

Fig. 1 (left). Debris from the crumbling masonry walls has been removed to reveal the funerary offerings on the floor of the Margarita Tomb after the burial slab had been lifted. A complicated deposit that contained two pyrite mirrors and over 2,000 small objects and was covered with toxic red cinnabar pigment is visible in the center of the floor.

Fig. 2 (above). Bundles of worked bone needles and strands of carved shell rings strung together by a now-decayed cord are visible in the top layers of the western half of the central floor deposit. The remains of baskets, bags, and gourds scattered throughout the deposit indicate that the adornments were stored in perishable containers placed beneath the burial slab.

## The Margarita Tomb at Copán, Honduras: A Research Update

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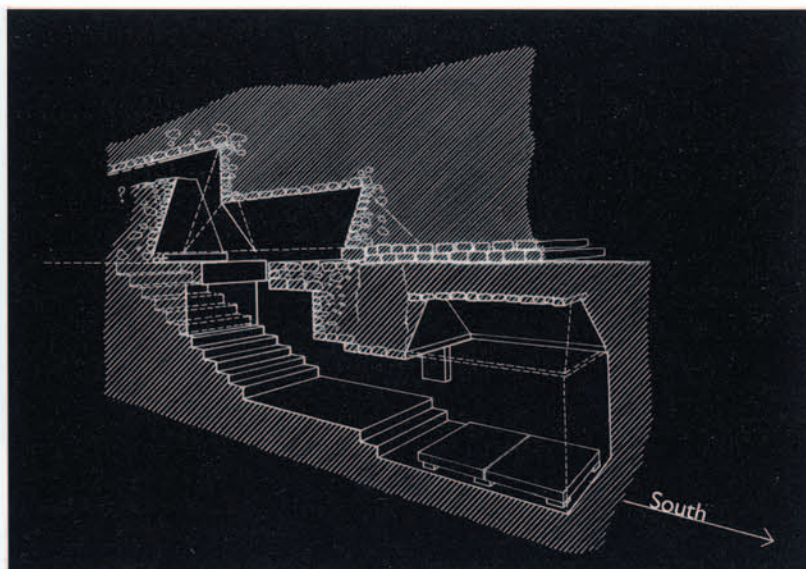
In an earlier issue of *Expedition* (41[2]), we reported on the first five years of work in an Early Classic burial at the Maya center of Copán, Honduras. The multi-chambered Margarita Tomb (AD 440–450) lies deeply buried at the center of the core of the Late Classic Copán Acropolis. It contains the remains of a woman who may have been the wife of the dynastic founder, K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo', and lies near the Hunal Tomb, which may contain his body.

Margarita includes an upper chamber filled with offerings, a lower burial chamber containing a raised stone funerary slab, and a vaulted stairway that connects the two (see Fig. 3). This last spring we completed the sixth and final season of excavation in this exciting deposit, which involved completing the documentation and removal of the offerings on the floor of the burial chamber.

In 1999 we had cleared away the fallen wall debris and lifted the northern half of the funerary



Fig. 3. A schematic drawing of the Margarita Tomb complex at the World Heritage site of Copán, Honduras. The smaller upper chamber was filled with ceramic vessels, jade adornments, and elaborately painted perishable containers, while the lower chamber housed the burial slab, the remains of an adult female, and over 15,000 objects.



slab. Although we could see the general outline of the objects on the floor under the slab, much remained to be done during the 2000 field season (Fig. 1). The largest, most striking, and most complicated offering still in situ had looked like an amorphous clump of cinnabar and debris when we first peered under the slab in 1994. It turned out to be a concentration of over 2,000 objects (Fig. 2), including a painted basket and other organic objects, two pyrite mirrors, seashells, stingray spines, and a large mass of jade beads and shell rings that were probably strung together into necklaces and other adornments. These objects filled baskets, bags, and painted gourds grouped together in the center of the floor.

One of the most remarkable of these decorated perishable containers was a stuccoed basket lid painted with a fine-line polychrome design. Careful excavation and conservation of the lid helped determine that it had flipped off its base and buckled over a neighboring object, resulting in layer after layer of friable paint flakes. When it was first discovered, only a fragment of the rim and the stucco layer with well-preserved impressions of the now-decayed basketry was visible. We were able, however, to consolidate, lift, and clean the largest fragment to reveal a representation of a figure in profile wearing a decorated turban headdress similar to those depicted on other monuments (Altar Q, for example) at Copán (Fig. 4).

After the painted basket lid had been removed, we began working on the rest of the central deposit. This concentration included perishable containers filled with strands of jade beads, bundles of worked bone needles, and carved shell rings (Fig. 5). Some of the rings were carved with faces whose incised features were highlighted by a filling of bright red cinnabar, and whose eyes were inlaid with jade. These objects are especially interesting as rings and needles have not been found (especially in these quantities) in other elite burials at the site. Stingray spines that could have been used for blood-letting were found nearby, and the bases of two of the straw baskets were preserved below the strands of jade and shell beads they had held for over 1500 years.

On the eastern side of the central deposit were two slate and pyrite mirrors (Figs. 6, 7). Similar to mirrors found at Kaminaljuyu and other Maya sites, these were made of pieces of highly polished pyrite anchored to slate backs painted with colorful, fine-line designs. The mirrors had been wrapped in a tightly woven textile and bundled into a loosely twined container before they were placed on the tomb floor. Our first indication that the slate backings of the mirrors might have been painted came as we cleaned the edge of the lower mirror. The cleaning revealed a series of small painted yellow dots and stars, and as it continued, we were able to see that the entire back was covered with a design.

Unfortunately for us, as the pyrite that made up the reflective surface of each mirror decayed, it produced sulfuric acid, corroding and discoloring the slate backing and its stuccoed surface.

Although it is difficult to see, the mirror backs are decorated in the same fine-line, Teotihuacan style seen on a vividly painted vase called the Dazler that we found in the upper chamber of the tomb when it was first opened in 1993 (see Bell et al. in *Expedition* 41, no. 2 [1999]: 29–35). The motif on Mirror 1 is a geometric design that may represent a Central Mexican-style headdress (Fig. 7). Regrettably, the central motif was destroyed by the decaying pyrite. The border includes yellow dots and stars similar to those on a jar from Teotihuacan found in the Hunal Tomb. The scene

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on Mirror 2 features a winged Teotihuacan-style figure standing in profile with a speech scroll in front of his mouth and an object, which may be a trophy head, dangling from his hand. The border of the disk is formed by a serpent whose scales are visible along the base (Fig. 6). Both mirrors were probably worn suspended from a cord.

The eastern side of the tomb floor was covered by quantities of needles in two groups bundled into organic wrappings, probably textiles. While all of the needles are made of worked bone, the ones in the northern group are stained a bright blue-green color. University of Pennsylvania Museum conservator Lynn Grant is working to determine how and by what these needles were stained. While the needles may have formed part of a “tool kit,” there are far more than could have been used at one time by a single woman. Noted Mayanist Linda Schele has suggested that elements of the burial costume may indicate that the woman in the Margarita Tomb was dressed as an aspect of the Moon Goddess, and the needles would have been an important part of the weaving tools that characterized that deity.

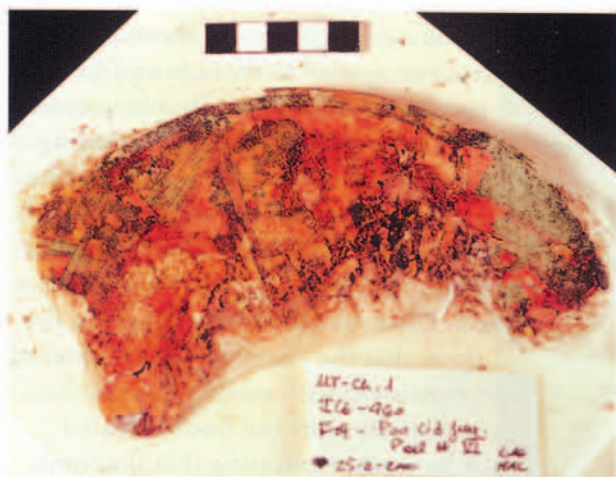
The rest of the tomb floor was covered with a series of deposits similar to those found in the center: concentrations of jade beads, painted gourds full of cinnabar, and two small grinding stones, possibly used to prepare pigment. A pair of jade mosaic mother-of-pearl earflares was found near the north end of the floor, while the south end contained a ceramic bowl and a few other artifacts. Disturbance of the objects on the west side suggests that the chamber was re-entered in antiquity, consistent with earlier observations.

A crack in the center of the floor revealed another floor beneath, indicating that the tomb chamber had been modified before the funerary slab was lowered into it. After all of the objects had been safely removed, David Sedat, Marcello

Canuto, and Fernando Lopez sank a test pit into the floor to find that, surprisingly, a third floor—the original floor of the chamber—lay more than a meter below. They also found that this earlier version of the tomb had been substantially wider and deeper than its final version, and that it was roughly contemporaneous with the nearby Hunal Tomb, thought to contain the remains of the dynastic founder, K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'. This latest evidence raises new questions about how the chamber was used before it was transformed to receive the woman's body.

Taken as a whole, the objects on the floor of the chamber present a picture that differs slightly from that suggested by the material on top of the slab. The offerings directly associated with the woman's body seem to signal her status as a member of the highest stratum of the polity's elite, and include traditional royal trappings like jade earflares, jade knee bands, and an elaborate jade, shell, and pearl necklace. The offerings below the slab continue the theme of elite status, but they also seem to be of a more functional or active nature—they are objects to be used (or to symbolically represent use or activity) rather than objects to be worn.





The artifacts within the funerary chamber represent a variety of stylistic canons and suggest contact with people in highland Mexico (especially Teotihuacan), the central Peten in northern Guatemala (particularly Tikal), highland Guatemala (especially Kaminaljuyu), and the Southeast Maya Periphery (sites in western Honduras and El Salvador). While the Teotihuacan-style imagery on the mirror backs and fine-line painted gourds is particularly noteworthy, there are also forms and designs that fit squarely within Maya traditions from the Peten and that reflect indigenous patterns. The objects on the floor of the tomb therefore are in line with the osteological evidence that suggests that the woman buried within the chamber was a member of a powerful, elite local lineage. She may have married the founder and



Fig. 5. A face highlighted by bright red cinnabar pigment (mercuric sulfide) peers out from a carved shell ring ca. 2 cm in diameter. Some of the faces on these rings have eyes inlaid with tiny jade beads.

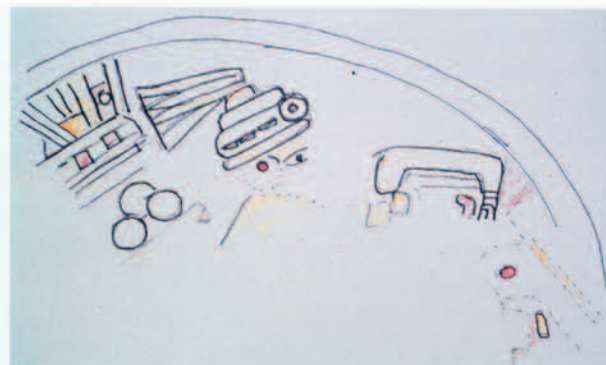


Fig. 4a,b. Although the fibers of which this basket lid was woven decayed long ago, the stuccoed, painted surface that decorated it remains. A seated figure wears a turban-style headdress similar to those worn by individuals depicted on Copán stelae and ceramics.

Drawing by Lynn Grant

assumed the role of First Mother within a nascent dynastic line.

Our examination of the floor offerings and new evidence of a more complicated building sequence combine with earlier work to challenge and refine our understanding of the complex and the Copán polity in the Early Classic period.



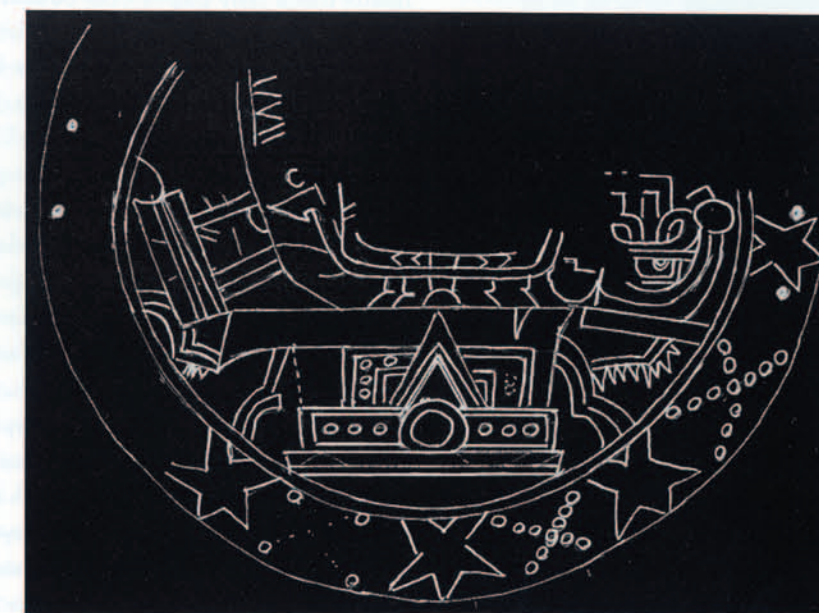
Fig. 6. The painted back of this pyrite and slate mirror (2) includes a standing figure with a feathered headdress, cape, and sandals. The speech scroll that issues from his lips is identical to many seen on murals and ceramics at the highland Mexico center of Teotihuacan.

Drawing by Lynn Grant



Fig. 7a,b. Half the surface of Mirror 1 has been eaten away by acids produced by the decaying pyrite surface. To stabilize and preserve what remains of the decorated surface, UPM conservator Lynn Grant injected glass microballoons suspended in consolidant under the bubbled and cracked stucco, giving it a firm base on which to rest. The decoration includes a portion of a highland Mexico-style headdress (b); the ridges that held the pyrite mosaic pieces in place on the reflective surface (now dulled by decay) are also visible.

Drawing by Lynn Grant



The authors are all members of the UPM's Early Copán Acropolis Program excavation team.