

# Excavations, Interpretations, and Implications of the Earliest Structures Beneath Structure 10L-26 at Copan, Honduras

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## Introduction

Investigations of Copan Structure 10L-26 began over a century ago with the Peabody Museum (Gordon 1902), and continued again in the 1930s with the Carnegie Institution and again in the 1970s with the first phase of the Copan Archaeological Project (Cheek 1983). Present excavations began in 1985 with the Copan Mosaics Project (W. Fash 1988), and continue today. Curiosity about 10L-26 is not hard to understand given its famous Hieroglyphic Stairway, the longest in the New World. Structure 10L-26 is located on the northern edge of Copan's Acropolis and immediately south of the Ball Court.

The goal of the Copan Mosaics Project investigations of 10L-26 was twofold (W. Fash 1988). First and foremost, the project was formed to assist in the conservation and documentation of the 10L-26 and other mosaic facade sculptures strewn about the Principal Group of Copan, and to preserve the Hieroglyphic Stairway itself. Second, the investigation of this glyphic and iconographic material allowed for the opportunity to piece together how religion and history were manipulated by the 8th century kings for their own agendas in response to rising political problems. The research design (W. Fash 1988) was specifically formulated to resolve the question of who controlled Copan after the decapitation of Copan's 13th ruler, 18 Rabbit, by Cauac Sky of Quirigua in A.D. 738, and whether the Hieroglyphic Stairway was commissioned as a conquest monument by the rulers of Quirigua or as a colossal attempt by

the Copan lineage to re-legitimize their right to rule.

Epigraphic, iconographic, and archaeological data have shown that the construction of the Hieroglyphic Stairway was an indigenous achievement (B. Fash 1989; W. Fash 1988; Fash and Stuart 1991; Stuart 1992; Stuart and Schele 1986a). But how much historical truth was reflected in this monument was still to be questioned. By comparing the text of the stairway to inscribed texts that were created during the earlier centuries at Copan and Quirigua, epigraphers were able to obtain independent confirmation of the historical accuracy of the Hieroglyphic Stairway (Stuart and Schele 1986a, 1986b). However, it also became apparent that investigation of the earlier structures buried beneath the final phase of Structure 10L-26 was necessary. By reconstructing the architectural and religious use of this locus through time we could determine how innovative or conservative the final phase monument was in comparison to its predecessors.

With this in mind research within the pyramidal base of Structure 10L-26 began in 1986 and still continues today (Fash et al. 1992). The strategy behind the tunneling operations was to begin excavations from the point of the known architectural features exposed in the tunnels excavated by Gustav Stromsvik (1952) and later expanded by Charles Cheek (1983), to the unknown, in order to document the architectural history of this locus through space and time. The tunnels offer a non-destructive method of obtaining this informa-



*Fig. 1 Decorative motif from southern corner of Mot Mot.*

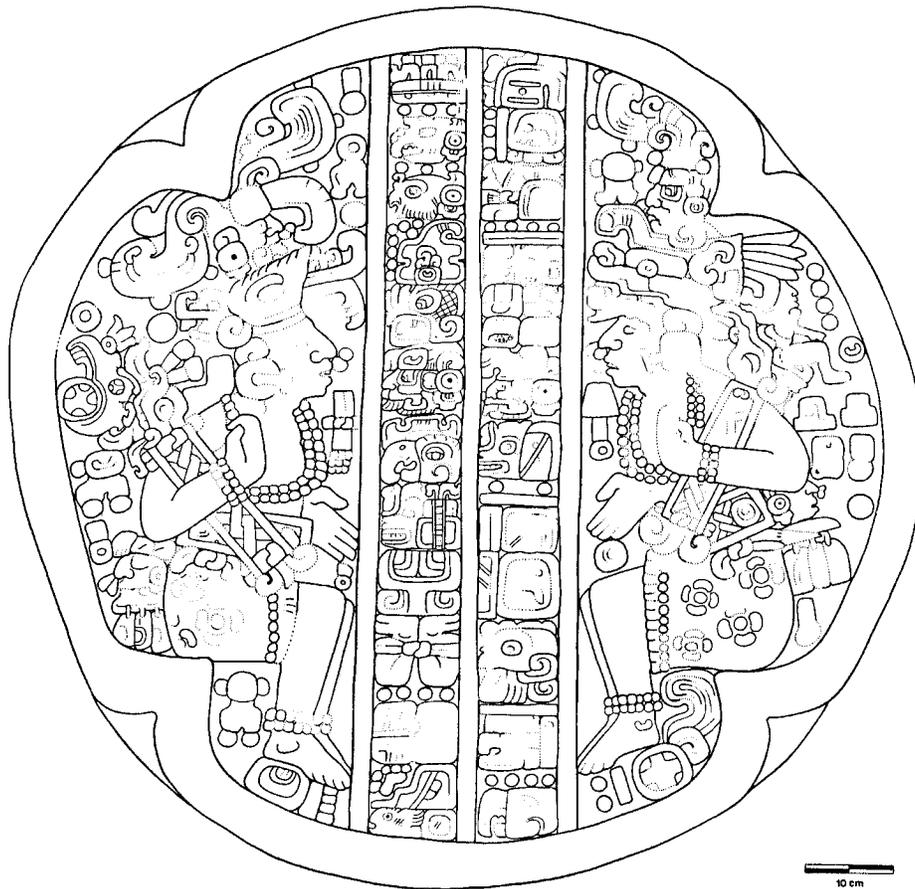


*Fig. 2 Mot Mot's east terrace and molding.*

tion. It is possible to expose parts of all four basal substructure walls, all superstructure interiors, all axially placed offerings and inscribed monuments, and the material residues of activities that took place within these buildings while keeping the final phase structure intact.

As the structures under investigation

were public monuments, associated activities were largely termination or dedication rites. Any material that was once used in the activities of these buried structures was long destroyed in the continuous cleaning of the temples. It is therefore difficult to determine what activities actually occurred within these buildings, and instead we must deduce the pur-



*Fig. 3 Mot Mot's inscribed marker. Drawing by Barbara Fash.*

pose of these structures from the architecture, inscribed monuments and stucco decorations, and possibly from the dedication/termination rites. Although a great deal has been achieved with the tunnel excavations to this point, until the entire construction sequence is known field designations are used to refer to the early platforms and buildings rather than a numbered sequence.

### New Interpretations from 1992-93 Excavations

The construction history of 10L-26

spans over 300 years and includes eight separate buildings. The first construction at this locale dates to approximately A.D. 430 while the final construction, the Hieroglyphic Stairway and its temple date to 756. All but the earliest buildings have been described previously in *Ancient Mesoamerica* (Fash, et al 1992), therefore this paper concentrates on the earliest structures uncovered during the 1992-93 season and their implications for our understanding of Structure 10L-26 and Copan.

The first structure constructed at the 10L-26 locale was a platform, whose field des-

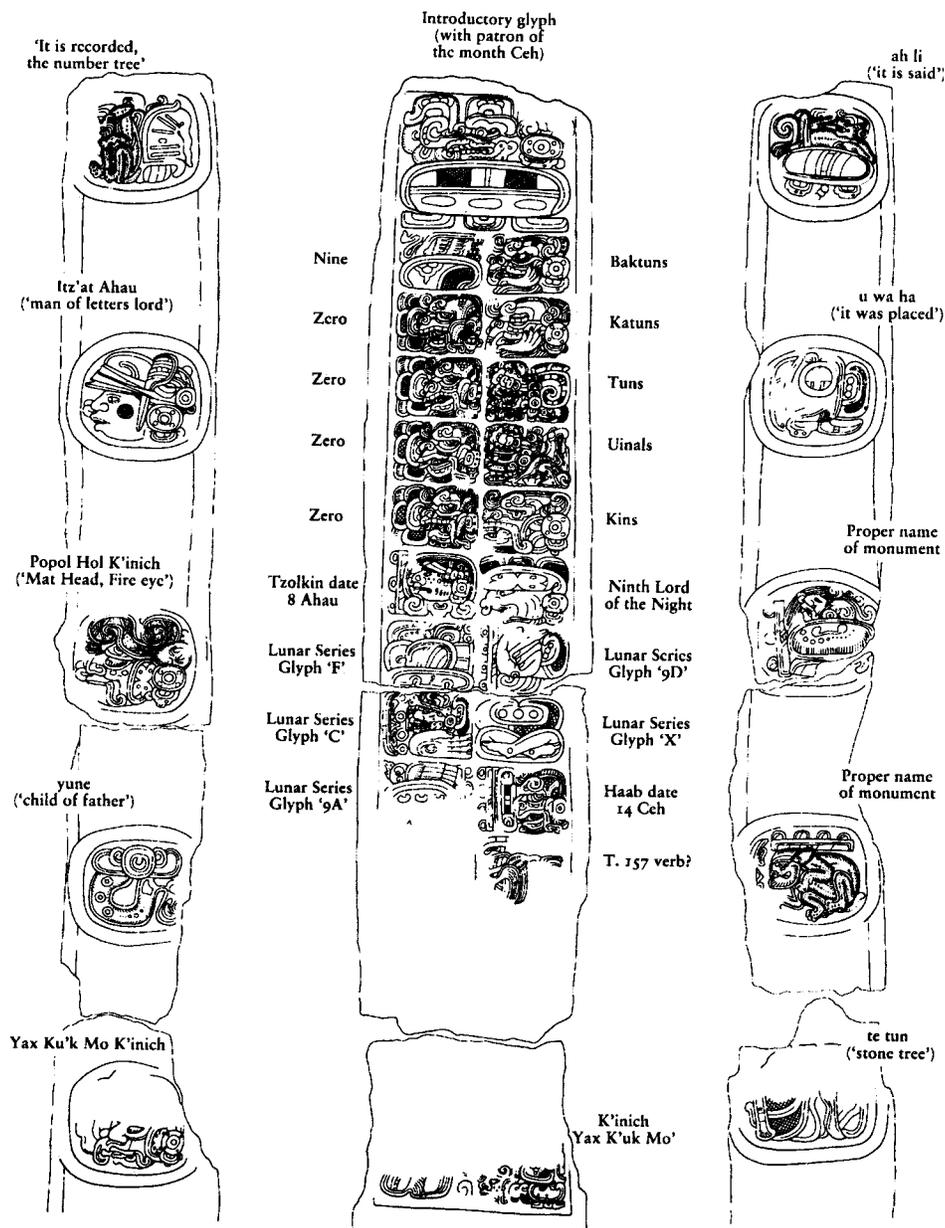


Fig. 4 Stela 63. Drawing by Barbara Fash.

ignation is Yax. Several lines of evidence indicate that Yax is the oldest building. A tunnel placed through its central axis east-west showed no signs of earlier architecture. A large amount of ceramics, lithics, bone, and carbon was retrieved within the fill of Yax, indicating that material from a midden was used in the construction of this platform.

Test pits were excavated on all four sides of Yax and one within the structure. The stratigraphy was the same in all five test pits, with the exception that the interior test pit did not encounter the floor that lips up to Yax. The first layer consists of 30cm of cultural debris, then two and a half meters of sterile soil and sand and finally river cobbles. The stratigraphy is indicative of a one time flood in the area followed by a time period with no activity which allowed the upper layer of dark brown soil to dry before the uppermost layer of cultural debris was deposited, probably to make the area level for construction. Three stucco floors, one on top of the other, surrounded but did not run beneath Yax. The uppermost floor lips up to the structure that encapsulated Yax, called Mot Mot. The middle floor lips up to Yax. The lowermost floor extends one meter outside the limits of Yax with no evidence of it continuing within the structure. A red line that followed the limits of Yax's walls was painted on this floor. As this was the first structure built at this locale it appears that the Maya laid this floor to be used as the foundation for the



*Fig. 5 Deer skeleton and human skull above the capstones of the cist.*

construction of Yax.

Yax was a rectangular platform, measuring twenty meters north-south and ten meters east-west, with its access to the west. Unfortunately when the platform was covered by Mot Mot, its north, south, and west walls were completely destroyed leaving only their lip scar. The center of its east wall survived, but only to a height of one and a half meters. The original height of the platform is unknown. Along the central axis of the east wall, in an area that would have been outside, two graffiti patolli boards were discovered in the stucco floor.

At this time there is no absolute date for the construction of Yax. The analysis of the ceramics in the fill of the structure should prove useful, as will radiocarbon dating of the carbon found. However, as this material comes from a redeposited midden, the ceramics and carbon must be older than the structure itself.

The structure that encapsulated Yax, Mot Mot, also faced to the west. Unfortunately, this was the side of the platform that was most completely destroyed, leaving only a lip scar. The platform measures 24 meters north-south by 12 meters east-west and has a 14 meter outset on its west side. The stratigraphy of Mot Mot's fill indicates that this outset was stepped. On the southern corner of the west side inset is a decorative motif with a face in the upper panel and a Yax Kin cartouche with a Venus sign or Akbal below it with a sky band dividing the two elements (fig. I). Fragments of a large bird mask with stucco feathers adorn the central axis of the east side of Mot Mot. Although almost completely destroyed, there is evidence of Venus signs and skybands surrounding the bird.

The terrace on the east side of Mot Mot is completely intact. It includes a molding 60 cm from the floor and the terrace stands at a height of three meters (fig. 2). A patolli board was discovered etched into the stucco floor one meter away from this wall. At the top of this wall the building's platform floor was discovered partially intact. There is no evidence



*Fig. 6 Cist and first layer of the tomb before cleaning.*

of a stone masonry superstructure, suggesting that the superstructure was made of perishable materials. Along the central axis of the platform, two and a half meters west of the east wall another patolli board was uncovered, within what would have been the room of the structure.

Along the central axis three and a half meters west of Mot Mot's staircase an inscribed marker was inset flush with Mot Mot's stucco plaza floor (fig. 3). The marker is oriented so it could be seen as one walked toward the staircase. It depicts the founder of the Copan dynasty, Yax K'uk Mo', on the left and his son, the second ruler, Mat Head on the right. Between the two rulers are two columns which each contain 12 hieroglyphs. The text is read in a single column glyph order. Although the first glyph appears to be an Initial Series Introductory Glyph, it is unclear whether or not there is a Long Count date. The text includes the glyphs for both Yax K'uk Mo' at A7 and Mat Head at B6. Following the name of each ruler are two unusual emblem glyphs. While the distinctive curl snout bat is present in the glyph, none of the other emblem glyph indicators are present. At B2 and B4 the calendar round date 8 Ahau 14 Ceh is inscribed. This calendar round date is also inscribed on Stela 63 (fig. 4), which stood within the temple that buried the marker and Mot Mot structure, and is associated with the Long Count 9.0.0.0.0, or AD. 435 (Williamson 1989). This

date is associated with Yax K'uk Mo' and not Mat Head and so could not be the dedication date of the marker or Stela 63. At B8 a Distance Number is recorded with either a seven or ten tun (Linda Schele, personal communication 1993). This date, approximately 445, fits well with the archaeological evidence as the date of both Mot Mot's and the marker's dedication. The marker must have been commissioned during the early part of Mat Head's reign since the building that buried the marker, called Papagayo, was also constructed by Mat Head and housed Stela 63.

The quatrefoil outline of the marker portrays Yax K'uk Mo' as being in the underworld with Mat Head alive and communicating with his father. (It is known that Mat Head is alive and not also in the underworld because he commissions Stela 63 which buries the marker.) Investigations beneath the marker uncovered a series of activities. Directly beneath the marker 100 milliliters of mercury was recovered. The pattern suggests that the mercury was placed in a gourd and then the marker was placed down on top of it, but no physical evidence of the gourd was recovered. This level also contained some carbon and traces of cinnabar.

Below this was a layer of river cobbles. Its dimensions were the same as the marker, 1.5 m by 1.5 m. Traces of mercury were found in the earth at this level, indicating that once the mercury's container was destroyed or deteriorated, the mercury was free to filter down.

Below the layer of river cobbles an entire skeleton of a deer, except its skull, and a single human skull were found lying upon five capstones (fig. 5). Another human skull was found level with and just west of the western capstone. The first four vertebra were still adjacent to the skull indicating that this was a sacrificial decapitation. All of the bones were smoked, as were some areas of the capstones. The capstones covered a cylindrical cist that has the same diameter as the marker above it, one meter.

The stones that make the walls of the cist include both river cobbles and cut tuff blocks. The masonry is very crude and the mortar was nothing more than white earth, most of which fell into the cist itself. However, the preservation of the cist is incredible since the cist is circular (fig. 6). The preservation of the contents within the cist is also spectacular and includes one disarticulated human skeleton, eleven complete vessels, several bird skeletons, a deer skull, a jaguar skull, and a decapitated human skull. Most of the bones were smoked and there is evidence that a fire took place within the cist. The remains of a petate were recovered sitting on the floor of the cist. Rebecca Storey (personal communication 1993) has identified the disarticulated skeleton as male with age of death between 35 and 50. She has also determined that the individual was overweight and that he ate well based upon tooth wear.

All vessels were intact and were of local origin. There were no polychromes, but four shoe pots have been identified so far.

The stratigraphy of the area indicates that the construction of the cist, the placement of the marker, and the various activities between were contemporaneous. The floor of Yax was clearly cut and the stratigraphy near the area undisturbed. Once the marker was in place the area was filled with stucco during the construction of Mot Mot's floor.

As there is only one complete human skeleton within the cist and since it is obvious that the other human skull was placed in the cist with its flesh still on (since the first five vertebra were still articulated with the skull), it would appear that the cist was a tomb rather than an offering. Given the iconography and epigraphy of the marker there is reason to believe that this is the tomb of Yax K'uk Mo'. Analysis has just begun however, and given the unimpressive size of the tomb and its contents, it is still too early to come to any conclusions.

When the marker was buried during the construction of Papagayo it was done so with

extreme care. Placed upon the marker was a series of organic materials from which feathers, textiles, and bark paper were recovered. On this thin layer of organic materials were placed four jade ear flares or spools, one in each cardinal direction. Three different types of shell were also recovered. After the organic offering was in place a large single slab of limestone covered it.

The next objective was to relate the construction sequence of 10L-26 to that of the Great Plaza. The easiest and most obvious place to start was with the ballcourt. Stromsvik (1952) excavated and reconstructed the final phase of the ballcourt, which he labeled Ball Court III in the 1930s. He also partially excavated the two earlier versions of the ballcourt, Ball Court II and I. Cheek (1983), during the first phase of the Copan Archaeological Project, studied the ballcourt sequence and its related plaza floors during his excavations of the Great Plaza. He tentatively placed the construction of the earliest ballcourt, Ball Court I, at A.D. 350 on the basis of stratigraphy and ceramics.

A test pit placed in the Court of the Hieroglyphic Stairway on the central axis of Mot Mot and Papagayo uncovered the plaza floors of both structures, but there was no evidence of a plaza floor for Yax. The stratigraphy in this pit showed five distinct floors with Mot Mot's floor separated from Papagayo's floor above, by 30 cm of fill. Stromsvik's profile drawings of the ballcourt sequence corresponded with this, except he did not encounter Mot Mot's floor. Since the plaza floors within the Court of the Hieroglyphic Stairway are very distinct, with each floor related to a different construction episode of the ballcourt, we noted the possibility of a yet undiscovered, earlier ballcourt. Thus a 24 meter trench running north-south was excavated in front of the Hieroglyphic Stairway adjoining the buried remains of Ball Court I. It was determined that Papagayo's floor sloped up the farther south it went from Ball Court I, probably for water drainage, and that near the ballcourt the two

floors were laid one on top of the other. Stromsvik had inadvertently labeled the two floors as one. Both floors lipped up to Ball Court I and there was no evidence of an earlier ballcourt. This suggests that Ball Court I and Mot Mot were constructed at the same time during the reign of Mat Head. The implication is that the construction of Ball Court I cannot date to A.D. 350 as Cheek (1983) suggested but must instead date to the construction of Mot Mot at A.D. 440.

### Conclusion

The investigations of the Copan Acropolis Archaeological Project continue to increase our knowledge of ancient Copan. At this point the tunnels of the East Court, dug under the direction of Robert Sharer (Sharer et al. 1992), and the tunnels of 10L-26, are directly connected at several different locales thus offering better stratigraphic control. With these relationships and the connection between 10L-26 and the ballcourt it will soon be possible to map the growth of the entire Principal Group through time and space. Given the more intensive excavations of the Acropolis it will be possible to re-evaluate the dates given to the Great Plaza. The 10L-26 research suggests that the use of ceramics as a primary indicator of dating at Copan is not feasible to within 100 years of accuracy. It is hoped that the sequence can be refined after the analysis of the ceramics from 10L-26 are completed. Although most of the ceramics come from secondary deposits within the fill of structures, the eleven vessels found in the cist below the marker are not only in a primary context they have an absolute date associated with them.

The investigations indicate that while construction at the Principal Group began later than thought, the volume of structures that are now being uncovered within the tunnels suggests that once begun, complex society progresses rapidly. There is currently no known evidence of any predynastic activity within 10L-26 and no specific evidence of construction by Yax K'uk Mo'. The first historical fig-

ure for whom we have definite evidence at 10L-26 is Mat Head with the placement of the marker.

While this paper has concentrated mainly on the two earliest structures located within 10L-26, it will be necessary to compare the entire sequence of construction at 26 to see how art, architecture, and activities changed through time. This will help to determine the origins of Copan's elite, and whether they were an indigenous political development or the result of an external spark. A study of the sequence will also lead to an understanding of how the use of space changed through time, and whether change was conservative or innovative.

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