

Archeology: The Ruins at Copán

Article Summary

Important New Discoveries At Copan, Honduras (Thursday, March 10, 2005)

Honduran and Japanese archeologists have discovered 30 new structures and the remains of 69 Mayans at Honduras' famed Copan archeological site. Project director Seiichi Nakamura said the structures are from the early classical period, 300-600 A.D., and from the late classical, 600-900 A.D.

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Lesson One

You and your two partners were part of the group of archeologists that recently excavated the 69 bodies at Copán. Because of your role in that important find, the three of you have been invited to give a presentation at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Prepare an oral and visual presentation to give to the audience at the museum. The organizers would like you to talk about two things in particular:

- 1) What is the goal/purpose of archeology?
- 2) What methods do archeologists use in the excavation of bodies, from the beginning of the dig to dating the bones?

Lesson One Content Links

" Archaeology"

<http://www.archaeology.org/online/features/copan/index.html>

" History World"

<http://history-world.org/archeology.htm>

" Simon Fraser University: What Archaeologists do and don't do "

<http://www.sfu.ca/archaeology/museum/ask/what.htm>

" BBC "

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/archaeology/carbon_dating_01.shtml

" Discovery Channel Radiometric Dating Video "

<http://science.discovery.com/videos/100-greatest-discoveries-shorts-radiometric-dating.html>

" Unmuseum "

<http://www.unmuseum.org/archaeol.htm>

Lesson Two

As the leader of a tour group, you and your partners have been assigned to guide a group of Japanese vacationers on a tour of Copán. Having never been to Copán, you need to compile some basic information about the site and about Mayan culture. To get ready for the tour, you should prepare the following:

1. Brief introduction to Honduras: Where is it located, what kind of people are there, what kind of government does it have, what are some of its major cultural characteristics?
2. Overview of the site as a whole: What was its major function(s), when was it occupied, how many people lived there, how was society structured, and why might the people have left?
3. Brief information about some of the major structures there (especially the major temples, stelae, and ball court): What were they used for and what do they tell us about Mayan culture?
4. Information about hieroglyphics at the site: What are the characteristics of this kind of writing, how well understood is it today, and where is seen preserved at Copán?
5. Connections between Copán and other Mayan sites: To what degree was it tied to other Mayan sites, what kinds of goods were traded, and what cultural characteristics were shared?

Lesson Two Content Links

"Collapse: Why do Civilizations Fail: The Maya"

<http://www.learner.org/exhibits/collapse/mayans.html>

" Hieroglyphics and History at Copán "

<http://www.peabody.harvard.edu/Copan/text.html>

" Misericordia College: Copán, Honduras "

<http://www.misericordia.edu/users/davies/maya/copan.htm>

" Copán Ruins "

<http://www.honduras.net/copan/ruins/mainplaza.html>

" Omniglot: Writing Systems and Languages of the World "

<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/mayan.htm>

" Mesoamerican Writing Systems "

<http://www.angelfire.com/ca/humanorigins/writing.html>

Important New Discoveries At Copan, Honduras

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By: Mike Leffert

Honduran and Japanese archeologists have discovered 30 new structures and the remains of 69 Mayans at Honduras' famed Copan archeological site. Project director Seiichi Nakamura said the structures are from the early classical period, 300-600 A.D., and from the late classical, 600-900 A.D.

It is believed that Copan was abandoned after 900 A.D. because of overpopulation. The human remains were estimated to be 1,450 years old, putting the people in walking-around condition at about 550 A.D. Also found, according to Nakamura, were offerings in and around the burial sites and very valuable artifacts near the remains of a 12-year-old child, indicating the child was a member of Copan high society.

This is not Nakamura's first great find at Copan. In 2000 his team discovered a tomb filled with jade offerings and painted ceramics. He was surprised at that discovery because it was in an area thought to have no pre-Hispanic remains. The reason for the find was that he was doing test excavations prior to the building of a road linking the Copan ruins with El Florido on the Guatemalan border. Copan lies just inside Honduras, and Guatemalans are the most frequent tourists to the ruins. Most impressive among the artifacts at the 2000 site were two large jade pectorals, one almost 24 cm long with the image of a god in the early classic style, the other carved with a design indicating that the tomb's occupant was a ruler. The importance of this, said the scientist, was that, "if a king or queen's tomb was placed outside of the acropolis, it would require us to rethink our traditional interpretations of the sociopolitical organization of Copan. This discovery could possess huge significance for all studies of Maya occupation at the site."

Further investigation led to the opinion that the tomb was that of a king, making him the eighth of Copan's 16 kings to have been discovered. It might have been paved over. The 2000 discovery halted the road building and might thereby have prevented this latest from being lost under the hard crust of development. The new find is located near the entrance to the Grupo Principal where, said Carmen Julia Fajardo of the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia (IHAIH), "a group of high-ranking people lived, with homes joined by courtyards, and the quantity of offerings that have been found is incredible." Nakamura said of the 69 human remains, "We believe these remains belong to the families of the tenth Maya ruler, Luna Jaguar." The artifacts included more than 450 vessels, jade musical instruments, stones, conchas, and ceramics.

The new site will not be open to tourists until 2007. It will take that long to restore the buildings. Since 1998, Japan has spent US\$4.1 million on Copan archeological projects. Copan, 305 km west of Tegucigalpa, flourished between 250 A.D. and 900 A.D. It was part of a Mayan empire that stretched across southern Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Historians believe that the first reports of the existence of Copan were from Diego Garcia de Palacios, a representative of King Felipe II

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of Spain, who wrote to the crown of the site on March 8, 1576. In the 1840s, US explorers John L. Stephens and Frederick Catherwood brought Copan to international prominence.

[Sources: archeology.org, 11/28/00; Reuters, 05/29/01; Prensa Libre (Guatemala), 02/06/05; ACAN-EFE, 03/06/05; Associated Press, 03/07/05; Hondudiario (Honduras), 03/09/05]

Standards

National Standards (McREL) <http://www.mcrel.org/>

- **Geography Standard 10**
 - Understands the nature and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics
- **Geography Standard 11**
 - Understands the patterns and networks of economic interdependence on Earth's surface
- **Geography Standard 12**
 - Understands the patterns of human settlement and their causes
- **World History Standard 17**
 - Understands the rise of centers of civilization in Mesoamerica and Andean South America in the 1st millennium CE
- **Language Arts 4**
 - Gathers and uses information for research purposes
- **Language Arts 7**
 - Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts
- **Language Arts 8**
 - Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes



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