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Foothill Settlement and Urban Planning at Late Classic Copán, Honduras

Interim Report

Research Year: 2000

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Late Classic

Location: Copán, Honduras

Site: Comedero Region

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Introduction to Harvard's Project at Group 9J-5

The recent project at Group 9J-5 developed out of a growing interest on the part of IHAH (Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History) to protect areas of the northern foothills of the Copán ruins. Currently, the ancient monuments of this foothill region are located on privately owned land. The long-term aim has been to work towards incorporating the monuments of this area into the archaeological park of Copán, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is presently the third largest generator of revenue from tourism in Honduras. Thus, plans for the preservation of its monuments and their inclusion within the Institute's administrative purview are ongoing, as demonstrated, not least, by the drawing up of a new park management plan, due for submission by the end of March 2001.

In 1994, the owner of the land around Group 9J-5 bulldozed a minor portion of the site in order to build a new house. Professor William Fash of Harvard University has long-recognized the importance of the group (see Fash 1983) and, at the urging of the Institute, he initiated the Archaeological Project at Group 9J-5 the following year. Fash has served as Project Director since that time, and Allan Maca, a graduate student at Harvard, has been Field Director since 1996. Many of the data from five seasons of

large and small-scale excavations at 9J-5 are included in Maca's (upcoming) doctoral thesis.

Within the Harvard typology (see Willey and Leventhal 1979), Group 9J-5 is a 'Type 4' site, i.e., one of the most complex and monumental in the Valley of Copán. Outside of the Principal Group, there are only eight other architectural groupings so designated. Group 9J-5 consists of more than thirty mounds organized around six plazas. Although there are considerably earlier strata (dating to ca. A.D. 500), all of the sampled surface architecture and deposits date to the Late and Terminal Classic periods, between A.D. 750 and 950. Two of the group's plazas are considerably large and notable. Plaza B measures approximately 20 × 40 meters, and is framed on all four sides by architecture, most notably by a 30 m long range structure on the east side. Plaza A, while smaller in area than Plaza B, is perhaps the most remarkable architectural assemblage of the group. Its elevated and monumental U-shaped arrangement, remnants of façade sculpture, and its sweeping view to the southeast over the Copán Valley, make this plaza one of the foremost wonders of the ancient city.

Located approximately 600 meters northwest of the Principal Group of ruins, in the Comedero region (Fash and Long 1983), Group 9J-5 sits approximately twenty meters above the valley floor. At 617.50 m (above sea level), the elevation of Plaza A is within about fifty centimeters of the elevation of the East Acropolis platform, on which sit the prominent buildings of the East Court, including the Council House (Str. 10L-22A) and Temple 22 (Str. 10L-22). Were it not for the modern forest cover in the Principal Group, one could peer just beyond the remains of the structure atop the Hieroglyphic Stairway to the (dance) platform located immediately south of Structure 22A on the East Court.

From the west side of the Great Plaza of the Principal Group (approximate elevation, 600.00 meters), remnants of one of the two ancient roads (or sacbes) extends northwestward in an arc, terminating just 100 meters from Group 9J-5. The actual terminus point is marked by a low structure near the base of Cerro Chino, a hill to the west of Group 9J-5 upon which rest approximately ten mounds dating to the Proto and Early Classic periods. Part of the final length of this road extends along the west side of the (Plaza A) U-Group at 9J-5.

Fash has proposed that the road conducted pilgrims and celebrants between the Principal Group and Cerro Chino, the latter of which may have served as a natural shrine or ancestral monument. Due to 9J-5's proximity to Cerro Chino, its direct association with the road, and the presence of sculpture fragments discovered in surface survey, Fash hypothesizes that Group 9J-5 was intentionally integrated into the dynastic sphere (1983). Test excavations carried out in the 1980s and in 1995 demonstrate that the majority of large surface architecture at the site dates to the Late Classic Coner ceramic phase. The project was begun in an attempt to assess to what extent the growth of the site could be attributed to royal designs for social and spatial circumscription of local communities or lineages. For example, did Group 9J-5 develop *ex nihilo* for purposes dictated by the dynasty, or did the site have its own long, and complex history? To answer this and other questions, the project began with three simple objectives: To understand (1) the length of the site's occupation; (2) the

relationship between the site and the sacbe; and (3) what information regarding site function could be gleaned from *in situ* sculptural motifs.

Before 1995, two other projects dug test pits at 9J-5: PAC I in the late 1970s (during which time William Fash himself supervised excavations); and an extension of PAC II (during which time AnnCorinne Freter, then of Penn State, supervised excavations of about a dozen pits). The current Harvard/IHAH Archaeological Project at Group 9J-5 began largely as sculpture reconnaissance, with much of the strategic test-pitting carried out along the sides of large buildings. This was done in an effort to evaluate the broader importance of the site during the Late Classic period, and to enable comparative analyses with other sculpture-bearing monuments in the Principal Group and elsewhere (as has been done successfully in projects from PAC I to PAAC, and the ongoing effort of the Copán Mosaics Project under co-Directors William Fash and Barbara Fash).

Early in the 1997 field season, however, it was discovered that the site had a longer and more complex history than had been anticipated. Although dozens of sculptural fragments were found, none could be found *in situ*. Rather, a significant number of sculptural fragments were found incorporated into late constructions dating to the late 9th or early 10th century. Due to this discovery, methods and objectives were shifted to include limited excavations of two large buildings (9K-89 and 9K-88) and sections of the plaza (Plaza B) associated with them. This was deemed necessary in order to derive more and better information relating to site development, to attempt to answer the initial questions with straight-forward horizontal exposure. Through analyses of stratigraphy and excavated ceramics, we now know that the site was occupied up to and through much of the 10th century. This characterizes for the first time a Terminal Classic ceramic phase at Copán, one that accentuates the role of the settlement groups in the northern foothills of the city.

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Proposal for FAMSI Funding

The FAMSI proposal requested the funding necessary to continue three phases of data analysis. These consisted of laboratory analyses in Copán, especially of macrobotanical materials and ceramics; the AMS dating of six carbon samples; and the continuation of a laser mapping/GIS survey that encompasses the topography and architecture of the western region of the northern foothills. Funds were granted for lab analyses and for mapping, but were not provided for the processing of C14 samples.

FAMSI support has been a boon to the project. It allowed for Allan Maca to spend June and part of July 2000 in the Regional Center for Archaeological Research at Copán. He

continued the analysis of ceramics and human remains and oversaw the ongoing work of a project artist, also funded by FAMSI. Lincoln Vaughan of the Yale Forestry Department was brought to Copán to oversee the flotation and preliminary characterization of more than three hundred soil samples, each between one and two liters in volume. The mapping effort was continued during the fall (2000) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, using Arch View GIS software and Golden Surfer. Maca worked with Marc Wolf of TAMS (NY) to incorporate the foothills' data into the GIS format. Maca and Wolf also spent part of February, 2001 in the field in Copán, employing a Sokkia digital theodolite belonging to Wolf. As explained in section four, these data are presented in the FAMSI Final Report.

Results of Proposal to Date

For this Interim Report, there are provided only the results of the recent analyses of human remains and ceramics. During the 1997 field season, two human 'offerings' were discovered, laid out in association with the terminal phase of Structure 9K-88. One was placed 1.0 meter north of the building's northwest corner, directly atop the final phase stucco of Plaza B. The other was placed against the east wall of the building, directly on top of the final stucco phase of a corridor between 9K-89 and 9K-88. Both were flexed and neither interment enjoyed elaboration, though cinnabar was found to have covered parts of the skeleton of the north side. Their placement immediately on top of the final phase plaza and corridor, respectively, would support other project data that suggest large-scale termination events at Group 9J-5, sometime after A.D. 800. The presence of secondary middens covering the major public access stairs to Plaza B (in the southwest corner), as well as covering the broad corridor between Structures 9J-33 and 9J-34, also an access to Plaza B, would indicate intentional disruption of passage to and from the site core.

Interestingly, the context of the interments is not the only evidence to suggest the possibility of termination events. With the assistance of Rebecca Storey of the University of Houston, it was determined that both 'offerings' were male and of average stature. Based on an examination of the cranium of the eastern 'offering', Megan Rhoads of the University of New Mexico noted that there is rather severe nasal prognathism, suggesting some type of physical distinction for this individual in life. Maca and Rhoads made a closer study of the long bones of this individual, and discovered extensive cut marks on many of the upper and lower limbs, representing some form of extensive, post-mortem evisceration and dismemberment. Clearly, the sample begs interpretation as ritual sacrifice. However, this is a rare case at Copán and, until other similar data are found for comparative study, the meaning of this lone example will remain elusive.

Other analyses carried out during the summer (2000) largely involved the study of ceramics. Northwest of the NW corner of Structure 9J-38W, 1999 excavations uncovered three phases of paving where the sacbe grants access to the site core and Plaza B. Above the final phase was found a dense deposit of ceremonial vessels of the

Sepultura type. Analysis of a mere 50 cubic centimeters of this deposit determined that there are more than thirty pots of this type alone, and more than sixty in total. Much of the Sepultura sample consists of censer wares, but braziers, bowls, and comals are also represented. Of most interest, however, was the discovery that many of these censers have elaborate anthropomorphic and zoomorphic appliqué designs, similar to those of the Sepultura vessels found around the outside of the tomb of Ruler 12 (beneath the Hieroglyphic Stairway). The meaning of this deposit remains to be unraveled, but, taken with other lines of evidence, including those mentioned above, it is likely that Group 9J-5 had a role that was not limited to 'residential' during the Late Classic period. In fact, unequivocal evidence of living debris is only found after the site's 'termination', during the period of the late 9th and early 10th centuries.

Outline of Final Report

The Final Report to FAMSI details the results of recent advances in the mapping of the foothills region around Group 9J-5. It characterizes numerous new data, including those gathered during a field season in the month of February, 2001, during which time FAMSI funding provided for the surveying work of Allan Maca and Marc Wolf. The report includes a copy of the current map as well as, for comparative purposes, a copy of the Fash and Long map (1983). Many new buildings have been identified in the region, and numerous undiscovered terrace structures have been found and accordingly mapped. Perhaps most impressive is the discovery of a major architectural monument that, for its location in dense foliage amidst the Quebrada Comedero, was previously undetected. This single find greatly expands the surface extent of Group 9J-5, and forces a re-evaluation of settlement layout and design in Comedero.

The Final Report also explains plans for future study of the northern foothills, especially with respect to the ongoing mapping project, carried out in cooperation with IHAH and local landowners, and through the collaboration of Allan Maca and Marc Wolf.

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