

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS IN THE LOWER MOTAGUA VALLEY

Survey and excavations have revealed marked differences between Quirigua and the other major centers in this valley

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The lower Motagua valley, situated in the tropical lowlands of Guatemala between the major Maya site of Quirigua and the Caribbean coast, has long been the focus of intermittent archaeological work. Karl Sapper in the latter part of the 19th century was the first individual to provide any detailed information on the archaeology of this region, reporting on the major site of Las Quebradas and noting the location of several other large centers (Sapper 1895). Subsequent surveys in the valley have been carried out by Gustav Stromsvik, locating the site of Comanche Farm (Stromsvik 1936), Heinrich Berlin, working around Playitas (Berlin 1952) and Timothy Nowak who conducted an extensive reconnaissance over much of the region (Nowak 1973, 1975). As a result of these research programs it was suspected that settlement in the lower Motagua valley was complex and varied in its configurations, though little detailed data on the appearance or period of occupation of any one site was available to clarify or support this suspicion.

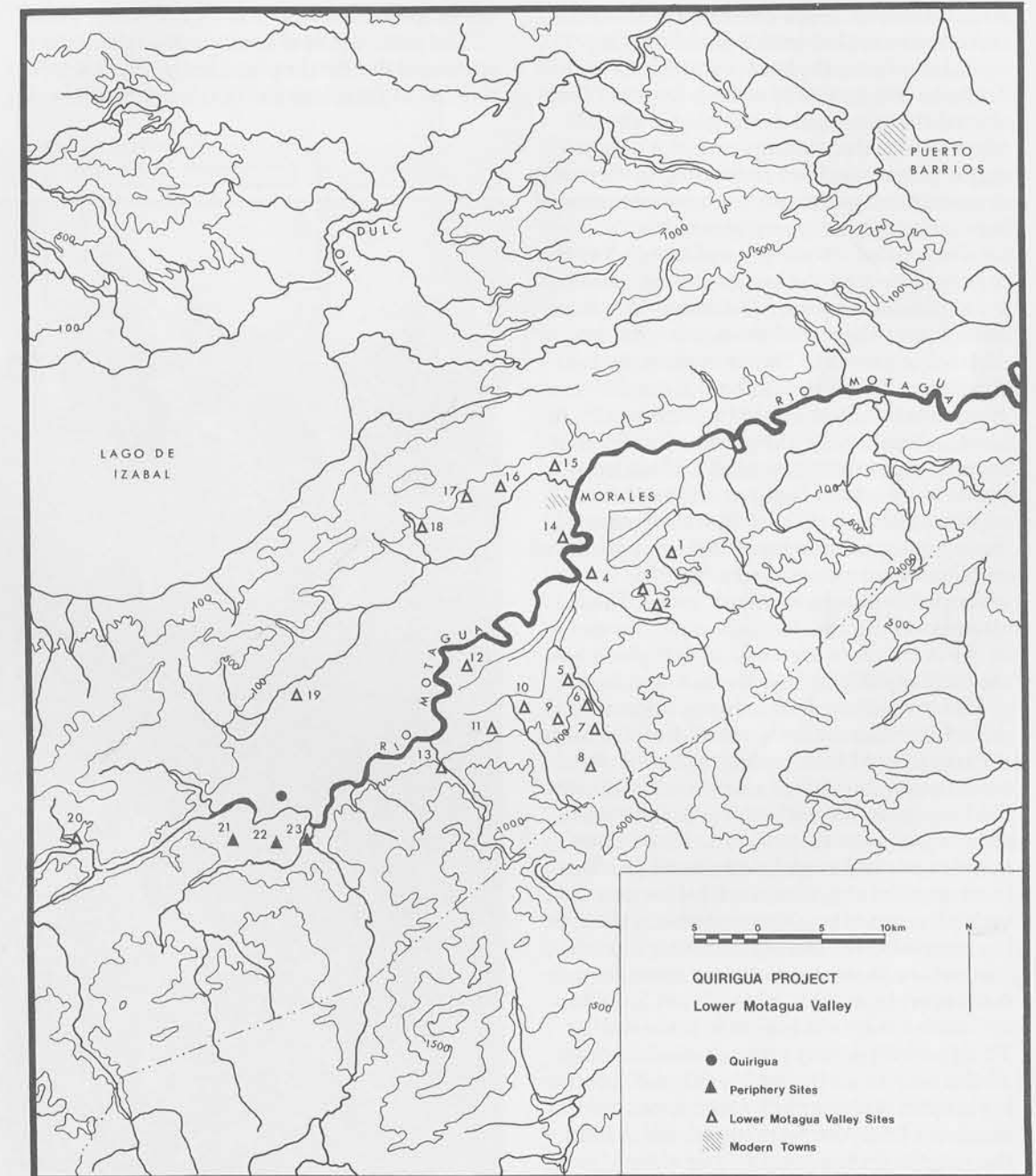
Based on this presentiment, in 1977 the Lower Motagua Valley Survey Project, as a part of the Quirigua Archaeological Project, initiated a survey and test excavation program in the southern portion of this extensive zone. In particular, the survey area was defined by the Rio Motagua and the Espiritu Santo mountains on the west and east and the Rios Quebrada Grande and Tepemechines on the north and south. In this area of ca. 180.8 km.<sup>2</sup> (43,392 acres) twenty sites were located and recorded in the three seasons between 1977 and 1979. Nine of these sites, all dating to the Late Classic, contain monumental architecture, that is, structures whose size and complexity strongly suggest that their occupants had a control of labor and managerial expertise well beyond the means of the common householder (Adams 1980).

These sites include Quebrada Grande, Bobos, Las Quebradas, Playitas, Mojanales, Choco, Comanche Farm, Arapahoe Viejo, and Juyama. Three of these centers not only contain monumental constructions but also equal in formal size and complexity the far better known site of Quirigua. Las Quebradas, situated on a steep bluff overlooking the Rio Bobos, encompasses 290 recorded structures within an area roughly 0.92 km.<sup>2</sup> (220.8 acres) and contains three monumental plaza units. Playitas, on the broad floodplain of the Rio Chinamito, has a total of 194 structures scattered over approximately 3.22 km.<sup>2</sup> (772.8 acres) with four major plaza groups defined by substructure platforms ranging in height up to 8.0 m. Quebrada Grande, at the far northern edge of the survey zone, has a mere 43 structures, though 21 of these are large substructure platforms integrated into four separate plaza units located in a rough north-south line extending 0.64 km. The location of so many apparently contemporary Late Classic major centers within such a restricted area, with an average distance between them of only 5.65 km., was one unexpected result of the survey.

A second result had to do with the surprising differences in material culture noted between Quirigua and its valley neighbors. These differences are related to the broad data categories of architecture, monuments and site planning. In these respects Quirigua is an exemplar of the Late Classic Lowland Maya pattern, containing those elements which are considered as hallmarks of that culture: cut and faced block masonry, corbelled vaults, stucco and plaster decoration of architectural features, and inscribed glyphic texts on monuments and structures. Even such characteristic Maya structural groupings as the Ballcourt and Acropolis are recognizable here. The large and complex centers found farther to the northeast down the valley, a scant 25

1  
Map of the lower Motagua valley showing important sites and natural features:

- 1 Quebrada Grande
- 2 Las Quebradas
- 3 Los Cerritos
- 4 Bobos
- 5 Playitas
- 6 Los Limones
- 7 Los Vitales
- 8 Mojanales
- 9 La Corozal
- 10 Choco
- 11 Arapahoe Viejo
- 12 Comanche Farm
- 13 Juyama
- 14 Oneida
- 15 Cruce de Morales
- 16 Monterey
- 17 Finca America
- 18 Puente Virginia
- 19 Cristina
- 20 Juan de Paz
- 21 Chapulco
- 22 Jubuco
- 23 Morja



km. away, do not exhibit these features and, in fact, appear to be participating in a completely different tradition.

First, in terms of site morphology, all nine valley sites with monumental architecture, despite their range of sizes, show a certain redundancy in configuration. Each of these sites contains at least one principal group composed of four large substructure platforms, ranging in height from 2.0 to 8.0 m., and arranged orthogonally around a central plaza which they enclose on all sides. At least two of the corners providing potential access to the central plaza are closed by construction linking adjacent structures and, more commonly, all four corners are sealed in this fashion. The enclosed plazas themselves range in area between 920 and 5330 square meters. The size of the principal group(s) at a site ranges from those composed of a single major plaza to others consisting of two or three adjoining plazas of almost identical form sharing a common structure(s) between them. It is a general truism for the survey zone that the larger the total size of a site, the more numerous the major plaza units found there and the more complex their arrangements. Small centers such as Arapahoe Viejo contain only a single monumental plaza while the larger sites of Las Quebradas and Playitas not only have several separate monumental plaza units but at least one of these consists of three adjoining closed plazas. Scattered around these major architectural foci are a series of smaller structures placed singly or arranged in groups of three to six. These attendant structures cluster most densely in the immediate area of a major plaza and drop off rapidly in frequency away from it.

The investigated structures, no matter what their dimensions, are all built without the use of cut block masonry. By far the most common method employed in raising the large platforms comprising the main groups involves the use of unfaced river cobbles packed round with small pebbles to construct long, low, vertical terrace walls. Surmounting these cobble walls are horizontally laid stone slabs which form the terrace treads, usually no more than 0.40 m. wide, which, in turn, run back to and under the next higher terrace wall. This procedure was often carried through all the way to a structure's summit, producing a substructure platform composed of a number of narrow terraces which extend the length of the platform and slowly step up in height in small increments of 0.35-

0.40 m. Only one example of plastered terrace surfaces was recorded, this at Playitas. Obviously, special steps and staircases were unnecessary as all four sides of these platforms could potentially provide access to the summit.

The superstructures which topped these platforms were constructed of perishable materials, principally adobe. Excavations suggest that these perishable walls were often set on low stone foundations and there is even some evidence at most of the major sites to indicate the use of rough cobble pillar bases in the superstructures. The plazas which these structures faced are largely unpaved.

The more modest constructions which surround the major plaza units also eschew the use of faced masonry though here the



platform walls stand vertically, 0.6-1.0 m. high, and are built of horizontal courses of river cobbles, packed round with chinking stones, and enclosing a packed earth fill. Superstructures were also of adobe and at least some were set on a stone footing.

Given the sculptural florescence at nearby Quirigua, it is surprising that carved monuments are largely absent from the lower Motagua valley centers. While eight monuments were located by the survey, seven at Las Quebradas and one at Arapahoe Viejo, they consist of roughly shaped columns, spheres and four completely unmodified large slabs and boulders. Contrary to the very open location of most of the Quirigua monuments in the Great Plaza, their counterparts in the valley are exclusively secluded in the center of the

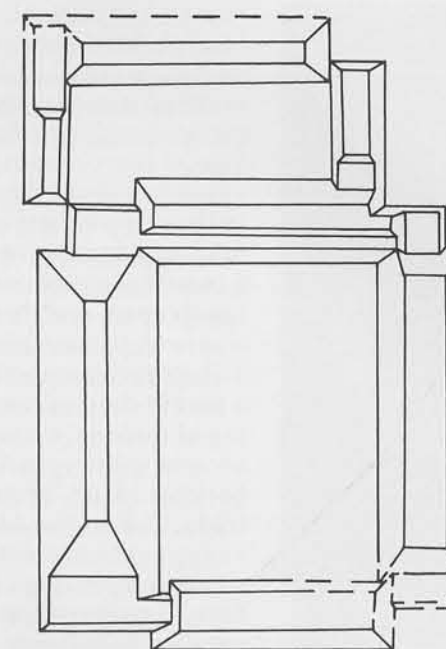
majority of the ceramic collections, no matter what their contexts, are composed of utilitarian wares, with imported polychromes being at a minimum. The chipped stone assemblages, primarily obsidian, are largely composed of prismatic blades with some evidence pointing to the peripheries of the major plazas as the locus for the last stages of their manufacture.

The apparent distinctions between Quirigua, easily classified on the basis of architecture, glyphic inscribed monuments and site plan as a Late Classic Maya center, and its contemporary neighbors to the northeast pose the problem as to "why" these Maya patterns seem to stop so abruptly within Quirigua's immediate hinterland. No major physical obstacles exist on the flat Motagua floodplain that could effectively block communication between Quirigua and the valley centers. Even if this had been the case, the striking similarities in ceramics between the two areas would strongly suggest that they were never fully isolated from each other. The question raised, therefore, about what factors lie behind the noted differences between Quirigua and its lower Motagua valley neighbors must focus on the less tangible aspects of interaction; in particular, those embedded in the social sphere. As the lower Motagua valley falls on or near to the boundary traditionally drawn demarcating the Southeast Maya Periphery (Thompson 1970), the factors seen as underlying the interactions in this particular region may have broader implications in the study of the forces behind the maintenance of, and fluctuations in, this broad boundary through time.

First, we must understand that the traits used to distinguish Quirigua from its valley neighbors, and also used to define the "Maya area" in general, are most probably associated with elite level activities. As a result, the material elements so often enumerated as defining a Late Classic Maya "culture" most probably reflect interaction between social and economic high status holders resident at various locales over a wide and potentially culturally heterogeneous area. In essence, I am hypothesizing that by at least the Late Classic there was what Freidel (1979) has called an elite "ethos" or interaction sphere (Caldwell 1965) exemplified by a series of traits held in common by high status holders residing within what is commonly termed the Lowland Maya world. This network of ties was maintained through exchanges of material

2  
One of the monumental structures which dominate the site of Las Quebradas.

3  
Map of the Comanche Farm Main Group, illustrating the characteristic plan of lower Motagua valley major plazas.



COMANCHE FARM  
LOCUS 210  
0 10 20 30m

large closed plazas.

These distinctive lower Motagua valley patterns, so different from those recognized at Quirigua and the sites in its hinterland, are partly offset by the remarkable similarity in the ceramics from the two areas. By and large, only minor differences, most at the varietal level, were noted between Late Classic Quirigua and the lower Motagua valley assemblages, suggesting the existence in the area of an active regional ceramic tradition at this period. Also, as at Quirigua, by far the

items, both prosaic, e.g., obsidian, and ceremonial/social, e.g., jade and pottery, in significance. The important point for our concern here is that it was through these links that new innovations, whether in architecture or calendrics, spread rapidly, giving a certain appearance of unity to the Maya realm.

The second point to realize about the common Maya trait list is that it is a rather eclectic assortment of items ranging from architecture to glyphic inscriptions to site plan. These varied material elements are, no doubt, the reflections of an equally great variety of behavioral spheres and cannot be simply accounted for in terms of some monolithic generating "culture" concept. Following from this, the distribu-

4 View of one of the major Playitas plaza groups from the air.

5 A low, vertical, cobble wall typical of the construction characteristic of the humbler structures which surrounded the major plazas. This particular example is from the site of Playitas.

tion of these traits at and across any boundary cannot be understood by viewing them as isolated entities floating in a social vacuum. What is at question in any contact zone is whether the behavioral systems from one group will be accepted in a new context, the distribution of the material items being no more than a reflection of that acceptance or rejection. As cultural anthropological studies of diffusion have shown, what elements of a cultural system will be accepted or rejected depends on a variety of factors, some unique to that local situation, and as a result the material distributions which reflect this selective process will be complex and will vary from locale to locale.

Returning to the original problem, one factor which recent ethnoarchaeological research in East Africa has suggested as a cause behind the development of mutually exclusive distributions of at least some material items is competition between the groups involved (Hodder 1977, 1979). Where two or more groups are intensively vying to control the same set of resources in the same area there seems to be a tendency for them to use material items as a means of expressing their ethnic distinctiveness and their corporate will to compete. In the case of the lower Motagua valley, such competition could have played a part in determining the inter-site patterning of material culture, with competition occurring between Quirigua and its neighbors over land, people or, more plausibly, trade. The largest of the lower Motagua valley centers, including Quirigua, are all situated at strategic points on potential lines of communication: Quirigua at the crossroads between routes leading southwards toward Copan and east to west from the coast to the highlands; Playitas and Las Quebradas each on one of the few rivers to breach the Espiritu Santo mountains, providing passes south and eastward to Honduras. It may well have been a desire to control commerce entering the valley which introduced some level of competition into the relations between the major centers; and this competition may have found expression in the inter-site patterning of material items. That this competition over trade could have been going on between the largest lower Motagua valley centers as well is suggested by certain differences in patterns of material distributions between Playitas and Las Quebradas. In particular, the preva-

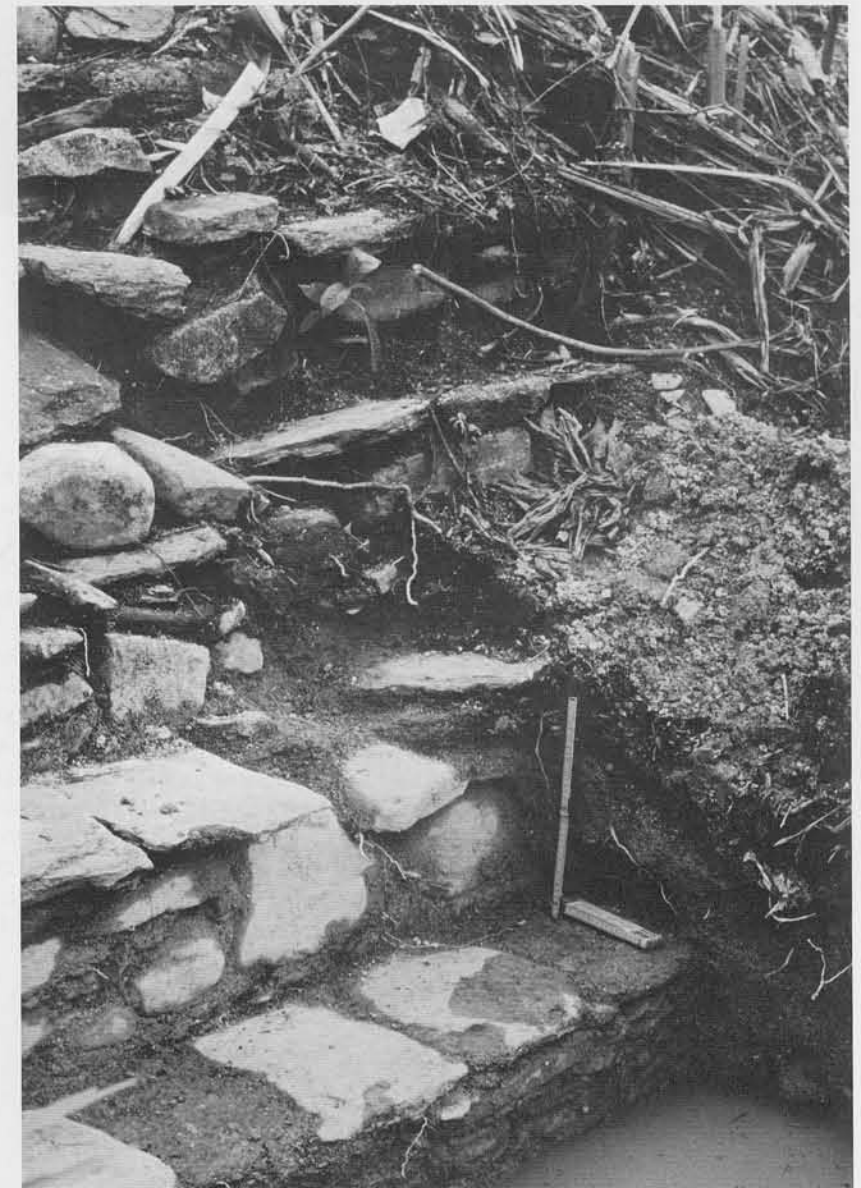
lence of uncarved monuments at the latter and their total absence at the former may be a reflection of the use of material items to communicate and reinforce group distinctiveness.

A second factor of possibly broader significance is the possible existence of a severe cultural gap between the elite in the lower Motagua valley and those at Quirigua. The aspects of the Maya elite pattern represented at Quirigua which, on first principles, might have been the most completely embedded in the Maya elite ethos would also be expected to have the most restricted distribution. In particular, the use of glyphic inscriptions for political legitimation and calendric computations could probably not spread to any area where the very specialized role they served in the Maya elite system did not already exist. This probably accounts for their absence not only in the lower Motagua valley but in all those areas to the southeast which constitute the traditional non-Maya world. An examination of the lower Motagua valley data suggests, in addition, that while the sites here were indeed large and formally complex, they might represent a less complexly differentiated form of society than that found among the Classic Maya. Most major Maya centers are marked not only by the large size of their structures but also by the variety of their forms and combinations into groups (see Andrews 1975). The valley centers, however, show a redundancy in structure form and arrangement, the only noted variation in monumental constructions being from single to double to triple closed plazas: a mere combination and repetition of the same basic forms. In so far as monumental structures were designed and built to serve as the physical facilities for particular activities, diversity of structure forms and combinations should grossly reflect the complexity and segregation of different activities. On the basis of this general measure, the lower Motagua valley elite may have been less complexly organized than their Maya counterparts, with a less rigid spatial separation of their various functions: indeed, they may have served a more limited range of functions than did the Maya elite. Under these circumstances, there would be less need felt for many Maya elite behavioral innovations with their accompanying physical facilities, e.g., specialized structures such as temples, shrines or ballcourts.

Material elements which, again on first principles, may have been less deeply embedded in the Maya elite ethos, such as cut block masonry which was most likely primarily related to the technological sphere, were probably restricted in their distributions by more prosaic factors such as resource availability. The general, if spotty, distribution of cut block masonry beyond the traditional Maya boundary suggests that the acceptance of this trait may have entailed fewer fundamental behavioral adjustments among the "non-Maya" elite to whom it spread (see Andrews 1976; Baudez and Becquelin 1973).

Other factors, such as a desire on the part of the Maya elite at Quirigua to shroud

6 Example of monumental structure construction at the site of Playitas. Note the way unfaced cobbles and slabs are integrated to form a series of low, narrow terraces.



certain aspects of their ethos in secrecy, may also have played a role in restricting their distribution. Access to certain mysterious, esoteric practices and knowledge might have inspired awe among the locals, especially if the rulers at Quirigua were immigrants residing within a largely autochthonous population. Islamic traders in pre-colonial West Africa often used their knowledge of the Koran and certain magic formulae associated with it to just this end, ensuring their respect and, by extension, their safety among non-Islamic peoples (Curtin 1975:67). Such secrecy might also have been inspired by a desire of the elite of Quirigua to maintain their self-esteem through their distinctiveness as a non-local group whose ties lay towards other, "high prestige," zones beyond the valley.

Whatever the reasons behind the differences observed in material distributions in the Late Classic lower Motagua valley, there is no need to suppose that interaction between the major centers was severely restricted. The aforementioned similarities in ceramics strongly argue for continued contacts. If the obsidian found at all major valley sites was entering the region from the Guatemala Highlands, then it is also probable that its regional distribution was controlled by Quirigua which was strategically located on the most likely highland route, the valley of the Motagua. Trade between valley centers and Quirigua would, therefore, be essential.

This short discussion has presented a tentative model to account for the observed material distributions of certain categories of data in one small portion of the Southeast Maya Periphery. Several factors, including competition, cultural differences, resource availability and a desire for secrecy have been offered to account for that distribution. All of these factors, and more should certainly be considered, are subject to testing and further revisions as work continues. It is further suggested that future work, not only in this valley but at any point along the frontier, should consider the question of what constitutes the Maya elite material pattern and what

accounts for the distribution of the elements of that pattern in any supposed contact situation. It is to be expected that as Maya elite groups interacted for different purposes and under various conditions with the different cultures located along the vast extent of the Southeast Periphery, the material manifestations of these interactions would be different. A zone heterogenous in terms of the distribution of Maya elite traits is to be expected mirroring the variety of these contact situations.



7  
The northeast interior corner of the Choco Main Group, illustrating how the corners of these massive plazas were closed by the junction of step-terraces.

In this framework, the distribution of Maya elite material traits could begin to provide information not only on the nature of the interactions taking place but also on the nature of the partners involved and, perhaps, their purposes in the interactions. Of course, changes in the boundary through time could also be examined in these terms, attempting to specify the factors controlling interactions at one locale and why and how these change. It is only in this way that we may begin to unravel the significance of a phenomenon that has been too long taken for granted as a real and established fact: the existence and location of the Southeast Maya Periphery.



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