

# HOLMUL, PETEN GUATEMALA 2003

## POST-SEASON INTERIM REPORT.



Early Classic mask decorating the frieze of Str. 1 –sub 1 at La Sufricaya,  
(drawing Jessica Mundt).

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*Francisco Estrada-Belli (PI), August 23, 2003*

**INTRODUCTION**

The present report is a first preliminary summary of recent work at Holmul in 2003. The field work started on May 13 and ended on June 30, 2003. The analysis of artifacts was conducted in the USAC-CUDEP laboratory in Flores, Petén between June 30 and July 18, 2003. Further analysis of all data is still in progress. A more complete progress report on the 2003 results is expected to be released in December 2003.

**LA SUFRICAYA**

At La Sufricaya, work directed by VU graduate student Jenn Foley focused on the Str. 1 mural building. Two excavations were placed on the centerline of the mound, away from the location of previously found murals. An interesting sequence of construction stages emerged from these excavations. We were able to identify at least 5 different sub-structure stages within the mound. The latest phase is of Late/Terminal Classic date and includes mostly perishable buildings, probably residences, built on top of a flat-topped mound. Underneath the last phase, are two consecutive staircases leading up to a perishable building on the north end of the mound. The ground plan of this building is largely lost due to the collapse of the edge of the mound into the plaza below. The earliest staircase of the two had eroded painted decoration on the steps, possibly hieroglyphic in content.

A tunnel on the east side of this staircase led to uncovering a C-shaped wall with a painted mural. This wall was actually the western end wall of the room containing the Teotihuacan murals found in 2001. While most of the paint is still covered by a thin lime

wash applied in ancient times, some of the figures are visible and can be identified as (more) seated warriors wearing goggle-eyed headdresses in Teotihuacan style.

In effect, the stairway was built on the outside of the C-shaped mural room, which actually resembles an open portico, and the murals could have been visible on the side of the stairway when it was in use.

The stairway covered an earlier construction on the outside of the mural room (Room 1). This consisted of a long e-w wall abutting the NW corner of the Room 1 building. In the centerline of this wall (and of the mound itself) was a large masonry bench. The position and size of this bench suggests that it may have been a throne, even though it is not very elaborate. This centerline throne would be accessed by walking by the portico with the Teotihuacán mural when it was in use. The finding of the throne also reinforces our initial hypothesis that this structure functioned as a royal palace, at least for a short time in the Early Classic period (ca A.D. 400-450), and that the Room 1 mural depicts an accession ceremony presided by Teotihuacán warriors. On the outside (NW) corner of the mural room (Room 1), where this is abutted by the E-W wall with the new bench, a stucco frieze was found. This frieze included quatrefoils and a small stucco head painted in black and red. This rather devilish-looking head wears a bib and cloth in the ears and has inlaid teeth. According to Coggins (pers. comm.) it may be a representation of a captive with Highland Mexican connotations.

Further excavation revealed a doorway opening from Room 1 to the north where a later room was built onto an open portico (as described above). From this room, a sealed doorway led to a second room to the west. Behind this doorway were the outside walls

(south and east) of a buried small structure with a cornice and plastered walls. In style and size, this building resembles Str. 5D 10 sub-1<sup>st</sup> in the Northern Acropolis of Tikal (Coggins pers. comm.), although no paintings were seen in our building.

It is difficult to determine the function of this small building although a small temple or a funerary shrine would be appropriate due to its centerline location, and the construction of a later throne on top of it.

We believe that an excavation from the north end of the mound will reveal the main entrance to this small building, its sub-floor contents and its function. The tentative date for this building is A.D. 350-400.

Also at La Sufricaya, Dr. A. Semeraro (Istituto Centrale di Restauro) cleaned and stabilized all of Mural 5 and a small section of Mural 1. Dr. Gene Ware (BYU) completed the high-resolution documentation of Mural 5 (the scaffold sacrifice) with a multi-spectral camera. The results of which are much more vivid and the infra-red images reveal details of great significance that are invisible to the naked eye. Earlier this spring conservators Lesley Rainier and Angelyn Rivera inspected the murals and prepared a lengthy technical report on their conservation and long-term salvage. Plans for long-term preservation of the murals are still in progress.

### **HOLMUL-SITE CENTER**

At Holmul site center, work in Group III revealed a grand staircase leading up to the court from the main plaza. At the top of the court stairway was an arched entryway built between two multi-room buildings facing out to the plaza below. A stairway led from the arched entrance in the courtyard facing the western throne room.

Clearing of rubble in the rooms adjacent the arched entrance revealed a throne (with tapered legs and arm rests) in room 8. This may have been the latest official use of the court as a palace.

Clearing of a vaulted passage under the western throne room (str. 43) revealed a Terminal Classic midden filled with fine ceramics, possibly from the palace rooms. Clearing of the buildings on the southern end of the court (str. 60) showed Terminal Classic closing off of this area and a large midden demonstrating that the south end was used as a trash midden by the last occupants of the complex.

Also at Holmul, in Group II, cleaning of Merwin's excavated deposits in Building B accidentally uncovered an unexcavated protoclassic tomb. The stone crypt contained a single body accompanied by a complete mammiform vessel and a tubular jade bead. It was found stratigraphically below the earliest of the excavated tombs (Rooms 9 and 8) and under the broken floor of Room 1 (the earliest). Therefore, it is a most significant addition to the sample of protoclassic tombs in that it provides a secure dating for the beginning of the Holmul 1 phase in this group and for its stylistically interesting pot. Further excavation may reveal more burials and architecture undetected by the R.E. Merwin's excavation of the building.

## **CIVAL**

At Cival, some of the most spectacular finds of the 2003 seasons were made. A tunnel in Str. 1 on top of Triadic Group 1 (the eastern structure) penetrated the later phase stairway of a Preclassic pyramid (dated stylistically at A.D. 100 in 2002). On an earlier façade buried inside the core of this pyramid, was a giant stucco mask (ca. 5m wide and 3 m

high) preserved in almost all detail. The mask depicts a Sun-God (perhaps G III), with an L-shaped eye and eyebrows with U-shape motifs, surmounted by merlons. The image has a squarish mouth with single fang, short nose, Kan-cross incised on the cheek, ear flare with four dots on a squared-circle and U-shape sign in the center. The flare is surmounted by a knot and a scroll with an unusual motif dangling from it.

Strong parallels with the Cerros lower terrace masks on Str. 5C-2<sup>nd</sup> support the identification of this anthropomorphic mask as a Sun God (Freidel and Schele 1988). It is located on the south side of the upper terrace of the pyramid. We believe that a lower terrace mask and a paring set on the opposing side of the stairway may well be preserved on this structure. Also, at the top of this pyramid is a largely preserved Late Preclassic masonry building only partially exposed by a looters' trench which may be explored in future excavations.

On the centerline of the east platform of Cival's E-group (Str. 7) an excavation by Molly Morgan and Jeremy Bauer attempted to locate the stela butt for Preclassic Stela 2, which was stylistically dated by Nikolai Grube to ca. 300-200 B.C. A possible cut was found, with stone bracing and the correct dimensions to fit a stela. The bottom of this stela cut contained a cache of Sierra Red bowl with two *Spondylus* shells which encapsulated a jade fragment, a carved shell disc and a fragment of hematite as well as the remains of cinnabar. The Late Preclassic date of this stela butt is consistent with Grube's initial stylistic dating of Stela 2, as one of the earliest carved stelae in the Maya Lowlands.

A second, similar cache was found at an earlier level in this same area.

Further down into the stratigraphy of this centerline location a large cruciform cut into bedrock was detected. Four large jars were found smashed in each of the four arms of the cross and one in the center. The southern jar was red while all others were black.

Under the central jar was a depression containing five upright plain jade celts (ca. 25 cm long) in cruciform patterns. The central and western jade were distinct in being of blue jade while all others were of green jade. Surrounding the celts was a scatter of 115 pebbles of green and blue jade.

We identified the jars as Chunhinta black, Desprecio Incised and Joventud red types which place the whole cache in the Middle Preclassic Period. The content and shape of this cache closely approximates the early Middle Preclassic cache from Seibal and other jade caches from San Isidro Chiapas and La Venta. Structural and material similarities also link this cache to the Nohmul and Cerros Late Preclassic jade masks caches as well as the Pomona ear flare and associated figurines (four) as elaborated kan-cross or cruciform cosmograms (Justeson et al. 1986).

The new Cival deposit of jars and the jade recalls water symbolism. The upright jade celts may also symbolize sprouting Maize plants (Taube pers. comm.), while the scattering of jade is often equated with scattering of blood (Stuart 1988). A round post hole was found cut into the surface of fill covering the cache. Schele (1992) suggests a symbolic link between jades/sprouting maize plants and a central world tree, as part of a royal symbolism common throughout lowland Mesoamerica. Therefore, a ceremony of accession to power involving the erection of a world-tree may be associated with this offering.

Moreover the structural similarity of this cache with other Preclassic Maya cruciform caches reveals a Sun-God symbolism as well as a cardinal-direction cosmological order.

Its placement on the centerline of the eastern platform of the e-group, i.e. on the equinoxial axis reinforces the idea of a sun-based ritual and agricultural cycle/accession to power. The cache itself may help date the very first use of this long eastern structure as an E-Group complex in the Middle Preclassic.

In sum, we believe the significance of this cache may not only be in the early date, its material contents and its cosmological symbolism but also in the architectural context in which it was found which identifies it as part of a public ritual associated with accession to secular power (in homology to later Pomona Flare text and Nohmul, Cerros caches), and as such, it may be one of the earliest examples of dynastic rituals among the Preclassic Maya. Furthermore, at Cival there is clear continuity between the cache's early context and symbolism of secular power with Sun-God, maize, rain symbolism and the triadic group as a later monumental cosmogram formed by the Sun God mask (as at Cerros) and other yet to be discovered masks flanking an eastern building on the same E-W axis as the earlier cruciform cache.

Further research at Cival, will certainly uncover further evidence of monumental sculpture, burial and ritual deposits connected with the early development of kingship among the Preclassic Lowland Maya.

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**FIGURES**



Figure 1. Stucco mask adorning the NW corner of Room 1. Paint is red and black. Traces of mural painting below the mask is also visible.



Figure 2. Mammiform vessel found in tomb in Building B, Group III.



Figure 3. Stucco mask adorning the southern side of the upper terrace of Str.1 sub-2<sup>nd</sup> in Triadic Group 1 at Cival, Petén. Viewer looks northeast. Scale bar is 2 m.



Figure 4a. Cruciform cache of five jars and underlying jades cut into bedrock on centerline of E-Group at Cival. Scale is 25 cm.



Figure 4b.



Figure 5. Central pit in cruciform cache with five upright jade celts and 115 pebbles. Scale is 25 cm.



Figure 6. Cival Cruciform cache with partially reconstructed jars reassembled in the lab.  
Scale is 25 cm