ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS IN THE SITE CORE OF QUIRIGUA

Epigraphic and archaeological data now provide evidence of an occupation history spanning half a millennium

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Quirigua’s dynastic and constructional history was of central concern to the site-core excavations. Since we last considered these topics (Jones 1977; Sharer 1978) several new findings at Quirigua have provided information that considerably amplifies the history of the site. Thus, our purpose here is to integrate these new findings into our former reconstruction of Quirigua’s development.

Our knowledge of the origins and early development of Quirigua was significantly increased by the discovery of Monument 26 in late 1976 and the 1979 excavations conducted as a consequence of this discovery. Details of the monument’s recovery and the subsequent excavation of the associated Str 3C-14 are summarized by Ashmore, Schortman and Sharer in Quirigua Reports II, in press.

Monument 26 was discovered accidentally by a dragline excavating new drainage canals for the Del Monte banana plantation just north of the site core, reportedly from a depth of ca. 1.6 meters beneath the alluvium. Ashmore’s excavations at this location indicate that Monument 26 probably rested on a low paved platform that was bisected by the dragline. This platform also supported a small platform called “altar” (left in situ by the dragline) and a small rectangular structure. The excavations located an elaborate cache in the structure, containing six Early Classic vessels filled with burned jadeite artifacts, pyrite mirrors and cinnabar reduced to metallic mercury (see the final article of this issue). Epigraphic and stylistic evidence provided by Monument 26 clarifies Quirigua’s origins and early development. A fuller treatment may be found in Jones (in press). The Initial Series date is not only incomplete but actually displays incongruous information, and therefore cannot be read with certainty. Out of various possibilities we prefer the more straightforward reading of O.18.0.0 at 19 Ahau 8 Pax (A.D. 483).
even though the two dots of the katun coefficient are oddly connected by a bar, and thus could conceivably be read as 9.7.18.0 (one bar and two dots equal seven).

Our opinion is based first on comparison with the previously discovered Quirigua Monument 21 (Stela U: Morley 1937:38; IV, 69-92, V, Pl. 169b). In Morley’s photographs and our own, Monument 21 clearly carries a Katun 2 Initial Series date. The two monuments are of a similar bluish schist stone, are of a similar size and shape, and feature a front-facing figure with a horizontally held bar. More specifically, on both monuments, the frontal design extends onto the stela sides. Also, an animal glyph with band headdress appearing on Monument 21 is carved in large size on Monument 21 as though it represented a ruler’s name.

Second, certain features of style also support our Early Classic dating when compared to monuments outside Quirigua. The tor and usual glyphs on Monument 26 carry distinctive fed headaddresses with frontal tassels found only on early Maya monuments (Tikal Stelae 29 and 6, the Leyden Plate, Copan Stela 24, and Yaxchilan Lintel 48, all from 8.12.14.6.15 to 9.4.11.8.16). Other specific elements of style, such as the bent-armed scroll work, the peculiar split ends of the serpent-head fangs, the lack of paneling on the belt, and the flared tassels on the collar ornament, are all Early traits (Proskouriakoff 1950: 29-70). The wrap-around design and the costuming resemble most strongly those of Tikal Stela 2, style dated to 9.3.10.0.0: 2 katuns (Proskouriakoff 1950: 195). William Coe has pointed out that a similar full-frontal figure is found on Uaxactun Stela 20, probably dated to 9.3.0.0.0 (Morley 1937-38: 1, 188-191, V, Pl. 61).

Altar de Sacrificios and Copan had carved monuments before 9.2.0.0.0, but Quirigua’s Monuments 26 and 21 are the earliest known dated figural stelae outside of the core area. Although they retain the bas-relief carving tradition of the Peten, Monuments 21 and 26 were the first to pull together the wrap-around idea and the full-frontal pose which later became the hallmark of Quirigua and Copan stelae. This break from, or re-combination of, Peten modes established a new regional style of incipient three-dimensionality which progressed at Copan into the almost free-standing “statue” stelae.
MONUMENT
Mon. 11 (Stela K)
Jade Sky
Mon. 9 (Stela I)
Jade Sky? (16 hel)
Regent? ("Imix Dog")
Mon. 16 (Zoomorph P)
Sky Xul
Mon. 7 (Zoomorph G)

ASSOCIATED DATES AND EVENTS
(Maya Long Count) (Gregorian)
9.18.15.0.0 A.D. 805
9.18.10.0.0 A.D. 800
9.10.5.0.0 A.D. 795
9.17.15.0.0 A.D. 785
(Sky Xul inauguration at 9.17.14.16.18)
(Cauac Sky death at 9.17.14.13.0)

Mon. 5 (Stela 5)
Cauac Sky
9.17.0.0.0 A.D. 771
(Cauac Sky captures 18 Rabbit, ruler of Copan at 9.15.6.14.8)

Mon. 10 (Stela J)
Cauac Sky (14 hel)
9.16.5.0.0 A.D. 756
(Cauac Sky inauguration at 9.14.13.4.17)

Mon. 26
Ruler 3 or 47 (3 & 4 hel)
9.2.18.0.0? A.D. 493
9.1.0.0.0 A.D. 455

Mon. 3 (Stela G)
Ruler 17
9.1.15.0.0 (Monument carved in 9.17.5.0.0)

Third, a very interesting set of glyphs on the back of Monument 26 shows a coefficient 3 with a hel-and-spiral glyph, followed by three undeciphered glyph blocks and then a coefficient 4 with an identical hel-and-spiral compound. According to Riese (1979), similar hel-with-coefficient notations are used by rulers’ names to mark a count of succession at Copan and other sites. By this interpretation Quiriguá’s great ruler, Cauac Sky, inaugurated at 9.14.13.4.17, labeled himself the fourteenth ruler, and Jade Sky, who appears to come to power about seventy years later, was the sixteenth.

Thus, these hel calculations support the early date for the monument. However, it must be remembered that none of the above epigraphic and stylistic arguments constitute proof of a specific Katun 2 date and we must continue to allow for later possibilities, at least until Katun 7 (A.D. 573).

Peter Mathews has pointed out to us the relevance of a text carved on the west side of Quiriguá Monument 3 (Stela C; dated at 9.17.5.0.0, A.D. 775; see Morley 1937-38: IV, 156-162). Although the stele was carved late, it carries an Initial Series date of 9.1.0.0.0 (A.D. 435) followed by a mahk-hin-a title and the Quiriguá Emblem Glyph, both indicators of rulers’ name phrases. This text may be seen as an historical reference to an Early Classic Quiriguá ruler, perhaps the local dynastic founder, made at or near the end of the reign of Quiriguá’s dominant Late Classic ruler, Cauac Sky (see below). The Initial Series date associated with the reference (9.1.0.0.0) falls nearly forty years earlier than the presumed third or fourth ruler associated with Monument 26.

After this apparent founding period in the Early Classic, the known historical record at Quiriguá is mute for some two hundred years, or until the dedication of Monument 13 (Altar M) at 9.15.0.0.0 (A.D. 734) and Monument 19 (Stela S) at 9.15.15.0.0 (A.D. 746). The only exceptions are Monument 20 (Stela T) which Morley (1937-38: IV, 86-89) dated at 9.13.0.0.0, and Monument 12 (Altar L) that Satterthwaite (1979) placed at 9.12.0.0.0 (A.D. 672).

The archaeological record indicates that it may have been during this intermediate period at Quiriguá (ca. A.D. 550-720) that construction began in what was to become the Late Classic site core. Here the earliest buildings in the site’s largest architectural
Burial of a single adult male in a stone-lined crypt under an eastern "shrine" structure of Construction Stage 4. This may be an early Quirigua ruler, perhaps even one of those mentioned on Monument 3, 5, or 26.

Excavation through a thin wall of cobble masonry typical of Construction Stage 4, the earliest level in the Acropolis.

Quirigua Monument 18 (Altar R). This small rhyolite monument resembles Copan ballcourt markers and may have come from the buried Construction Stage 3 ballcourt under the Acropolis. (Diam. about 68 cm.)

Excavation into the room of a structure completely filled and buried by Construction Stage 1.

Sandstone masonry of Construction Stage 2 buried by the massive later stairway of Construction Stage 1.

L, Q, and R), may have been markers for the ballcourt buried under later buildings on the west side of the Acropolis. If so, then Construction Stage 2 would have begun earlier than the 9.14.13.4.17 inaugural date of Caac' Sky. We can detect some time depth for Construction Stage 3, with Str. 1B-2 appearing to be later in masonry style than the ballcourt itself. Nevertheless, the cache vessels associated with the ballcourt are of a later ceramic type than those from the Monument 20 platform.

Clearer correlation can be made between the architecture and masonry of the succeeding Acropolis construction (Construction Stage 2) and the series of Caac' Sky's monuments from Monument 19 (Stela 5 at 9.15.15.0.0 and A.D. 740) to Monument 7 (Zoomorph G at 9.17.15.3.0 or A.D. 745). The most commonly used material of both is sandstone, the craftsmanship is superb, the design is grandiose. Furthermore, the mosaic masonry figure on Str. 1B-Sub. 1, the great western wall of the Construction Stage 2 Acropolis, matches the figures on the monuments in scroll work and in costume details.

Quirigua was fully transformed architecturally during Construction Stage 2 (ca. A.D. 740-810), when some seventy years of seemingly continuous building activity replaced the former small residential compound with the monumental architectural and sculptural remains we now recognize as an important Late Classic Maya center. The Acropolis was considerably enlarged and its structures rebuilt, burying all the previous constructions except Str. 1B-2. The Great Plaza was expanded to the north, ultimately, by the construction of a huge cobble-fill platform (100 x 85 m.) to support the latest and largest of Caac' Sky's monuments. All this rapid growth follows a single historical event, seemingly the capture of Copan's ruler, 18 Rabbit, by Caac' Sky in 9.15.4.14.6 (A.D. 737), that has been identified from multiple references in the Quirigua inscriptions (Proskouriakoff 1973: 165-175, Marcus 1978: 135). As we have suggested elsewhere (Jones 1977; Sharer 1978: 66-88), the architecturally visible transformation of Quirigua after this event reflects a new status as an independent political and mercantile power, commanding the Motagua valley jade and obsidian routes.

Significantly, there is little in Quirigua's Construction Stage 2 that can be considered of Copan derivation or inspiration. The exquisite sandstone masonry and...
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16 Mat designs on Maya stela (not drawn to same scale)
(a) Copan Stela J, back (from Maudslay 1869-1892, Pl. 71).
(b) Quirigua Stela H, back (from Morley 1937-38, Vol. 6, Fig. 130).
(c) Copan Stela 3, front (from Tourtellot, Sabloff, and Sharrock 1978, Fig. 40).

Quirigua’s connections were with the Peten, either by way of the Caribbean coast and the Matagus and Belize rivers, or more directly by way of overland trails through the Lower Verapaz and the southern Peten. As Miller [1980] has pointed out, Copan’s sculptural styles owe much to a non-Peten influence and are more free and creative than the stiff Tikal-like forms of Quirigua. We should point out that this conclusion was reached independently from, but in agreement with similar findings based upon ceramic studies (Willet et al. 1980; also see Sharer 1980:2).

Our archaeological excavations indicate that while the site continued to be occupied into the Postclassic period, it may have come under the control of outsiders. For the first time, occupation debris from the latest levels of areas such as the Ballcourt Plaza contain sizeable proportions of “foreign” pottery. The closest affinities for these ceramics are from the north, along the east coast of Yucatan. Other new elements appear at this time, including chipped-stone projectile points. This suggests contacts with areas to the north, probably via the newly emerging seacoast long-distance trade networks (Sabloff and Rathje 1975). The Central Mexican flavor of such Postclassic contacts may explain the earlier reports of “non Maya” artifacts found at Quirigua, including a “chaacmol” sculpture (Richardson 1940) and a carved stone of apparent Coastal Veracruz style (see Thompson 1970:131).

Despite these indications of longer period occupation, Quirigua was probably abandoned by the end of the Early Postclassic era (ca. AD 1250). When Cortes and his party marched through the Maya lowlands to Honduras (1524-1526) they visited the prosperous commercial center of Nito on the Rio Dulce 60 km. to the northeast of Quirigua. This location was significant, for Nito undoubtedly acted as Quirigua’s replacement as a trade center serving the commerce between the Maya highlands and the Caribbean.

To summarize, then, although there certainly is a clear regional Southeastern Maya artistic and architectural style shared by Quirigua and Copan, the great period of Classic Sky’s rule at Quirigua cannot, in our view, be characterized simply as imitative of Copan. We think, rather, based on our excavations and the newly discovered monument, that it derives from earlier local models and ultimately, perhaps, from the Central Peten, Quirigua’s Postclassic occupation, with its suggested Yucatecan connections and significant transfer of commercial power to Nito on the coast, can be viewed simply as a continuation of this association with the north that began in the Early Classic.