Uncovering Copán’s Earliest Royal Tombs

by Ellen E. Bell, Loo P. Traxler, David W. Sedat, and Robert J. Sharer

Fig. 1. Remains of the royal woman in the Margarita Tomb with jade and shell ornaments, after the debris had been cleared (1990). The red pigment covering the bones is oolinban, a toxic pigment.

Photograph by Robert J. Sharer

The royal tombs found buried deep within the core of the Acropolis are a potent source of information about Early Classic life at Copán. In order to glean as much information as possible about the tomb occupants and the jumble of objects surrounding them (Fig. 1), precise excavation techniques—and infinite patience—are called for.

Fig. 2. Some of the ceramic vessels found on the floor of the Margarita offering chamber.

John Harris is a retired chemist (Ph.D. University of Pennsylvania) whose interest in Maya hieroglyphic writing began with the early Maya Weekends at the UPM, and was intensified by many years’ attendance at Linda Schele’s Advanced Seminar in Maya Hieroglyphic Writing at the University of Texas in Austin. Together with Stephen Stearns, he is the author of Understanding Maya Inscriptions (2d ed. University Museum Publications, 1997). In recent years, he has co-taught a graduate course on Maya hieroglyphic writing in Penn’s Anthropology Department. He is currently a Research Associate in the American Section of the University of Pennsylvania Museum.
THE MARGARITA TOMB

The Margarita Tomb is an elaborate funerary complex that may have served as a focus of ritual activity for many years. With an upper offering chamber and a lower burial chamber connected by a staircase (Fig. 2), it is unlike most Early Classic tombs. Two additional vaults were constructed to extend the stairway at the time that later temples were built over the tomb and the Margarita platform was buried (see Sedat and Lopez, this issue). This, together with other compelling evidence, indicates that the Maya maintained continued access to the chambers, re-entering the tomb following the initial burial event.

In 1994, one year after the tomb was discovered, we assembled a team of archaeologists, conservators, artists, and photographers to painstakingly document, remove, and curate the contents of the tomb. Work in the upper chamber began with the careful removal of the southern wall to allow access to the contents. Inside were over 18 elaborately decorated pottery vessels (Fig. 2), some of which still held food (dried fish and fresh-water shrimp), painted gourds (used as serving vessels), nested baskets, jade earflares, and mosaic adornments of jade and shell. The pattern of deposition indicates that additional offerings were added after part of the vault had collapsed. The presence and extraordinary preservation of straw baskets and other organic objects prompted us to turn over the excavation of this area to our conservation team (see Grant, Fig. 6).

As work there continued, we turned to the lower burial chamber. Our first task was to shore up the crumbling plaster on the vault stones, which threatened the delicate objects below. In 1995, after the chamber walls had been stabilized, the debris obscuring the bones and offerings was removed. In the 1996 and subsequent seasons, the thousands of jade and shell pieces that adorned the burial were documented, carefully removed, and taken to the project lab.

The skeletal remains lay on a massive funerary slab set on four cylindrical stone pedestals. The stone slab had been broken in antiquity by structural settling or an earthquake. The fracturing of the slab and falling debris disturbed a number of objects, making our task of reconstructing the original arrangement of the deposit all the more difficult. But careful excavation revealed both the arrangement and composition of the remains. The slab had first been covered with a straw mat or coarsely woven textile. A thick layer of red pigment, mostly cinnabar (mercuric sulfide), lay between the mat and the elaborately dressed remains of an elderly woman (see Fig. 1). Research by bioanthropologist Jane Buikstra indicates that the woman was about 4 feet 10 inches tall and over 55 years of age at the time of her death (Fig. 4). While her identity remains uncertain, she was most likely the wife of the founder, Yax K'uk' Mo', and the mother of Ruler 2 (see Sharer, this issue).

This woman was buried with the richest array of jade and shell ornaments yet encountered at Copán. She wore intricate sandals or anklets fashioned of shell plates and knife-bands of large jade beads (Fig. 5). Strands of tubular jade beads and rounded blue beads were laid on the slab along her right side, while over 9,000 tiny jade beads (no more than a quarter of an inch in diameter) were piled on top of a thick layer of cinnabar along her left side. Her waist was adorned with sea shells, and about her were the remains of a burial garment decorated with jade beads, jade earflares, feathered bird heads, and a pyrite mirror. She also wore arm bands with three rows of large jade beads, and wrislets made of layers of tiny rectangular jade plates.

The most spectacular adornments were concentrated on the woman's torso. She wore an elaborate necklace made of shell and jade beads in a variety of shapes and sizes. The right side of the necklace was principally composed of long, curved shell beads, while the left side was made of round shell and jade beads, including a carved shell coati mundi with its paws on its nose. Her neck was also encircled by a strand of 10 large jade figures carved with symbols of elite status and rulership that may have spelled out her name and titles (see Coates, Figs. 4, 5). Tragically, only five of these were documented; the remaining pieces were stolen along with a portion of the jade and shell necklace when looters broke into the tomb in 1998. Despite this loss, the vast majority of the tomb contents were documented and safely moved to the security of the Copán Project lab.

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Because the spatial relationships between artifacts are lost when they are removed, precise documentation of the position of each object is vital to the interpretation of any deposit. The complicated arrangement of the artifacts in the Margarita Tomb, the depth of the cinnabar deposit (up to 6 inches), and the precarious balance of the tiniest beads made the recording of each object's location especially important and time-consuming. In her work in Copán's Sub-Jaguar tomb (see EXPEDITION 35(3): 56), Los Trailor had used a 10 centimeter grid to pinpoint the location of artifacts. This grid was laid out by stretching fine thread between pins placed at 10 centimeter intervals. While we wanted to use a similar system in the Margarita Tomb, we found that even the finest thread displaced small jade beads when laid across them. The problem was solved by establishing a "virtual" grid. The corners of the squares were marked by pins, but instead of stretching thread between the pins, we snapped digital photos of the gridlines, and drew in the gridlines on the computer (Fig. 6).
In 1998, the systematic documentation and excavation of the burial slab itself began (see Fig. 7). Once again digital photography and a "virtual" grid were employed. As the bones and offerings were removed, the delicate lifting procedures learned in the Margarita and Sub-Jaguar Tomb excavations proved invaluable.

The elderly man had been buried with an elaborate headdress made of cut shell "spangles," an uncarved jade pectoral, a jade bead with a mat design, and jade earflares and perforated disks adorning his upper body (one of the earflares had fallen to the floor). A cluster of stingray spines and bone awls probably used for ritual bloodletting were found along his left leg, while a jaguar claw anklet was near his right leg (see Coates, Fig. 2). A number of poorly preserved shells lay along the edges of the burial slab, which had been covered with a textile or finely woven mat.

While many of the remains were apparently undisturbed, others had been displaced, suggesting that the Hunal Tomb had also been revisited. We had been puzzled by large chunks of red-pigmented material associated with the undisplaced bones. We initially postulated that these might be desiccated human tissue, but once analyzed they proved to consist of inorganic pigment and vegetable matter, including saprophytic fungi, preserved by the red pigment (cinnabar). This means the cinnabar was applied after the body had decomposed and the fungi had flourished. Thus, both the analyzed material and the documented state of the bones and adornments indicate that the Maya re-entered the tomb, probably to conduct postmortem rituals that included painting the bones with red pigment.

At the end of the 1998 season, three ceramic
vessels were removed from the tomb floor. As with the Margarita Tomb, all of the artifacts and samples were inventoried, placed in containers, and transported to the project laboratory for further study.

In 1999, the burial slab was lifted to reveal over 21 ceramic serving vessels (Figs. 9, 10), including the deer effigy vessel and a jar painted with Central Mexican figures. One of the most spectacular objects on the floor was a shell disk inlaid with jade, shell, and pearls. Along with three whimsical shell animals (a warty-tailed jaguar and two abstract animals; see Grant, Fig. 8), this disk formed a chest ornament or collar. The disk also included two incised hieroglyphs which may provide information about its name and owner.

What's Next?

The rest of the vessels and the remaining floor offerings in the two tombs are scheduled to be recorded and removed in 2000. The human remains found in the tombs have been securely stored in containers and placed in a tunnel storage area to prevent damage caused by sudden changes in temperature and relative humidity. Once our studies are completed, we plan to return the bones from both tombs to their original resting places.

Through our investigations of these tombs, we have garnered much information about who these people were and when and how they lived and died. Their elaborate burials have provided evidence of ritual practices, trade, local craft manufacture, and diet. Further seasons of study will hopefully give us an even more detailed picture of Maya life during the Early Classic period.