

Can Pacal become a man?

Scholarly sources:

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Meet Pacal

Pacal was a seventeen-year-old Maya boy living in the seventh century. His home was in the area that today is Honduras in Central America.

Pacal was considered beautiful by ancient Maya standards because his eyes were crossed. Yet as beautiful as he was, Pacal had a problem.

But we'll get to that in a minute. First, let's look at Pacal's world.



Pacal's world

Pacal was born in the ancient city of Copan. It was a beautiful city of over 20,000 people, with humble thatch homes, grand masonry homes, elaborate temples, public squares, and a great ball court for audience seating.

When Pacal was born, the Maya had their own writing system, a bureaucratic government, and a complex urban infrastructure.



Pacal's parents had tried to have children for many years before he was born. His mother prayed daily to the goddess of childbirth, Ix Chel (right), and even put a stone image of her under her mattress at night.



Finally she gave birth to baby Pacal.
As you can see, he was not born with
crossed eyes.



Pacal's mother wanted her son to be the most beautiful boy in all of Copan. She did what many mothers among the Maya did. When Pacal was a toddler, she tied a little ball to his hair that hung down between his eyes. As Pacal gazed at the ball, his eyes eventually crossed and became fixed in that position.



Pacal grew to be not only beautiful, but very accomplished as well. He was a skilled athlete by the time he was about twelve. In Copan, ball playing was an important sport. By Pacal's fifteenth year, he was asked to join one of the two most important ball teams in the city.



Of course life was not all fun and games. Some days Pacal worked in the fields growing corn with the other young men.



But Pacal was also lucky enough to get an apprenticeship to become a stone mason. In Copan, this was a most important occupation. All adults had to give a certain number of work hours a year to the government. To be involved in creating the beautiful architecture was really valued.

Masonry buildings in Copan had single or multiple doorways and thick walls of sculpted stone to support roofs of mortar or vaults like the one you see in the picture.



With his beautiful crossed eyes, his athletic ability, and great future as a stone mason, Pacal had the attention of many young women of Copan.

While the Maya girls were extremely modest and lowered their eyes around the males, in private they discussed boys all the time—especially Pacal. Many of the young women (and some not so young) hoped they would become his wife.



But this could only happen after Pacal had gone through his rite of passage. A rite of passage was a ceremony that would allow him to pass to the next stage in life—in this case, to become a man.

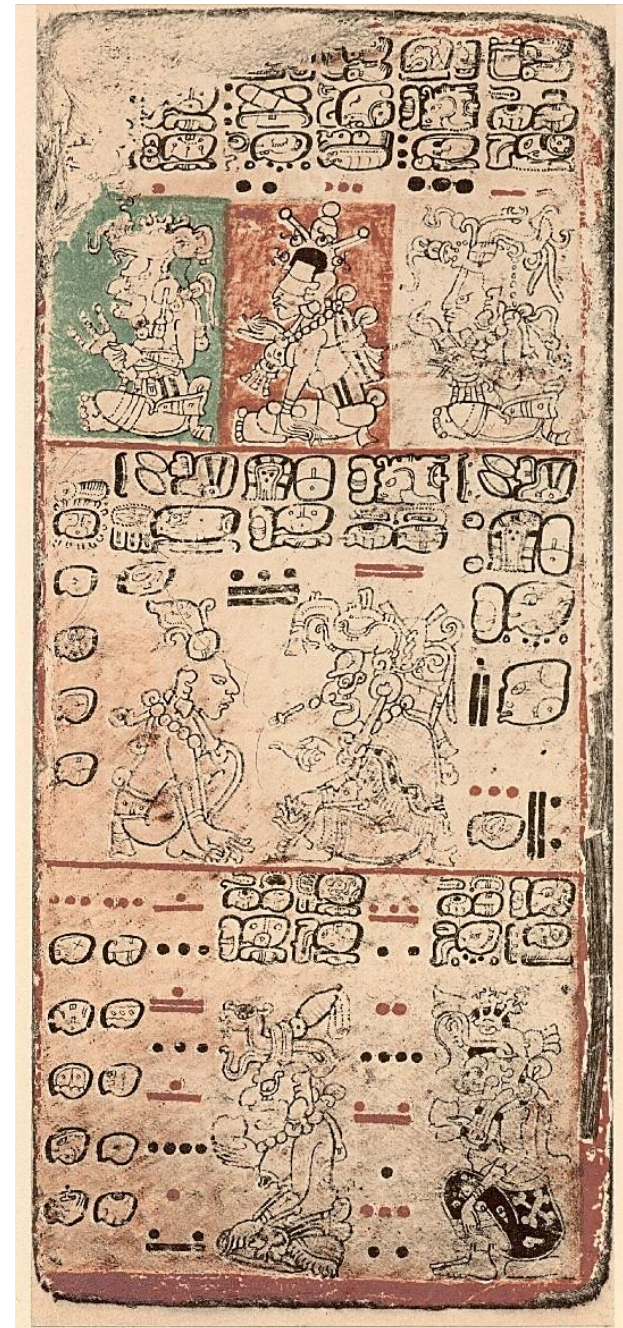
And here is where his problem came in.



Pacal's problem

Every so many years elders and priests in each of Copan's neighborhoods would consult the Maya almanac, which had 260 days. With the help of local shamans, they would select an auspicious day (a day that would be lucky or promising) for the rite of passage.

This time they selected the day after a great ballgame between Copan's two top teams.



The community elders and parents would look at the young people in their neighborhoods and decide which ones seemed ready to become adults. They wanted to make sure that the young people they chose were able to make responsible enough decisions to enter into marriage and parenthood. This included both boys and girls.



Under ordinary circumstances, Pacal would be considered ready for the ceremony. But there had been a problem. See, Pacal had was a bit of a risk taker. He could never ignore a call to adventure.

He had a close buddy named Cocom who was a member of Pacal's ball team. Cocom was nearly as adventurous as his friend. But we'd like to emphasize the word "nearly."



On the day before the great ballgame, the two were out hunting when they discovered a hidden cave.

"Let's go in," exclaimed Pacal.

"You're crazy!" yelled Cocom. "That's an entrance to Xibalba!"



See, the Maya believed the universe was divided into three realms: (a) earth, (b) the sky above with its celestial gods, and (c) Xibalba, the invisible world of underground deities. Caves were supposed to be entrances to Xibalba where the rituals for the dead were conducted.

"Only kings and priests are allowed into the caves," Cocum argued.



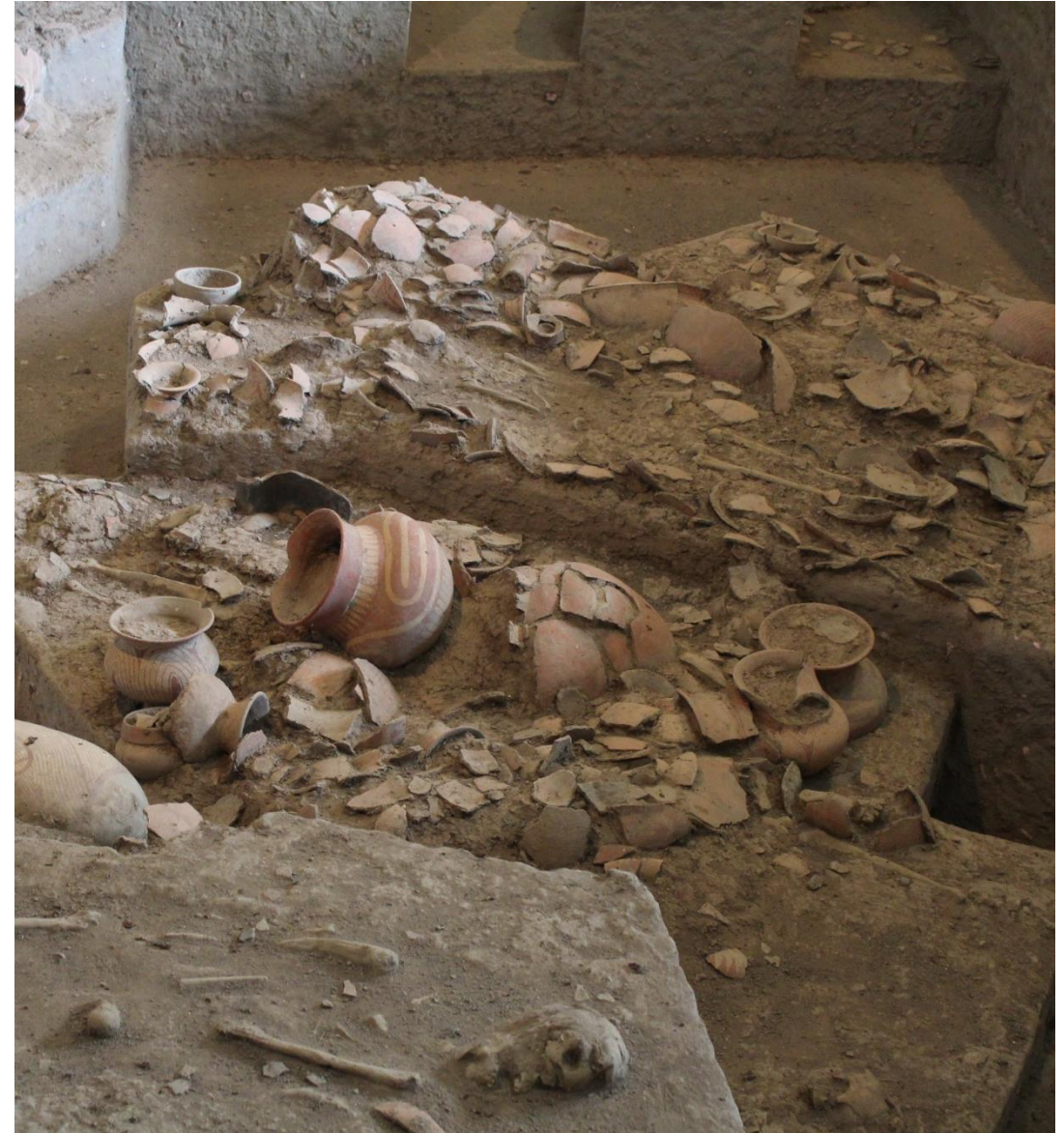
But still Pacal insisted. They walked a little farther. In time they saw pottery jars that were meant for food.

"See!" shrieked Cocom. "This is a tomb. The spirits of the dead walk here."

"Ah," sighed Pacal. "You may be right. We might actually relive the adventure of the Hero Twins and the underground gods."

This was too much for Cocom. He ran out of the tomb and went to report Pacal to the elders.

But Pacal was too intrigued. Like most Maya youth, he'd grown up with the myth of the Hero Twins.



Pacal went over the story of the Twins in his mind, as he wandered further and further into the underworld.

See, the Hero Twins, Hanapu and Xbalauque, were believed by the Maya to be the very first humans. They once had a father who was an underworld ball player, but his head had been cut off by the death gods.



The father's head was put into a tree. One day one of the daughters of the death gods was walking by the tree and the head spit into her hand. It caused her to become pregnant.

She then had to flee the death gods and go to the earthly realm where she gave birth to the Hero Twins.



On earth, the twins grew. One day they discovered their father's old ball game equipment. They began to play ball. They got so good on earth that they were invited to play ball in Xibalba with the lords of the underworld.

Once in Xibalba, they realized that they were going to be sacrificed like their father had been. To try and escape they jumped into a pit of fire.



The death gods ground up their charred bones and tossed them into a river. In the river the twins were reborn and decided to go back to Xibalba to seek revenge. They tricked the death gods. To show off their feats, one twin decapitated the other and brought him back to life. As they'd hoped, the evil death deities wanted them to repeat the feat on them. The twins did, but this time they didn't bring them back from death.

The Hero Twins then returned to the realm of earth. Later they were transformed into the celestial gods of the sun and Venus.



"Ah, to have an adventure like they had," Pacal thought as he continued to explore the tomb. He began to find burial sites with bones.

But what Pacal did not know is that his close friend had returned to Copan and told the elders that Pacal had invaded an underground cave.



The following day, just before the great ballgame was about to start, an elder came to Pacal and told him that his act of going into the underground tomb was so serious that he might not be able to take part in the rite of passage ceremony the next day.

Pacal was utterly shocked. If this was true, it would be many, many years before he could be declared a man. He would not even be able to think about marriage or doing any work meant for an adult. He would remain a child.



Despite this tragedy, Pacal had to concentrate on the game. The crowds were gathered all around the court. The game itself acted out the story of the Hero Twins that Pacal so wanted to imitate.

The ball court was in the center of Copan and was about the size of a football field. Opposing teams had to get the ball to end zones on either side. The ball was a bit larger than today's basketball. This game was played with two teams of four players each. Team members had to pass the ball around without having it touch their hands or feet. They would get a point if they could get the ball to the other team's end zone.



There were also rubber rings at each end zone (see right), but it almost never happened that someone would be able to force a ball through those. This feat had never been accomplished during Pacal's life.

If it ever did happen, the game would end instantly, and that person's team would be declared winner. It would be so important that the audience was allowed to steal the clothing or other belongings of the losing team.



The game was exhausting. It went on for hours and the score always ended up being tied.

Pacal was so tired. Then suddenly, just as he and his teammates were approaching the other team's end zone, the ball came to him. With his elbow, he gave the ball a mighty jolt upwards.

To Pacal's amazement, the ball went right through the ring! The game had been won! The crowds screamed and jumped to their feet. They began looting the opposing team's belongings. No one had ever seen anything like this.

Pacal was a super hero.



That night it was feasting everywhere in Copan. Pacal was carried around on a hammock cart. He was given the best spot at the table and was even served royal chocolate drink from a royal piece of pottery.

But poor Pacal could not rejoice. He could only think about the next day—that he would be denied his rite of passage.



In the crowd of feasters, he spotted the elder who had told him he was not worthy of the ceremony. The elder came to his table and said this.

"Son, you were indeed a great hero today. There are two ways I can look at this. I can say that because you have made the people of this city so happy, I should look at your transgressions of yesterday as a silly mistake of an overly imaginative boy and allow you to partake in the ceremony. Or else I can say that this game is only a game, but what you have done yesterday breaks our sacred traditions and because of this you will be denied your ceremony."

The elder considered the two choices. You should consider the choices too.



What would you say if you were the elder?

1. Would you forgive Pacal for his overly zealous mistake? After all, hadn't he made up for this because of his game heroics?
2. Would you deny Pacal the rite of passage because he broke a sacred tradition?

Discuss this—what are the pros and cons of each choice?

Then, to find out what the elder's decision was, turn the page.

The decision

The elder told Pacal to go to the ceremony the next day and he would leave the decision up to the shaman.

Pacal did as he was told. He went to the ceremony, which was on the purified patio at the elder's home. The ceremony would be conducted by the shaman and four assistant shamans called chacs. The elder, parents, and all the young people were also in attendance.



The chacs put pieces of white cloth on all the children's heads. The shaman said a prayer and gave a bone to the elder that he could use to use to tap each young person on their forehead. The elder did not tap Pacal's forehead. But Pacal knew that it was ultimately up to the shaman to decide his fate.



The shaman had a scepter decorated with rattlesnake rattles. He raised the scepter and began going down the line to anoint the children with sacred water. When he got to Pacal he stopped. But then he raised his arm and anointed him as well.



Pacal was so happy that he could almost feel tears well up in his lovely crossed eyes. He knew he would never try and challenge the Maya sacred rituals again.



The next day the man Pacal woke up and took a walk around his village. He looked at all the lovely young ladies and knew that it would not be long before one of these would become his wife.

He admired all the great artwork of his people.

He was to live a very happy and fulfilled life.

And for one hundred years all the people of Copan would tell the story of the boy who had accomplished the feat of propelling a ball through the rubber ring.



The end
Did you get it right?
Let's talk!!