

Resurrecting

Figurines from a Maya tomb bring a royal funeral to life

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For two weeks we had been tunnelling beneath the surface of the acropolis hill at the ancient Maya city of Waká in Guatemala's Petén rainforest. It was the spring of

2006, and we knew that under the surface of the acropolis was a virtual layer cake of earlier structures. The acropolis had been one of the city's enduring spiritual centers before it was abandoned around A.D. 820. A large pyramid and several buildings still stand there today. We were at the bottom of a shaft we had dug the previous spring, working our way up the stairs of a buried building when we encountered a stone wall. Over five days a team led by Field Director

Michelle Rich removed the wall and cleared away the dirt behind it. Gradually, it became clear that the wall was part of a tomb whose roof had collapsed. Inside were the remains of an unnamed king who had died in the early seventh century A.D., and was buried with an intriguing array of artifacts. The variety of luxury items in the tomb is a testament to the kingdom's wealth—intricately carved and painted bones, miniature mosaics of shell and agate, a carved jade talisman, a serpentine figurine already more than a thousand years old when it was placed in the tomb, mirrors faced with pyrite crystals—but the most intriguing find was a carefully arranged set of 23 ceramic figurines between four and nine inches tall wearing the elaborate costumes of Maya nobility.

Unfortunately, most whole Maya figurines that have been available for study were looted from archaeological sites and therefore provide few clues about when they were made or what ritual function they might have served. This collection gave us our first opportunity to study a royal funeral and ritual of resurrection.

The scene shows members of the royal court standing in a circle performing a ceremony. A portly king, wearing only a loincloth and jewelry, kneels beside a deer spirit who prays over him. This king has his arms crossed over his chest, a typical pose of a penitent or shaman's patient in modern Maya cultures. We think this pose means that the deer is preparing to cure him of the final affliction, death. The king's hair is styled to resemble the Maize God, who resurrects people from death just as maize sprouts from seeds, so we call the deceased ruler the Maize King. The deer and



the Maize King

the dead king are fixed to a ceramic tablet that is painted yellow, the color of maize, with a border in red, the color of the dawn and life. Maya rulers had spirit companions called *way* (pronounced “why”) creatures. These enigmatic creatures seem to have collaborated with kings, perhaps to harm their enemies, but this one seems to serve a peaceful and curative mission. Such spirits were attached to kings and dynasties, and this deer spirit may be the companion of another king who is presiding over the ceremony. The presiding king and his queen stand to the left of the deer spirit and deceased king. In all likelihood, the presiding king was either the successor to the throne of Waká or an important overlord. In this funeral ritual, he and his queen are responsible for the fate of the deceased king and his well-being in the afterlife.

We call the presiding figure the Scribe King because he is wearing an animal headdress that represents his connection to the monkey gods, the patrons of scribes and artists. The monkey gods—a spider monkey and a howler monkey—were the first-born sons of the Maize God and the elder brothers of Hunaphu and Xbalanque, the twin boys who defeated the gods of death and resurrected their father in the Classic period versions of the Maya creation story told in the *Popol Vuh*. The monkey gods were the patrons of scribes and artists, because in Maya mythology they were associated with the creators of the cosmos who were, like scribes, “makers and modelers.”

The Scribe King’s monkey headdress is a spangled turban typical of scribes, artists, and sages. The turban is adorned with a small green mask nestled inside a red seashell held in place by the thumb of a floating hand, which is similar to the way Maya scribes are depicted holding face masks in glyphic texts. In this case, the artist is cradling a red shell that contains a piece of carved jade; together they represent life emerging from the underworld. Specifically, they symbolize the resurrection of maize in the time of creation, and the resurrection of the soul of the dead king in this tomb.

The spirit deer is being conjured by a singer, the seated black figurine in the center of the tableau. Based on its clothing, this figure appears to be female, and she has a bundle of sticks nestled under her left arm. Many Classic Maya scribes were depicted wearing bundles of small sticks in their headdresses. Michael Coe, professor emeritus at Yale University, thinks these might be quill pens. We think they may be sticks used for counting, representing units of five, while small tokens stood for ones, yielding the “bar and dot” symbols of Maya written numerals. The singing figure was filled with hematite paint, which is red, the color of life. She has

Vibrant figurines found in a 1,300-year-old tomb at the city of Waká reveal the ancient Maya ceremonies of burial and resurrection. A figure probably representing the successor king, left, and his queen, right, seemed to preside over the funeral.



the muzzle, round eyes, and ears of a monkey, as well as the long pigtail of a shaman who could conjure spirits.

Next to the singer stands her assistant, a dwarf wearing a deer head as a headdress and holding an effigy conch shell trumpet with which to call the deer from the underworld. Just above the dwarf squats a black toad, a symbol of birth because the Maya word for birth and toad sound similar. Two other dwarves dressed as boxers and wearing special helmets prepare for a fight as part of the funeral. Karl Taube of the University of California, Berkeley, and Marc Zender of Harvard University note that there is evidence that boxing was an ancient Mesoamerican sport often associated with dancing or ballgames. They speculate such matches between two individuals could be symbolic of the contrast of cosmic forces like life and death.

Below, a supernatural deer spirit prays over the figure of the king buried in the tomb. The deer may be the king's spiritual protector. The king's pose—kneeling with his arms crossed—is typical of a person undergoing a shamanic healing ritual.



We still have much to learn by studying the symbolism of these figurines. While there are ritual figurine tableaux from the Maya Late Postclassic period (A.D. 1250–1520) and the Olmec Middle Preclassic (1000–500 B.C.), this is the first one from the Classic period. We have only scenes on decorated vases that show how actual mortuary rituals of resurrection might have been performed. This tableau gives us vivid insights into the way the Maya sang, fought, and prayed their way between this life and the next. ■

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The Scribe King's headdress gets a delicate cleaning from a conservator in Guatemala City. A team led by Lynn Grant at the University of Pennsylvania and lab supervisor Griselda Perez were responsible for reassembling and preserving the 23 figurines.



Left, a falling slab of stone from the tomb's roof crushed 23 figurines that had been arranged to depict a funeral ceremony. Right, the restored figurines are shown in roughly the positions in which they were found.



As a precaution, the archaeologists tunnelled into the tomb from above. Michelle Rich, left, Varina Matute, top, and Jennifer Piehl, right, remove stones that had fallen onto the king's burial platform, and excavate the fragmented artifacts.