

# Copán: The History of an Ancient Maya Kingdom

## 1

### **Contributions and Controversies in the Archaeology and History of Copán**

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The Classic Maya kingdom of Copán has enriched and enlivened scholarly debate on a host of anthropological issues since the mid-nineteenth century. Best known for the abundance and great artistry of its stone sculpture, Copán reached its apogee during what scholars refer to as the Classic period (A.D. 250–900) of Lowland Maya civilization. Its settlements, architectural history, and hieroglyphic inscriptions attest that this southeasternmost Maya state peaked during the historically documented dynasty that reigned from A.D. 426 to 822. Copán has provided fertile ground for productive theoretical debates on issues as diverse as state formation, urbanism, sociopolitical organization, economic specialization, the relative merits and strengths of historical texts and archaeological data, architecture and space, warfare, the Classic Maya collapse, and the possibilities for linking archaeology, epigraphy, and iconography in Mesoamerican studies. As Joyce Marcus (2004:372) noted recently, the Copán case has transcended its region: “One need no longer be a Mayanist to find the Copán story compelling. It is now one of the most detailed archaeological examples of secondary state formation in the prehistoric world.”

The abundance of Copán's carved stone monuments has privileged the study of its hieroglyphic inscriptions and pictorial sculpture ever since ancient Maya ruins became an object of search, and research, in the early nineteenth century. The diversity and sheer numbers of its inscribed texts have made Copán the origin or the litmus test for a number of hieroglyphic decipherments. Its inscriptions are so well known by relevant specialists and so frequently scrutinized in the literature that Copán has one of the best-documented dynastic histories of the ancient world. The resulting historical data provided an important context for the evaluation of competing anthropological models of sociopolitical organization and evolution (Marcus 1992a, 1993, 2004). Such formulations have been examined both on the basis of the inscriptions alone (Marcus 1976; Stuart, chapter 10 in this volume) and by testing via independent archaeological data (Aoyama 1999; Sanders and Webster 1988; Webster, chapter 2 in this volume).

Field archaeologists are skeptical of political pronouncements on public monuments at ancient sites, and Mesoamericanists are no exception (Marcus 1974, 1992b). Much research has been devoted to illuminating the social and economic contexts of the claims made by ancient Maya rulers, through concerted archaeological investigations both within and outside their royal precincts. The Copán research has contributed strongly to this effort, with extensive settlement surveys, household archaeology, and specialized studies of architecture, artifacts, and osteology (Storey, chapter 8 in this volume). Even within the valley research, however, controversies continue with regard to the population's size and heterogeneity (fueling debates on its degree of urbanization), the degree of economic specialization (enlightening discussions of ranked versus stratified societies), and, most hotly contested of all, the nature and timing of the so-called "Classic Maya collapse" (T. P. Culbert, ed., 1973). In particular, how many people remained in the Copán Valley (figure 1.1), and for how long, after the fall of centralized authority in the early ninth century A.D.?

At its peak, the population of the kingdom of Copán numbered at least twenty thousand, with marked status differences (whether ranked or stratified; see Webster, chapter 2 in this volume) between its households. At its height, the hegemony of its royal line extended over an area of at least 250 km<sup>2</sup>. Most of the populace consisted of commoners



**Figure 1.1**

*An aerial view of the Copán Valley, looking east. The Principal Group, or royal compound, lies in the forested area in the center of the alluvial bottomlands. (Photograph by B. Fash in 1977)*

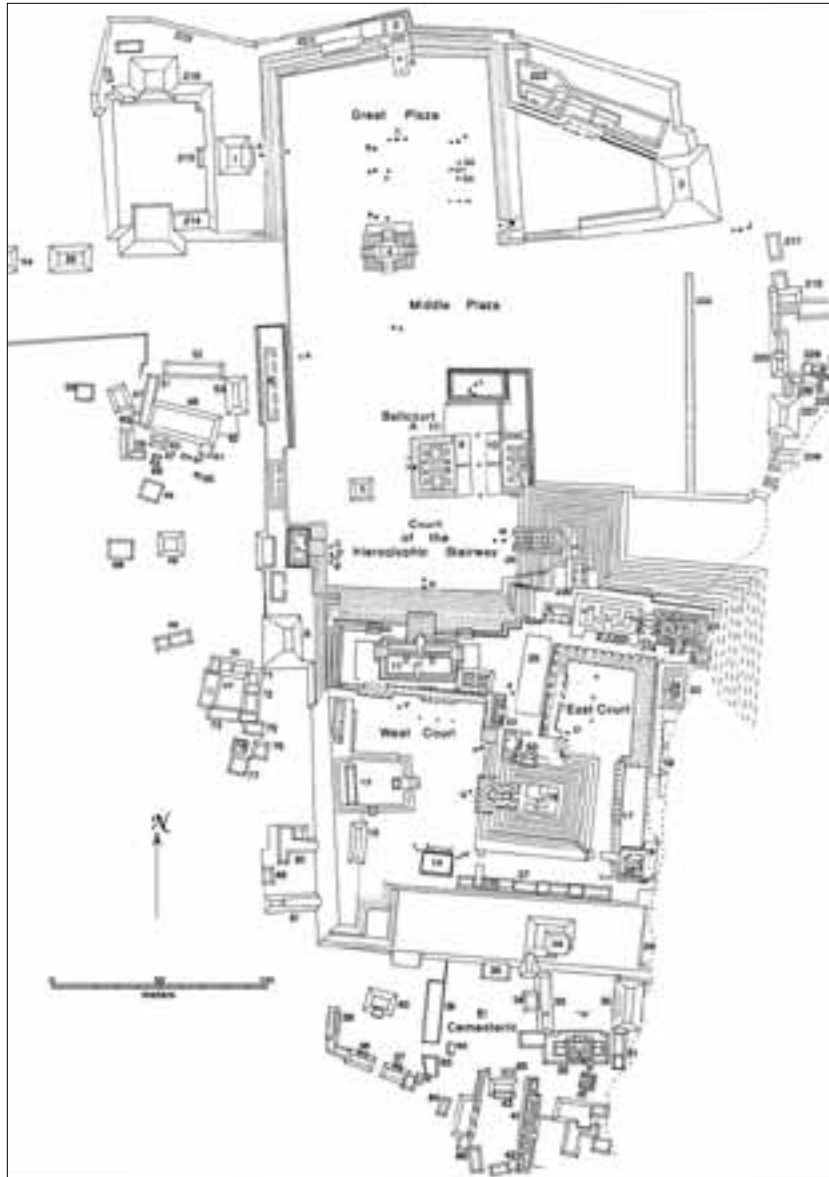
engaged in agricultural pursuits, but excavations show that many of them practiced part-time craft specializations as well (Abrams 1987). The case of the chipped-stone industry indicates that state sponsorship of full-time craftsmen also took place (Aoyama 1999). Among the nobility, numerous citizens distinguished themselves as scribes, sculptors, ballplayers, administrators, warriors, councilors, and rulers. This volume is fundamentally devoted to understanding the origins and development of this remarkable city and the forces that eventually brought about its end. To that purpose, the authors pursue their distinct approaches and specialized studies within the larger framework of paradigms and questions that have shaped Maya and Mesoamerican archaeology for the past 150 years.

The advanced seminar on Copán both built upon and reflected the contributions of previous School of American Research seminars, such as the rise (Adams 1977) and the fall (T. P. Culbert, ed., 1973) of Classic Maya civilization, lowland Maya settlement patterns (Ashmore

1981) and political history (P. Culbert 1991), and the nature of late Lowland Maya civilization (Andrews and Sabloff 1986). While the Classic-period inscriptions played a large role in scholarly understanding of political history and relations between centers, Maya archaeology—like the broader field of Mesoamerican archaeology—continues to be characterized by a diversity of research interests and agendas. The interest in settlement patterns and its logical extension into household archaeology have provided Mesoamericanists with remarkable opportunities to study all segments of ancient society.

In Copán, attention was focused on the settlements outside the city center or “site core” (figure 1.2) as far back as the early twentieth century by the pioneering epigrapher Sylvanus Morley (1920). The residential zones surrounding the royal compound have been the focus of continual archaeological research projects since Gordon Willey’s Copán Valley research began in 1975. Willey’s settlement mapping (Leventhal 1979, 1981; Willey and Leventhal 1979) and household archaeology (Willey, Leventhal, and Fash 1978; Willey et al. 1994) opened new vistas onto the organization of society that have been pursued through diverse specialized studies in a variety of research projects in the valley that show no signs of abating.

As in all of academe, much of Maya archaeology has been sharply divided between scholars pursuing scientific approaches and those pursuing humanistic approaches (Marcus 1995). In Copán, there certainly have been strong players in each camp over the years. Nonetheless, Willey’s (1980) vision of pursuing a holistic view of Maya civilization has come to fruition in Copán, where recent research is viewed as “a model of multidisciplinary integration” (Marcus 2003b:94). Willey’s project was also important in leading the charge to incorporate the study of hieroglyphic inscriptions found at elite residential sites into the broader study of their inhabitants’ lifeways. The abundance of such inscriptions in the Copán Valley, combined with the fruitful nature of conjoined studies of written history, art, and archaeology, have led to an excavated sample that is biased toward elites. Although household archaeology and survey of smaller sites in the valley have been extensive compared to many other Mesoamerican settlement zones (Webster, chapter 2 in this volume), our understanding



**Figure 1.2**

*The Principal Group of Copán, showing structures in the 10L quad of the valley map (after W. Fash 2002).*

of Copán's history is heavily weighted to the lifestyles of the rich and famous. The many strengths of the Copán data on elites are reflected in this volume but are also balanced by a wide array of information on the evolution of complex society in Copán presented in several chapters in the book (chapters 2, 3, 4, 8, and 11).

This introduction provides background on the origins and development of scholarship on Copán and on the forces that brought about the production of this book and many others. Increasingly, the social context of archaeology is seen as a key element in the questions asked, the methods employed, and the results obtained by its practitioners. We hope that this brief review can serve as a framework that will be useful for historians of the larger discipline, as well as those interested in why the Copán research—and the larger field of studies of the ancient Maya and Mesoamerica—has taken the course leading us to where we are in 2004. For the interested reader, more detailed descriptions of the various projects and players on the stage of Copán studies can be found in W. Fash 1991 and Webster 1999. The conclusion of this introduction broadly outlines, for the non-Mesoamericanist reader, our present understandings of ancient Mesoamerican culture history and cultural process at Copán and serves as a baseline for the more detailed and specialized treatments that follow.

## CHANGING TIMES, QUESTIONS, AND DEBATES IN COPÁN STUDIES

The ruins of Copán were among the first ancient Mesoamerican sites to attract the attention of Western travelers, scholars, and the European-American public in what Willey and Sabloff (1993) refer to as the "Period of Exploration and Discovery." The first was the 1576 visit of Diego García de Palacios, who managed to secure a Maya codex ("the only one in the region"), as well as the local wisdom that the ancient city was built by a single ruler from Yucatán. The story was that this "outsider king" eventually became disgruntled with the local people and returned to his homeland. It was García de Palacios who recorded the local name *Copán* for the abandoned ruin, a designation by which it has been known ever since. Explorations by the colorful Irishman John Gallagher (a.k.a. Juan Galindo) and the famous team of John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood in the 1830s brought

the site to the attention of a broad readership (Stephens 1841). Stephens' assessment that the Maya ruins were built by the ancestors of the Maya still living in the region was hotly debated, with many "scholars" trying to ascribe them to Old World peoples and cultures instead (Willey and Sabloff 1993). Thereafter, Alfred Maudslay (1889–1902) made a signal contribution to the study of ancient Maya art and hieroglyphic writing by publishing detailed drawings of the stelae, altars, and architectural sculpture of Copán and numerous other lowland Maya sites. Maudslay also participated in one of the four Copán expeditions of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University in the early 1890s.

Conducting the first institutional exploration of the site with the authorization of the Honduran government, the Peabody investigators carried out excavations on Structures 10L-4, 10L-26 (with its Hieroglyphic Stairway), 10L-32, and 10L-41 in the Principal Group and the first excavation of a house-mound (Structure 10L-36) in Maya archaeology. The interest in the valley and its archaeological remains translated into the first map (Gordon 1896) and the discovery of ancient burials in caves (Gordon 1898), presaging further interests in this direction in years to come. The Peabody investigations inspired a Harvard graduate student by the name of Herbert Joseph Spinden (1913) to undertake a thesis that would eventually be published as *A Study of Maya Art*. Spinden's insights on Maya art were brilliant, but it was his concern with chronology that established the systematic cross-checks on chronology that have characterized Maya archaeology and history ever since.

The advances in Gordon's (1902) decipherment of the dates on the Hieroglyphic Stairway and other stelae, and in the chronological studies by Spinden, were to be enhanced by Sylvanus Morley (1920) in his massive tome, *The Inscriptions at Copán*. Morley was fascinated by the dates in the texts, which became a virtual obsession for him and other Mayanists during a time when chronology building was the central focus of American archaeology (Willey and Sabloff 1993). Morley (1920:402), however, was prescient in hoping that "we may possibly look forward with some degree of confidence to finding...place-names, personal-names, and signs of generalized meaning, by the aid of which we will eventually be able to fill in the background of Maya

history as successfully as we have already constructed its chronological framework.” This statement shows that the larger concern was to get beyond the dates to the history of the people and places associated with the chronological and astronomical data inscribed in the texts.

Beginning with the efforts of the Carnegie Institution of Washington in the 1930s and 1940s, a number of patterns were established in the investigation and conservation of Copán and other Maya sites. These patterns have helped shape attitudes, priorities, and actions in Maya archaeology from that day to this. First, the government of Honduras assumed an active role in the work, paying for the workers and helping to set the agenda for the restoration work (then called “repair”) and investigations. Second, conservation became a major focus of the efforts, not only to save the monuments for the future but also to create a stronger sense of national identity. More pragmatically, the restoration work, the construction of an airstrip, and the building of a modest visitors’ center at the site, as well as a museum and fountain on the town square, were intended to literally pave the way for increased tourist visitation and revenues. Finally, complementing the investigation and conservation of the site’s civic-ceremonial center (the Principal Group), mapping and excavation in the surrounding settlements were undertaken to provide a broader perspective on the ancient city’s history.

A plane-table and allidade map by John Burgh appeared in the frontispiece of John Longyear’s still widely consulted Carnegie Institution volume *Copan Ceramics* in 1952. Longyear laid out the chronology of the valley’s human occupations, tying the Classic-period sequence to the inscriptions and datable architecture in the Principal Group. He also confirmed Morley’s earlier assessment that non-Maya populations occupied the valley before the bearers of the “stela cult” arrived. Both Morley and Longyear believed the latter to have come from the central Petén, most likely the area around Tikal. Thus, Copán has always been thought of as a cosmopolitan, multiethnic site, beginning at least with the arrival of people from the central Petén ca. 9.0.0.0.0 (A.D. 435).

Students of the Maya will forever be indebted to the brilliant artist, architect, and scholar Tatiana Proskouriakoff, another key member of the Carnegie team in Copán and beyond. Her compelling renderings



of the Copán Principal Group (Proskouriakoff 1946) continue to inspire all who behold them. On the intellectual front, her insights into the history and derivation of Copán's artistic style (Proskouriakoff 1950) and its sacred geography and dynastic history (Proskouriakoff 1973) continue to provoke fresh ideas and approaches.

Jesús Nuñez Chinchilla was the next archaeologist—and first Honduran—to direct fieldwork in Copán, having trained at the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico before becoming the director of the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia (IHAH) when it was founded in 1952. He conducted a series of excavations in the Copán Valley, including a mountain shrine with jade offerings (Nuñez Chinchilla 1966). His successor as director of the IHAH, Dr. J. Adan Cueva, made Copán a national project and a symbol of Honduran identity. Himself a Copaneco, Dr. Cueva had trained, practiced, and taught as a physician in Tegucigalpa, but he never lost his love for the ruins of Copán and his hometown. His vision and strategy for Copán's development placed scholarship and conservation before, and as a permanent check on, economic development.

Dr. Cueva invited Gordon R. Willey of Harvard University to Honduras, asking him to design a long-term plan of "protection" and investigation for the ruins. In turn, Willey invited Robert Sharer and William Coe from the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, at that time working just across the border at Quiriguá, Guatemala, to join him in formulating that research and conservation design. They drew up a plan, and it graced the pages of the very first issue of the IHAH journal, *Yaxkin* (Willey, Coe, and Sharer 1976). Mapping all the archaeological features in the Copán Valley served as a necessary first step to any kind of infrastructure development. The conservation and consolidation of the great river cut of the Acropolis and other important monuments were also key aspects of the long-term management plan.

The Willey, Coe, and Sharer study has served as the blueprint for most of the subsequent archaeological investigations in Copán. It envisioned a broad-gauged, multidisciplinary research program that would investigate Maya society from the ground up, with settlement surveys and household archaeology in the residential areas as the key to understanding the populace as a whole. A renewed attack on the inscriptions

and imagery in the stone monuments was to be complemented by studies of the architecture in the royal precinct, particularly in the long river cut into one side of the Acropolis. Willey himself got the plan underway, beginning a settlement pattern survey with his graduate student Richard Leventhal in 1975. Willey and Leventhal started the detailed instrument mapping of the valley settlements and the excavation of a sampling of sites in the following two seasons (1976 and 1977). Leventhal's doctoral research on the settlement patterns at Copán laid the groundwork for all subsequent research on the topic (Leventhal 1979, 1981). As in the rest of Mesoamerica, the broad theoretical and ecological concerns of the settlement pattern study pioneered by Willey in the Virú Valley of Peru (1953) and subsequently in the Maya area (Willey et al. 1965) brought a wealth of new questions and a much broader understanding of Copán's archaeology and history. Willey and Richard Leventhal devised a typology of the household groupings (into categories 1–5, with the Principal Group being the only Type 5 site) to reflect the social classes of their respective occupants (Willey and Leventhal 1979).

Subsequent excavations of test probes throughout the valley and of entire households by Willey, Leventhal, and William Fash (Willey, Leventhal, and Fash 1978; W. Fash 1983a; Willey et al. 1994) and in the Honduran government-sponsored Proyecto Arqueológico Copán, or PAC (directed by Claude Baudez during its first phase, from 1978 to 1980 [Baudez, ed. 1983; W. Fash 1983b, 1983c], and by William Sanders from 1980 to 1984 in PAC II [Sanders, ed., 1986, 1990]), confirmed that the Willey and Leventhal site typology accurately reflects social status. Roberto Reyes Mazzoni, a Honduran economist and archaeologist trained in Mexico, had been instrumental in formulating the first phase of the PAC and acquiring funding by the Central American Bank for Economic Integration, conceiving the PAC as a training ground for Central American archaeologists of various nationalities. Honduran, Guatemalan, and Nicaraguan students participated in the project, and dozens of local townspeople were trained in various archaeological jobs.

In the first phase of the PAC, Claude Baudez assembled an international, interdisciplinary team to pursue all the facets proposed in the Willey, Coe, and Sharer plan, adding a few new elements. Ethnographic



**Figure 1.3**

*Map of the urban core of ancient Copán, comprising all the structures within 1 km of the center of the Principal Group, Ballcourt A-III (after W. Fash 2001, figure 96).*

research and ethnohistoric research on the Copán region were important new components to the work. While Baudez continued the Harvard program of mapping the Late Classic (A.D. 600–900) visible remains (figure 1.3), he also sought to investigate a new realm of the valley's occupation: the buried remains of earlier settlements. This was to be accomplished by testing the areas between the superficially visible remains through a variety of statistically based sampling methods of physical *space*, rather than relying on investigations of visible *mounds*, or mound-groupings, as done previously. The various sampling methods

did locate major Preclassic deposits that well served Baudez's project ceramicist, René Viel, in his efforts to expand and revise Longyear's ceramic sequence (Viel 1983, 1993a, 1993b). The valley research conducted under Baudez's direction demonstrated that the bottomlands were the first and always the most intensively settled, followed by the adjacent piedmont and lower slopes. Only in the final years of the Classic period was there sparse habitation on the uppermost slopes of the hills and mountains that delineated the edges of what Willey and Leventhal defined as the Copán "pocket" of the larger Copán Valley system (W. Fash 1983b, 1983c).

The detailed analysis of the Copán region's physical environment and human ecology has greatly broadened our understanding of the rise and fall of this Classic Maya realm, as well as the occupations before and after its glory days. Begun under Willey's project, with a team of geographers and other natural scientists directed by the cultural geographer B. L. Turner II, this group continued its work under the subsequent Honduran government PAC I project, incorporating specialized studies of flora, rainfall patterns, geology, river geomorphology, soils, pollen, agricultural technology, and deforestation (Turner et al. 1983).

Baudez' project also made strong contributions to the renewed study of the royal precinct. In the Great Plaza area, Cheek (1983a, 1983b) was able to piece together a detailed and useful construction history for this most public part of the Principal Group, including the Late Classic Structures 10L-2 and 10L-4. His work complemented the epigraphic research on the monolithic and architectural monuments entrusted by Baudez to Berthold Riese (1986, 1988) and the iconographic research of those same monuments commenced by Marie-France Fauvet and subsequently completed by Baudez himself (Baudez 1985, 1988, 1994). Further enhancing these investigations, Jorge Guillemin and Juan Antonio Valdés began the documentation and preliminary tunneling of the Acropolis Cut, which had been envisioned as part of the Willey, Coe, and Sharer proposal. Upon Guillemin's untimely death, Marshall Becker (1983) continued this work, providing an initial glimpse into the complexities of the Acropolis's architectural sequence. In this way, working outlines of the ruling dynasty's political history, the Principal Group's architectural history, and the

valley's settlement and ecological history were, as a whole, laid out in the first phase of the PAC.

Turner and his colleagues' work served as a base for continuing ecological research during William Sanders' PAC II. This incorporated the study of demography and disease, which were reflected in the human skeletal remains recovered from excavations conducted throughout the Copán Valley (Storey, chapter 8 in this volume). Sanders' vast experience in settlement survey and settlement history in the Basin of Mexico (Sanders, Parsons, and Santley 1979) and the Valley of Guatemala (Sanders and Michaels, eds., 1977) and his broad anthropological perspectives were among the many reasons he was selected to direct this second phase of the Honduran government project, financed by the World Bank and administered by the IHAH. Sanders decided to expand the settlement survey to a much larger realm under the direction of David Webster, insistent that Mayanists do archaeological survey on too small a scale to give a complete picture of human settlement and resource exploitation on a regional frame of reference (Sanders, ed., 1986; Webster and Freter 1990a, 1990b).

Continuing and expanding upon the Harvard/PAC I interest in soils (Wingard 1988), pollen and botanical studies (Abrams and Rue 1988; Rue 1987), and agricultural technology (Sanders, Webster, and van Rossum 1992; Webster, chapter 2 in this volume), Sanders also brought in new methodologies. These included studies of energetics (Abrams 1994) and obsidian hydration, to refine the dating of valley settlements (Freter 1992; Webster and Freter 1990a, 1990b). The obsidian-hydration dating and the pollen and soils research have prompted Sanders, Webster, and their former students to propose that Copán's decline or "collapse" was not sudden at all. Their dating of settlements outside the royal compound indicates that the abandonment of the valley was a long process, drawn out over several centuries following the end of dynastic rule (Freter 1992; Webster 1999, 2002, and chapter 2 in this volume; Webster and Freter 1990a, 1990b; Webster, Freter, and Gonlin 2000). Again, chronology became the focus of significant debate in Copán research, with the obsidian-hydration dating placing the end of occupation in the valley much later than the traditional view of the city's decline espoused by such scholars as Longyear (1952), W. Fash (1983b, 1983c), and Viel (1983, 1993a, 1993b).

### **Debating the Classic Maya Collapse in Copán**

Few subjects in Mesoamerican archaeology have captivated both scholars and laymen more than the decline of Classic Maya civilization (T. P. Culbert, ed., 1973). Factors as diverse as ecological degradation, droughts (deMenocal 2001; Gill 2000; Haug et al. 2003; Hodell, Curtis, and Brenner 1995; Hodell et al. 2001), disease (Shimkin 1973), changing commercial systems (Andrews and Sabloff 1986), warfare (Webster 1977, 1998a, 1998b), and the inability of Maya kingdoms to restructure their social systems for larger polities (Demarest 1992a, 1992b; W. Fash 1983b; Webster 1998b) have all been posited as important components—either alone or in combination—in the decline and abandonment of the large centers throughout the southern Maya lowlands in the ninth century A.D. Much productive research in Copán has focused on the ecological overshoot model (Webster, chapter 2 in this volume) and elite competition and structural defects (W. Fash 1983b; Webster 1998b). The relative weight of each purported factor varies greatly across the Maya lowlands, as do the timing and duration of the decline.

One of the most engaging aspects of the revised chronology for the supporting population's decline was that the obsidian-hydration dating held out the possibility of life histories for individual households in the Copán Valley. The prospect of firmly establishing the dates of occupation and use of each household within spans of decades instead of centuries would have allowed a much better understanding of the supporting population's life, times, and roles in shaping events. In many ways, this quest was not unlike Morley's earlier hope that scholars would eventually decipher the names of people and places recorded in association with dates, as indeed they have. The fundamental difference is that the texts tell us only about a minute percentage of the population, whereas obsidian tools are found in every household in Copán and thus hold the potential to provide chronological frames of reference for each and every one of them.

As with all innovations, the new schema aroused considerable skepticism. While the senior author embraced the new possibilities inherent in the method and the argument for a longer decline in the valley (W. Fash 1991:174), he and other colleagues were less persuaded by other initial results of the new method. In addition, the discovery and meticulous documentation of an Early Postclassic village just to

the south of the Copán Acropolis by T. K. Manahan (1995, 2000, 2002a, 2002b) have brought renewed vigor to the question of the timing and nature of the valley's abandonment after the collapse of centralized rule. This continues to generate considerable debate, with two distinct views on the subject well represented here in chapters 2, 7, and 11. Likewise, the dating of the valley's visible mounds to the Late Classic and Postclassic, which led Webster and Freter (1990a, 1990b) to assert that no earlier occupations in the valley were of any consequence or significance, has also inspired productive scholarly exchanges (W. Fash and Sharer 1991; W. Fash and Stuart 1991).

### **The Rise of Copán and the State**

Morley and Longyear's early assertions that the Classic Maya tradition "arrived" in the Copán Valley ca. A.D. 435 came under renewed scrutiny as a result of the new chronological approach provided by the obsidian-hydration studies. Particularly provocative was Webster and Freter's (1990a) claim that the records of Early Classic kings in Copán's inscriptions and on the four sides of the king's list carved on Altar Q were those of "putative kings," recorded by later rulers to give a fictive, longer history and genealogy to what was essentially a Late Classic phenomenon. The intensive excavations of the Acropolis have demonstrated that those Early Classic rulers undertook significant constructions from the early fifth century onward (see chapters 3, 5, 6, 9, and 10), laying that particular issue to rest.

Nonetheless, the processes and timing of the state's formation in Copán continue to be debated. This ties into larger anthropological debates regarding what criteria best allow us to define and demonstrate a state level of sociopolitical organization. Most states are centered in cities, making the definition and establishment of urban society part and parcel of the discussion. Sanders and Webster (1988) produced a masterful study of the Mesoamerican urban tradition; size and economic heterogeneity were the foremost criteria for the definition of urban societies. There, and in Webster's chapter 2 in this volume, they assert that even during its apogee in the late eighth and early ninth centuries A.D., Copán had many features more in line with ranked societies than stratified societies. W. Fash (1983b) argued that a state level of society was achieved in the seventh century A.D., and

more recently Marcus (2003a, 2004) suggests that the founder of the Copán dynasty established a secondary state there in the fifth century A.D. Clearly, this is another issue in which the Copán data are useful for such scholarly considerations, with several chapters in the present volume providing much grist for the mill.

### **The Reliability of the Historical Record**

The controversy regarding the degree to which the inscriptions and pictorial sculpture commissioned by Mesoamerican rulers do, indeed, constitute a reasonable representation of historical events (leaving aside questions of ultimate truth) is an ongoing and lively debate in historiography and, more broadly, archaeology. Marcus (1992b) has masterfully evaluated the social and political context in which Mesoamerican writing systems evolved, concluding that for the Maya and other Mesoamerican societies, the public monuments contained a mixture of history, myth, and propaganda. It hardly seems novel that we should question the pronouncements of public figures, particularly those in positions of relative weakness rather than strength (Marcus 1974). Yet the decipherment of the Classic-period inscriptions at Copán and other Maya centers is now providing us with the opportunity to check and cross-check the claims of rival rulers in the many conflicts that played out on the stage of ancient Maya history (Martin and Grube 2000; Schele and Freidel 1990; Sharer 2004).

During the early days of the epigraphic revolution in Maya studies (1959 to the present), there were many more skeptics of the inscriptions than true believers among the ranks of field archaeologists. Some grouched that the epigraphers were constantly changing their minds about how to read particular glyphs. Their more even-tempered colleagues pointed out that the epigraphers were right to revisit their readings responsibly with the same frequency and dedication as field archaeologists revising their population estimates and dates for ceramic phases. Many archaeologists admired and had confidence in their epigrapher colleagues' abilities to read the texts but simply could not bring themselves to agree that the inscriptions could be accepted at face value, given that these constituted "winner's history." The value of providing checks and counterchecks on the content of historical records became increasingly apparent to Mesoamericanists, and the



questioning of such records has led to ethnohistorical (Gillespie 1989) and archaeological (Webster and Freter 1990b) revisionism.

Copán was to play a valuable role in this debate because a strong database in the archaeology of the supporting population nicely balanced the abundance of the inscriptions and iconography. The PAC and subsequent Pennsylvania State University research in the valley, directed by David Webster, provided one set of checks on the inscriptions' content in the mid-1980s. It remained to test the historical and iconographic registers with new conjoined investigations in the royal precinct. The most pressing issue at that time was to identify the consequences of the defeat in A.D. 738 of the Copán ruler XVIII Jog (also known as "18 Rabbit" and now as "Waxaklahun Ub'ah K'awil") by the sovereign of Quiriguá, Cauac Sky (now "K'ak' Tiliw"), in each of those kingdoms.

This question tied Copán into the larger issue of the causes and consequences of Maya warfare (Webster 1977), making the question pertinent to larger anthropological concerns than just the culture history of this particular realm. One project set out to test this particular historical event, with a renewed investigation of both the archaeology and the epigraphy and iconography in the Principal Group. Besides testing the veracity of this historical account from the perspective of the Copán inscriptions and archaeology, this new effort sought to ascertain the role of ideology in forging cultural cohesion at Copán following the purported sacrifice of its thirteenth ruler (W. Fash 1988).

#### **THE STUDY OF IDEOLOGY AND HUMAN AGENCY IN THE ANCIENT HISTORY OF COPÁN**

Gordon Willey's larger research interests left another legacy that played a role in the direction taken by the archaeology of Copán: his conviction that ideology played a key role in culture history and that it could be productively investigated and analyzed in the archaeological record (Willey 1962, 1976). This view has subsequently been applied with success to the archaeology of the ancient Maya on both local and macroregional scales (Demarest 1992a, 1992b; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993; Schele and Freidel 1990). In Copán, the first project directly focused on this aspect of the archaeological record was the Copán Mosaics Project (W. Fash 1988). As a direct result of the work

in elite residential sites in the urban ward on the east side of the Principal Group (known as “Sepulturas”), William Fash, Barbara Fash, and Rudy Larios developed a collaborative relationship born of a keen sense of the need for the long-term conservation of architectural sculpture and an understanding of how much potential existed for its study (Larios and Fash 1985). They subsequently formed the Mosaics Project in 1985 to preserve the architectural sculptures that lay strewn about the Principal Group. This project sought to describe and explain ideological adaptations within the context of the social, economic, and political forces that had been documented for eighteenth-century Copán.

The “great divide” between scientific and humanist approaches to the study of Maya archaeology referred to by Marcus (1995) has, of course, played more broadly in Mesoamerica as well. For every major city, seemingly, there have been those who have taken the materialist position to explain its rise to prominence, counterposed—if not necessarily balanced—by those who have sought to place ideology in the causative role. For Teotihuacan, Sanders (1956) and Price (Sanders and Price 1968) used cultural materialism as their theoretical framework for explaining the rise of urban life (and “civilization”) in Mesoamerica at Teotihuacan. The landmark Basin of Mexico volume (Sanders, Parsons, and Santley 1979) made a compelling case for this theoretical perspective’s strengths in describing and explaining the evolution of complex society and states in the region that produced the two largest and most powerful polities in ancient Mesoamerica. This paradigm was countered by the one espoused by René Millon (1981), who argued for the primacy of ideology in the formation of the Teotihuacan city, state, and civilization. His arguments were based on the religious ideas and social mores expressed in the murals of the early city and in the cave beneath the Pyramid of the Sun. Similarly, Arthur Demarest (1986) argued for the primacy of ideas and human agency in the formation of the Triple Alliance, in the wake of what he referred to as the “transformational crisis” of the war with the Tepanecs. The same division between materialists and ideationists, of course, exists in Maya studies. Whereas many scholars emphasize such factors as soil fertility and drainage, natural communication corridors, and other environmental factors to explain the ascendance of sites like

Tikal and Calakmul, others prefer to put ideas in causative roles.

The intellectual agenda for the Copán Mosaics Project research was to describe and explain ideological adaptations by the final four rulers of Copán, via their expression in art, texts, and architecture, in response to the increasing ecological and political problems that the PAC I and II projects had documented in a variety of databases (W. Fash 1988; W. Fash and B. Fash 1990). Larios was the architectural master, William Fash provided expertise on ceramics, dating, and stratigraphy gleaned from his research in household archaeology in the valley, and Barbara Fash lent her keen eye to the recognition and refitting of the blocks of fallen architectural sculpture that gave the project its name and motivation. Linda Schele and David Stuart joined the project to engage in a renewed attack on the hieroglyphic inscriptions at Copán.

The project focused on explaining the political and ideological strategies of each ruler, based on our reconstruction of the historical events and context in which he acted. The ideological strategies were believed to be reflected in the historical records and archaeological remains of royal rituals, the dates chosen for the rituals, the iconography of buildings and freestanding monuments, and the names given to the buildings and monuments. We hoped to reach the level of individual action, and agency, in ancient Copán through the conjoined study of its archaeology and history (for comparison, see Flannery 1999).

The interplay of ideas on this project was open, frank, occasionally sharp, and always challenging. No data point or argument was sacred, and in the exchange among peers, each scholar learned much more about the other fields. The occasions when data or perspectives differed—at times, dramatically—challenged us all the most. Often, project members found themselves teasing out solutions that none could have anticipated when the discussion began. Schele and Stuart's collaborations resulted in the series of brief field reports on epigraphy called the *Copán Notes*, which helped enormously in fostering the exchange of information and ideas among the research team members. Several chapters in the present volume reflect that interdisciplinary collaboration, which is now something of a standard operating procedure in lowland Classic Maya archaeology.

The Mosaics Project expanded to incorporate the Hieroglyphic

Stairway Project in 1986, which then was incorporated in the more ambitious Acropolis Project. In 1988, the senior author founded the Copán Acropolis Archaeological Project (*PAAC* in Spanish), with funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and directed it for its eight-year duration, through 1996. The project was administered through the IHAH, that is, through the central Honduran government, following in many ways the precedent and structure of the earlier Carnegie and PAC projects. Most Maya projects directed by the United States had been run by a single institution, such as the Peabody Museum, the Carnegie Institution of Washington, the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and the Middle American Research Institute of Tulane University.

For the PAAC, Fash sought to bring in colleagues from institutions traditionally involved in Maya archaeology, universities representing solid traditions of scholarship in the field and producing renowned publication series. These were Robert Sharer, of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and E. Wyllys Andrews V, director of the Middle American Research Institute (MARI) of Tulane University. Bob Sharer's (and the University Museum's) experience with investigating complicated architectural sequences in the Maya area made him the natural choice for the investigation of the Copán Acropolis Archaeological Cut (el Corte Arqueológico) and its related buildings in the untouched earlier levels of the Acropolis, to the west of the Corte. Will Andrews was asked to investigate the elite residential area on the south flank of the Acropolis, given his (and MARI's) long trajectory of investigation of Maya architecture in the northern Maya lowlands, as well as his familiarity with ceramics of the southeastern Mesoamerican zone. In this residential complex, the nineteenth-century Peabody Museum project and Carnegie investigators had investigated several of the largest buildings but had never backfilled them, resulting in serious conservation problems that could be addressed only after recovering the pertinent archaeological and architectural data. The third US-based institution to become a partner in the Acropolis Project was Northern Illinois University, which provided strong support to the Fashes on many levels from 1984 to 1994. The example of combining institutions and investigators on large-scale projects has been emulated at many major Maya

sites and has proven just as effective as in the Acropolis Project. Such collaborations are now so commonplace that our graduate students view them as the norm instead of the exception, as if things have always been done this way in Maya archaeology.

The Acropolis Project, like its parents and predecessors the Mosaics and Hieroglyphic Stairway projects, also continued to draw upon the tremendous talents and insights provided by Rudy Larios and the project epigraphers, Schele and Stuart. Over the years, the epigraphers engaged in much fruitful collaboration with their colleagues Grube, Lounsbury, Houston, and Fahsen. The interchange between scholars working on the hieroglyphic texts, the iconography on artifacts and architecture, and the excavations that uncovered them, as well as so many other features and datable materials, was intense and highly productive. In turn, the constant comparisons and exchange of data from excavations on various parts of the Acropolis, excavated by different research teams, was stimulating and enormously beneficial to the larger enterprise. More than thirty graduate students participated in the Acropolis Project and kept their professors up to date. In many cases, these same students conducted primary research for their dissertations, just as on the earlier Harvard, PAC I, PAC II, and Pennsylvania State University settlement survey projects.

Ricardo Agurcia Fasquelle constituted the other key element of this enterprise, having worked on the PAC I valley survey, mapping, and excavation program and having served as the subdirector and representative of the IHAH on the PAC II project and subsequently as the director of the IHAH. Agurcia was deeply committed to Copán and its cultural and natural patrimony, and he became the co-director and IHAH representative on the Acropolis Project in 1989, remaining so until its work was completed in 1996. Our collaboration also resulted in the formation of the Copán Association for Pre-Columbian Studies in 1990, a nonprofit organization designed to champion conservation issues and projects across the country and promote the dissemination of scientific and humanistic research to the people of Honduras and beyond. The Copán Association was the executor of another outgrowth of the Acropolis Project, namely, the construction of the Copán Sculpture Museum, completed in 1996 (figure 1.4). Because the governmental apparatus was notoriously slow and cumbersome, the



**Figure 1.4**

*The Copán Sculpture Museum, view from the second story, looking north. (Photograph by R. Frehsee)*

realization of this dream, first conceived by Barbara Fash but quickly seized upon by all who heard it, would likely never have occurred were it not for the administrative skills of Agurcia and his board of directors. The association was empowered to oversee the project design and supervise the construction (W. Fash and Agurcia Fasquelle 1996; W. Fash and B. Fash 1996; W. Fash et al. 1996). Today, the museum stands as a testimony to the artistic and architectural genius of the ancient people of Copán and to their nuanced expressions of the importance of religion and human agency in constructing that legacy.

In the meantime, René Viel joined his University of Queensland colleague Jay Hall in the 1990s to begin several research ventures in the Copán Valley that have continued to provide important new information. Among these are projects that strongly focus on documenting changes in the physical landscape of the valley bottomlands through a variety of subsurface sensing techniques (Hall and Viel 1994, 2004) and make a concerted effort to broaden and deepen our understand-

ing of Copán and its development during the Preclassic period (Viel 1999a). Likewise, Viel's study of the ceramics, the social factions, and the iconography of public portraiture on Altar Q and Structure 10L-11 has led to the formulation of a provocative new model for the political structure of the ancient kingdom of Copán (Viel 1999b). Robert Sharer engaged the physical anthropologist Jane Buikstra to study the strontium and DNA aspects of the Copán Acropolis skeletons (Buikstra et al. 2004), just as Hall and Viel had undertaken with the valley material, as well as other former students of Sanders and Webster (Whittington 1989, 1999; Whittington and Reed 1997). In the late 1990s the IHAH commenced a new phase of the conservation efforts with the formation of the PICPAC (Proyecto Integral de Conservación del Parque Arqueológico de Copán), first under the direction of George Hasemann and then, following Hasemann's untimely passing, under Seiichi Nakamura. Also, the IHAH founded the Hieroglyphic Stairway Conservation to engage the Getty Conservation Institute in the conservation of that monument, with Barbara Fash serving as director from 1999 to 2002.

At this writing, a new wave of research and conservation projects has begun under the overall direction of Agurcia and the IHAH. These will, no doubt, bring surprises and unprecedented confirmations and contradictions of varying data sets as the archaeology of Copán commences a new chapter in its cultural history in the twenty-first century. Conservation is the credo of the projects we have directed or participated in over the years, with Copán serving as the inspiration and setting for the Declaration of Copán. Signed in 1993 by the heads of state of the five nations with Maya archaeological remains, this document provides a charter for conservation and responsible development in the region. Scholars and local communities must hold their respective central governments accountable for observing the spirit and the letter of that charter. In Copán, economic returns on investment in infrastructure and archaeology have been so impressive that the central government now finds its authority over the ruins contested by both the Ladino and indigenous segments of the local community. Their competing claims for ownership of the ruins may play a significant role in the formulation and execution of conservation and research projects in the Copán Valley in the twenty-first century.

**A BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF CULTURE HISTORY AND  
CULTURAL PROCESS IN CLASSIC-PERIOD COPÁN**

In what follows, we briefly outline the past 175 years of Copán research in order to contextualize the issues that are examined in greater detail in this volume. References to the specialized literature on all these topics can be gleaned from each chapter and are not cited in the remainder of this introduction. Instead, we direct the reader to the appropriate chapters where a particular facet is discussed in most detail.

By 1000 B.C., sedentary village agriculturalists in the Copán Valley began constructing large, elevated, stone platforms for their houses and burying their dead beneath the house floors, along with ceramics and jade offerings that signal their participation in the larger Mesoamerican exchange systems of the Early Formative Horizon (W. Fash 1982, 2001). By A.D. 250–400, Copán was home to a vibrant community that had expanded into all the physiographic zones in the Copán pocket and the larger Copán Valley (W. Fash 1983c). The valley and its growing population provided economic opportunities that, apparently, attracted the attention of the larger, more urbanized Maya communities to the west and the north. In the early fifth century A.D., an interloper, a “Lord of the West” (Stuart 2000), came to change the course of history in this idyllic and fertile setting.

The regal-ritual center known today as “the Acropolis” was founded by a foreigner named *K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'* in the hieroglyphic texts. The city's later inscriptions state that he “arrived” in December of A.D. 426, some three days after he first grasped the insignia of rulership (*K'awil*). Subsequent retrospective histories of this “outsider king” state that he practiced royal rituals ten years before the famed “arrival” date, in A.D. 416, but do not stipulate where those actions took place (W. Fash 2001, Stuart 2004). Several hieroglyphic texts refer to him as a “Lord of the West,” and the analysis of his bone chemistry reveals that he was not a native of the Copán Valley (Sharer et al., chapter 5 in this volume). Present evidence indicates that he probably passed his childhood and adolescent years in the central Petén, in the region of Tikal. He was buried in a building (known as “Hunal Structure”) whose substructure sported the *talud-tablero* facade associated with Teotihuacan. In later portraits, he is depicted in the garb of a Teotihuacano, com-



plete with Tlaloc (Storm God) goggles over his eyes. The form and decoration of his funerary temple, as well as his Late Classic portraits and glyphic titles, show that he wanted to be remembered, and his successors wanted him to be remembered, as having affiliations with the great urban center of Teotihuacan in the Basin of Mexico (W. Fash and B. Fash 2000; Stuart 2000, 2004, and chapter 10 in this volume).

The original nucleus of the Acropolis included three buildings (including Hunal) grouped around a central courtyard, as well as ancestral versions of Structure 10L-11 and of the dynastic temple (Structure 10L-26) that was later to carry the famed Hieroglyphic Stairway, and the ball court to the north (W. Fash, chapter 3, and Sharer et al., chapter 5 in this volume). An inscribed floor marker in association with the first constructions of the ball court and Structure 10L-26 bears an important early text and portraits of the founder of the Classic dynasty and his son and successor, Ruler 2 (W. Fash, chapter 3, and Schele andLooper, chapter 9 in this volume). Succeeding his father in the office of *K'ul Ajaw* (Holy Lord) of Copán in A.D. 437, Ruler 2 immediately embarked upon an ambitious building program, creating a series of buildings and associated art and inscriptions in Early Classic Maya style.

Over the ensuing four centuries, the successors of K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' rebuilt the Acropolis and its constituent buildings and courtyards many times over. Particularly grandiose construction projects were undertaken by Rulers 7 (Waterlily Jaguar), 10 (Moon Jaguar), and 12 (Smoke Imix God K). Hunal Structure was the centerpoint for all subsequent versions of the Acropolis, but the larger civic-ceremonial center of which it formed a part included temples, administrative buildings, a ball court, and the royal residence, ever more grandiose and elaborate with each passing sovereign. Two of the most ornately embellished structures investigated to date, Ante Structure and the famous Rosalila, the latter standing above the successors to Hunal and the tomb of the founder (Agurcia Fasquelle and B. Fash, chapter 6 in this volume), were built during this era. Rosalila, its predecessors, and its successors bear the first ruler's name and religious symbolism in their façade sculptures, modeled in stucco in the case of Rosalila and its predecessors and in stone perhaps as early as the reign of Ruler 10.

Reigning in the glory days of the Copán kingdom, Ruler 12 was in

power longer than any other king in the city's history, from A.D. 628 to 695. At this time, the Acropolis was the center of a vast and complex domain, with more architects and sculptors in its employ than ever before. A new, high-relief sculpture style was being employed on building façades, decorated with tenoned mosaic stone pieces. Ruler 12 also commissioned more stelae and altars than any other dynast, including a set of six stelae erected at selected spots throughout the valley in A.D. 652 to do homage to the sacred geography and the role of the king and his ancestors (especially K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo', named on two of the stelae) in rituals designed to maintain order in the secular and supernatural worlds. Shortly before A.D. 652 he oversaw the installment of a ruler at the site of Quiriguá, located 70 km to the northwest, as recorded on the latter's accession monument (Quiriguá Altar L). This statement implies that Copán's twelfth ruler held sway over dominions both far and near to his regal-ritual center. This king's death was marked by the construction of one of the largest tomb chambers in the Maya area, stocked with hundreds of offerings in ceramics, shell, jade, and perishable materials such as wood and gourds. Atop his grave, his son and successor, Ruler 13, built Esmeralda Structure, which bore the first Hieroglyphic Stairway and references to the death and burial of Ruler 12 (Stuart, chapter 10 in this volume). Esmeralda was soon to be covered by the final version of Structure 10L-26 and the larger, more grandiose version of the Hieroglyphic Stairway visible at the site today.

Ruler 13, Waxaklajun Ub'ah K'awil, took the high-relief sculptural tradition initiated in his father's reign to new heights in his own architectural masterpieces, Structure 10L-22, the first version of the Hieroglyphic Stairway (Stuart, chapter 10 in this volume), and the final version of the Copán ball court. He is best known, however, for the exquisite, nearly full-round stelae he erected in the Great Plaza. Each of these commemorate important rituals he performed to mark the passage of the Period Endings in the Long Count calendric system that occurred during his reign (A.D. 695–738). The dominion Copán held over Quiriguá came to an abrupt and violent end in 738, when Waxaklajun Ub'ah K'awil was captured in battle and beheaded by his counterpart from Quiriguá, K'ak' Tiliw (Two-Legged Sky, or Cauac Sky). His death was viewed at Copán as heroic martyrdom, where the

second and final version of the Hieroglyphic Stairway text records that he was killed on that fateful day “with his flint [weapon], with his shield.” The text of the final version of the stairway, dedicated by Ruler 15, K’ak’ Yipyaj Chan K’awil, thus constitutes a “loser’s history” of Ruler 13’s death, providing us with a check on the accuracy of the claims of K’ak’ Tiliw of Quiriguá. The Copán dynasty weathered this storm and was to prosper for nearly a century after the loss of Waxaklajun Ub’ah K’awil. All his architectural and sculpture monuments in the Great Plaza were maintained, rather than displaced or built over, by the city’s last three rulers.

It is thought that his successor, Ruler 14 (K’ak’ Joplaj Chan K’awil), responded in an innovative manner to the humiliating loss of this great patron of the arts. Rather than continue in the tradition of erecting stelae and altars in his own honor, this ruler built a new and highly decorated version of the council house, Structure 10L-22A, in which he portrayed each of the nine council members seated above toponymic hieroglyphs that named the wards or places each of them represented in the deliberations that took place there (B. Fash, chapter 4 in this volume). The building is labeled by ten large mats that gave its name, *popol nah* or *popol otot* (translated as “Mat House,” “Council House,” or “Community House”). Such buildings (and the institution of the council) were cited in Maya dictionaries and other documents of the Colonial period, indicating that they survived the vicissitudes of the conquest. In front of the council house was a dance platform (dance is frequently mentioned in conjunction with the council house in Colonial documents) and a food preparation area (feasts were offered immediately after the convening of the council). The kingdom subdivisions represented by the toponyms may have been organized by water management districts similar to those of the living Maya and of Southeast Asia (B. Fash, chapter 4 in this volume). However successful this building and the consensus it sought to maintain, Ruler 14 reigned for only eleven years (A.D. 738–749) and did not erect any other monuments, as far as is known.

Ruler 15 completed the magnificent Hieroglyphic Stairway and temple of Structure 10L-26 in A.D. 757, extolling the achievements of all his predecessors in office and placing his own portrait (Stela M) squarely in front of the stairs at its base (W. Fash, chapter 3, and Stuart,

chapter 10, in this volume). This is the longest pre-Columbian hieroglyphic text to survive the Spanish conquest, detailing the life histories of the first fifteen kings and portraying them in grand style as powerful warriors bearing lance and shield. The text in the temple at the pyramid's summit bears two forms of writing, in parallel columns (Stuart, chapter 10 in this volume). One is presented in Classic Maya "full-figure" style, but the parallel text (the first in each pair of columns) relays the same information in a glyphic style that incorporates elements from central Mexican (that is, Teotihuacan) iconography and picture writing. This monument and earlier ones at this locus refer to the place of the bullrush (ancient Tollan). Both this text and the Teotihuacan-derived iconography displayed on most of the ruler portraits on the stairway and temple also serve to highlight the affiliations this Maya dynasty enjoyed with the great metropolis of the west. Ruler 15 also commissioned Stela N, placed at the base of the nearby Structure 10L-11, portraying himself on the south side and Ruler 14 on the north side.

After Ruler 15's death, the last great king of Copán, Yax Pasaj Chan Yopat (Newly Dawned), ushered in a new era in the city's history. During his early years in power, this sovereign created some of the largest and most imposing architectural monuments in the Maya world in the final versions of Structures 10L-11, 10L-16, and 10L-21A, as well as an elaborate personal residence on the south flank of the Acropolis (Andrews and Bill, chapter 7 in this volume). These were adorned with abundant façade sculptures and hieroglyphic texts. Structure 10L-11 had some of the largest and most elaborate façade sculptures ever carved in ancient Mesamerica, as well as numerous inscriptions in its eight temple panels, in the Reviewing Stand text on the West Court side, and in an outset sculpture panel on the side of the Hieroglyphic Stairway plaza.

During the middle and later years of his long reign (A.D. 763–ca. 822), Yax Pasaj was content to dedicate a series of small stone sculptures in the form of altars, stone censers, and circular bases for censers with inscribed dates. These marked the passing of the Period Endings and the ceremonies he performed on those occasions. His name also appears on a series of inscribed benches or thrones in the domiciles of the patriarchs of noble families who lived in the Type 3 and Type 4 elite

residences in the valley. The abundance of these and other sculpture monuments in so many palatial noble quarters has led the senior author to suggest that the dynasty may have ended because the number of political posts available was limited (recall the nine places represented in the council house) vis-à-vis the much larger number of men who sought to occupy those positions of power and influence (W. Fash, chapter 3 in this volume).

The political problems caused by an elite class that had burgeoned during four centuries of dynastic rule, as well as the breakaway of Quiriguá and other formerly subsidiary centers, resulted in the loss of vital tribute to the kingdom precisely when it was most in need. By building the city center in the middle of the best farmland, the dynasty's founders inadvertently created an enormous problem for future generations, for by the eighth century A.D. the city covered all the best agricultural fields. This forced agriculture up into the adjacent piedmont, which residences also took over as the population rapidly expanded. Eventually, the maize, beans, and squash that had always formed the mainstay of the diet had to be cultivated on thin, upland slopes. These were quickly washed away in the massive erosion in the late eighth and early ninth centuries A.D., indicated by various kinds of evidence (Webster, chapter 2 in this volume). Elliot Abrams (1994) has demonstrated that the valley's deforestation resulted primarily from the need to secure cooking fuel for the city's hearths. With each passing year, the city was less able to provide its own food, fuel, and potable water.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the years following Yax Pasaj's death saw numerous destructive actions in the temples, palaces, and monuments of the royal line (Andrews and Bill, chapter 7 in this volume). Yax Pasaj's private ancestral shrine (Structure 10L-29) was burned and toppled, as was his funerary temple (Structure 10L-18), and the council house (Structure 10L-22A). Fragments of human bone, jade beads, and an inscribed marble vessel from the tomb of Structure 10L-18 suggest that Yax Pasaj's tomb was looted and then ransacked. The offering caches found inside the sculpture panels on the stairways of Structures 10L-11 and 10L-16 were also looted, and some of their sculptures were rolled down the stairs. Many families residing in the urban core continued to live there for another generation or two, but

by the mid-tenth century the valley was abandoned (Andrews and W. Fash, chapter 11 in this volume). A group of immigrants from the west or south built a modest village in the shadow of the Acropolis ca. A.D. 975, scavenging the last king's funerary temple for sculptures and other nearby buildings for their house foundations and an occasional household shrine as reminders of the glory that had been. Within a century, they, too, were gone. The valley held no other significant occupation until well after the first Spanish description of Copán (and the first mention of it by that name), penned by Diego García de Palacios in 1576.

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