DISCOVERING EARLY CLASSIC QUIRIGUA

A unique opportunity to examine an important sector of the early center

WENDY ASHMORE

The discovery came, one could say, just in the nick of time.

The Quirigua Project had been scheduled to run from 1974 through 1978. As Sharer explained earlier in this issue, the field seasons were organized to gather information concerning the rise, occupation and demise of the Classic Maya center of Quirigua. But commercial excavation of agricultural drainage ditches around the site, beginning in late 1977, promised a way around one of our more frustrating problems—the burial and effective concealment of the bulk of the archaeological remains by ten centuries' worth of flood silts. This unparalleled field opportunity persuaded us to extend the research for a 1979 season, to record and study the wealth of newly exposed materials. Then, in November of 1978, the dragline bucket pulled up two large fragments of an anciently broken Maya stela, and what began as unforeseen good fortune turned into one of the more exciting investigations of the project.

The stela, labelled Monument 26, was discovered by BANDEGUA, a Guatemala subsidiary of the Del Monte Fruit Company, while cutting drainage ditches in preparation for a new banana plantation. The two large stela fragments were turned over to the Instituto de Antropologia e Historia and are now housed in the Instituto offices in Guatemala City for study and safekeeping. Although only the dragline operator and his crew were on hand at the actual discovery, they were able to indicate the approximate source of the pieces. In the same vicinity was clear indication of an earthen platform of fairly substantial size (obliquely cross-sectioned by the ditch), on which an altar-like circular slab of schist was still in place, protruding slightly from the face of the ditch.

These discoveries were of special interest for two principal reasons. First, as Sharer points out, one of the project's main goals was to determine how long before its 8th century florescence Quirigua had been founded. But we soon realized that if flooding had made finding Late Classic remains difficult, it had made detection of any earlier floodplain occupation virtually impossible. Although we had tried a number of archaeological approaches to locating buried remains, the BANDEGUA excavations were a perfectly timed and extremely useful "solution" to the problem, on a scale we could not have attempted ourselves (see Ashmore article, pp. 20-27).

Most germane to the present discussion is the important fact that these ditches have yielded the first substantial evidence of occupation predating about A.D. 700. The majority of this early material comes from the ditch bottoms, and most is in the form of trash—broken pottery, bits of obsidian and other artifactual material. Only rarely is construction revealed, and that is buried so deeply that we cannot clear the overburden to record plans or

1 Group A, aerial view from the southwest. Note large illicit trench into principal structure.
found to date at Quirigua.

The cache (Special Deposit 21) was intended in a rhomboidal chamber built as an integral part of the structure. Within the chamber a clay floor was laid down over a layer of charcoal (a sample of which is currently being subjected to radiocarbon age-determination analysis). Along the east wall of the chamber were three pairs of plaited reed pottery vessels, the only visible contents of the cache. The vessels, three of which acted as covers for identical mates, were of a type we had come to recognize as cache bowls at Quirigua, from similar finds made in Group A and two somewhat later deposits discovered in the Acropolis. They are plain bowls, with straight to slightly flaring walls and everted rims, painted a deep mottled red. The bowls of this cache were very similar to the cache fragments associated with the Early Classic Monument 21, from Group A, but slightly different from the Acropolis cache bowls.

These slight differences in form did not prepare us, however, for the differences in

Expedition

contents.

In the later, Acropolis caches (one S.D. 8, from c. A.D. 740) contained shell, two pieces of worked jadeite, about 1700 small fragments of jadeite, and about 100 bits of pyrite. Another, stratigraphically earlier, cache in the Acropolis (S.D. 13; we are not yet sure of its calendar age) was apparently empty. The cache from Group A (S.D. 16), the one associated with Monument 21, had been disturbed but what was left of the single vessel contained at least some shale (possibly a broken backing for a pyrite plaque or mirror), small fragments, and strands of cinnabar, along with its derivative, liquid mercury. In the cache unearthed this year, all three vessel pairs had been burned, reducing some of the large amounts of cinnabar they contained to mercury. They also held bits of pyrite, and the central pair contained a bird bone and what is possibly an armadillo palate. Most spectacular—and probably most informative—however, were six pieces of worked light green jadeite, weighing together more than five pounds.

The central bowl, the lower half of the

largest vessel pair, held two large chunks of jadeite, roughly trapezoidal in outline. These appear to be unfinished earplugs, the large ear ornaments worn by the ruling Maya elite. Each piece was about 10 cm. across, weighed roughly 965 grams (34 oz.) and 1080 grams (38 oz.) respectively, and had a central perforation under which lay a small curved flint, also in jadeite. Each of these portrayed a clenching right human hand, nearly identical in size and style to two fragmentary pieces, described by Talia Paykouriakoff (1974: figure 11; plate 80: 19, 20; p. 132), that were dredged from the Sacred Cerne of Chichen Itza.

Paykouriakoff (1974: 14-15) suggests that many of the pieces that ultimately wound up in the cenote at Chichen, in northern Yucatan, were looted in Terminal Classic and Postclassic times from Classic Maya tombs and other deposits of wealth, from sites in the central lowlands a considerable distance to the south of Chichen Itza. Thus the discovery of stylistic analogues at a distant site whose principal occupation is later in time does not contradict an Early Classic date for the Quirigua jades; in fact, Proskouriakoff attributes an "early" date to the Chichen funerary deposits on stylistic grounds.

Perhaps even more interesting are the jades that were found in the other vessels, in the smaller pairs flanking the central bowls. On the west side of each of these bowls were found two pendants, one in each vessel pair, stylistically distinct but showing the same motif of a thorny or tubular column and a sceptered figure. Both are portrayed in right profile. Comparative materials include a jade piece (incised head) from Kaminajuyu, an important center, particularly during the Early Classic period, now engulfed by the urban growth of Guatemala City (Kidder, Jennings, and Shook 1946: a pendant from the Sacred Cerne of Chichén Itza [Proskouriakoff 1974]; and a figure in fine-painted black stone from Asunción Mita, near the El Salvador border in southeastern highland Guatemala, and the southernmost site with "Classic Lowland Maya, attributes (Kidder 1943). The closest resemblance, however, is
orientations or even area (beyond the dimensions revealed in the ditch exposures). Nonetheless, the ditches have provided good evidence of a significant settlement at the site of Quirigua during Early Classic times.

And that brings us to the second reason why this past year's discoveries are so important: the settlement was clearly more than a simple village. More specifically, however, as part of a larger program of research on Maya inscriptions, the great epigrapher Sylvanus G. Morley made a study of the monuments of Quirigua (Morley, 1950, 1957-58). Morley noted that the earliest dates at which Quirigua monuments were erected were inscribed on two steles, Monument 20 and 21 (which he called Stele T and U, respectively). These two monoliths were located in Group A, a small site at the highest point of a ridge overlooking Quirigua, and indeed, the whole western end of the lower Motagua valley. Because of the early dates, Morley argued that Group A was the first local seat of Maya power, the prototype for the Late Classic center of Quirigua on the floodplain below. Morley read the dates on Monuments 20 and 21 as 9.13.0.0.0 and 9.14.0.0.0 in the Maya system, or A.D. 692 and 711, respectively, a reading that has been generally accepted for Monument 21 as 9.3.0.0.0 (A.D. 495), nearly two hundred years earlier, in the Early Classic.

In 1976, we conducted excavations in Group A to try to resolve the paradox of stele 21. Early dates combined with stylistically late (ca. A.D. 900) architecture there. At the time, the excavations seemed frustratingly inconclusive: Group A was an anomaly in our view of the Late Classic climax of local occupation, but how much earlier it was founded we could not say for sure (Stuart 1978a, press). A few early sherds buried under the mass of the principal structure did suggest Early Classic occupation. That the architecture itself produced little that helped to date any but the final phase of construction. In excavations around the stele, the only relevant chronology was Early Classic; the cache associated with Monument 21—that had been disturbed long ago. We believe Group A served as a lookout post during Late Classic times, but as to Morley's proposal concerning its original founding, we could neither positively support nor clearly refute the idea.

Then in November 1978, Monument 26 was discovered. Although broken in antiquity, the stela surface is not eroded, and enough remains of the inscription to read tentatively the dedicatory date: 0.2.16.0.0 or A.D. 483. More specific description of the stele, its inscription and figural content, is given by Christopher Jones (in press) and summarized in this issue by Jones and Sharer. What is important here is that it is similar in style, material (bluish-gray schist) and inscribed date to Monument 21 in Group A. Monument 26 therefore verifies elite Maya presence at Quirigua on the floodplain itself during the late 5th century A.D., about one kilometer northwest of the Acropolis, the later epicenter of elite activity. The whole site and the area during the Early Classic was probably larger than the area for which we now have evidence, but we clearly do have one focus of civic importance.

In order to get some better idea of the nature of the Early Classic center, we excavated the architectural remains believed to have been associated with the stela. The excavation was important, not only as an attempt to clarify the context of the stela, but because it constituted our only opportunity to clear and record construction of this relatively early—and therefore deeply buried—structure.

Our starting point was an examination of the cross section manifest in the faces of the existing drainage ditch. This showed an earthen platform (Platform 3G-1) topped by a flooring of crushed rhyolite; the latter was the surface on which the aforementioned schist “altar” (Monument 27) sat. Three steps of rhyolite blocks marked the north face of the platform, just north of the altar. To the south, the flooring faded out after a distance of about 27 m. with no evidence of a corresponding face. It appears that the southern face of the platform (whose total extent is therefore unknown) was destroyed, probably washed away in a flood.

Because most of the evidence of construction—as well as Monument 27—was on the west side of the ditch, we decided to concentrate our excavations there. Needless to say, we hoped to encounter more stela fragments as well as to clear the architectural remains. Moons, Roy Wells and Mario Mena of BANDEGA generously loaned us the use of a dragline, thus enabling us to remove the overburden sealing the platform. The skilled operator could approach the level of the platform,

leaving a small cap on the surface for us to clear by hand. The ditch cross section showed no overlapping construction, and the mechanical earth removal allowed us to clear a wider area than would have been possible using only manual labor.

Three trenches were laid out in a "Y" plan radiating from the location of the "altar." One trench ran north from this point, one west and one south, along the west side of the principal BANDEGA ditch. We watched breathlessly as the machine's bucket dug in. Nothing unusual in the north trench; nothing in the west trench. Suddenly, in the third, southern trench, the bucket struck masonry, immediately we called a halt: there was a small structure on top of the platform. After careful examination, the dragline resumed excavation, but at a safely higher level, and broadening the width of the south trench to allow us a wider area to clear the structure later.

Manual excavation began immediately, clearing the platform surface and the newly found structure. Platform 3G-1 itself turned out to be more than 32 m. north-south by more than 24 m. east-west, with rhyolite-block steps along both north and west sides of a low, central base, on which the platform rested, in lower than the level of the ditch. The crushed rhyolite surface petered out toward the southeast. As we already noted, we believe the southeast corner was washed away. We could find no evidence of more than the single structure mentioned (Str. 3G-14), but that structure was very rewarding. Paradoxically, it turned out that the main BANDEGA ditch missed the northeast corner of the structure by less than 30 cm. Built of earth and rhyolite rubble and faced with mortar of the same volcanic stone, the structure was nearly rectangular, 9.5 m. north-south and 5 m. wide (east-west), aligned with the cardinal directions. The structure was about 80 cm. to a meter high, and had single, small, outset steps on all four sides. Its upper surface was mostly destroyed in antiquity, but we could find no evidence of a building nor of a stela pit on the summit. However, the middle of the west side of the surface was intact; there the facing consisted of three schist slabs, laid transversely along the east-west axis of the structure. We excavated a trench across this axis to gain details of construction sequence and complexity. This trench also yielded the single most spectacular cached deposit.
with three "incised pebbles" from a cache at Quiriguá's important southern neighbor, Copan. These figures were part of a cache of nine such "pebbles" portraying a variety of poses, sometimes referred to as "acrobat." They were found in a cache along with a carved jadeite figure showing a seated person in frontal view. In 1932, John M. Longyear tentatively ascribed to these jades a Late Classic date by stylistic comparison of the figure with another argued to be Late Classic. Perhaps the source of the cache, the so-called "Mound of Stela 7," also had an influence, as the date of Stela 7 is 9.9.0.0.0 [A.D. 613]. But the same mound is also associated with four of the earliest stelas at Copan. Stelas 20, 24, 25 and 15, whose dedicatory dates range from 9.10.0.0 [A.D. 405] to 9.19.9.9.0 [A.D. 524] all squarely within the Early Classic. And Morley (1972: 271) states that the cache came from the foundation stone of an early stela. Furthermore, subsequent analyses of Maya jades carving styles and technology point to an Early Classic date for the carving of the Copan—and Quiriguá—pieces (see Rigby 1972 and Proskouriakoff 1974).

The foregoing concern with comparison and dates may seem overly detailed, but it is justified on at least two grounds. The first pertains specifically to the situation at Quiriguá; despite the circumstantial evidence, we cannot demonstrate that the newly discovered Quiriguá stela came from the excavated platform. Their contemporaneity and association seem highly likely, but unfortunately we found no more stela fragments. Possible evidence for the association of the stela with Pl. 3C-1 is an unexplained feature west of the structure and on the same axis as the cache, which might be a candidate for a stela-bracing pit. The feature contained only four pairs of upright slabs, forming a square. It seemed to be intact, not disturbed—such as by removal of a stela—and was sealed by two of the platform floors. A debatable earlier floor was broken in the area overlying this feature, so there remains a possibility that something—a stela or otherwise—was removed from the "pit."

There is no direct stratigraphic link between Platform 3C-1 and Acropolis (or any other) architecture, but we suspect that this overlying platform and structure antedate the earliest known Acropolis constructions. Since we have no radiocarbon dates as yet, our only means of dating the construction is by local stratigraphy and by associated artifactual materials. Local stratigraphy supports the Early Classic dating. The only cultural material overlying the construction in question is typologically Late Classic (a trash lens). Also, the relative elevation within the ditch is congruent with an Early Classic date: all other Early Classic materials come from levels at the bottom of the drainage ditches, and, as mentioned earlier, the ground surface on which this elevated platform was built is below the level of the base of the ditch.

Probably the best clue, however, is artificial. Ceramic analysis ties the
structure and platform to an Early Classic ceramic assemblage. This complex is currently dated to approximately A.D. 400-700. Further analyses may allow us to refine chronological placement within this rather long stated time-span. Most likely Platform 3C-2 and Str. 3C-14 can be dated at the early end of the span. Other associated artifacts have so far offered no temporally diagnostic aids—except for the jades. Again, the evidence is comparative and therefore somewhat indirect, but on stylistic and technological grounds, these artifacts appear most compatible with an Early Classic date. Altogether these chronological clues do not demonstrate the association of the stela with the construction, but they do argue strongly for its close contemporaneity. Incidentally, the distinctive rounded-face masonry of Str. 3C-14 is very similar in form to the earliest, previously undated masonry found at Group A. An Early Classic placement of Str. 3C-14 therefore provides support for inferring an Early Classic founding date for the hilltop site as well.

There is a second reason why the detailed consideration of the jades is of interest. This concerns a suggestive hypothesis about symbolic manipulation among the Early Classic elite in this southeastern part of the Maya area. The Early Classic throughout Mesoamerica is a period characterized by the spread of influence from the great Central Mexican center of Teotihuacan. Many writers have described this “influence” as indicative of a Teotihuacan economic, political, and cultural influence that brought both the Teotihuacan style to other parts of the Maya area. The Early Classic style is present throughout Mesoamerica, and it is evident that it had an impact on Quirigua in this period. And here the reference is to the ritual part of elite life. At Kaminaljuyu, the peak period of Teotihuacan influence is marked—in addition to the aforementioned diagnostic traits—by particular forms of tomb burials of a “Type” Charles Elliott (1977) has shown to be quite restricted both in time and within the site. The pattern was first described in 1946 by A. V. Kidder, J. D. Jennings, and E. M. Shook in their report on the excavations of two mounds in the southeastern part of Kaminaljuyu. Here they found a coherent series of tomb burials in which the principal personage was buried with one or more flanking attendants, all interred in a seated position. Each of the relevant tombs was on the axial line of a structure, and each seems to have been associated with the start of a new building phase—in other words, “dedication” to the new structure. The grave goods varied somewhat, but one could note that in five of the six relevant cases, the principal personage had at least one pair of jade earplugs in Tomb A-V the principal personage had none. Of these cases, one tomb (B-14) had earplugs; in a later tomb (B-14) one did, but these were stone, not jade.

What does all this mean? The following
central vessel would represent the principal personage, signified by the “ear-flares”; the meaning of the little fists is unclear, partly for lack of comparative material, but Jones suggests that perhaps (using a glyphic analogy) they stood for “completion” or death. The flanking vessels would represent the flanking individuals of the Kaminaljuyu tombs, personified in effigy form by the jade pendants of kneeling or (more probably) seated figures. It may be noteworthy in this regard that of the figures portrayed in the “acrobats” cache at Copan, the one frontal figurine (the principal personage?) is also shown seated.

One other attribute makes the Quirigua jades important: we know where they came from and how they were interred. Jade was an extremely highly prized commodity among the Maya. It symbolized water and even signified life itself. Frequently single jade beads are found in the mouth or throat areas of Maya skeletons, as if the jade would give the corpse new life. jade was also relatively rare, and difficult to work. Unfortunately, the same substance and the same finely worked pieces are highly valued in the modern world. They are, again today, coveted items in ever-insufficient supply. All too frequently the jades we have to study are in beautiful collections that lack one very critical aspect: a record of where they came from. Some of these are recovered accidentally; some were looted in antiquity (for example, the finds in the Sacred Cenote). But many are known to have come from fairly recent illicit excavations. The pieces are beautiful indeed, and their carving often has much to tell us. But how much more they could tell us if we knew where they came from. Certainly the effigy-tomb interpretation offered here would not be possible without information on the original location and arrangement of the materials. We always need more comparative specimens, but what we need most of all are comparative materials (jade, pottery or otherwise) from well documented contexts.

The discoveries of late 1978 and early 1979 at Quirigua are certainly not the only significant or interesting findings made during the project’s investigations. They do, however, give us a great deal of exciting new information on an otherwise poorly known period in the history of this fascinating Maya center. Although we had originally planned to close operations of the Quirigua Project with the end of the 1978 season, we were fortunate to be able to go back and take advantage of the opportunities made available in this final, “extra” 1979 season. As noted at the outset, the discoveries were made just in the nick of time.