QUIRIGUA: A CLASSIC MAYA CENTER
AND ITS TROPICAL VALLEY SETTING

THE QUIRIGUA PROJECT, 1974-1979
A brief outline of the development and structure of the research

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In December 1973, after over one year of feasibility studies and negotiations in Guatemala, a contract forming the Quirigua Project was signed by representatives of the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, and the Ministry of Education, Government of Guatemala. Once ratified by the President of Guatemala and his Council of Ministers, the Quirigua Project commenced its investigations, beginning slowly in 1974, and then continuing with full-scale field seasons in 1975 through 1978, before finishing its work with a final, small-scale effort in 1979. These investigations centered upon the Classic Maya site of Quirigua, but also included an extensive investigation of the site’s natural setting, the lower Motagua valley.

The University Museum was responsible for all funds for the conduct of the archaeological research, while the Government of Guatemala financed the consolidation of the major structures at Quirigua. Now that this research has been completed, it seems fitting to look back and review some of the results of our investigations. Thus, we have gathered together a series of papers written by members of the Quirigua Project, summarizing some of the results of their own research. But to begin with, it seems appropriate to review the origins of the Quirigua Project, and to outline some of its principal objectives.

With the beginning of a new decade in 1970, the American Section of the University Museum, and its curator, Dr. William R. Coe, began to make plans for a new archaeological research program in the Maya area. The location and goals for a new investigation were conditioned by several findings from the just-completed Tikal Project. The University Museum’s work at Tikal had shown that this, the largest known Maya center, had reached its apogee during the Classic period (A.D. 250-900), but also found tantalizing clues from a lingering occupation during the subsequent, and much less known, Early Postclassic era (A.D. 900-1250). A smaller site, known as Tayasal, located on the shores of Lake Peten not far south of Tikal, seemed to promise further information about Postclassic society in the Maya lowlands. Thus, in 1971, the American Section launched a pilot excavation program at Tayasal to ascertain whether or not there had been a sizable Postclassic occupation at that site.

The results of the Tayasal study were disappointing. While abundant remains of
Classic period construction seemed to cover the Tayasal peninsula, the evidence of Postclassic occupation was concentrated in a few house platforms strung along the lake shore. Reluctantly, it was decided not to continue the work at Tayasal and to abandon, for the time being at least, this project's principal objective, namely the search for a major Postclassic site.

Thus, in 1972 the University Museum once again began to search for a likely Maya site to investigate. In that year I joined the staff of the American Section, and assisted Dr. Cox in this endeavor. Together we agreed that the criteria for selection should center on two points. The site and its surrounding region had to be archaeologically unknown, at least by modern standards of investigation. Furthermore, a prospective site had to have a good potential for revealing significant new information about the ancient Maya. Using these criteria, some seven sites were considered during this period. For a while attention focused upon Cobá, a Classic center in the little-known northeastern district of the Yucatan peninsula. But after negotiations with the Mexican government were unsuccessful, a new candidate emerged, Quirigui.

The archaeological site of Quiriguá, located at the head of the lower Motagua river valley in the southeastern corner of the Classic Maya area, fulfilled both of our criteria. Very little was known about the duration or extent of Classic Maya occupation at either Quiriguá proper or its surrounding lower Motagua valley region, despite the fact that the site had been visited, recorded and probed by numerous archaeologists since the 19th century. Frederick Catherwood was the first to report to the outside world Quiriguá's now famous sculptured monuments. In the late 19th century, Alfred P. Maudslay spent several seasons photographing these monuments, taking molds of several sculptures, and sponsoring the first known excavations at the site. In the early 20th century the Archaeological Institute of America conducted excavations led by Edgar Lee Hewett and Sylvanus G. Morley. These were followed by investigations sponsored by the Carnegie Institution of Washington that included test excavations and the re-setting of several fallen monuments.

But very few records of these investigations have survived, and the published accounts of the work provide little information about the origins, development and demise of Quiriguá. Beyond the rather short time span recorded on Quiriguá's monuments, almost nothing was known about the time Quiriguá was occupied. Thus, a thorough archaeological investigation at Quiriguá promised to reveal a great deal of information about the site and its surrounding area. Furthermore, since Quiriguá was located in an almost unknown area, research would also provide new information about the southeastern Maya lowlands, and add to our knowledge about the diversity of Maya civilization.

For instance, the application of settlement archaeology during the Tikal investigations had transformed our concepts about the organization and function of Classic Maya centers. The revealed extent and density of dwelling remains ("house platforms") at Tikal effectively negated the former view of Maya sites as "ceremonial centers" serving low-density and dispersed populations subsisting by slash and burn agriculture. Rather, Tikal could be seen as a large and highly complex urban center, different in many respects from the more densely settled highland cities of ancient Mexico, but a focus for a host of diverse activities nonetheless. Tikal was certainly a center for ceremonial and cult activities, but it was also a political and administrative capital, a major marketing and craft manufacturing center, a pivotal link in the trade routes across the base of Yucatan that connected the Caribbean with the Gulf coast, and the largest known Classic Maya population center.

But the first archaeological settlement study in the Maya area was carried out in the Belize River valley, to the east of Tikal. There, in an alluvial valley setting unlike Tikal's, archaeologists from the Peabody Museum of Harvard University found a series of relatively small population centers throughout the flood plain. There was no single large "capital" to dominate the entire region, as Tikal clearly dominated its region.

With these findings in mind, as we planned our research at Quiriguá we were concerned to discover what kind of settlement had existed in the lower Motagua valley. Would Quiriguá prove to be a dominant and functionally-urban center like Tikal, or would its alluvial valley setting contain a more dispersed population similar to that of the Belize River valley? At the onset of our research, we knew that Quiriguá was the only identified Classic Maya center in the lower Motagua valley, so that it had usually been viewed as a "capital" for its surrounding valley region. But other sites were known to exist in the
valley, and our research would seek to identify further examples. The question remained as to their relationship with Quirigua; as our research began no one knew whether or not these other sites were even occupied at the same time as Quirigua. These questions provided the basis for a specific hypothesis to be tested by our investigations. That is, did Quirigua function as a political and administrative capital for the lower Motagua region, controlling a series of subsidiary centers and their economic resources? As part of this question, our research would seek to determine whether Quirigua had controlled the production of such cash crops as cacao, oil palm, cotton, and the like. To test the latter proposition, we sought ecological evidence, both to reconstruct the ancient environment and, although this later proved impossible, to obtain pollen samples that could demonstrate the ancient existence of certain cash crops. The best evidence actually recovered at Quirigua in support of this idea was a small number of pottery effigy cacao pods.

From the beginning of the Quirigua research several other hypotheses were to be tested. The site is located along the Motagua river, the major route between the Maya highlands to the west and the Caribbean to the east. This suggests that Quirigua once served as a trading center, controlling river traffic as well as overland commerce between the lowlands to the north and the major Maya center of Copan to the south. This hypothesis was further strengthened by the fact that the source of the most prized of all Maya substances, jadeite, is located in the middle Motagua valley, a little more than 100 km, up river from Quirigua. Metagal jadeite almost certainly was traded down the Motagua to the Caribbean, and then up the coast and by river into the heart of the Maya lowlands. It also reached lower Central America, probably via both the Caribbean and overland trade routes. Thus, Quirigua was in a position to control a good portion of jadeite commerce into both areas. It should be added that an additional critical commodity, obsidian, was mined at Ixtepeque, another 100 km, southwest of Quirigua and reached by a tributary of the Motagua. Obsidian trade probably followed the same Motagua route through Quirigua to the lowlands.

The trade center hypothesis could be tested by looking for commercial facilities at Quirigua. Support could also come from the discovery of jadeite and obsidian processing or manufacture. Indirect evidence of trade could be seen in various indications of accumulation of power, wealth and prestige at Quirigua, especially on the part of its rulers.

Another long-standing idea to be tested involved the ancient relationships with Copan, a much larger Classic center located across the mountains some 50 km, to the south. The traditional theory held that Quirigua was founded in the Late Classic period (ca. A.D. 600-900) as a colony of Copan. This supposition could be tested by dating the founding and occupation span of Quirigua. The question to be answered was whether Quirigua was founded well after or at about the same time as Copan. If the latter situation could be archaeologically demonstrated, it might indicate that both sites were founded as colonies from the outside. Furthermore, the material remains recovered at Quirigua might reveal whether or not close cultural ties existed between the two centers. Finally, further epigraphic information from additional decipherments of Quirigua’s hieroglyphic texts could be used in conjunction with excavations to identify and interrelate the ancient events bearing on this question.

However, before these and similar hypotheses could be tested, our Quirigua investigations had to address several problems basic to most archaeological situations. In the first place, a chronological framework had to be determined in order to date as precisely as possible the archaeological remains uncovered by our research. As at most Maya sites, the most reliable chronological indicator turned out to be pottery, although the ceramic industry of Quirigua appears to be unlike that revealed at any other Classic Maya site. A spatial framework was also needed to define the areal extent of Quirigua and other sites in the lower Motagua valley, and, ultimately, to help determine the kinds of relationships that once existed between these centers. These frameworks would eventually allow us to place reconstructed activities and events in a proper temporal and spatial relationship.

To achieve these objectives, our research at Quirigua was organized into a series of interrelated programs. The overall administration of the Project was directed by David W. Sedlak, Research Associate in the American Section, throughout all phases of its research. The site care program conducted excavations within the main group at Quirigua. Its first goal was to document the sequence of occupation and construction activity within the architectural and monumental core of the site. This program was directed by Dr. Cose during the first year of intensive investigations (1973), and then by Dr. Christopher Jones (1976 and 1977), and finally by the author (1978 and 1979). In conjunction with the site-care program, the Instituto de Antropologia e Historia de Guatemala (IDAEH) undertook the consolidation and conservation of the major buildings in the main group at Quirigua. This work was directed by Arq. Marcelino González C., and supervised on a day-to-day basis by Sr. Enrique Monterroso during most of the period of research. The consolidation work commenced in 1975 and continues as of this writing. The sculptured monuments of Quirigua, once heavily encrusted with lichens, were successfully treated for the removal of these growths under the expert supervision of Dr. Mason E. Hale, Jr., of the Department of Botany, Smithsonian Institution.

The site-periphery program concentrated its research upon the area surrounding the site core. This zone, some 25 km³ (23.475 acres) in extent, was intensively investigated to determine the nature and limits of settlement at Quirigua. The site-periphery program was directed by Wendy Ashmore over a period of five seasons (1975-1979). Her summary of this research follows the
ARTHELIOLOGICAL 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 dynamic 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 1978 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 “bar” [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 burnished 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 0.18.0.0 at 18 Ahau 9 Pax (A.D. 402).