Archaeology and History in the Royal Acropolis, Copán, Honduras

by Robert J. Sharer

In a tropical valley on the western edge of Honduras lie the massive ruins of Copán. Here Maya farmers once lived, ruled by powerful kings who built magnificent decorated temples and were buried amid a wealth of objects. Today Copán’s importance is recognized in its designation as a World Heritage Site.

During the Classic period of Maya civilization, Copán was the prosperous capital of a major city-state. The ruins of this ancient capital cover an area of about 4 square kilometers in the center of the Copán Valley (Figs. 1, 2). The archaeological site is composed of a civic and ceremonial core surrounded by elite and non-elite residential groups, ranging from the remains of masonry palaces to low mounds that once supported pole- and-thatch dwellings. At the center of the site lies the Acropolis (Fig. 3), the accumulation of many royal temples and palaces built over the course of the Classic period. Its initial constructions belong to the Early Classic, dated at Copán to ca. AD 400-650. The University of Pennsylvania Museum’s Early Copán Acropolis Program (ECAP) is excavating and integrating the overall sequence of this buried architecture. Our efforts are providing one of the most complete records of the origins and development of an Early Classic royal complex found anywhere in the Maya area.

Fig. 1. Map showing the location of Copán in Honduras, as well as other Maya sites.

Fig. 2. The fertile Copán flood plain, a short distance from the Acropolis. Photograph by Bunny Coates, 1999
Tunneling into the Past

Much of our work has involved tunnels, which have the advantage of being far less destructive of buried architecture than trenching. ECAP's tunnels originate from the corté (river cut), a unique exposure created over the past thousand years as the Copán River swept away the eastern margin of the Acropolis, leaving a cross-section of the layers of buildings (Fig. 4). (The river has since been diverted away from the Acropolis.) Our tunnels follow each level of superimposed buildings westward from the corté, which is over 200 meters long (north-south) and up to 30 meters high. This is possible because the ancient Maya builders buried each successive stage of architecture with wet-laid fills that can be tunneled without requiring additional support. By the close of our final season of excavation in 1996, we had opened some 3 kilometers of tunnels. By linking the ECAP network to previously excavated tunnels beneath Temple 16 and Temple 26 (see box on the history of the Copán excavations), we have an excellent overall architectural sequence.

ECAP's tunnels reveal that the Acropolis originated from three separate groups of buildings, each undergoing multiple stages of development (Fig. 5a). The largest and most complex of these is the "Mini-Acropolis of the South" (MAS). A second component consists of the Northeast Court Group, and the third is the Temple 26 Group. This last group comprises a sequence of temples and ball courts situated directly north of MAS, and now buried beneath Temple 26 and its famous Hieroglyphic Stairway. Over time MAS expanded to merge with both groups, forming a single Acropolis.

Archaeology and History

Hieroglyphic texts discovered at Copán record the reigns of 16 kings who ruled between AD 426 and 820. The famous Altar Q found in front of Temple 16 (see Harris, Fig. 1) depicts all of these rulers, beginning with Yax Ku’ik’ Mo’ (ca. AD 426–437) who bears the title of founder (see Harris, this issue). We now know that Yax Ku’ik’ Mo’ began four centuries of building efforts that expanded the Acropolis. Over this period the Acropolis was the setting for royal activities—inaugurations, audiences, council meetings, rituals, funerals, and burials.

When our research began, dynastic founder titles and royal names had been deciphered at Copán and other Maya sites. But these references were retrospective—they were in texts carved long after the recorded events had taken place. At Copán, the only contemporaneous historical references dated to the Late Classic era, two hundred years or more after the reign of the founder. In 1989 there simply was no archeological evidence to determine whether Copán’s founder accounts were records of actual historical events or later political propaganda. The excavation of the Early Classic levels of the Copán Acropolis provided a wonderful opportunity to gain such evidence.

Copán was first explored in the early 1800s and had been mapped and photographed by the end of that century. Then, in the 1930s, the Carnegie Institute of Washington tunneled beneath three major Late Classic buildings, Temples 11, 16, and 26. Gordon R. Willey of Harvard University began studying the ancient settlement remains in 1976, and Copán and its environs have been investigated continuously since then. Excavations in the Main Group dominated by the Acropolis began in 1978. Since 1988 the Acropolis has been the focus of several research programs under the overall direction of William Fash (Harvard University). One of the critical components of this ongoing investigation is the University of Pennsylvania’s Museum’s Early Copán Acropolis Program (ECAP), which I have directed since its beginning in 1989.

The first corte tunnels were excavated in 1978 under the direction of George Guillemin. After one season and the excavation of some 100 meters of tunnels, Guillemin died and this work ended. At Fash’s invitation, I organized ECAP to renew the corte tunnels. ECAP’s first two seasons of excavation defined the building sequence in the Northeast Court Group (see Sharer, Traxler, and Miller 1991), and in 1992 we began investigating a large cluster of buildings to the south of that group (see Sedat and Lopez, this issue).

ECAP’s team has grown over the years, and new specialists and consultants have joined the research effort in recent years, including Dr. Jane Buikstra, University of New Mexico (biological anthropologist), Cameron McNeill, CUNY (archeobotanical analysis), Dr. Dorie Reents and Dr. Ronald Bishop, Smithsonian Institution (ceramic neutron-activation analysis). The current staff includes Dr. Robert J. Sharer, Curator of the Museum’s American Section (Director), David W. Sedat, Museum Research Specialist (Field Director), Los P. Traxler, Assistant Curator of the Pre-Columbian Collection, Dumbarton Oaks (Excavation and Mapping Supervisor), Lynn Grant, Museum Conservation Specialist (Conservator), Ellen E. Bell, University of Pennsylvania graduate student (Excavation Supervisor and artifact analysis), Christine Carrelli, Rutgers University graduate student (construction materials analysis), Christian Wells, Arizona State University (Excavation Assistant), and Fernando Lopez, Copán Project (Surveyor and architectural consolidation).

Members of the ECAP team in 1998, from l to r: Bucky Coates, Christine Carrelli, Lynn Grant, Los Traxler, Bob Shater, Ellen Bell (rear), Jennifer Ehret, and David Sedat. Photograph by Bucky Coates.

Fernando Lopez in the tunnels.
Fig. 4. This deep section (seen in 1992) through the superimposed buildings and fill of the eastern side of the Acropolis was cut over the centuries by the Copán River. Its face has been consolidated and stabilized by the Honduran government, and the tunnel openings provide access to the early buildings discussed here.

One of our specific goals was to find direct proof to support or refute the Late Classic historical accounts. There was also a real possibility that we would find new texts with contemporaneous accounts of Copán’s earlier rulers. If newly discovered texts listed the same names and events as detailed in the retrospective accounts, the veracity of these later records could be vindicated. On the other hand, if they listed different names and events, the later accounts would be shown to be fabrications or political propaganda.

As it turned out, it did not take long to find support for the historical accounts in Copán’s Late Classic texts. Our excavations in a buried courtyard just below the surface of the Acropolis East Court found an elaborately decorated temple with a text carved on its stairway. The text records that the building was built in AD 542 by the 7th king, Waterlily Jaguar, and its staircase was rededicated by the 10th ruler, Moon Jaguar, some 30 years later. These were the same names attributed to these Early Classic kings over two hundred years later on Altar Q dedicated during the Late Classic era. After we found this Ante text, we excavated a royal tomb across the buried courtyard beneath the East Court directly to the west of this temple. The tomb held a male skeleton covered with offerings and debris that most likely represents the remains of Waterlily Jaguar himself (see Teather 1994). By this time a new monument known as Stela 63 had been found beneath Temple 26. The text on this stela records that it was dedicated during the reign of Copán’s 2nd king, and refers to him as the son of Yax K’uk’ Mo’.

**Looking for Kings**

With firm evidence supporting the dynastic histories given in later texts, we redoubled our efforts to find the earliest levels in the Acropolis, hoping to find the buildings used by Copán’s earliest kings, perhaps even the founder himself. Our efforts paid off and over the past two seasons (1997 and 1998) we have focused on two early royal tombs, labeled the Hunal and Margarrita Tombs (field names given by ECAP), discovered within the core of the earliest stage of the MAS complex (see Bell et al., this issue). Our preliminary conclusions are that the Hunal Tomb was indeed the burial place for Copán’s dynastic founder, Yax K’uk’ Mo’, while the Margarrita Tomb holds the remains of his queen.

The proof for these assertions is limited and the Margarrita Tomb identification has far less evidence to support it than the Hunal Tomb identification. While Copán’s texts provide us with information about the dynastic founder, there is no mention of his wife or any other royal woman during the founding era.

The association of the Hunal Tomb with Yax K’uk’ Mo’ is based on several different lines of evidence that all point to the same conclusion. The offering vessels in the Hunal Tomb appear to date to the 5th century, the time of the founder’s death. A jade from the chest area of the male skeleton (Fig. 6) is carved with the mat design, a Maya symbol for rulership, and near the carved jade lay a large jade bar pectoral, similar to that worn by Yax K’uk’ Mo’ in his famous Altar Q portrait (Figs. 7, 8). Study of the man’s bones revealed that this individual suffered several combat-type injuries that crippled him for the remainder of his life. On Altar Q the founder wears a small shield on his right forearm, identifying this as his parry arm; this is consistent with the severe parry fracture of the right forearm on the tomb’s bust. A later Copán text records that an unnamed individual struck Yax K’uk’ Mo’ (see Harris, this issue), which may explain the injuries preserved in the bones in the Hunal Tomb. If this man came to Copán as a conqueror, he paid a price for his victory!

Finally, strontium isotope analyses of the Hunal bones indicate that this man was not native to Copán. This finding is consistent with Altar Q’s text which says Yax K’uk’ Mo’ arrived at Copán in 426. Further strontium tests may indicate where Yax K’uk’ Mo’ came from, but at present this is not known.

Further research in both of these burial chambers remains to be done and is planned by ECAP’s team of archaeologists, with the assistance of specialists from several other disciplines.

**Conclusions**

While guided by several unchanging overall objectives, before each field season we define new questions to be examined based on our findings from previous seasons. As a result, our reconstructions of Copán’s past have emerged from a year-by-year process of gathering new evidence which, in turn, spawns plausible new reconstructions. These reconstructions are then tested by gathering evidence from further excavation in an on-going cycle.

Our tunnels in the depths of the Acropolis have documented the buildings used by Yax K’uk’ Mo’ and his immediate successors. The earliest tombs beneath the very center of the Acropolis can be proposed as those of the founder himself and an important royal woman who was probably his queen. The latter demonstrates the dangers in relying on history alone, or relying on any single source of evidence. Since there is no mention of a royal woman at this time in the Copán texts, without the archaeo-
logical discovery of her tomb we would have no knowledge of this woman, who was clearly an important personage in her own right. On the other hand, unless new texts are found, we may never know her name or relationship to the founder. Archaeology has reinforced and expanded our view of the founding events at Copán, first revealed by decipherment of its dynastic texts. While archaeology supports the dynastic history recorded by Copán’s later texts, this does not mean that all such retrospective accounts should be accepted at face value. There are certainly cases where such accounts were used by Maya kings as political propaganda. Thus, archaeology should be used to test dynastic histories before they are accepted.

At Copán archaeology also reveals events not mentioned in Copán’s historical texts. One is that around the founding date given in later inscriptions, Yax K’u’uk’ Mo’ appears to have established a new royal center that was both physically and symbolically separate from any pre-existing complex at Copán. The location of the new royal center near the Copán River undoubtedly provided important economic advantages that helped Yax K’u’uk’ Mo’ consolidate his position as Copán’s new ruler.

The timing and patterning of the remains EGAP has uncovered are direct evidence of the founding and growth of Copán as the capital of a Classic period polity consistent with the accounts recorded on later texts at the site. These findings have advanced our knowledge of the origins of rule at Copán and help us better understand the development of polities throughout the Maya area.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful for the assistance of the Instituto de Honduras de Antropología e Historia, especially Drs. Olga Joya S., Manager, and both Licda. Carmen Julia Fajardo (Chief, Department of Archaeological Investigation) and Prof. Oscar Cruz M. (Chief, Northeast Region). EGAP’s research has been funded by the University of Pennsylvania Museum (Boyner and Shoemaker Chair funds), the University of Pennsylvania Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the National Geographic Society, the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Research, the Selz Foundation, the Maya Workshop Foundation, and numerous private donors.

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