounding a central courtyard.

Despite the damaged condition that Del Rio found the buildings in, he was able to clear the architectural complex of foliage and debris and entered the rooms whose vaults were still standing. An intuitive understanding of the Palace as Del Rio would have seen it can be gathered from 19th century lithographs, by explorers such as Desire Charnay. In the report that Del Rio prepared summarizing his mission, he described the buildings on the east side of the courtyard, one of which contains the Oval Tablet, by stating “they contain nothing worthy of notice, excepting a stone of an elliptical form, embedded in the wall, about a yard above the pavement, the height of which is one yard and a quarter, and the breadth one yard [...] Below the elliptical stone above described, there is a plain rectangular block, more than two yards long by one yard and four inches broad and seven inches thick, placed upon four feet in form of a table, with a figure in bas-relief in the attitude of supporting it” (Del Rio 1822:12-13). This textual description is illustrated by a drawing by Almendáriz showing the tablet and bench as they would have been configured at the time (Figure 2). This functional description of the tablet and table-like bench as an integrated piece of furniture is the extent of the description provided by Del Rio. The specific style and content of the carvings on the backrest seem irrelevant to him.

Besides documenting the architecture and art at Palenque, Del Rio altered Palenque’s landscape by carrying out excavations, and he sent objects from Palenque back to Spain. This is particularly relevant to the discussion of the Oval Tablet, as one of the items that was sent to Spain is the right front leg of the associated bench (Figure 3). He explained his action by stating, “I dispatch, in order that the bas-relief may be the more easily understood, as well as to give a specimen of the progress of the natives in this branch of sculpture, so very prevalent on all

the stones, although displaying no variety of subject or difference either in the quality or style of the execution” (Del Rio 1822:13). The stone slab that formed the seat of the bench was later recovered in fragments, and was published by Heinrich Berlin in 1965 (Schele and Mathews 1979:plate 140). The fact that the slab was not recovered in its entirety suggests that the seat may have been broken into pieces during Del Rio’s process of extracting the carved leg that he sent to Spain. Thus, Del Rio left the bench, which he presumably found standing, in a dilapidated condition.

After Del Rio’s expedition, Palenque was not seriously investigated by Westerners for 18 years, until the new King of Spain, Charles IV, sent Guillermo Dupaix, in 1805, to document additional antiquities. This expedition consisted of multiple trips to several ancient sites, including Xochicalco, Mitla, and Palenque. At Palenque, the artist who accompanied the expedition, Luciano Castañeda, made 48 drawings, one of which shows the Oval Tablet. (Dupaix, et al. 1969; Grube, et al. 2001:410; Parsons and Jay I. Kislak Foundation. 1993:94) (Figure 4).

While it is not known to what degree a formal connection may have existed between Castañeda and Almendáriz, it is clear that Castañeda not only had access to, but copied details from, Almendáriz’s earlier work. The similarity between their sets of published images has been noted by scholars since 1935 (Parsons and Jay I. Kislak Foundation. 1993:84-85). When compared with each other, the images of the Oval Tablet created by Almendáriz and Castañeda appear similar because both artists have framed the image nearly identically; both have included a stucco border around the backrest, and both have included the bench beneath the tablet. While these similarities in and of themselves suggest a connection between the two images, the fact that both Castañeda and Almendáriz included aspects of the bench that were, in fact, never present

proves that Castañeda was copying details from Almendáriz's earlier drawing. For example, in these drawings, both artists include a rectangular panel behind the bench that is divided into five sections containing decorative elements. This panel must have been an attempt by Almendáriz to reconstruct surrounding stucco fragments and paint that, even today, remain on the wall immediately adjacent to where the bench stood. However, careful scrutiny by recent archaeologists has revealed that the fragments are part of a complex scene filling the surrounding wall involving several people and hieroglyphic inscriptions (Robertson 1985:Plate 92) – an arrangement that is much different than the panel drawn by Castañeda and Almendáriz.

Although Castañeda clearly drew on Almendáriz's work, it is not solely a copy. Upon close inspection, it is apparent that Castañeda has interpreted the Oval Tablet on his own, altering many of the details. For example, Castañeda depicts the headdresses using hard angles in contrast to Almendáriz's organic curves. Castañeda also adds a flower garland to the costume of the person on the left and adds a square bead on the bottom of the necklace worn by the person on the right. A stucco border comprised of many volutes surrounds the tablet in both images. This is shown in the earlier drawing by Almendáriz, where the volutes continue their repetition across the top of the tablet. However, Castañeda has not included volutes across the top, opting instead for a scratchy pattern suggesting a damaged surface.

The motivations behind depicting this stucco border in a damaged condition, as Castañeda would have seen it with his own eyes, are made more complicated when the bench is also considered. Dupaix described the bench that Castañeda drew, in the report that he prepared chronicling his expedition, as being “of a rare or ideal composition; it is a table with symmetrical adornments and trimming that surrounds the field of this medallion” (El pedestal que sirve de basa al objeto principal, es de una composicion rarissima o ideal, se vé una cierta mesa con

adornos simétricos y la orla que circunda el Campo del dicho medallion) (Dupaix, et al. 1969:211-212). He then minimized discussing the damaged condition of the bench seat and remaining carved leg with the understatement “the figures repeated in it are worthy of repair” (lo muy reparable son las figuras repetidas en el) (Dupaix, et al. 1969:211-212). This idealized description of the bench must have been in sharp contrast to the sight that Dupaix and Castañeda encountered upon entering the room containing the Oval Tablet. The oval backrest remained on the wall, but the carved seat and remaining legs beneath must have lied in an awkward and possibly broken heap.

Castañeda’s drawing of the tablet is particularly interesting, then, because it illustrates the contradictions that he must have had in his mind while making his drawing. On the top of the drawing, he is committed to showing the tablet as it appeared to his own eyes. He does this by including the stucco border in its eroded condition. However, on the bottom of the drawing he reconstructs a bench that is no longer intact, restoring the combination of backrest and bench to the appearance that it would have had when Almendáriz drew it as well as bringing it closer to the appearance that it would have had in antiquity. To depict the dilapidated bench otherwise would have obscured the specific function of the whole.

Dupaix and Castañeda also emphasized the architectural context and size of the backrest by stating “This medallion [...] is a yard and a half in diameter, carved in relief into the surface of a durable stone and is well conserved. This is inlaid or inserted into the face of the wall of one of the Buildings’ interiors” (Este medallon que sigue, es de una vara y media de Diametro, esculpido de relieve en la superficie de una piedra durisima, y en una buena conservacion, esta incrustado o embutido en la pared del frontispicio de uno de los Edificios interiors) (Dupaix, et

al. 1969:211-212). And, they provided the first iconographic interpretation of the backrest, which reads:

The two people or characters depicted are both sitting females. One offers a gift to the other, and she receives it gratefully. She is in rest on a kind of throne, enlivened by a monstrous animal body armed with two heads whose fields of vision are diametrically opposed, with necklaces of pearls and knots on the necks, finished by insignias; it seems that they wanted to allegorically demonstrate a passage of their fabulous history. The complete nudity of this female represents Nature; she wears a very light and extremely original cap; she has a choker or necklace of pearls or precious stones, with an insignia similar to the [letter] T. of our Alphabet. Her arms are equipped in the same way, unlike the other female, who was a representation of some Goddess of that nation, entirely dressed and decorated, apparently according to custom, seated squatting on the ground [...] Both are [shown] with their mouth and lips open in an actual discussion, and to increase comprehension of the subject, the artifice is illustrated with various hieroglyphic passages. (Free translation by Travis Nygard)

Las dos personas o personajes que se abocan son mugeriles ambas sentadas, la una ofrece un Don a la otra, y esta lo recibe con agradecimiento, se halla en reposo sobre una especie de Trono, avivado por un animal monstruoso de un cuerpo armado de dos Cabezas, con sus miras diametralmente opuestas con ciertos collares de perlas y lazos en los pescuezos, terminados por unas insignias; parece que quisieran demostrar alegoricamente un paso de su historia fabulosa. La entera desnudez de esta muger

imagen de la Naturaleza, lleva una cofia muy liviana y sumamente original, tiene su gargantilla o collar de perlas o pedreria, con una insignia parecida a la T., de nuestro Alfaveto, asi mismo sus brazos son guarnecidos, al contrario de la otra muger, o era representacion de alguna Diosa de aquella Nacion, vestida y aderezada enteramente y segun usanza sentada de cuclillas en el suelo aparente, tiene sus sarcillos, manteleta y faldas, tejidas al modo de redesilla, con unas perlas en los angulos de las mallas terminadas con festones y con su cintura modesta, tampoco carece de Cofia estraña. Ambas son con la boca y labios despegados y en un actual coloquio y para dar mas comprehencion al asunto, el artifice lo Ilustro con varios Trozos geroglificos. (Dupaix, et al. 1969:211-212)

This interpretation of the backrest as depicting one female figure offering a gift to another informed the scholarship of later explorers and archaeologists, including the last one who I will discuss, Jean Frederick Waldeck.

In 1822 the report written by Antonio Del Rio (the first explorer/archaeologist that I discussed) was published in London, translated into English, under the title *Description of the Ruins of an Ancient City*. This publication had been facilitated by an Englishman named McQuay, who apparently had access to the original manuscript in Guatemala (Grube, et al. 2001:410). At the time, Jean Frederick Waldeck, was employed by McQuay as a lithographer. The majority of the lithographs included with this report documenting the Del Rio expedition are initialed by Waldeck, indicating that he was intimately involved with the publication process (Grube, et al. 2001:410-411; Parsons and Jay I. Kislak Foundation. 1993:84-85). However, the lithograph of the Oval Tablet from the Del Rio report is not initialed, and I believe that it was not

done by Waldeck himself . I say this because compared to plates that are initialed by Waldeck, it is clear that the contour line drawing of the Oval Tablet is less detailed and it shows less mastery in depicting anatomy.

Working on this publishing project apparently inspired Waldeck to pursue his own expedition to Palenque. It took 10 years for Waldeck to find funding for this trip, resulting in 1832 with Edward King Viscount Kingsborough funding him to visit many sites in Mexico. The fact that Kingsborough funded the trip is highly significant, as in 1831 (one year before funding Waldeck) he had published the drawings made by Castañeda, in his nine volume encyclopedia *Antiquities of Mexico*. This encyclopedia was accompanied by a text attributing the origin of indigenous cultures in Mexico to a lost tribe of Israel (Kingsborough, et al. 1831). Thus, through the patronship of Kingsborough, Waldeck and Dupaix were clearly part of the same community of inquirers, and Dupaix's expertise would have been passed on to Waldeck before his expedition.

Waldeck visited Palenque between 1832 and 1833. Having received formal training as an artist, he created drawings of his travels, one of which shows the Oval Tablet, an image that was published as a lithograph in 1866 (Brasseur de Bourbourg and Waldeck 1866:Plate 17) (Figure 5). This lithograph is strikingly different than the two previous drawings by Almendáriz and Castañeda, as he has excluded the bench, stucco border, and ground line. Stylistically, Waldeck's lithograph is more similar to the original carving than the drawings by either Almendáriz or Castañeda, probably due to his working methods, including using a grid, as is evident from surviving sketches (Baudez and Waldeck 1993:Figures 11,12,13,14).

Waldeck's work was delayed in publication for 33 years until he collaborated with the priest and historian Brasseur de Bourbourg. Bourbourg described the subject matter of the Oval

Tablet drawing on old-world theories presented in the encyclopedia by Kingsborough and other scholars. Like the description by Dupaix, Bourbourg states that the two figures are female.

However, Bourbourg considers the scene to be royal, rather than mythological:

This beautiful low-relief in stone seems to represent a queen squatted on a rich sofa receiving an offering held by a richly dressed and kneeling woman. The latter is obviously Ethiopian: her origin is undeniably proven by the character of the profile and the still visible black color on the skin. White color is pronounced on the face of the queen. In regards to the diadem, [there is] a grampus behind which a hand holds a tassel. A more curious detail still is the nose ornament repeated on both profiles. (Free translation by Travis Nygard)

Ce beau bas-relief en Pierre semble représenter une reine accroupie sur un riche sofa, et recevant une offrande tenue par une femme richement vêtue et agenouillée. Cette dernière est évidemment éthiopienne: son origine est prouvée d'une manière incontestable par le caractère du profil et par la couleur noire encore visible sur les chairs. La reine, sur le visage de laquelle la couleur blanche est parfaitement accusée. A pour diadème un dauphin derrière lequel une main tient un gland. Un détail plus curieux encore est l'ornement *nesem* répété sur les deux profils. (Brasseur de Bourbourg and Waldeck 1866:VI)

Like the lithograph of the backrest that he was describing, Bourbourg's description makes no reference to the bench. This omission was not because of ignorance about the bench's

presence, which admittedly may have been difficult to reconstruct solely from the objects left on site at Palenque, for they were clearly aware of earlier drawings by both Almandariz and Castaneda. Thus, Waldeck's image of the Oval Tablet with the accompanying text by Bourbourg represents the result of a conceptual transformation. The backrest no longer is viewed as functional furniture, but is seen as an autonomous sculpture.

Cropping the backrest out of context, as Waldeck did, has been the typical way of representing the tablet since that time, with few exceptions (a few of the exceptions include Fuente 1965; Robertson 1985; Stuart, et al. 1977). The tablet has been redrawn (a few of the drawings include Robertson 1985; Schele, et al. 1986), cast in plaster (British Museum. Dept. of Ceramics and Ethnology. and Joyce 1923), and photographed (a few of the photographs include Fuente 1965; Grube, et al. 2001; Robertson 1985; Wauchope 1964), preserving the composition set forth by Waldeck. Today, through the decipherment of the hieroglyphic inscription, archaeologists have determined that the backrest depicts the coronation of one of the most prominent male rulers from Palenque named Pakal. The right half of the backrest shows Pakal sitting with his legs crossed on a two-headed jaguar throne. On the left half of the backrest, Pakal's mother, Sak K'uk', is shown kneeling on the ground and handing the royal headdress of Palenque to her son (Robertson 1985: 28-32). Thus, while our knowledge of the iconography has been corrected, the image that we see remains in the 19th century with Waldeck, who rejected the earlier published works in favor of presenting a decontextualized object.

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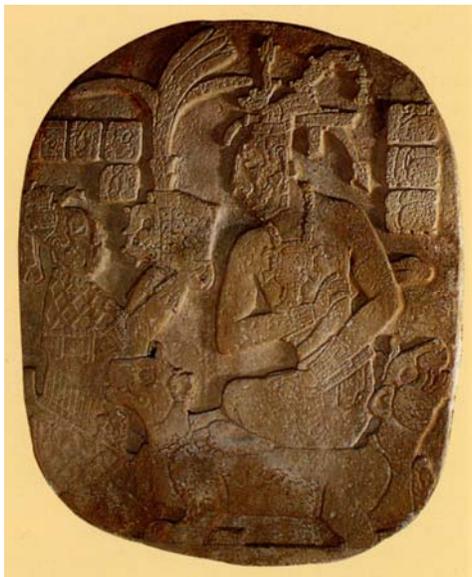


Figure 1. The Oval Tablet. Included in *Maya: Divine Kings of the Rainforest* edited by Nikolai Grube, 2001. Page 96.



Figure 2. Ricardo Almendáriz, Drawing of the Oval Tablet, 1786



Figure 3. Right leg of the bench beneath the Oval Tablet. Now in Museo De America, Madrid.

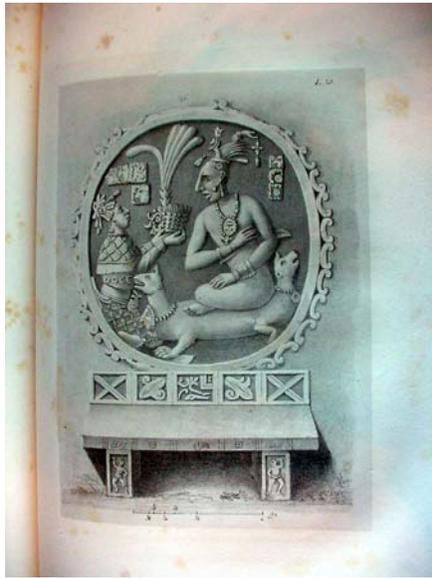


Figure 4. The Oval Tablet by José Luciano Castañada, 1805-1808



Figure 5. Oval Tablet, lithograph after drawing by Jean Frédéric Waldeck, 1866.