

Tunneling into the Heart of the Copán Acropolis

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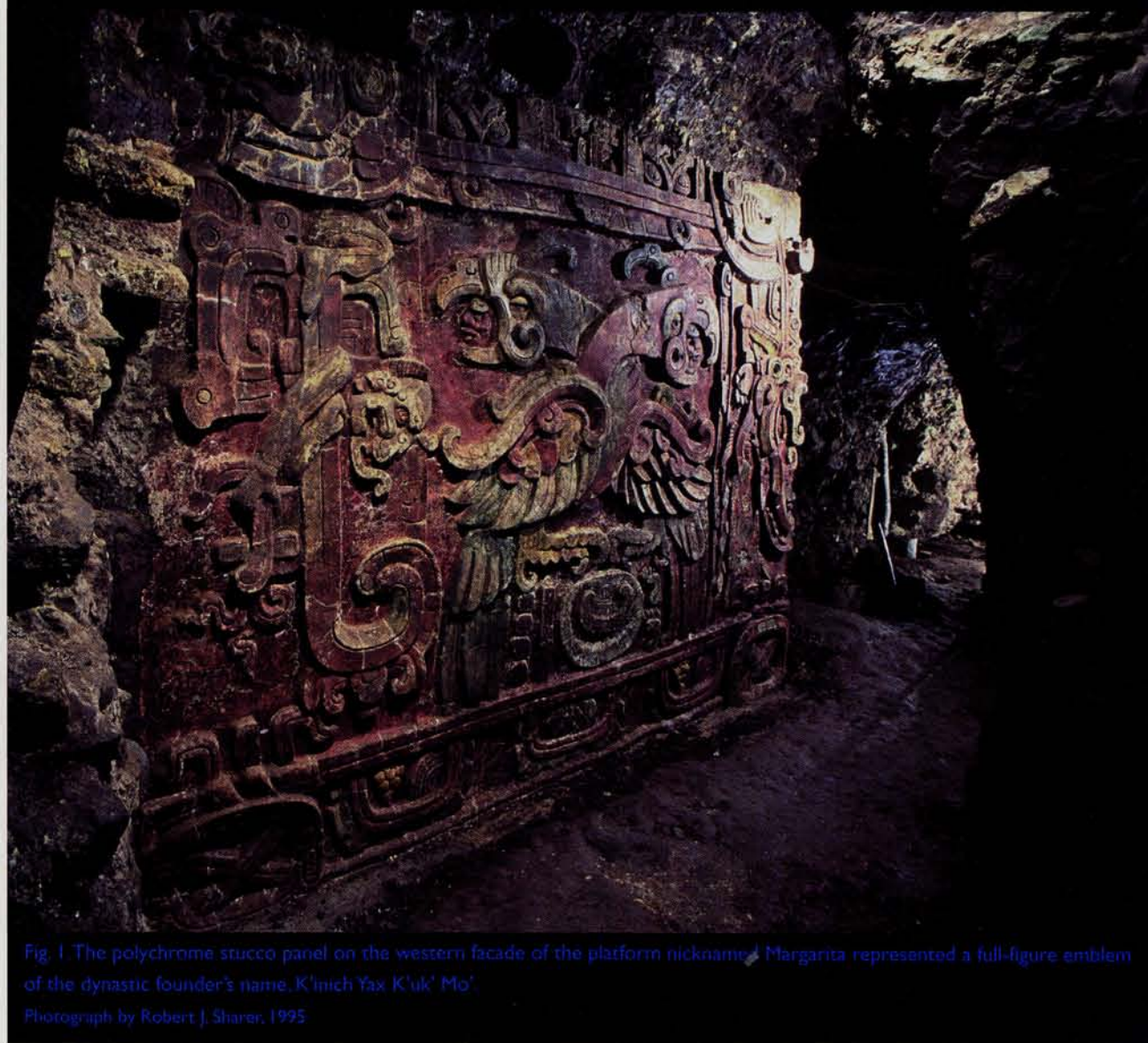


Fig. 1. The polychrome stucco panel on the western facade of the platform nicknamed Margarita represented a full-figure emblem of the dynastic founder's name, K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'.
Photograph by Robert J. Sharer, 1995

Around AD 426 K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' achieved preeminence at Copán and founded a dynasty. During his reign, a complex of buildings was erected on a platform 100 meters west of the Copán River. The stucco-surfaced platform (named Yune) measured 75 meters on a side and had low walls around it, either for defense or flood protection or to separate this first royal center from the residential groups around it. On the platform were a diverse assemblage of buildings constructed of both masonry and adobe (see Sharer, Fig. 5b). These buildings were arranged around several courts which focused on a single building at its center (Hunal).

Yune Platform was equipped with conduits and drains apparently designed to retain water fed onto the platform's surface to create a shallow "reflecting pond" around a central structure, possibly symbolizing the primordial sea in Maya cosmology. This feature could have enhanced the ritual function of this central locus, where, in addition, royal residential, administrative, and commercial activities are all presumed to have taken place.

Yax K'uk' Mo's successors built repeatedly on top of this complex, expanding it and adding elaborate, decorated structures. Eventually, Yune, and the remains of the structures it had supported, lay buried deep beneath the center of Copán's Acropolis in its final form.

THE EAST-WEST AXIS

One of the goals of the Early Copán Acropolis Program (ECAP) was to locate evidence of Copán's founder. Our investigations, as well as

other excavations, had suggested that the area we call the "Mini-Acropolis of the South" (MAS) dated to the earliest era of Copán's history. Accordingly, in 1992 Robert Sharer issued me the daunting challenge of tunneling into the mysterious MAS and revealing its early architecture.

We were hoping our research would answer a number of questions. Did MAS contain earlier buried construction stages, and if so, what did these suggest about Copán's size, organization, and external connections? To answer questions such as these, we decided to tunnel along the northern and southern flanks of MAS to define its extent and determine its east-west axis, where the Maya frequently located their burials and ritual offerings. This axis would be the best place to penetrate MAS to reveal its construction sequence.

By the end of the 1992 season we had found the axis and had started digging a new tunnel westward from the corte side along this axis. As our skilled crews tunneled ever deeper into the Acrop-



Fig. 2. Close-up of the k'uk' (quetzal) bird head on the Margarita stucco panel showing infixed head of the Maya Sun God (k'inich).
Photograph by Bunny Coates, 1995



Fig. 3. The Xukpi Stone with its carved hieroglyphic text, set into the southern wall of the Margarita upper chamber, was one of the key pieces of evidence to suggest that it might be Yax K'uk' Mo' lying in the burial chamber.

Photograph by Bunny Coates, 1994

olis we were rewarded with evidence that MAS had expanded over time in successive stages. Our tunnels also revealed that the main access to the MAS summit was on its western side when, at the mid-point of the western facade, we found the remains of a succession of staircases. These staircases confirmed anew the east-west axis we had calculated. Therefore, we shifted operations to the western side of MAS and began to tunnel back to the east, along the same axis and directly toward the corte. We were confident that we were closing in on the earliest buildings at the core of the Acropolis. At this point we were some 10 meters below the 1930s Carnegie tunnels under Temple 16.

By the end of the 1993 season our two-fronted excavations closed in on a spectacular structure nicknamed Margarita, deeply buried directly under Rosalila Temple, which in turn is buried beneath Temple 16. Like the later temples built at this same locus, Margarita had a western staircase and, surprisingly, had been built in the apron-molded style of Tikal, a city far away in the

Maya lowlands of Guatemala. The staircase and the building that once surmounted Margarita had been destroyed in antiquity, but preserved on the western facade of its substructure, or platform, were magnificently modeled and painted stuccoed panels (Fig. 1). Because of concerns about the preservation of these panels we delayed revealing them until two seasons later, when we could put into practice recommendations by conservation experts.

FIRST SIGNS OF THE FOUNDER

Careful clearing of the facade in 1995 revealed a stunning representation of two intertwined birds, framed on the top by a sky band motif and on the bottom by a series of earth symbols. The bird on the left with crested head, red breast, and long green tail was a quetzal (*k'uk'* in Mayan; see Fig. 2), while the righthand bird with its great hooked beak was a scarlet macaw (*mo'*). Inside the beak of each bird was the profile head

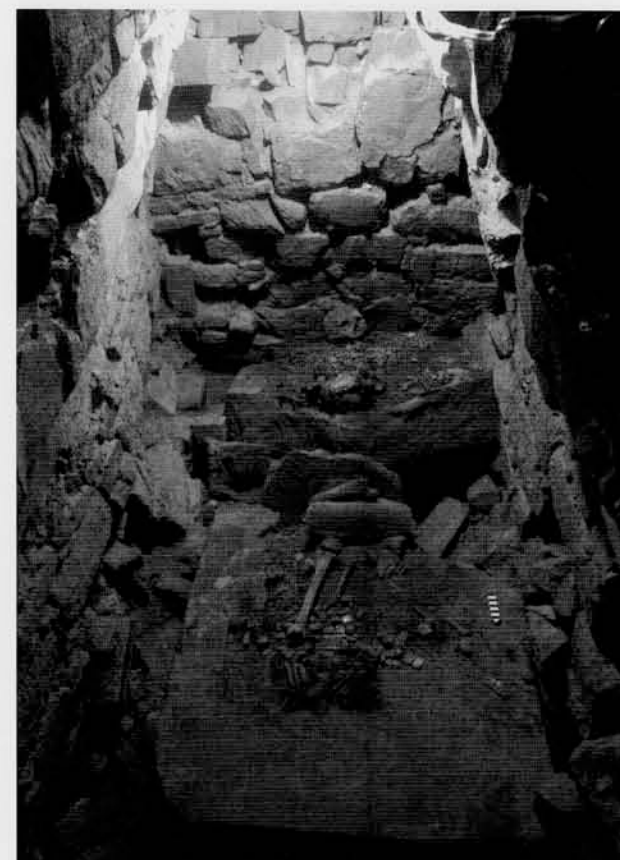


Fig. 4. View into the Margarita Tomb chamber. The burial slab had been broken in antiquity. The identification of the remains as those of a woman confounded expectations that the dynastic founder was buried there.

Photograph by Robert J. Sharer, 1996

of K'inich Ahaw, the Sun God (see Harris, this issue). And the crescent-shaped *yax* glyphs over the heads of both birds signified "blue-green," "first," or "preeminent." Here was incontrovertible evidence that the name of Copán's dynastic founder, K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo', had been proclaimed on one of the earliest structures at the center of the developing Acropolis.

MORE SURPRISES

Meanwhile, we had continued excavating the summit of Margarita, looking for wall scars to detect the layout of the demolished temple. In so doing we found a large rectangular stone with its upper surface covered by carved glyphs (Fig. 3). In clearing this discovery (nicknamed the Xukpi Stone), a small hole appeared just above the

carved stone, revealing a dark void beyond. By the light of a flashlight we could see a vaulted chamber, but little else except for collapsed debris. In the gloom at the far end of the chamber we could barely discern a shaft leading downward. News of the discovery spread to the other excavation teams, and one by one everybody took his or her turn to look inside the chamber. Invariably there was a gasp of astonishment as each person saw in the beam of the flashlight a brilliantly painted pottery vessel, immediately nicknamed "the Dazzler" (see Fig. 5).

To fully evaluate this complex chamber we called on the National Geographic Society, and they sent a team with remote-controlled video cameras which were carefully threaded into the chamber to record what lay beyond our view. On a video monitor we could see a rubble-covered staircase leading downwards at the far end of the chamber. At the bottom was a red-painted stone portal which opened into a second vaulted chamber. Incredibly, the camera was maneuvered to look inside this lower crypt, revealing skeletal remains lying amid glimpses of jade and scattered debris upon a shattered stone slab, all covered with red pigment (Fig. 4).

We could not reach this lower burial crypt by going through the upper chamber with all its fragile offerings. So we used the remote video to select an already collapsed wall section on the west side of the tomb for access. We tunneled to this spot during an extra field season in the fall of 1993. Along the way we found a small masonry chamber containing two lidded ceramic vessels left as offerings. One of the vessels contained liquid mercury which produces poisonous vapors, forcing us to seal over this offering and delay our Margarita Tomb work.

We began the 1994 season by exposing the carved Xukpi Stone embedded in the southern wall of the Margarita offering chamber. This revealed a pristine hieroglyphic text that when deciphered provided vital evidence about the events and personalities associated with the earliest buildings of the Acropolis. The Xukpi text details the dedication of a royal tomb in AD 437 by Copán's second king, the son of the founder. It goes on to record the name of Yax K'uk' Mo', by



Fig. 5. View of the stuccoed, polychrome-painted cylindrical tripod vessel nicknamed "The Dazzler" in situ in the Margarita offering chamber.

Photograph by Robert J. Sharer, 1993

implication the subject of the tomb dedication. Like the Margarita facade, the Xukpi Stone thus provides proof that the dynastic founder was a historical personage just as was recorded in later Copán texts. But now we had evidence that it could be Yax K'uk' Mo' himself who lay in the Margarita Tomb.

We spent the 1994 season tunneling eastward within Margarita until we found an earlier, smaller substructure we named Yehnal. Although decorated by stucco-modeled panels on its west facade like Margarita, Yehnal presented front-view images of K'inich Ahaw, the Maya Sun God (see cover of issue). Could this be an earlier reference to the founder, K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'?

During the 1995 season we continued to uncover and record evidence of the earliest royal center beneath the Acropolis. We gained working access to the Margarita burial chamber, and spent the remainder of the season consolidating structural damage and documenting the tomb contents. The fallen debris inside was carefully cleared in 1996. Once cleared it was evident that the Margarita Tomb represented the richest burial yet found at Copán, rivaling the magnificent Pacal Tomb at Palenque (in southern Mexico) in architectural planning and complexity.

Since the Margarita Tomb had all the hallmarks of a royal burial, was in the center of the Acropolis, and was within a structure marked by

the founder's name, all of us felt that we had discovered the tomb of Yax K'uk' Mo', just as recorded on the Xukpi Stone found in the wall of the tomb. Moreover, after expert cleaning and conservation, the now-famous Dazzler vessel found in the Margarita offering chamber could be clearly seen to depict a goggled-eyed person holding a long-tailed quetzal-like bird very similar to the birds on the Margarita facade (Fig. 6). This further supported the association of the founder with the Margarita Tomb.

FURTHER DISCOVERIES

Late in the 1995 season, excavations within Yehnal had revealed remnants of an even earlier masonry structure we named Hunal. Although its summit building had, as usual, been demolished by the Maya, its platform had been built in a style unique for its time at Copán—the talud-tablero style of Central Mexico.



Fig. 6. "The Dazzler" after conservation, showing Central Mexican-style talud-tablero temple with a goggle-eyed figure in the doorway.

Photograph by Robert J. Sharer



Fig. 7. Remains of the royal burial on the stone slab in the Hunal Tomb after overlying debris was removed (1993).

Photograph by Robert J. Sharer

On the last day of the season another vaulted chamber was found within Hunal, close to the Margarita Tomb. A small camera taped to a pole was used to assess its interior. Black and white pictures were taken sight unseen, and when these were processed we were astounded to see a human skull lying on a stone slab, its vacant eye-sockets staring straight up at us (Fig. 7). But with the season ending, the tunnels leading to both early tombs were sealed to await the resumption of work in January 1996.

We were able to do a complete assessment of the new tomb in 1996, again thanks to the remote-controlled video cameras brought down to Copán by the National Geographic team. These also allowed us to look under the burial slab and see an array of intact pottery vessels and other funerary offerings (see Bell et al., Fig. 9). It was now clear that the Hunal Tomb was a second major royal burial at the very core of the sacred axis of the Acropolis.

Two royal tombs presented a real dilemma. Which tomb held the founder, and who was in the other tomb? Now the Dazzler vessel was seen in a new light. Not only did the goggle-eyed figure probably represent Yax K'uk' Mo', but the talud-tablero style of Hunal was nearly identical to the building depicted on the vessel. Could the scene on the Dazzler vessel mean that the founder was actually buried within Hunal? If so, then perhaps

the person in the slightly later Margarita Tomb could be his son and successor, Ruler 2. This hypothesis was shattered when the bones in Margarita were identified as those of a woman!

The huge tasks of documenting and conserving all the materials in both tombs absorbed much of our time and energy during the 1996–1998 seasons (see Bell et al., this issue). And Jane Buikstra's identification of a woman in the Margarita Tomb opened up entirely new and very exciting possibilities for discussion and investigation.

CONCLUSION

Although work in the tombs continues, excavation of new tunnels ended with the 1996 season, and our final stratigraphic probes into the earliest constructions ended with the 1998 season. All the architectural evidence uncovered over the years has allowed us to produce detailed maps of the progressively larger and more complex stages of development of the early Acropolis (see Sharer, Fig. 5a,b). Our tunnels have discovered the royal center established by the dynastic founder and the first major expansion of this center undertaken by his son and successor. For nearly four centuries following these first two kings, Copán's rulers continued to embellish and expand this royal center, creating the architectural wonder we call the Acropolis today. 