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NEW INSIGHTS ON THE ACROPOLIS OF KAMINALJUYU, GUATEMALA

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Between 1958 and 1962, the Guatemalan archaeologist Gustavo Espinoza conducted a number of deep excavations at the Acropolis of Kaminaljuyu (Group C-II-4). At that time, these were the largest excavations conducted by an exclusively national team, with extensive test pitting and tunnels that delimited the borders of the talud-tablero type buildings. The evidence of floors defined with the use of trowels, and test pits with the primary objective of uncovering superimposed buildings, show, altogether, a much developed sensitivity regarding the archaeological strata. Espinoza used a method for excavating tunnels opening them in the form of an arrow (with the tip up) to maintain structural stability, often following the alignment of some architectural trait detected, to guarantee appropriate safety levels.

It is possible that Espinoza lived one of his earliest field experiences at the Acropolis, under the supervision of A. Ledyard Smith, who investigated the presumed "ballcourt" in C-II-4, around the beginning of World War II (Shook and Smith 1942:265). At that time, Smith found an architectural mode affiliated with Teotihuacan –the talud-tablero feature- at the end of his trench. It is presumed that it was then when Espinoza initially considered the Acropolis as a future focus of investigations to be conducted by the National Museum of Archaeology.

Today, the area excavated by Espinoza has become a city park under State control, used by people as a tourist attraction and focus of indigenous ritual activities as a sacred place. However, all these cavities and sections, profiles and tunnels, the origin of nearly 4000 m3 of refill and earth removed by Espinoza, have remained unpublished –with the exception of a report written by Charles Cheek in 1962, based on drawings made by Tatiana Proskouriakoff.

Therefore, it was decided to initiate an exhaustive record of Espinoza's excavations as part of the Kaminaljuyu Park Project, with the financial support of Brigham Young University. Several questions come to the minds of all those who visit the Acropolis: which are the construction and chronologic sequence, the function of buildings, and above all, the links between the talud-tablero buildings of the Acropolis and the

analogous architectural traits from Teotihuacan? Each one of these questions have been responded, with different degrees of confidence, by the investigation conducted in 2003 (Houston *et al.* 2003).

The first levels of the Acropolis can be presumably traced back to the Preclassic period. However, there is no explicit evidence of this dating, and most of the strata detected in the pits around the Acropolis contain Early Classic sherds (Popenoe de Hatch, personal communication 2003). That which can be confirmed is that the earlier levels represent extensive areas in the form of embankments which possibly reach the margins of the original border of the Acropolis. The only way of defining the nature of those traits, at least of three of them, one on top of the other, was by means of tunnels or trenches that approached the deposits from the outside.

The more illustrative construction phases are those showing the talud-tablero style (Figure 1). The main problem regarding this type of architectural mode, at least as far as interpretation is concerned, consists in defining its ancient meaning in a variety of contexts. The findings accomplished by Laporte (1988), and Plunket and Uruñuela (1998) prove the complexity of the origin of such mode. Although heavily eroded, there is no doubt that Building F, in fact only a component of Structure A/F, and in spite of an opinion on the contrary by Proskouriakoff, displayed murals with red circles on its south panel. Similar designs may be observed in Substructure 3 of the Temple of the Feathered Snails (Miller 1973: 33-34, Figs. 58 to 62). In this case, the panel may have worked as a place for exhibition, with designs –including textiles- protected from the elements by the structural eave. Unfortunately, the proportions of the talud-tablero samples do not provide much information, as the laying of the additional floors, as was the case with Buildings E and A, reduced the size of the sloping panel, while the measures of the horizontal portion became equivalent.

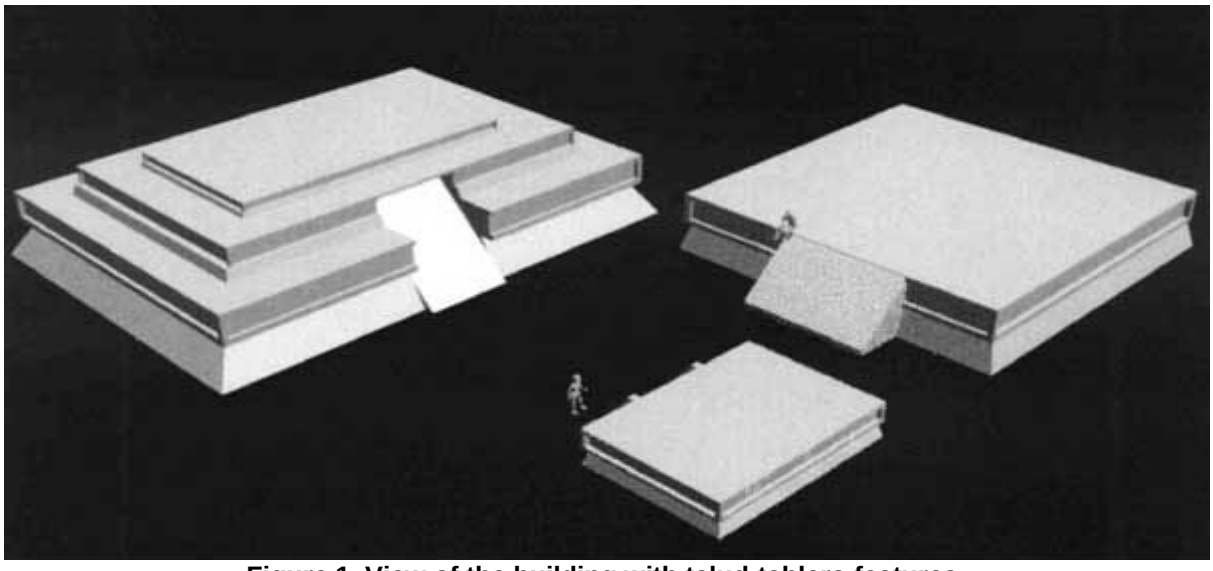

Figure 1. View of the building with talud-tablero features.

No doubt, the first building with a talud-tablero was Building E, a structure that according to Ellen Spensley (Houston *et al*. 2003:55) evidenced a crucial change regarding construction materials, which switched from the clay of the presumed

Preclassic levels to a pumice and clay matrix with signs of burnishing. The floor around the final stage of the building showed clear evidence of a perimeter of missing posts or sculptures, traces of which were observed in Buildings G and K, with something similar in Structure A-2 excavated by the project run by the Carnegie Institution of Washington (Kidder *et al.* 1946: Fig. 106b). Probably, Acropolis Building E may have been connected with a two-terrace platform now hidden behind Building G, implying that the latter was never exposed as a complete building but merely as a façade. An additional interesting feature of Building E is the presence of a construction stage that failed as a consequence of instability of the horizontal panel, in a way that the architects of antiquity added other stages, at times with vestiges of blue, yellow and red colors. Finally, it should be observed that the final orientation of Building E, in relation to Building A/F, is very similar to the "altars" in the sectors of Atelelco, the West Plaza Group, Tetitla and Yayahuala in Teotihuacan. Consequently, we do not concur with Geoffrey Braswell (2003b:121, Fig. 4.2), who suggests a considerable difference between the ground plans from buildings of Central Mexico and those featuring a "Teotihuacan" style at Kaminaljuyu. In fact, recent information about the Acropolis stresses the risk of comparing superficial traits, because in general, the architectural attributes that are visible date to the Late Classic period.

A test unit conducted in Building A/F by Espinoza, which has remained unpublished, was drawn in 2004 by Carlos Alvarado. The internal sequence confirms that this assemblage with two talud-tablero components corresponds to the same construction event. While examining the upper portion of Building A/F it was clear that the structure still had another level, this time with a half-tablero, that is, without its lower feature. This talud-tablero was severely damaged by a leveling event occurred at a later date. Therefore, an inversed entasis effect, a sort of exaggerated perspective, could be considered. Each level displayed, before the public attending the plaza, the effect of a progressively more reduced size, until the lower feature of the tablero, at the third level, became no longer necessary; in other words, the functional accent was decisively decreased to the view or the sight of those observed upwards, from the plaza. On the contrary, the visual effect in the Amatle phase (Late Classic period), distinguished itself for the emphasis placed on the horizontal perspectives of the plazas, perhaps for ceremonies of a more civic nature, such as dances or processions.

Building G shows an enigmatic trait that presents an additional and so far unknown aspect of the talud-tablero buildings from Kaminaljuyu (Houston *et al.* 2003: Fig. 6). A pit excavated by Espinoza contained a box of mortar and stones that worked as the container for a post of at least 0.30 m in diameter. It is probable that a parallel post, destroyed by the subsequent construction of a drainage made in part with slabs taken from a horizontal panel, was placed symmetrically at the other side of Building G. George Cowgill (personal communication 2003) reported that a trait with identical attributes was excavated at the Abutting Platform of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent in Teotihuacan.

Within such context, the much distinctive mode of talud-tablero construction at the Acropolis is often mentioned. Without exception, its refills include some charcoal fragments and scarce ceramic evidence, as if they were deposits thrown down on

purpose or retrieved from new sources of construction materials. In addition, surfaces were made with a special type of sticky concrete, perhaps, because of its red appearance, “fired” before its application and formed by moldings, like in the modern technology of construction. As a support, the horizontal panels have several bifacial stones carved with an amazing precision, without deviating not a single centimeter in the alignment. Another surprising attribute was the method used for applying the concrete vertically: the overlapping pattern makes it possible to distinguish “work tasks”, each one with some 3 to 4 cm in length, placed on a counter-clockwise direction, beginning at the stairway’s axis and ending right at the same place after the process of covering the talud-tablero with its thin layer of pumice and gravel.

In interpreting this information it is advisable to re-examine the “absolute” dates taken from this talud-tablero buildings. For now, the only chronometric dates are derived from Daniel Wolfman’s work based on archaeomagnetic methodology (Wolfman 1973, 1990; Braswell 2003a:91). The dates are concentrated on AD 490-525, and AD 500-520 (Building A), and AD 585-610 (Building D), with the presumption that all these structures can be traced back to a time prior to AD 610. Thanks to several charcoal fragments detected in the profiles, it was possible to retrieve samples for a process of regular radiocarbon chronology and AMS (Figure 2). Originated right on top of Building E, the oldest talud-tablero in stratigraphic terms, revealed a calibrated date of 1520 +/- 35 BP (AA55657), and in the layer on top of the final level of the talud-tablero time span, a calibrated date of 1475 +/-30 (AA57656). With the help of Ian Robertson, Stanford University, these dates were calibrated together with other dates obtained from talud-tablero contexts in the Acropolis, to the first decades after 500 AD, in other words, in full concordance with Wolfman’s approach.

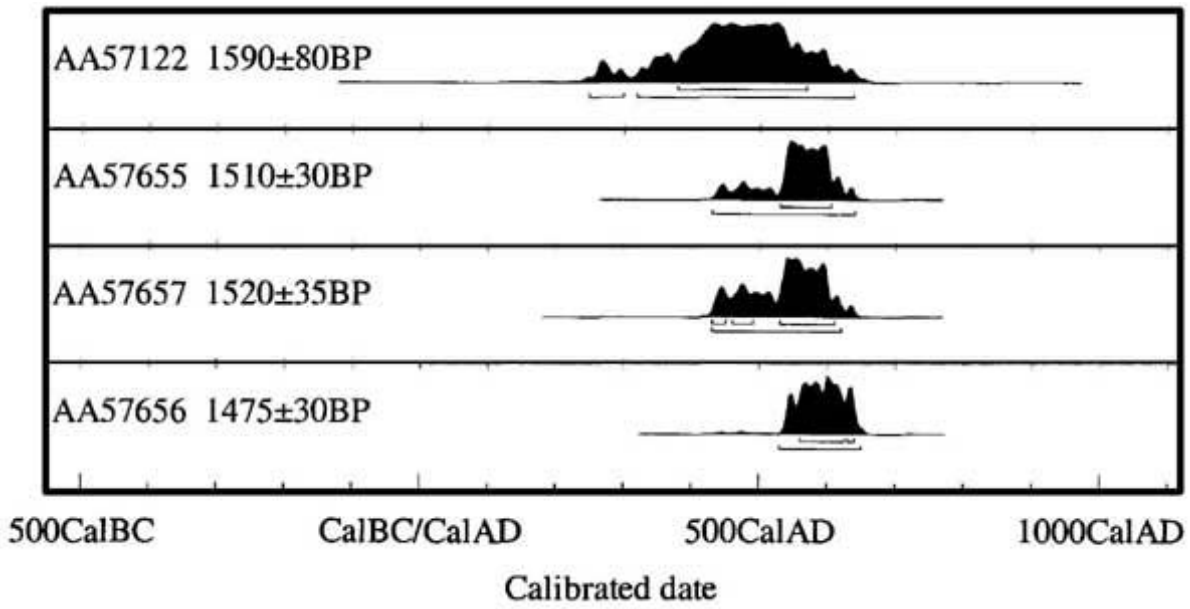

Figure 2. A.M.S. dates related to talud-tablero buildings.

The deposit that covers these levels, in the upper part of a tunnel behind the summit of Building F, provided a dating to AD 770 (between AD 620 and AD 920 [A-13080,

1180 +/- 150, n.b., not calibrated), obviously of the Amatle phase. The most impressive of these dates is their internal consistency and the evidence that the interval between the first and the last buildings that show the talud-tablero style at the Acropolis statistically comprise one single event, with rapid construction occurrences. Such observation brings forward two implications:

- That the dates are later than the presumed "entrance" of Teotihuacán's in Tikal in AD 378 and than the acts related to the foundation of the Copan dynasty in Honduras.

- That at the Acropolis, this event may be considered as a very restricted period of contact with other places.

One possibility is that the technology of the talud-tablero buildings, an architectural mode obviously introduced, though probably not from Teotihuacan, was the result of a very small group of foreign specialists; in other words, it has nothing to do with an event represented by the intrusion of a group of "warriors" or "*pochtecas"*, or of sovereigns from Central Mexico, but rather, with a highly limited historic process which was supervised by the Kaminaljuyu rulers themselves. Therefore, this guideline seems to become quite separated from the observations made by Bove and Medrano for the South Coast of Guatemala, where there is evidence of direct contact with Teotihuacan (Bove and Medrano 2003: 72-73).

The new data are consistent with several recent models that emphasize the autonomous behavior of Kaminaljuyu in matters of contact with Teotihuacan (Braswell 2003, ed., *passim*). For example, according to Marion Popenoe de Hatch and Zachary Hruby, only a few sherds of a Teotihuacan character were recovered during the excavations carried out by this project at Kaminaljuyu, as well as an extremely scarce amount of green obsidian from Pachuca. It is suspected that the use of concrete may reflect some more intense contacts with the Mexican Gulf Coast. Nevertheless, this speculation does not invalidate the fact that the present understanding of the Kaminaljuyu polity during the Esperanza phase is practically null, given the absence of hieroglyphic texts that did in fact exist in earlier times. Besides, although the foreign contact may have a strong side, it seems to have been limited to the highest ranks of the urban society at the site. The data available at Kaminaljuyu do not allow for refuting characters such as *Sihyaj K'ahk'* from Tikal, or *Yax K'uk' Mo'* from Copan.

The sculpture at the Acropolis represents an additional problem of interpretation. The studies accomplished at Kaminaljuyu have led to the development of some kind of dogma, courageously confronted by Federico Fahsen among others, by which there is little or none sculptural works of the Esperanza phase at Kaminaljuyu (see though Parsons 1986: 81-83). No doubt, the "architects" of the talud-tablero buildings in Kaminaljuyu did in fact incorporate sculptures of the Verbena or Arenal phases, a good example of which is represented by the so far unrecognized talud-tablero building located across the street, behind La Palangana (Figure 3).

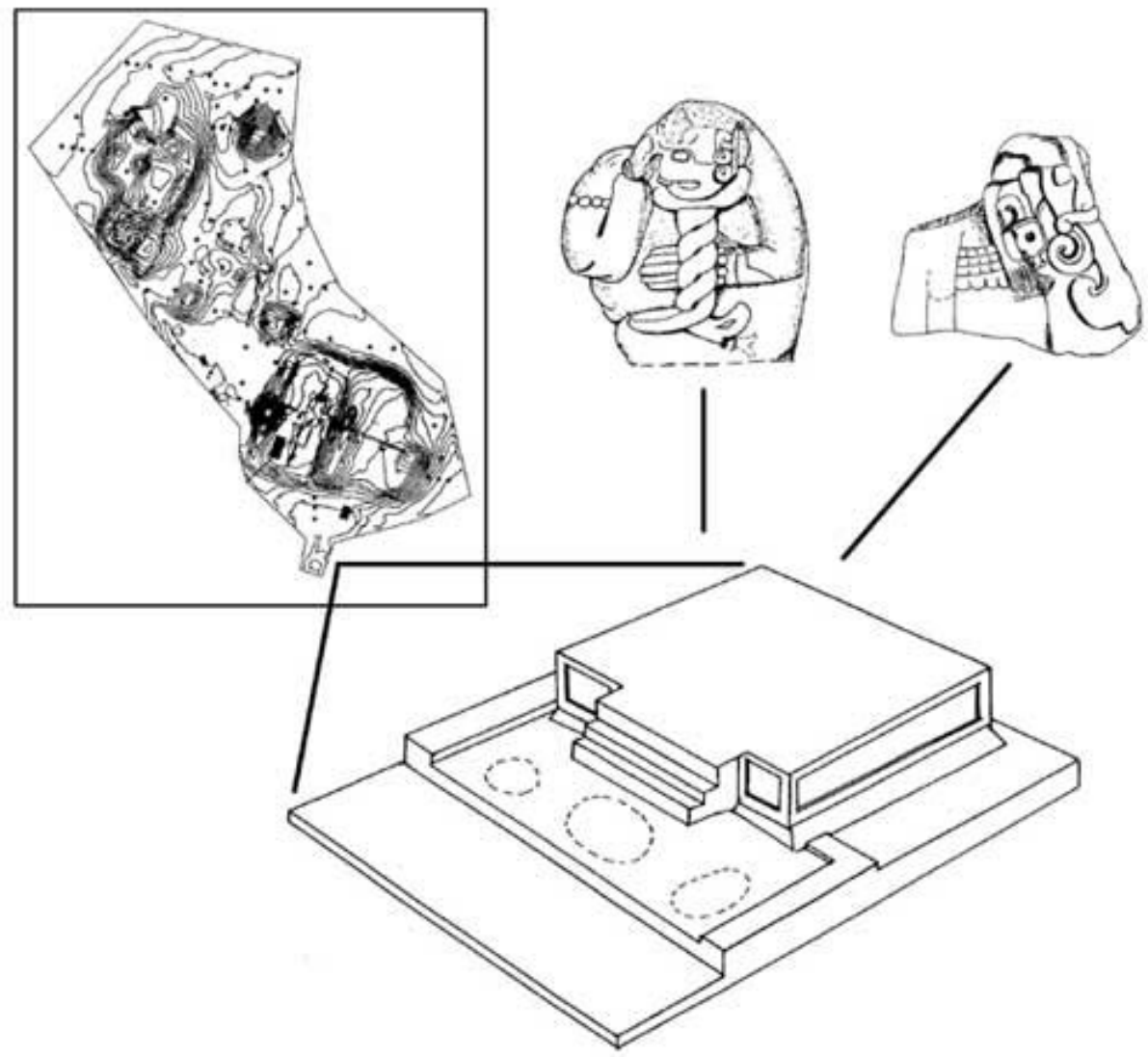

Figure 3. Talud-tablero building outside the limits of the Kaminaljuyu Park.

There, Monuments 42 and 43 are still in place –the second being a representation of a headdress- on a platform, just like Cheek found them in the excavations he conducted at the plaza in La Palangana. It is rather surprising that the two sculptures presently found at the Acropolis, a jaguar (a tenoned sculpture) and a skull (with a censer function and signs of its base in the first terrace of the talud-tablero, Building G), were not previously described by other authors (Figure 4). Clearly, the jaguar represents this feline in a purely, almost metropolitan Teotihuacan style, as is the case of the serpent-shaped tenon found at Cobá, Quintana Roo (Benavides 1981: Fig. 28). Another monument from Kaminaljuyu, Stela 13 (Parsons 1986: Fig. 188), of unknown provenience, probably functioned as part of a beam of a pure Teotihuacan style (see photo in Kerr #8037). An additional sculpture, Stela 23 (Parsona 1986: Fig. 190), seems to include a day sign, but again, in the form of an individual from the city of Teotihuacan.

Figure 4. Sculptures from the Acropolis of Cobá, at the lower left, and from Kaminaljuyu, at right.

In the final construction stages of the Acropolis of Kaminaljuyu there is evidence we cannot discuss in detail in this report. After the talud-tablero epoch, there is an uninterrupted phase of use, with constructions built with some kind of adobe (*talpetate* blocks covered by thin layers of daub). In the final stage, the Amatle phase, there is a crucial change in the construction process of buildings within the Acropolis. Instead of the highly specialized method of the talud-tablero, and as opposed to the age of the red painted *talpetate,* with traces of a continued exhibition of samples of the talud-tablero mode, all previous buildings were covered with deep layers of mud, with foundations and cobble alignments possibly extracted from a ravine, considering their forms modeled by the movements of water.

It is now important to refer to the subject of the specialization of those buildings that corresponded to the very much extended Amatle phase, as they occupied the entire superficial area visible today, they represented huge energy investments with implications in the social organization, but with construction forms so simple that they could be reproduced by any peasant. It is evident that the time of architectural specialization was over, and Kaminaljuyu would soon begin the long journey to its present urban decay.

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