Colgate archaeologist discovers ancient tomb, unusual remains in Copán, Honduras
Discoveries suggest a politically complex, culturally diverse city

Hamilton, N.Y. — Colgate University anthropology professor Allan Maca and his team of researchers have found a previously unknown tomb in Copán, Honduras, dating back to the 7th century A.D. that contained the skeleton of an elite member of ancient Maya society in the city. The unusual characteristics of the tomb’s construction, the human remains, and the artifacts found near the body, according to Maca, paint a picture of an urban state that was more politically complex and culturally diverse than was previously thought.

As reported this month by National Geographic News and the Honduran press, Maca and his group — which includes Kristin Landau, who graduated this May from Colgate — found the tomb in 2005 in Copán, the ancient city near the western edge of Honduras where the country borders Guatemala. Over the past two years, they have excavated and studied the tomb and its contents, with funding support from the National Geographic Society and Colgate.

While Copán, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is well known for grand, carved and inscribed monuments, a hieroglyphic stairway with the longest text in the Americas, and other famed discoveries in the ceremonial center of the city and its Acropolis, Maca’s discovery was unexpected because it comes from beyond the administrative heart of Copán, in an area that has not yet been well studied.

“Combined with other characteristics, it is becoming clear that this discovery provides unprecedented evidence for political complexity and cultural diversity at Copán during the early part of the Late Classic period [A.D. 600 to 750],” said Maca.

Maca explained that the interred individual, for example, was seated in an upright position and surrounded by shells, pottery, vessels, and jade adornments. That positioning, some of the artifacts near the body, and the structure of the tomb itself, he said, seem to indicate that the person was a high elite political and/or priestly figure.

The body also sported an elaborate jade necklace with beads of various sizes and a pectoral or carved pendant hanging from the center. The presence of such a quantity of jade always suggests “a level of control over economic resources,” said Maca, who also serves as director of the PAPAC (www.papacweb.org), a Spanish acronym for the Copán Urban Planning Project.

In addition, “the incised design on the pectoral likely represents a political title or social affiliation that links this individual to other major sites around the city,” he added.

According to Maca, the tomb is a rare split vault design that was created by interlocking lintels (load-bearing horizontal supports) and was accessed from above by a stuccoed stone chute that descends from the surface of the temple. The chute and the split vault enabled it to be reentered years after the original interment for purposes of ancestor veneration. He said the team has solid evidence that the tomb was reentered at least once and rituals were performed with the bones.

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“This design is without precedent in the Maya area and is the first elaborate tomb construction to be discovered outside the ceremonial center of Copán,” he said. “It is so unusual that we initially imagined it could only be the tomb of a king. We now believe, however, that the picture is much more complicated.”

Ornate tombs belonging to members of the Copán dynasty, royal court, and royal family are typically found in Copán’s Acropolis, he explained, so archaeologists have focused most of their research in the central area since the 1800s.

“As we begin to think more broadly about the great extent of the royal city, and about how to protect it against modern looting and population growth, we are coming to understand that the dynasty manifested its power in sectors of the Copán Valley that have never been explored,” Maca said. “Previous research in the Acropolis tells us much about vertical dimensions of power at Copán and has largely been focused on the kings and their palace at the head of the hierarchy. Now we are able to begin to look beyond the downtown and to think in more heterarchical terms regarding the nature and expression of power during this critical period in Copán’s history.”

He said the tomb was also marked by the following unusual features:

- The interred individual was placed in the tomb seated upright with his legs crossed, an uncommon burial position among the Classic period lowland Maya and unknown for the Late Classic period at Copán.

- Studies by one of Maca’s team members, Arizona State University doctoral candidate Katherine Miller, reveal that the person was a male and approximately 50 years old at the time of his death. He had numerous debilitating pathologies, such as mastoiditis (a bacterial infection in the ear), chronic infections and disfigurements, and poor arterial flow in the cervical vertebrae that may have made him both physically challenged and an unusual sight to behold.

- Dental modifications, such as inlays and designs, are common among the ancient Maya. The interred individual, however, bears combinations of modifications that have never been seen in the Maya area and which may suggest a regional origin in and/or affiliation with areas well beyond the Copán Valley.

- The painted pottery associated with the body appears to have come from well to the south of the area, probably near the Honduran border with present-day El Salvador. As such, it is unlikely that the pots were made in Copán; they probably signify some sort of cultural affiliation with that region.

- The seashells near the individual were arranged in such a way to illustrate a cosmological map that marked him as the center of the world. The shells may also represent the waters in Mayan creation mythology and were certainly transported to Copán through commercial exchanges with the coast.

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• The tomb and its associated temple were constructed as a whole unit. These were part of a funerary complex that marks the birth of a new sector of the city after the reclamation of swampland to accommodate a growing population. “This is the first good evidence for both the cultural and environmental elements of Copán’s urban expansion during the Late Classic period,” said Maca.

All in all, the discovery provides “an unusual archaeological context that helps expand our knowledge of the sociopolitical and cultural complexity of the ancient city and of the funerary and ritual landscape of the Copán Valley during the seventh century A.D.,” he continued.

Dario Euraque, director of the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History, agreed that Maca’s findings were significant for a number of reasons.

“Mainly, this is the first tomb to be found outside the principal monuments where all funeral sites are located,” he said.

“We never thought we would find any in the Bosque, which is along the periphery of Copán.”

He also believes that the artifacts and tomb characteristics were not representative of the Maya culture.

“This goes against theories that all populations in the Copán Valley were uniquely Mayan,” he said. “There appears to have been a cultural mix.”

The 2005 discovery was announced this month in conjunction with the Honduras Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Sports and the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History. Due to its location in an area of the National Park with poor security, the tomb will be reburied later this summer once consolidation and preliminary restoration have been completed.

*Founded in 1819, Colgate University is a highly selective, residential, liberal arts college serving nearly 2,800 undergraduates. Situated on a rolling 515-acre campus in central New York State, Colgate University attracts motivated students with diverse backgrounds, interests and talents.*

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