

*The abandoned heart of Copan, Honduras:  
Reconstruction of a classic period maya city  
in ruins by the sixteenth century \**

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INTRODUCTION

By the time that Hernan Cortés reached Central America the focus of Maya civilization had shifted to the coastal regions of Belize and Yucatan, where great cities continued to serve as centers of a culture thousands of years old. Various economic, political and social changes which were taking place in the centuries around 1000 A.D. had left the great cities of the Classic Period, with their carved stone monuments deep in the rain forests, in a state of economic decline from which they were never to recover. With the decline in the production of these monuments characteristic of «Classic» Maya civilization, new and perhaps more elaborate cultural products began to be produced, creating a «Post-Classic» society of great richness and complexity which only now is gaining the attention it deserves (see Chase and Rice, 1985).

The important transition between what arbitrarily have been called the «Classic» and «Post-Classic» periods appears to be an extended period of change, certainly stimulated by altered external relations as well as by normative internal processes. T. Proskouriakoff (1950: 164) observed that exotic (foreign) influences

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were gaining importance in Peten as early as 9.17.0.0.0. She inferred that at Copán, as a case in point, the serpent-mouth doors and architectural (and I believe sculptural) elaboration of, for example, Structures 11 and 22 (and now Str. 18: See Becker and Cheek 1983) correlate with the cessation of dated stelae about 9.16.10.0.0.

Although subsequent research has slightly altered the dates, Proskouriakoff's basic premise appears correct. Her conclusion (1950: 171) that the Toltecs, centered at Chichén Itzá, were in direct and influential contact with the lowland Maya of this period. Proskouriakoff (1950: 140-145) cautiously inferred that these external influences were significant factors in the processes of change then recognized at Copán and at Quiriguá, as characterized by architectural (and I add sculptural) elaboration and in the cessation of the erection of stelae. Earlier (1975, 1983c) I had suggested that these processes relate to factors of political leadership («kingship») at these sites.

Some 30 years after Proskouriakoff made these inferences, Chase and Chase (1982: 609) not only reaffirmed the generally known contemporaneity of Classic period Chichén Itzá with the major sites of the southern Maya area, but argued that Proskouriakoff was correct in her pioneering evaluations. The Chases state that Chichén Itzá was «directly involved in the Southern Lowland collapse». The term «collapse» had not been used by Proskouriakoff, nor do I (nor the Chases now: Pers. Com.) see these processes as being rapid or drastic. We now all agree that some factors of the political and cultural relationships of that era were important in the processes of change leading to the society found in the Maya lowlands when Cortés arrived (Chase and Chase, 1985).

Arlen and Diane Chase (personal communication, 2 Nov. 1985) believe that the Usumacinta region was tied, by at least trade, to the west coast of Yucatan prior to 9.8.0.0.0. Seibal and also Copán seem to have been connected in other ways (political?), but the evidence seems to be in the elaboration of building decoration correlated with a deemphasis of stela erection. At Seibal, according to the Chases, this is reflected in a «break» in the stela sequence from 9.17.5.0.0. to 10.10.0.0.0. Certainly at Copán elaborate sculpture on buildings such as Str. 22 (Triak 1939) and Str. 18 (Becker and Cheek, 1983) is a late phenomenon. Earlier structures on the Acropolis at Copán show none of this kind of decoration (Becker 1983a).

Identifying the extent and significance of Yucatan influence to the south (see Chase and Chase, 1982) is an important aspect of understanding the processes of change taking place throughout the Maya lowlands around 10.0.0.0. Was this transition (ca. 9.17.0.0. - 10.0.0.0.) «troubled» as Arlen Chase (1985: 114) had suggested of part of a normative process of change? A. Chase (personal communication, Nov. 1985) now notes that cultural disjunctures appear during this period, but that there is no evidence that there were «troubled» relationships. We now know that Structure 18 at Copán dates to 9.18.10.17.18 (ca. 800 A.D.; Baudez, 1983). B. Reise (Baudez, 1983: 491) dates Copán Stela 11 (CPN 60) at 9.18.0.0.0, demonstrating its contemporaneity with Structure 18, with which it was located. The Corte excavations at Copán (Becker, 1983a) clearly demonstrate that the architecture of Structure 18, and we may assume Stela 11, fall within the normative and gradual process of architectural change slowly taking place over the centuries.

By the time that Hernán Cortés reached the New World the great rain forest cities of the southern Lowland Maya had been slowly changing for over 500 years, a period longer than that which has passed since that important explorer reached this region. The description of the cities and civilization which Cortés encountered when he reached Central America is best left to the excavators with whom I am pleased to share Mesa Redonda. My goal in this report will be to describe the process of decline in one part of a major Maya city and try to provide some reconstruction of some aspects long lost in order that we may understand better the processes of change which were active at that time.

This report will focus on the Maya city of Copán, Honduras, located at the southern boundary of the realm of the ancient Maya. Like Palenque to the far «North», and Quiriguá to the northeast, Copán enjoyed a location in a region well supplied with running water throughout the entire year, something unavailable at those cities such as Tikal deep within the Peten rain forest. At Quiriguá the annual river floods brought rich silts to renew their fields. This abundant fresh water at Copan also had a significant effect on the daily lives of the ancient Copanecos, as well as providing a means by which the construction of their buildings could be improved throughout the year. The flow of the Copan River not only allowed building materials to be rafted into the city, but

provided water at all seasons of the year for the construction of «mudded» or forced earth construction.

The Copan River, which served these people so well during the construction and occupation of the city, came to have an interesting effect on the Acropolis in the centuries after the abandonment of this portion of the site. Much of the ancient city and most of the administrative and ceremonial area lie within the broad and rich floodplain of the Copán river (see Morley, 1920: 6-7). When the ancient city was being built, the river approached from the northeast, flowing southwest toward the city before curving toward the south and bypassing the central portion of the site before setting a more westerly course on its way to join the Motagua. However, at some time after the decline of the city, probably long after 1000 A.D., but possibly before the arrival of Cortés in the area, the Copán River changed its course. The new meander of this river carried it ever closer to the Acropolis, which gradually began to be undercut and eroded away by this newly directed flow (see Turner *et al.*, 1983: 78-73). This action produced a phenomenon unique in the Maya realm — a natural archaeological section through a major feature at the site.

Probably the ancient Copanecos took steps to limit natural alteration in the river bed, as it passed within the urban zone of Copan, as part of their diverse engineering accomplishments. Certainly the massive construction at Copán created a need for construction fills which could be secured with ease by dredging water-carried material from the river channel. Such dredging of the channel also would aid in the maintenance of the course of the river. Clay-like silts and gravels would have been carried down the river into the area of the site where they could be «mined» constantly. These materials could be recovered with ease when the water was low during the dry season, providing earth and gravel for construction as well as deepening the channel of the river would add considerable volume to the channel, which would reduce the speed of flow and in turn cause even more materials to settle out of the stream. However, after the decline of the city the relentless force of the river resumed its meandering action unchecked by such human activities. This resulted in the channel changing course (meandering) and ultimately resulted in a river course which cut into the construction on the eastern side of the Acropolis. This new path for the river eroded away some of the

architecture on the east side of the Acropolis, effectively destroying a row of building in the area now called the East Plaza.

This destruction, however, had one positive effect. It exposed an incredible view of the architectural development of the Acropolis in an almost straight north-south cut. This exposed surface, caused by the river cutting away at the base and the upper portions falling down, generally is termed «El Corte» (see Becker, 1983a). This natural archaeological section created by the river will be referred to as the Corte, without quotes, to facilitate description in this paper. This specific feature of the ancient world, a river-cut section of the ancient Acropolis may have been described as early as 1576 in a report of an early *entrada*. This suggests that this process probably had begun before the discovery of the New World and before Cortés arrived, when this cutting already had been considerably advance. No wonder early as well as recent explorers were fascinated by this aspect of Copán. Whereas most Classic period Maya sites are forest covered, sprawling zones, offering the visitor only the most superficial view of the latest buildings erected, the river cut at Copán bared a sequence of construction reflecting hundreds of years of activity. This exposure existed along the Copán river long before any archaeologist considered deep excavations to investigate such an accumulation of ancient architectural efforts as this Acropolis. Juan Galindo's fascination with this natural «profile», which he first saw over 100 years ago, is understandable, and he recorded some of what he saw in a drawing. Stephens and Catherwood were equally fascinated by this feature, and their illustrations from this site had wide circulation (e.g. Stephens, 1854) and attracted great attention. Morley (1920: 7) correctly noted that it «is probably the largest archaeological cross-section in the world». A sequence of 10 photographs (Peabody Museum n.d.: Nos. 54-63) recorded this face as it existed around the turn of the century, providing a valuable record of a portion of the site which has since fallen into the old river course.

Despite the layering visible in the river cut, and the cross sections of buildings so readily evident to us, no note was made by G. B. Gordon (1896), or any of the other early archaeologists at the site, of the stratigraphic sequence clearly revealed. Perhaps Gordon did not recognize that a series of structures were here superimposed, but more likely he and others who followed found it curious but irrelevant to the excavations technique (simple surface clearing, or «temple dusting») which was then in vogue. The

state of the science of archaeology at that time was but rudimentary. To «excavate» to these people only meant to clear or discover, and only the uppermost architectural features were of interest in the early studies at Copán, as at Quiriguá and elsewhere.

Merwin's pioneering work at Holmul (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932) was begun in 1910-11 and appears to be the first attempt at gathering stratigraphic data. Merwin thoroughly excavated numerous structures such as Building B of Group II and revealed both superpositioning of structures as well as the grave sequence that enabled him to work out a ceramic sequence. This work enabled Vaillant (Merwin and Vaillant, 1932: 3) to state clearly that «a universal Middle American architectonic trait is to cover one building by another whenever styles or peoples change...». The concern for stratigraphy generated by Merwin's approach intensified interest in the river cut at Copán. By the time that Morley began his work at Copán serious consideration was given architectural sequences. However, Morley's primary interest was in the inscriptions at Copán and his program concentrated on this aspect of the site. However, archaeologists interested in Copán recognized that an important stratigraphic sequence was available along the Corte, but before anyone could investigate in the action of the river had to be terminated. This was accomplished between 1936 and 1938 by the construction of diversionary dams, repeated over three seasons of work (Strömmsvik, 1947: 64). Until recently, the requirements for the preservation of monuments and other pressing needs left little time for examining the river cut. Only E. Shook's (n.d.) outstanding drawings made during the 1940 season provided compliments to the Peabody Museum photographs.

The recent decision by the government of Honduras to develop a comprehensive program of investigation and reconstruction at Copán (e.g. Becker, 1983a) provided the basis upon which a number of related programs could be initiated. One of these concerned the use of the natural profile of the Corte to gain information about the Acropolis. During the 1978 field season the late Jorge Guillemin, assisted by Juan Antonio Valdés, began to record information from the exposed area, and tunneled into the zone below the East Plaza to secure information about the architectural history of this area. This was the beginning of the process or recording these data, prior to consolidating this area to prevent further collapse.

In reconstructing the architectural development of the eastern of the East Plaza of the Acropolis at Copán, including aspects which have been destroyed by the Copán River, an historical review is necessary to provide an indication of the original extent of this portion of the site. The earliest known reference to the ruins appears in a report of 1576 by Diego García de Palacio to Philip II. A close inspection of Palacio's report is in order since subsequent interpretations at this site often relate to statements made by this early author. Numerous editions of Palacio's report exist of which only an extract is provided by Morley (Palacio, 1920: 541). Palacio notes that in one area (certainly the East Court) one climbs to a high place, on one side of which is a tower or terrace overhanging the river. At this place a large piece of the «wall» (face of the Corte) had fallen exposing the entrances of two caves.

The area described must be that of the site of Structure 20 on the east side of the East Court. The «caves» noted refer to a pair of drains from within the East Court. These drains seen by Palacio may not be those which were recorded in 1978 (and named «García» and «Palacio») since numerous drains have been exposed over the years. For example, in 1834, Galindo (n.d.: 15, 25) described one drain which is still visible in the East Court as well as two others; and Peabody Museum (n.d.: Nos. 55, 56) photographs show many more.

Palacio (1925: 542) also notes that a grand staircase descends to the river. This «staircase» may have been debris tumbling into the river, but possibly Palacio actually saw the steps which served as the connector between the Acropolis and the river. Unfortunately, Fuentes y Guzmán (1920) made no mention of the river cut in his commentary of 1689, nor did he describe any of these above noted features.

One other seventeenth century traveler records a visit to these spectacular ruins. About the time when the Pilgrims were landing at Plymouth Rock, Antonio Vázquez de Espinoza (1968) made a tour of the Indies in which he refers to the site. In his description of the Diocese of Comayagua he notes that he visited the important city of Valladolid. From here this intrepid traveler and keen observer journeyed 30 leagues to the west to the city of Gracias a Dios. Only 5 leagues from Gracias a Dios, in a direction not noted, Vázquez de Espinoza (1968; Chap. XXI: para, 697) found a number of grand buildings from the past in the midst of a huge city

which spread from 4 to 6 leagues around, like the ruins which he had seen near Merida in Yucatan.

The description of these buildings, including «a beautiful hall» with a table (altar?) with figures on it, galleries around this hall, and tall pillars, is unfortunately vague. Palacio's report of some 45 years before may have led Vázquez to the site. Another 70 years separates this brief note from the even more scant note of Fuentes y Guzmán.

Thus this vast city continued the process of decay which had begun before the arrival of Cortez. Not until the early 1830's when Juan Galindo «rediscovered» this complex of ruins was the world to hear of this enormous legacy of the past. In an article published in the «Bulletin de la Société de la Géographie», in Paris Galindo (1920) made available the first modern description of the site. However, his fine drawings were not included, and have only recently been located (Galindo n.d.). A tomb discovered by Galindo in the East Court is near the intersection of Structures 20 and 20X (see below), and provides but a glimpse of the riches of the ancients.

The Galindo papers (n.d.: 15, 24-5) also include a rough plan and reference to the Templo «Las Ventanas» in which the scale (one *vara Centro Americana* equals 84.8 cm.) is given, but the measurements of the buildings are not exact. The east wall along the river is shown intact and the central «ventana», which I have named «Diego», is depicted as being approximately twenty-four meters long. Galindo specifically denied that these «windows» could have been drains. His Planche XIII (Galindo, n.d.: 16, 25) is a view of the Corte clearly showing the collapsed face as he saw it in 1834. This is significant in terms of the work of Stephens and Catherwood. The Galindo representation dates from 1834 (Morley, 1920: 7, n4), while Stephens and Catherwood visited the site in 1839 so that their plan postdates that of Galindo by only a few years. Galindo (1920: 596) notes that the Court is bounded on the eastern margin by a precipice along the bank of the river, but he makes no reference to a tower. Galindo provides a long account of the discovery of the tomb, and perhaps this activity distracted him from exploring the structures around this courtyard.

From the plan offered by John L. Stephens (1854: facing 81; see also 1971, vol. I, no. 9), the Copán river appears not to have cut nearly as far into the Acropolis as it had by 1910. Stephen's



plan clearly indicates Galindo's «Selpuchre and underground passage leading to the river» (I). A comparative measurement of the length of this passage as depicted on this map from the point of entry on the west to the exit at the river is approximately 3 meters longer than the tunnel as depicted by Galindo (24 m.) suggesting that Stephens had made a more accurate observation, despite Morley's (1920) suggestion to the contrary.

More significantly Stephens describes a stairway leading eastward up from the East Court to the surface of the terrace in an area later to be designated by Maudslay as No. 20 (1889, vol. V: 26). Stephens does not describe a stairway leading down to the river. Stephens (1854: 88) describes this stairway as having 15 steps leading up to the east to a terrace 12 feet wide (3.66m), continuing with 15 additional steps up to another terrace 20 feet (6.10m) wide «extending to the river wall» (to the Corte as it was known in 1854).

Clearing and excavation have revealed that there are 7 steps in the lower and 10 remaining in the upper series, separated by a terrace about 2 meters wide. These 17 steps are probably the lower «15» described by Stephens, the remainder of the stairs as well as the building having fallen into the river. Whether this upper set of stairs was *within* the building (Str. 20) I do not know.

On each side of the center of these steps Stephens perceived a mound of ruins which appeared to him to be remains of circular towers. Towers are known only from a few widely distributed areas in the Maya area. The best known is a Palenque, and the Caracol at Chichen Itzá might be included. Less well known is the tower at Nocuchich in the Chenes region, and other examples are also cited by Pollock (1965: 429). Quite probably what Stephens saw were not true towers but the halves of a building with a steep interior stairway (see photograph by Maudslay 1889). The structure appears to have been relatively tall relative to its total floor area and might be perceived as being tower-like.

On Stephen's map (1854: facing 81) there appears the letter «J» south of the drain «Diego». The key accompanying this plan notes «Remains of two circular towers with Stairs». The «Stairs» are clearly associated with towers, and there is not a stairway depicted as descending to the river. Indeed, Stephens, as noted above, indicates that this platform ended at the «riverwall» and his «Plan» (1854: facing 81) clearly indicates by «vertical» lines that the area east of this platform drops off sharply. All other stepped or terra-

ced areas on his plans are indicated by lines parallel to the long axis of the surfaces.

This description solves several problems. The interesting structure described by Maudslay (1889, vol. V: 26) and called No. 20 appears to the north of the drain «Diego», which bisects the platform. The southern portion of the platform is generally (Strömsvik, 1954, map) linked with Structure 19. If a Structure (20x) matching Str. 20 had stood to the south, the pair would have formed a symmetrical unit between which would have been a passage leading east to the terrace, and possibly the steps down to the river seen by Palacio (1920: 54) in the 1500's. By the time that Stephens arrived in 1839 the stairway to the river was gone and the «towers» were in ruins.

When Maudslay described Str. 20 in 1888 he designated the area to the south as No. 19, and notes that then he found «the remains of a row of houses which had extended nearly the whole length of the terrace, the greater part of which had fallen into the river below». I believe that Stephens may have seen matched structures to the north, and what Maudslay found were the remains of some house platforms on No. 19 as well as a portion of the platform which I believe supported the second «tower». Maudslay simply lumped these remaining features into a «row of houses» south of Str. 20. Carnegie Institution photographs (Peabody Museum n.d.: Negs. 55 and 56) show considerable debris extant in the vicinity of Structure 20.

One further bit of information regarding the surface on which Str. 20 stood may be of interest. Meye and Schmidt (1883) describe «Terrace Q», on which Strs. 19 and 20 stand, as being drained by a stone gutter. Presumably this led to the eastern edge of this area and the water flowed out to join the river.

Both Galindo and Stephens made illustrations depicting the vertical surface resulting from the collapse of ancient construction into a resolute river. The plans of this area made by these travelers differ only slightly. Galindo depicts the river as having come to a location much as it was in 1830, while Stephens and Catherwood show a broad terrace upon which stood towers. The stairway down to the level of the river described by Diego García de Palacio in his report to Philip II must have crumbled into the river before 1830.

The river cut as it actually exists today is over 100 meters long in its principal north to south aspect. This aspect continues in a

curve of about 20 meters to the northeast, and considerably further to the south toward the area where Longyear (1952: Fig. 99a) found tombs within some residential groups. Quite possibly Galindo's observation of this considerable area was made far from the terrace with tower(s) and stairway which Stephens saw. The views of the river cut shown by both of these travelers suggest that by 1830 the stairway no longer existed. The extraordinary length of the cut and the tangle of vegetation covering the ruins at the edge probably created great difficulties for these early observers. That they did not see certain features can be understood.

Meye and Schmidt (1833) only mapped the site in order to locate the monuments which were their chief concern. Although they provide few details about construction, one reference does appear to relate to the East Court area. They describe a large terrace, «once paved with flagstones, which had a stone gutter to drain off water into the river. They do not locate this surface drain, and provide only a vague identification of what I suspect may have been the remains of Structure 20.

By far the best and most important information regarding the structure which once stood on the eastern margin of the East Court derives from Maudslay's studies in 1888. A plan and photographs of this remarkable building first note by Palacio are offered by Maudslay (1889, Vol. I: 26-7). Maudslay's first volume of plates (1889: Pls. 1-3) includes an important general view of the site, a section through Str. 20, and a photograph of the vaulted stairway which was in the building. Maudslay's plan shows quite clearly that the southern stairway of Structure 21 led down to the platform upon which Structure 20 stood. More significantly, the southern edge of Structure 20 was close to the drain «Diego», which is still visible in the court area.

Maudslay's efforts were made just in time. By the beginning of the Peabody Museum expeditions in the 1890's, led by G. B. Gordon, the «tower» appears to have fallen into the river. The photographs made during those final years of the nineteenth century (Peabody Museum n.d.: Nos. 23, 49, 64-66, etc.) provide outstanding views of the enormous cut made by the river which complement the information provided by Maudslay. The relationship between Structure 20 and 21 and a construction (or «building») linking them may be seen in several photographs (Peabody Museum: 185-193). These fine pictures would allow a fairly detailed reconstruction of these structures. A series of platforms or con-

structions appear to have linked these two major structures. The «ventana» I call «Diego» between Structures 20 and 19 is also depicted (Desagüe «Diego»: Peabody Museum: Negs. 145, 166). Structure 19 was represented by a long low platform upon which Maudslay had found the foundations of several small structures which he termed «houses». The designation «Str. 17» referred only to the platform which extends to the west from the southernmost two-thirds of Str. 19.

By the time that Strömssvik and others began to work at Copán in 1936 considerably more of the Acropolis had vanished. E. Shook (1936) provides the best descriptions of the area along the Corte at that time and provides a means by which we can see the extent of damage done between 1900 and 1936. Some later Peabody Museum photographs (1942: 13, 30, 31, 34; Neg. 189) show that only remnants of the buildings (Strs. 19, 20) existed in 1942, but by then most had crumbled into the path of the river.

The Carnegie expeditions and Peabody Museum people cleared growth from vast sections of the site in order to take photographs. Their activities also involved clearing the face of the Corte, a process which exposed a nearly vertical wall. The removal of overhanging growth and undercut building remains made a safer working situation and provided a relatively flat profile or section of this portion of the Acropolis. Since most of the deterioration and collapse along the Corte took place at the base where the river was undercutting this architectural mass, the removal of brush along the upper edge can only be seen as the most efficient course to follow before attempting to work below.

Strömssvik (1947: 63) suggested that between 1888 and the time when the river was diverted in the 1930's at least 20 m. of the edge of the Corte had fallen. At this rate of approximately 0.4 m. per year one might project back roughly to 1839 and calculate that prior to Maudslay's survey of 1888 another 20 m. had fallen. All of this is speculative, but does suggest that Stephens did see many features which were destroyed by the time Maudslay reached the site. Stephens certainly saw Structure 20 and possibly other constructions, which may have included a second tower (cf. Stephens, 1971: No. 9).

Two questions might be posed on the basis of the above observations. One question relates to why Str. 17 only fronts the southern portion of Str. 19; the other is why the tomb found by Juan Galindo appears near the «ventana» (Desagüe «Diego»). If a second

tower stood directly south of Str. 20 this burial found by Galindo would have been near the axis of this «pair» of buildings. Str. 19 would then relate only to the platform designated as No. 17. The 1978 tunnel program (Guillemin, 1978) provided information suggesting that earlier construction near this locus relates neither to Str. 20 nor any hypothesized construction, which means that whatever stood at this locus has no architectural antecedents.

All that survives of Structure 20 is some of the decorative stonework believed to have fallen from its west facade over the stairway (Kidder, 1942: 249). The origins of the excavations into the platform adjacent to the drain «Diego» and along this feature are not known. The Carnegie Institution restored the structures excavated as part of their program (Kidder, 1941: 293) and went on to restore a great portion of the East Court area.

Morley's statement (1920: 10; borrowed from Stephens, 1854: 87) that the East Court was the most holy part of the city may reflect their feelings that this was the ruler's residence. The structures bordering this space are among the most fascinating at the site and suggest a complex of residential and ritual buildings worthy of a ruler. These later buildings differ from those of an earlier date. Earlier construction along the «cut» is shown clearly in a series of photographs taken by the Peabody expedition (Peabody Museum: Negative Nos. 51-56). The most evident features are broad expanses of floors which indicate a continuing relationship between this general locus and the river. Subsequent constructions on the river side of these floors required that drains be incorporated in order to carry off water from the heavy winter rains. These drains (Guillemin, n.d.: 2) can be seen in almost all views of this part of the cut, including the drawings of Edwin Shook which locate these features so well. The extent of the drawings done in the amazingly short period of 8 days by E. M. Shook (n.d.) indicates how much could be recorded effectively by a skilled archaeologist. Despite the minor errors in the work of Hohmann and Vogrin (1982) their «Photogrammetric elevation» provides an interesting overview of the cut. When put in conjunction with subsequent studies all of these earlier efforts provided a means by which a program of excavation could be developed.

This long history, the importance of the area, and the need to salvage data before they are lost forever provided sufficient reason for continuing investigations in this area.

## SUMMARY OF THE 1978-1979 EXCAVATIONS

Prior to the 1978 season 4 series of elevations (2 with plans) of the river cut had been recorded, either by camera or other techniques.

1. Peabody Museum, Harvard University: Photographic series ca. 1900.
2. E. Shook: Elevations of 1940 (2 known, others may exist).
3. Hohmann and Vogrin photogrametric survey drawing ca. 1977.
4. Guillemin-Valdes plans and sections of 1978.

The deterioration of this exposed surface between 1900 and 1940 renders difficult the correlation of the early data with the later findings, but relationship could be established through careful study. A project to link all of these data would provide three dimensional information which is not available through the simple recording of the exposed surface. This project should be initiated after the completion of the recording of the Corte face. The slow progress made by Guillemin and Valdes over an 8 month season serves as a caution to those who follow.

Two major considerations guided the development of the 1978 project (see Becker, 1983a). The first relates to the ultimate problem of consolidation and restoration of the Acropolis. Our intent was to achieve scientific goals while developing aspects of the site of interest to tourism. The second consideration was the integration of previous work with a plan for a short field season which would yield the most information to form a coherent picture of the architectural history of this locus.

The overall goal of the 1979 season was to make an accurate record of the massive profile of this natural cut, which is more than 100 meters in length. This enormous south-to-north section lies almost on the same line as the major 1979 excavation efforts in the East Plaza area. This part of the testing program was designed to determine the relationships between Platform E, to the north of Str. 21, and the surrounding structures and plaza areas. This provided a means by which the section of the river cut can be linked in almost perfect section with this other area of the site. Also part of this recording along the vast exposed profile, trenches were dug into the debris (*escombros*) at the base of the

Corte to expose the lower and earlier face of this natural section.

In addition to these general concerns of work along the Corte there also existed the possibility of testing an hypothesis relating to mortuary activities at the Structure 18 locus. The top of 18 has already been subject to drastic pitting at some time in the past. A large hole on the southern flank appeared to relate to the collapse of most of the superstructure of this temple. Quite probably a burial was sought in this portion of the structure, possibly without success. There were, however, some reasons to believe that a burial may have been associated with Structure 18.

Copán, located at the southwestern fringe of the Maya area and in a separate linguistic zone, is sufficiently removed in space from the Maya «core area», around Tikal in central Peten, that one might expect differences in numerous aspects of the culture. At Copán the evidence prior to 1979 suggested that grand interments, and perhaps burials in general, were made in front of various buildings beneath the floors of associated plazas or courtyards.

A burial pattern commonly found at Tikal (beneath ritual structures located on the eastern margins of some ritual and residential groups; Becker, 1971), was accurately predicted to exist at Quiriguá (Becker, 1972; Jones *et al.*, 1977: 11). Since the main group at Quiriguá has been said to be similar to the central group at Copán (Morley, 1935: 30-31; vol. 4: 81) and early relations between the sites were close, one might expect this similarity of mortuary pattern to be present at the latter site. Unfortunately, Quiriguá is a small site and this burial pattern is known from only one example dated to an early phase of occupation. Subsequent construction at Quiriguá buried the *oratorio* beneath which the burial was placed, but did not disguise the configuration of the plaza which the structure is a part. At Copán the vast architectural development of the Late Classic may have eliminated any possibility of recognizing such a pattern had it existed in the Early Classic. The pattern appears to have had limited impact on Quiriguá, and one might assume that the effects at Copán, if any, were equally restricted.

Structures 3, 16, and 26 at Copán, all west facing temples, might fit the architectural group pattern described for Tikal. If so, a dedicatory burial would be expected. No single example of a group, or cluster of buildings, either at the center of Copán or nearby is a clear candidate, although the Str. 3 group is the most likely of these 3 noted.

Structure 18 a north facing temple with a long platform extending from its northern edge, is in a position of the east margin of a plaza like those defined at Tikal and evident from a single example at Quiriguá. The peculiar location of Structure 18, at the southeast periphery of the Acropolis and across from one of the rear corners of Structure 16, together with the attached platform suggests that an earlier structure at this locus, as at Quiriguá, may have served as a funerary temple, or as an *oratorio* with a dedicatory burial.

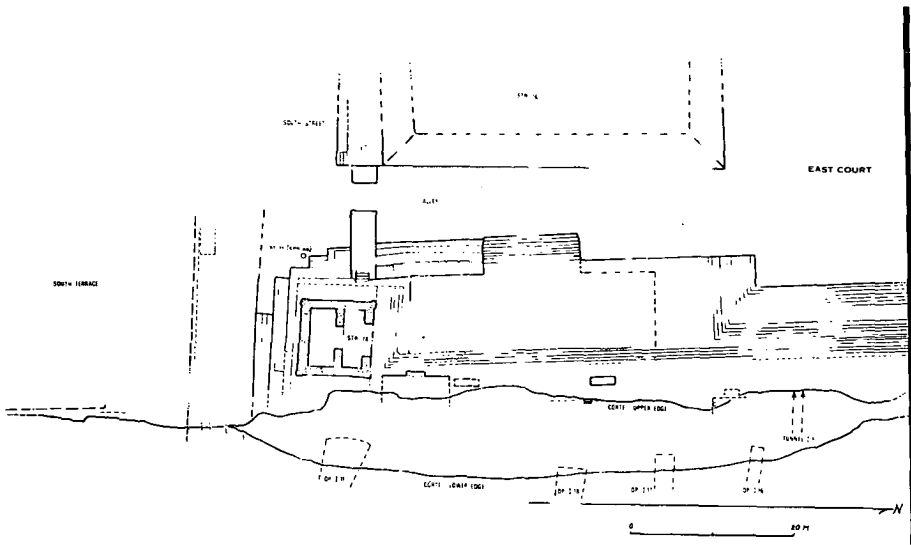
Although Structure 18 was demonstrated to cover a huge tomb the building bears no clear relationship to the theory noted above. This does not, however, eliminate the possibility that this theory may have valid examples elsewhere at the site and particularly at Structures 3 and 16. This pattern of interments may be found at Postclassic period sites, and would be important evidence for cultural continuities into the historic period. This mortuary pattern, which was fully developed by 450 A.D. at site such as Tikal and elsewhere (Becker, 1979c), can be shown to have continued for over 500 years and through all phases of the Classic period. Demonstrating continuity up to the time of Cortés, if not beyond, would show that this mortuary behavior, and presumably other aspects of Maya Society, were continuous over an enormous length of time.

These are some of the interesting points which relate to our studies of this Classic period Maya city, and how it is related to the Maya world which existed at the time of Cortés. These studies provide background for the exciting research which is now the subject of interest of this Mesa Redonda as well as excavations throughout the area inhabited by the ancient Maya.

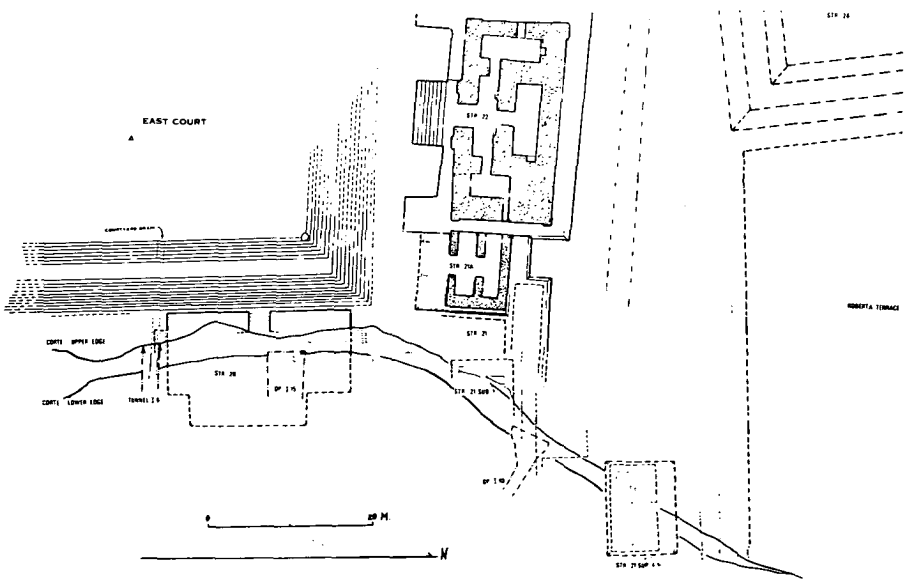
#### SUMMARY

This study of the Corte was designed both to gather information from the world's largest archaeological section and to determine if this particular area of the Acropolis held a relatively unbroken record of cultural activity dating back to the very beginnings of Copan. The probes which were undertaken in 1979 revealed a representative sequence along the River Cut. The earliest phases of occupation at Copán are only indirectly noted along this axis as well as by test pitting in adjacent areas. This work revealed





FIGS. 1A and 1B.—Plans of the area of the «Corte» of the Acropolis at Copán, along the eastern margin of the East Court.



FIGS. 2A and 2B.—Reconstruction of Copán Structure 20, derived from excavation data collected in 1979 and the work of Maudslay (1889: 27).

extensive Middle Preclassic activities in this general area, but none of the Corte probes yielded material of comparable age.

We now believe that at least 40 meters of the eastern edge of the Acropolis has been washed away by the river. On the basis of work completed to date the total damage to the Acropolis does not appear to have been significant. That Middle Preclassic occupation levels have not been encountered along the area probed does not eliminate the possibility that beneath the considerable area covered by the Acropolis there may be an important uninterrupted sequence of construction and occupation dating back that far. What has been revealed is a number of goods sequences from the very beginnings of the Classic period right up to the middle of the ninth century A.D.

Tantalizing clues also were recovered to suggest that evidence for preclassic occupation is nearby. The 1979 Corte excavations revealed a great deal about the ancient construction into the flood plain and the development of the Acropolis. The configuration of several walls and terraces exposed by the river suggests that the expansion of the Acropolis to the east was always a matter of building from a higher and previously established level out over a flat and open space of the flood plain. Thus walls of terraces facing this broad valley of the Copan River have generally been large, vertical, and atypical constructions. Although Maya buildings generally vary from region to region and from site to site, in general the platforms on which such buildings stand tend to be stepped or multiterraced. That is, each successive terrace is relatively low, and set back on all sides as one ascends the platform. Tall walls, either vertical or sloped (battered), which retain platform fills are quite rare. Often the rear of a late structure will be more steep, as is that of Temple I at Tikal and presumably Structures 22 and 26 at Copán, but in general platform retaining walls are moderate in scale. Structures dating from the Early Classic period appear to have had very different orientations (including to the north or to the south). This suggests that during the Early Classic the various building in this general area (e.g. in Op. I/3) were all at much lower levels and were not yet organized in the patterns known from the final stages of the Acropolis. Only after the Middle Classic, when vast renovations were made with huge filling operations, do we find the Acropolis taking on a form which seems to reflect political and economic developments. The earlier constructions in this area may have been larger or more elaborate

than contemporary structures elsewhere at the site, but elevations of building platforms are not known to vary significantly.

By the Middle Classic period great elevations (high substructures) for important buildings seem to have become common. The creation of an «Acropolis» by concentrating fills at one location within the site of Copán to build a massive «platform» upon which a series or related buildings can be placed appears to have been an early Middle Classic development, unless the core of the original Acropolis lies further to the west. Prior building groups may have occupied portions of this «zone», but the raising of an artificial hill was a process which involved considerable effort. This also involved amassing great wealth or power in the hands of a few. Une of socio-political power in a system employing a ranked hierarchy seems to be one of the attributes diagnostic of the Classic period.

The evidenc efrom the Corte suggests that at this part of the site the architectural trend was to have massive renovations of buildings, with large scale additions, reorientations ,and generally grand scale and cumulative development. This appears well documented from as early as the Middle Classic, but there are suggestions that this grandiose conceptualization of how to use construction and reconstruction to present a massive front may date from the Early Classic period if not before. Despite the availability of fills and the frequent use of them to raise plaza levels and generally develop massive construction, the people of Copán generally pulled down all or large parts of earlier buildings, and often excavated into existing fills in order to provide an altered architectural landscape, and not simply one which was more massive or more grand for the sake of grandeur alone. The socio-political ramifications of such changes should be explored in detail to note how architectural alterations correlate with or reflect these changes.

Despite the enormous size of the Acropolis at Copán and the vast expanses of raised plazas in the central area of the site, the use of fills and the details of construction in the development of these features were quite subtle. Rather than creating a tight, densely packed mass of structures and finely arranged constructions in a limited space (as on the North Acropolis at Tikal, Guatemala) the Copanecos built with imagination and style. Rarely does one feel that there is an overwhelming mass of construction at any one place. The Acropolis is quite large and its buildings complex and varied but one feels as if it a natural hill upon which

the ancient Maya spread their elite residential complexes, temples, and great public buildings in aesthetically pleasing patterns. The vast history of the site is not rigidly bound within a single location, but lies gracefully spaced over a broad expanse waiting to be revealed by future excavations.

The river cut has provided a natural archaeological section of enormous size. Excavations, largely in the form of debris removal to clean the actual face of the cut, demonstrated that the massive Late Classic fills which were visible in 1978 reflected a construction pattern of long standing. This filling style appears true all the way from the extreme south of the Acropolis, includes the middle terraces of the Acropolis, and also includes Platform Roberta and the Plaza yet further north. One can only assume that fills throughout the Acropolis from east to west are similiary extensive. This suggests that vast trenching would not be productive of detailed information. As a long term project undertaken to work out the details of the story which the Acropolis has to tell trenching might have some utility. Tunneling is no more productive on the whole but in certain situations, as at low elevations, may be very useful for clarifying points of interest.

In brief, several other possible projects searching for indications of the early distribution of settlement, residential patterns, and other phenomena less concentrated among the elite would appear to be more productive in a project where time and funding are major considerations. Much more specific questions about the Acropolis and the edifaces built on it can now be asked. These would form appropriate foci for research during Phase II of the archaeological project.

#### ANALYSIS OF FUNCTION: AN INTERPRETATION OF THE EVIDENCE

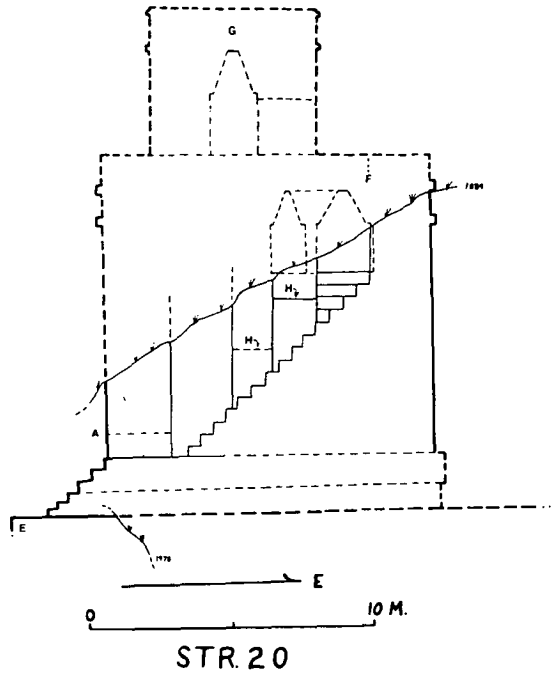
In the continued investigation of the Corte and the attempt to reconstruct the development of this vast construction a most striking feature of its history is the pattern by which the mass has grown. The increments in size which are so evident in the wide and thick fills not only increased the height and mass of the platform but they also reflect a growth in the size of individual buildings and a decentralization of structures. In brief, the early aspects of the Acropolis seem to encompass much of what may have been the heart of a growing town, probably including many if not

all of its ritual buildings. Priests or rulers may have been few in number, and social stratification probably was minimal. Through time the increasing bulk of this massive platform held fewer, but larger structures upon its surface. The space seems more reserved for an emerging elite, while craftsmen and lesser merchants and traders increasingly seem to be displaced from this «high rent district», probably toward the periphery to the south, west, and north. What possibly was a ceremonial nucleus for the site became an elite residential locus as social stratification lead to an association developing between the ruler and the ritual world.

By the Late Classic the actual uppermost surface of the Acropolis appears to be the exclusive residential complex of the ruling family. Other aristocratic families, trade legations, and the people of importance probably were resident in the complex of buildings just to the south. During the Late Classic the northern fringe area is transformed from a high status residential area into a vast public zone buffering the royal family from the masses. This transformation demonstrates the power of the ruler to control the people, who are given access to this zone for limited and specific occasions. One might compare the modern tax considerations in the United States of America where by individuals may donate large portions of their lands as public parks or as arboreta, thus gaining a tax deduction, public care of the land, and a buffer against the encroachment of the public. The middle class people of Late Classic Copán appear to be concentrated in an area to the west of the Acropolis, and scattered throughout the valley, put off by a royalty growing in power.

By 750 A.D. the Acropolis at Copán had become the sole preserve of the ruling family (see Becker 1983c). One interpretation of building function suggests that the majority of the structures of the East Court were residential in function or part of a residential complex. Only Strs. 20 and 21 appear to have had ritual uses, or functions not directly related to eating and sleeping. The West Court, however, appears to have buildings of a primarily ritual nature, chiefly Strs. 11 and 16.

That these 2 Courts are reciprocally related portions of the same entity I have no doubt. For an analogy one need only to examine the map of Iximiché included with the manuscript of Francisco Antonio Fuentes y Guzmán. The ancient capital of the Cakchiquel is depicted by Fuentes as surrounding a centralized



FIGS. 2A and 2B.—STR. 20: Becker reconstruction, after Maudslay (1889: 27) and excavation of 1979.

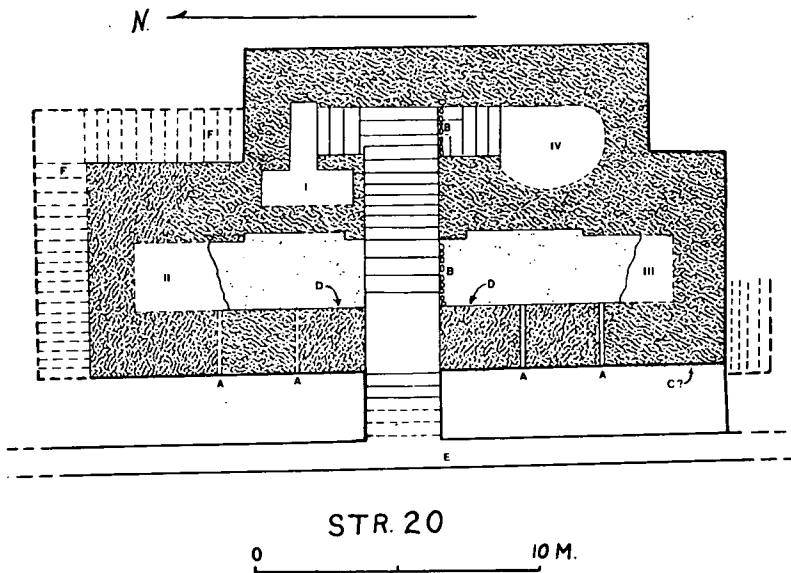
A. Slits 6 inches (15 cm) wide, which extend upward from 3 feet (1 meter) above floor to top of (known) wall. The location on the plan is not certain (see Maudslay, 1889: 27).

B. Blocking walls used to terminate functional life of rooms. These stones are faced on the stair side and built up to the vault over the the central stair, perhaps for support. Maudslay's plan shows this stone as small, suggesting that these walls simply sealed the chambers.

C. Maudslay notes elaborate ornamentation on this structure.

precinct, one half of which related to the «Plaza del Palacios» and the adjoining section noted as the «Plaza del Adoratorio» (see Maudslay II: 37-38, Pl. 73; also Guillemín 1965; Fuentes y Guzmán 1932). This ethnographic analogue appears to be documented at Copán with direct archaeological evidence from the Acropolis.

My interpretation of the West Court as a ritual zone is based on the principal structures (11 and 16) which are tall, have limited «living space» and otherwise appear to have primarily ritual functions. Structure 11 has a number of features which could



*D.* Maudslay notes a pair of heads on the wall flanking the stairway, possible used to suspend a curtain. He does not locate them, but they may have been in these positions, which are typical for «curtain holders».

*E.* Possible step no. 20 (plus or minus) of the stairway still extant at Copán which leads down leads down to the East Court. This surface also may be the Terrace floor upon which Str. 21 stands.

*F.* Hypothesized external staircase giving access to east side of roof.

*G.* Hypothesized second story (see Proskouriakoff reconstruction).

*H.* Spring of arch.

I-IV.—Chambers. Maudslay thought that the front south chamber (Chamber III) was never roofed.

be discussed as evidence for the probable function of the building, but these have been noted by others. My attention is directed to Structure 16, situated along the eastern margin of West Court and facing to the west. In every way this edifice conforms to the critical requirements of the diagnostic «temple on the east» of Tikal Plaza Plan 2 (Becker 1971), a configuration also noted at Quiriguá (Becker 1972) and elsewhere throughout the Maya lowlands (Becker 1979c). The late date of Structure 16, its huge size, and its position extending well into East Court all lead me to be-

lieve that this is a mortuary structure enclosing the tomb of Morning-Sun-at-Horizon.

In a moment I will return to the structures situated directly to the north of Structure 16, but first a few notes concerning the remaining buildings in the West Court are appropriate. The function of Structure 13 is more difficult to interpret since it appears to be a simple low square platform flanked on the north and south by low rectangular structures. Str. 14, at the west entrance to «South Street» could have served residential purposes, but like Str. 13 may have any one of a number of ritual functions. Unfortunately, our only data from this zone derives from various maps and the limited clearing done by the Carnegie Institution, much of the work being conducted preliminary to restoration.

Returning to the East Court, which is in some ways better known than the West, we find that it includes what appears to be a wide range of buildings in form and presumably function. I contend that the principal ruler of Copán (External Affairs, see Becker 1975) was resident in Str. 22 and its subsidiary buildings (Strs. 21A, 22A, etc.) Str. 25 and the complex of rooms designated as Str. 50 may have housed his staff. Str. 21, a tall pyramid of square base, probably served as a personal chapel Str. 20 is sufficiently peculiar in shape to risk considering it to have been for astronomical observations or other relatively esoteric uses which may reflect the personal interests or skills of this ruler.

Str. 20A (between 20 and 21) also may have had residential functions for members of the royal family. The remnants of structures designated as «19» along the eastern margin of the East Court have been termed houses by Maudslay and I have no reason to doubt that they served some domestic functions.

Str. 18, the building about which we know the most of all those on the Acropolis, presents certain problems of interpretation. Without a doubt the structure was built as a covering for a royal tomb, quite probably that of the wife of Morning-Sun-at-Horizon. The elaborate decoration of the building (see Baudez 1983) is not greater than that found on Str. 22, and like Str. 22 the rooms of Str. 18 must have been closed off by curtains or hangings. This is indicated by the presence of «cord-holders», the special holes flanking the interiors of doorways and used for fastening fabrics across the doorway. The floor plan of Str. 18, the total area, and the presence of lateral niches within the rooms (as indicated by the evidence in the front room) all suggest to me a residential



function for these rooms, despite the funerary nature of the original construction of the supporting pyramid. The interment of females in benches and beneath room floors of «palace» type structures of Tikal is well known (Becker field notes), and may be important to understanding the function of Copán Structure 18.

Diane and Arlen Chase (personal communication, 2 November 1985) provide an interesting interpretation which may be useful in understanding Structure 18. Their research at other Maya sites leads them to suggest that if the 2 (?) small structures north of Copán Structure 16 face to the east (are therefore part of the East Court), that the entire cluster of buildings would conform to their Plaza Plan W. Arlen Chase associates this Plaza Plan with an emphasis on women. This interesting observation leads me to suspect that there may well have been an important female in the Structure 18 tomb, just as I am certain that the last known (male) ruler of Copán is interred in a tomb beneath the final construction of Structure 16.

Perhaps an analysis of iconography associated with clearly ritual structures as compared with the iconography relating to relatively residential buildings may provide further clues to the function of Str. 18. At this time the interpretation of function for this building is not agreed upon. However, the complex of buildings of the East Court on the whole appears to be residentially oriented and I conclude that this group was the actual living area for the external affairs leader and his immediate kin, the West Court Complex being their personal ritual zone (but also see Chase and Chase, 1985, for other possible forms of political organization).

If this is the case, one might ask where the internal affairs leader resided (see Becker 1975, 1983c). I suggest that Copán Str. 3 and its ancillary buildings may be the residence of such a personage and his immediate family. If so, then we could predict that the iconography and items recovered from excavations in that important group will be demonstrated to pertain only to the site of Copán as a political entity, distinct from aspects of foreign concerns (warfare, for example) depicted throughout the Acropolis area (e.g. the militaristic panels which decorate Str. 18).

These theories reflect the excavations and interpretations of the evidence to date. As with all of Mesoamerican archaeology future excavations and details of interpretation may lead to the development of new theories as to how the ancients lived and how their society developed (Becker 1979a, 1979b), but at this time

these data and the interpretations drawn from them are presented for your inspection and as a contribution toward our mutual goal of knowing the Maya past.

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