

*Ancient Honduras:
Power, Wealth, and Rank in Early Chiefdoms*

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INTRODUCTION

HONDURAS LIES ON THE SOUTHERN PERIPHERY of the Mesoamerican culture area and on the northern edge of the Intermediate Area (Kirchoff 1943; Willey 1939). Due to this frontier-like setting, the prehistory of Honduras is exceedingly complex, and the archaeology frequently exhibits an admixture of both Mesoamerican (especially Mayan), Lower Central American, and even South American cultural features (Healy 1984a). Although the earliest inhabitants of this region, ten thousand years ago or more, were basically egalitarian bands of hunters and gatherers, by the time of the sixteenth-century Spanish incursions it was a land occupied by at least seven major language groups ruled by a plethora of elaborately ranked societies (Campbell 1979; Creamer 1986). The evolutionary path from a culture marked fundamentally by equality to one exhibiting diverse rank, wealth, and hierarchy has intrigued anthropologists virtually since the inception of the discipline (Tylor 1871; Morgan 1877).

Unfortunately, archaeological information on early Paleoindian and Archaic groups in Honduras is extremely limited. Reconstruction of lifeways during this preceramic era is based largely on better documented areas to both the north and south. It is not until the first millennium B.C. that archaeological evidence becomes sufficiently detailed to enable the beginnings of an archaeological reconstruction of the cultural life style and sociopolitical organization with any degree of reliability. What is apparent, however, is that even by 800 B.C., parts of western Honduras were already ruled by emergent chiefdoms, while more easterly regions of Honduras remained at a tribal level of sociopolitical organization.

TRIBES AND CHIEFDOMS

The Spanish chroniclers liberally applied the Arawak term *cacique*, meaning chief, throughout the Americas almost wherever they encountered

nucleated communities represented by a principal spokesperson or headman (Sauer 1966: 6). Recently, it has been argued that some aboriginal groups in Lower Central America clearly functioned, even as late as the time of the European conquest, as tribes with individual communities being economically independent and autonomous, but politically and ceremonially interdependent (Creamer and Haas 1985). Some features normally attributed to tribal societies include a subsistence level of economy with limited surpluses, which were not in the hands of one leader. Furthermore, the surpluses were not used to support group labor projects. Fried (1967) has noted, with regard to status, that tribes are non-hierarchical with only limited social ranking (some kin groups may attain higher status than others). The tribal system, then, is characterized as decentralized with egalitarian interaction and cooperation rather than hierarchical decision-making.

By contrast, chiefdoms stand as clearly defined, visibly ranked societies in which all members have a position on the social hierarchical ladder (Haviland 1978: 494). The new structural principle for integration of the diverse communities is "ranking" (Sanders and Marino 1970: 6-7). Chiefdoms are politically and socially centralized (Fried 1967; Sahlins 1968; Service 1971, 1975), and status differences in the hierarchy are maintained by the often conspicuous accrual and use of sumptuary goods by chiefs and their relatives. Chiefs enhanced their status by the systematic exchange of exotic goods with the chiefs of other areas (Flannery 1968; Creamer and Haas 1985: 740) and by the support of craft specialists and artisans.

Increased prestige and power accrued to chiefs through their ability to redistribute the resources of their domains. The management of internal community interaction, conflicts, and contacts with the "outside" world also contributed to a chief's prominence (Peebles and Kus 1977; Earle 1977). The chief becomes the principal decision-maker at the top of an integrated hierarchy (Haas 1982; Creamer and Haas 1985: 740), and authority spills into the areas of religion, warfare, communal projects, external trade, and foreign contacts (Levy n.d.).

Can we recognize this prehistoric transition from tribal to chiefly society in Honduras? At what point in time, and where, in the archaeological record, can we begin to discern the complex sociopolitical organization of a hierarchical society and the differentiated wealth so characteristic of classic chiefdoms? Creamer and Haas (1985: tab. 1) have established a useful list of defining features and corresponding archaeological expectations for tribes and chiefdoms. Though they focused on prehistoric groups in Costa Rica and Panama, they enumerated characteristics that are equally applicable to the aboriginal societies of ancient Honduras. Unfortunately, the archaeological data for this area are often incomplete, and hardly uniform, making a

full, detailed interpretation premature, if not problematic. As a result, the scenario presented here must be taken with reservations.

Despite these limitations, we can survey the extant archaeological information contrasting developments in western and eastern Honduras and isolate three major correlates for analysis: (a) evidence for large-scale architecture, (b) status goods, and (c) ranking. These features should sharpen the identification of tribal or chiefly organization, thereby helping us to begin evaluation of the process involved. Although we will occasionally refer to data from the early Maya center at Copan, the geographic focus is western, central, and northeastern Honduras. (The far west, Maya zone, is largely excluded by the conference theme.) The temporal focus is restricted to the time period from 1000 B.C. to A.D. 500, designated Period IV in a recent area periodization (Lange and Stone 1984: 7, fig. 1.2). This specific time span was chosen because the archaeological record in Honduras prior to 1000 B.C. is particularly impoverished, and there are signs that by A.D. 500 some societies in western Honduras had already evolved into highly organized chiefdoms.

PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE

Architectural features often lend themselves well to archaeological analysis because, probably more than any other single class of artifacts, they tend to be easily recognized, quantified, and measured, even without excavation. In an examination of the transition from tribe to chiefdom the crucial point is to distinguish a public building, constructed through the efforts of group activity for some type of ceremonial purpose, from more common, residential structures, presumably built by and for nuclear or extended family use. Large size is usually the distinguishing feature for a communally built construction, though the type of building materials employed and the quality of the craftsmanship exhibited would also figure into such evaluations. Among the non-Maya archaeological sites from the western half of Honduras, the most impressive evidence for early, substantive architectural construction comes from the centers of Los Naranjos (Bauduz and Becquelin 1973) and Yaramela (Canby n.d., 1951; Joesink-Mandeville 1987).

At Los Naranjos, on the north shore of Lake Yojoa, construction of a 6-m tall platform took place between 800 and 400 B.C. (Fig. 1). Other evidence of large-scale undertakings at this time includes a moatlike ditch, perhaps created as a fortification, about 1300 m long and as much as 7 m deep (Fig. 2). In central Honduras, at approximately the same time, the inhabitants at Yaramela, in the Comayagua Valley, were beginning to erect a remarkable earth-and-rubble mound, which by 300 B.C. reached a



Fig. 1 Aerial view of the main group of structures at Los Naranjos. Photograph by Claude Baudez.



Fig. 2 Ditch No. 1 at Los Naranjos (Jaral Phase). Photograph by Claude Baudez.

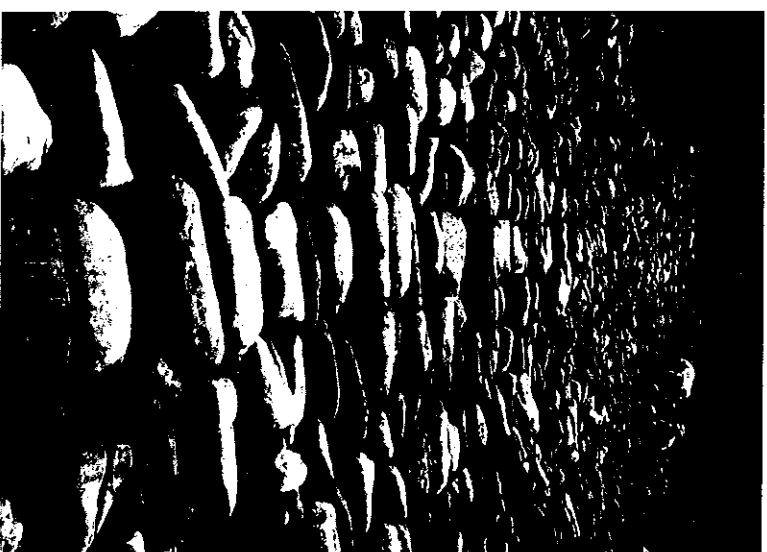


Fig. 3 Stone boulder ramp on exterior of Structure 4 at Los Naranjos. Photograph by Claude Baudez.

maximum height of 20 m. Three other large mounds were positioned atop a sizeable plateau of land and are aligned quite closely with the cardinal points (Leroy Joesink-Mandeville, personal communication, 1987).

The Los Naranjos and Yaramela constructions represent large-scale collective enterprises, and both examples suggest that the site rulers were able to marshal a significant population to undertake impressive earthworks for the “public good.” Precisely what public activities took place is not known, but the mounds are presumed to have been religious in nature.

In the eight centuries between 300 B. C. and A. D. 500, farming communities spread throughout western Honduras, and a number of other major centers emerged that relied upon public-works efforts to create quite impressive architectural assemblages. Sites that appear prominent at this time and bear remnant traces of public architecture include Santo Domingo, Rio Pelo, and La Guacamaya (Henderson et al. 1979; John Henderson, personal communication, 1987) in the Sula Valley; Lo de Vaca (Baudez 1966), in

the Comayagua Valley; the Baide site (Schortman et al. 1986; Benyo and Melchionne 1987) in the Teneca Valley; and others. These sites all show clear signs of emerging, complex social systems.

At Los Naranjos, the earlier successes that distinguished the site as a primary center in an incipient settlement hierarchy were expanded and enlarged by A.D. 500. The main architectural mound, Structure 1, became an earthen, stepped pyramid more than 18 m tall, with undressed limestone blocks on the exterior (Fig. 3). Another set of large mounds was aligned to the cardinal points and served to enclose a rectangular plaza. A second defensive ditch was dug around the site, this time a remarkable 5 km long, 4 m deep, and up to 15 m wide. The moatlike trench was further enhanced by a 2-m tall earthen embankment on the southwestern edge (Baudiez and Becquelin 1973).

Some 60 km to the southeast, at Yarumela, large-scale mound construction continued with impressive earthen, stepped platforms mounted by stone stairs or ramps. Canby (1951: 79) mentions half a dozen mounds ranging from 5 to 12 m tall. These early public works at Yarumela extend over an area of 1 km², and some were never surpassed in magnitude and size in the Comayagua Valley (Fig. 4).

In eastern Honduras, although there are remains of human activity, particularly in the northeast, which date to at least 1000 B.C. (Healy 1974), evidence for settlements with distinctive architectural features has not been found, neither by our site survey (1973-76), nor by a more recent effort in the northeast (Sharer et al. n.d.). Earlier settlements surely existed, but it is not until about A.D. 300 that communities marked by archaeologically recognizable earth and/or shell mounds begin to occur (Healy 1984a: 144-147).

At two such sites, Williams Ranch (Healy 1975) and Selin Farm (Healy 1978a), in the Department of Colón, mounds ranging from an average of about 1 m (or less) to the tallest structures, standing about 4 m in elevation, were accumulated through gradual build-up over the centuries. In addition to such modest mounds, the Williams Ranch site retained evidence of a moatlike trench, originally no more than 1.5 m deep and 350 m long, encircling the site. There are no indications of any specially prepared mound facings of stone or other materials, or of ramps or stairs, and it is presumed that the superstructures that once topped the mounds were built of perishable materials. All indications from the artifacts suggest that the buildings were principally residential.

True public architecture of any recognizable scale does not appear in northeast Honduras until the Basic-Transitional Selin Periods (A.D. 600-1000), when a 4-m tall earth-and-shell mound was created at the Selin Farm site (Healy 1978a). In the later Cocal Period, nearly two millennia after Los Naranjos was begun, large-scale public architecture was finally becoming



Fig. 4 View of Mound 101 and lower oxbow plain from top of Mound 103 at Yarumela. Photograph by Leroy Joesink-Mandeville.

commonplace, as exhibited at the Rio Claro site in the Aguan River Valley (Healy 1978b). The central mound at Rio Claro, for example, stood 7 m above the large plazas of the site and was faced, front and rear, by stone boulder ramps.

STATUS GOODS

With the emergence of a stratified society there is a concomitant appearance of elite goods, either locally produced or imported. These sumptuary goods are highly valued, either because they are made of exotic and attractive raw materials or because they are objects exhibiting an advanced degree of product specialization. Such valuables tend to be rare in tribal-level societies, and to be ostentatiously displayed in ranked chiefdoms. The exhibitionism of stratified chiefly societies may include open display of the status goods, as part of aristocratic apparel (e.g., insignia of office), the dramatic removal of such goods via elite burials, or ritual entombment of such items (e.g., caches).

As with public architecture, the earliest high-status goods have been found in western Honduras. At Los Naranjos, a Jaral Phase burial (dating perhaps as early as 800 B.C.), produced remains of an individual wearing a variety of finely crafted jade ornaments, including a necklace, multi-strand belt, and huge ear pieces (Figs. 5 and 6). A cache associated with the Jaral Phase platform contained a jade axe that had been ceremonially sprinkled with red cinnabar (Baudiez and Becquelin 1973: 89, figs. 17b, 145a, 145b).

This is the first documented appearance of jade and the earliest evidence of the ritual deposit of the substance in this part of Central America. It was not, however, an isolated instance; not far away, on the Uluá River at the site of Playa de los Muertos, carved jade ornaments, beads, pendants, and celtilike "axe-gods" have been recovered (Fig. 7). Kennedy (1986: 183) has suggested that occupation at the site may date as far back as 650 B.C. The jades here almost certainly date to the Middle Pre-Classic Period.

Jade, jadeite, or similar hard, green-hued lithic artifacts have been identified from burials at Gualojucito, in west central Honduras (Ashmore et al. 1987), and Rio Pelo (Wonderley n.d.), in the eastern Sula Plain, prior to A.D. 500. Although it usually occurs only in small quantities, jade is not a local commodity and likely was acquired through trade networks with Maya-speaking groups farther to the west. Sources for jade, for example, have been identified in the Motagua River Valley, in Guatemala (Foshag and Leslie 1955; Hammond et al. 1977). The usage of green-colored stone

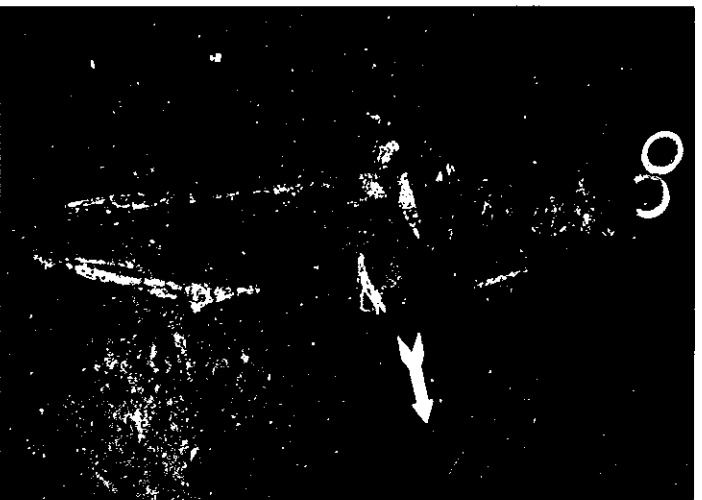


Fig. 5 Burial 2, Structure 4 (Jara! Phase) at Los Naranjos with jade ornaments. Photograph by Claude Baudéz.

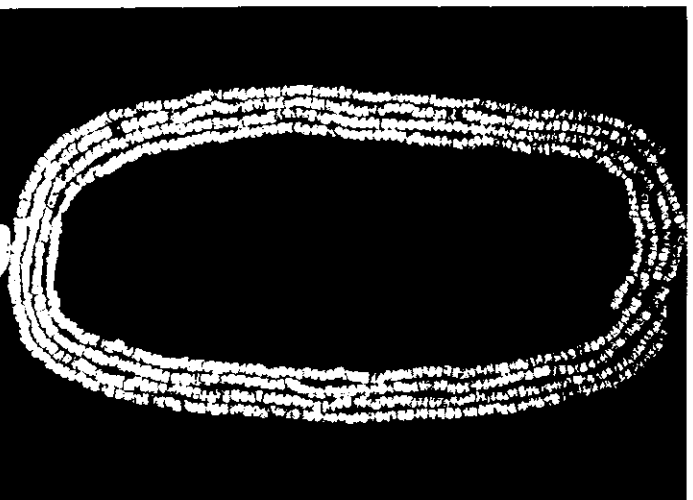


Fig. 6 Jade bead belt with pendant, from Burial 2, Structure 4 (Jara! Phase) at Los Naranjos. Photograph by Claude Baudéz.

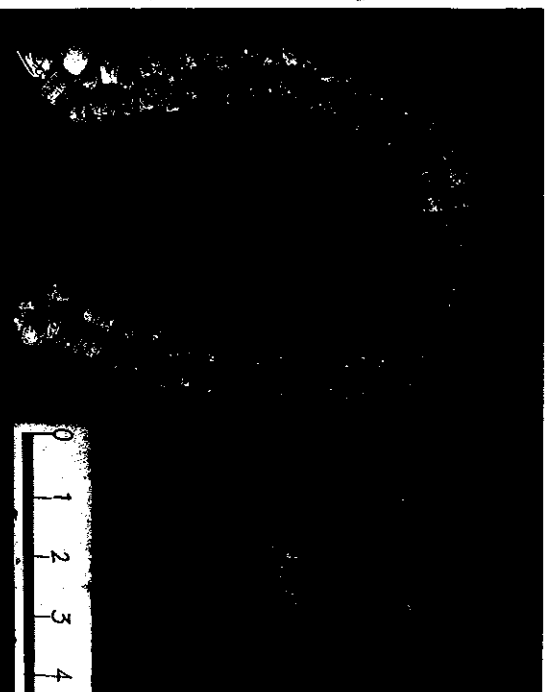


Fig. 7 Jade and shell beads with pendants, from Burial 8, Playa de los Muertos. Courtesy of Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Photograph by Hillel Burger. Cat. nos. 29-15-20/C10963 and /C10964.

for ceremonial ornamentation, usually elite, has a considerable antiquity in Mesoamerica, particularly in the Maya region where it occurs in small quantities at Cuello, Belize, about 1250 B.C. (Hammond 1986), and in the Gulf Coast region of Mexico, among the Olmec, at La Venta (Drucker et al. 1959), during the so-called Olmec Horizon (Sharer 1982).

In eastern Honduras, the identification of any obvious status goods for the period 1000 B.C. to A.D. 500 is difficult. We have no evidence of jade usage during the first half of the period. There are some greenstone (probably serpentine) tubular beads that occur in the Early Selin Period (A.D. 300-600), and probably represent the first identifiable status goods of the region. There are, by the end of this period (perhaps A.D. 500), crudely carved greenstone pebbles bearing some general resemblance to Lower Central American "axe god" celts. These northeast Honduran pieces usually have bore holes, suggesting they were once suspended as pendants and quite likely represent early northeast Honduras symbols of authority and distinction. These are, however, relatively rare, and are presently known only from private collections, albeit reputedly from known Selin Period settlements.

As such, status goods, particularly carved jade ornaments, appear fairly early (during the early half of the first millennium B.C.) and in appreciable quantities in the west. In contrast, there is a negligible, and apparently belated, development of a parallel "greenstone" tradition in eastern Honduras.

RANK

Cremer and Haas (1985) state that in tribal societies there is only limited evidence of status differences in burial goods, suggesting a continuous range of statuses. By contrast, chiefdoms exhibit rank-ordered burials with clear status levels. In western Honduras, Los Naranjos not only provides significant evidence for burials of different rank but quite early data for elaborate grave offerings. At Playa de los Muertos, a cemetery-like setting revealed a series of burials with variable grave goods (Popence 1934). These ranged from jade and shell jewelry, ceramic vessels, obsidian blades, and elaborately modeled clay figurines in some burials, to no grave goods at all in others (Figs. 8, 9). Of particular interest was the excavation of two child burials (nos. 8 and 14) complete with numerous grave goods, including jade ornaments, which were obviously accumulated by the children's families, suggesting hereditary ranking.

A further suggestion of early social differentiation at Playa de los Muertos occurs on the figurines themselves (Figs. 10-12). Given the extraordinary detail and individuality of the Playa figurines it seems plausible that they were produced by professional, or full-time, artisans (Aguarcia F. n.d.: 23).

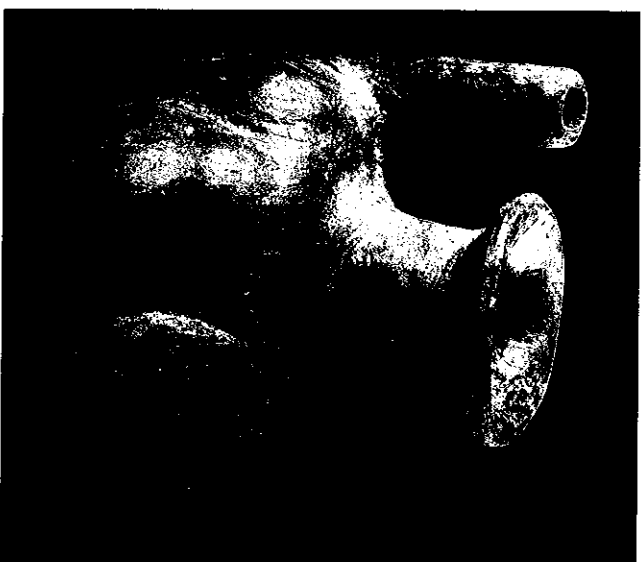


Fig. 8 Lobed, spouted, miniature jar (buff) in the form of a melon, from Burial 8, Playa de los Muertos. Courtesy of Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Photograph by Hillel Burger. Cat. no. 29-15-20/C10953.



Fig. 9 Pottery effigy figure, with legs forming stirrup bridge spout, from Burial 8, Playa de los Muertos. Courtesy of Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Photograph by Hillel Burger. Cat. no. 29-15-20/C10952.



Fig. 10 Pottery figurine heads with elaborate costume elements, Playa de los Muertos. Courtesy of Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Photograph by Hillel Burger. Cat. nos. 36-97-20/4638 (top), /4624 (left), /4623 (right).



Fig. 11 Pottery figurine head and torso, Playa de los Muertos. Courtesy of Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Photograph by Hillel Burger. Cat. no.



Fig. 12 Pottery figurine head and torso, Playa de los Muertos. Courtesy of Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Photograph by Hillel Burger. Cat. nos.

The degree of elaboration and the quality of some figurines may also be a reflection of status differentiation (Kennedy n.d.: 278).

Burial data from eastern Honduras are extremely limited but uniform in suggesting no apparent social ranking by A.D. 500. For example, graves examined from the Selin Farm site (Epstein n.d.: 45) and from the Williams Ranch site (Healy 1975: 65), both inhabited during the time period under analysis here, contained virtually no burial goods. Although our sample of fewer than ten burials warrants caution regarding broader interpretations, the initial picture that emerges regarding ranking is similar to that already demonstrated for both public architecture and status goods. We have obviously early indicators in the west and negligible (indeed, in the case of ranking, nil) evidence in the east.

DISCUSSION

In order to contrast the prehistoric development of western and eastern Honduras, I have chosen to concentrate on several elements that differentiate tribal and chiefly societies. There are, of course, a variety of other correlates in the archaeological record that might also be usefully examined. Although space does not permit us here to explore these fully, it is apparent that between 1000 B.C. and A.D. 500, western Honduras was witness to the emergence of site hierarchies in several different regions. There is some interesting recent evidence for this process in Santa Barbara (Schorman et al. 1986) and at El Cajon (Hirth 1988). In the Comayagua Valley of central Honduras during the Late Pre-Classical Period, there appears to have been a "primate" settlement pattern on the valley floor, with one primary center (Yarumela) several times the size of all other secondary centers (Dixon 1989). In western and central Honduras, by the start of the Christian era, it is possible to recognize the existence of several central places, such as Los Naranjos and Yarumela, belonging to and at the pinnacle of hierarchical settlement systems characteristic of chiefly societies.

In northeast Honduras, on the basis of present knowledge, it is not possible to identify any Early Selin Period site as unusually distinctive in size, form, or function from other sites. Such a uniform site pattern and absence of a settlement hierarchy is consistent with a tribal-level of development.

Likewise, there are more signs of interregional trade in western Honduras. We have already mentioned jade. Other commodities that were imported by groups in the west were obsidian from the Guatemalan highlands and Usulután ceramics, most likely from El Salvador. These goods occur at Yarumela (Joessink-Mandeville 1987: 198, 207), Santo Domingo, Rio Pelo, and La Guacamaya (Henderson et al. 1979; Wonderley n.d.); Site 123 in the Naco Valley (Urban n.d.: 637-638); and Gualjiquito (Ashmore 1987:

34). Joesink-Mandeville (n.d.: 10) reports imported Pacific marine shells, many carved, in Yarumela 1 deposits (perhaps as early as 1000 B.C.). From eastern Honduras, again, the inventory is negligible. Obsidian is rare, and Uslutan ceramics are virtually unknown. Exchange, what there may have been of it, was probably localized trading of subsistence goods, more typical of tribal societies.

The transition from a tribal style of social organization to that of a simple chiefdom occurs in western and central Honduras in the first millennium B.C. In the case of eastern Honduras, something resembling tribal organization appears to have been predominant until at least A.D. 500. Early Selin Period sites of the east show few, if any, signs of ranking, status differentiation, or accumulated wealth, in sharp contrast to their neighbors only 200 km to the west.

If we have correctly identified this developmental delay in the east, when does the transition to chiefdoms occur there? Elsewhere I have suggested that it was probably not until the Transitional Selin Period (A.D. 800-1000) that incipient chiefdoms make their appearance (Healy 1984c: 233; Willley 1984: 368). After A.D. 1000, we see a much more complicated and evolved society during the Cocal Period, complete with large public architecture and status goods. This is the ranked society described by the Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortes in 1525. It was a culture complete with large centers (central places) dominating as many as eighteen satellite villages and ruled by paramount chiefs (MacNutt 1908).

An obvious question, therefore, is: why was there such a delay in sociopolitical development in the east, given its relative proximity to the political evolution in the west? Similarly, why was there a precocious evolution of aboriginal groups in central and western Honduras? What cultural and/or environmental factors can be marshalled to account for the differences apparent in the archaeological record?

One important factor, for which we have precious little evidence, is the development of sedentary farming villages in Honduras. Although our understanding of the origins of agriculture in Mesoamerica is now fairly well documented, only recently have we begun to assemble primary evidence about the first farming societies in Honduras. Rue (1987) has produced a radiocarbon-dated pollen sequence from the south shore of Lake Yojoa, which suggests Late Archaic Period slash-and-burn (long fallow) agriculture with maize present by about 2600 B.C. There is secondary evidence (*metates* and *manos*) for maize agriculture by the Late Pre-Classical Period at Los Naranjos, possibly at Rio Pelo, and earlier evidence is likely at Playa de los Muertos and Yarumela (Baudex and Becquelin 1973: 379-381; Wonderley n.d.: 16; Joesink-Mandeville n.d.: 6). Given the proximity of western Honduras to the Mexican highlands, most would accept a diffusion of the corn-beans-squash farming complex from there.

It would appear that for the western half of Honduras, the start of this

agricultural process probably occurred during the poorly known Late Archaic or Early Formative Period. Certainly sedentary villages based on a more intensified corn farming economy were in existence by the Middle Formative in places like Copan and Los Naranjos and commonplace by the Late Formative (Rue 1987: 286). In addition to maize, there are suggestions of root crop (*manioc?*) processing at Yarumela as early as 500 B.C. (Joesink-Mandeville n.d.: 11).

Dixon (1989: 258) notes that all major, mounded sites in the Comayagua Valley occur along major waterways, suggesting that access to prime agricultural land and permanent water were the main factors in determining settlement, probably as far back as the Middle Pre-Classical Period. Hirth and colleagues (n.d.) note similar valley colonization in Cajon by Late Pre-Classical times. This nonintensive riverine subsistence pattern was replicated several times in the western Honduran Pre-Classical Period (Healy 1984a: 132) and recently has been carefully documented for the Ujua Valley (Pope n.d., 1987).

It is significant that there is no evidence for maize cultivation in northeastern Honduras prior to A.D. 300. Furthermore, there are strong suggestions that even at that relatively late date agriculture was but one food-getting component (and probably a minor one at that) in an otherwise successful hunting-gathering and fishing subsistence strategy until about A.D. 1000 (Healy 1984b).

A second process, certainly related to the shift to an increasing reliance on agriculture, was likely that of population expansion. I say *likely* because we still lack adequate Pre-Columbian population estimates for most areas of Honduras. Large-scale, regional analyses like those recently undertaken in the Naco Valley (Urban n.d.), Santa Barbara (Schortman et al. 1986; Ashmore et al. 1987), El Cajon (Hirth 1988), and Comayagua (Dixon 1989) will begin to correct this situation. The initial impressions gained from this research, however, indicate a steady population increase during the Formative Period in the west.

As Sanders (1974) has noted in the case of Kaminaljuyu, if a society were to hold together under growing population pressure and not fragment into a number of separate polities, structural changes in the sociopolitical organization would have to be made. Perhaps threats of militarism, as evidenced by the early fortifications at Los Naranjos, served to bind the groups together, inhibiting any tendencies to splinter into a series of equivalent political units. With an increased population, however, tribal organization in the west seems to have given way to the more complex type of governing institution of the chiefdom. Indeed, the large mounds at Los Naranjos and Yarumela can be seen as funerary monuments, structures for the ritual veneration and commemoration of their ancestral, elite (chiefly?) dead.

A third element in the formula for change was likely the proximity of

western Honduras to the nascent civilization of Mesoamerica proper. In this, Honduras is quite different from other areas discussed in this symposium. It is situated directly on the "frontier" of Mesoamerica and therefore was subject to considerable cultural interchange (Creamer 1987: 42-45). Evidence of contact with the Olmec civilization of the Mexican Gulf Coast has been identified over a wide area of highland and Pacific Mexico (Grove 1968, 1970), the Yucatan Peninsula (Andrews V 1986), Guatemala (Ichon 1977: 34; Willey 1978: 97), and into El Salvador and Honduras (Boggs 1950; Sharer 1974: 169-179).

Hirth (1988) has recently cautioned against too hurriedly accepting a diffusionary explanation for developments in Honduras. However, I am thinking here not of Olmec (and therefore early Mesoamerican) hegemony but of a gradually increasing economic relationship. Although not numerous, Olmec artifacts have been identified in both western and eastern Honduras (Stone 1957: fig. 84b; Bernal 1969: pl. 102; Healy 1974: 440-442; Ashmore 1987: 34), and there seems little question but that contact was being made with this remarkable Middle Formative chiefdom and its redistribution networks (Fig. 13). Henderson (personal communication, 1987) has noted Olmec jade figurines and carved celts from the Sula Valley from a now-destroyed site near Santa Rita (Figs. 14, 15). The jade/cinnabar burial at Los Naranjos is a particularly striking parallel to earlier La Venta practices of caching. Fash (n.d.) has also noted the connections at the site of Copan (Schele and Miller 1986: 75). Between 1000 and 1 B.C., a process of Mesoamericanization was underway in western Honduras with the erection of Mesoamerican style temple-pyramid mounds, the layout of plaza groups, and the working of jade. Perhaps the fertility and economic richness of places like the Uluá River Valley acted as a lure. Whatever the attraction, foreign trade became an important element in western and central Honduras in the Pre-Classic Period.

In contrast, in eastern Honduras we have several Olmecoid and Formative bottle-form vessels from ritual/burial contexts in the Cuyamel Caves, near Trujillo (Healy 1974), but there is little else linking the region to the Middle Pre-Classic Gulf Coast or to emergent Mesoamerican area cultural traditions. The contacts appear to have been sporadic and without lasting impact. In fact, foreign trade in northeast Honduras does not become a recognizable factor until after A.D. 1000. Similarly, by A.D. 300, at the start of the Early Selin Period, settlements in the northeast reveal a very different manner of site layout, with largely a scattered, haphazard placement of mounds. There is certainly nothing resembling an orderly site plan or the ballcourts and plaza groupings more typical of western and central Honduras (R. A. Joyce, personal communication, 1990). Nor is there clear evidence yet of any site hierarchy.



Fig. 13 Seated nephrite Olmecoid figurine from La Lima, Cortes, northwestern Honduras. Courtesy of Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University. Photograph by E. W. Andrews V. Accession no. 40-3671.

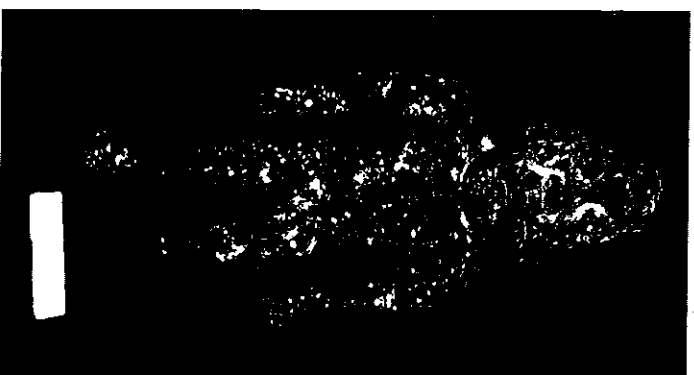


Fig. 14 Standing serpentine Olmec figurine (with red hematite) from near Santa Rita, northwestern Honduras. Photograph by John Henderson.



Fig. 15 Olmec "were"-jaguar celt from near Santa Rita, northwestern Honduras. Photograph by John Henderson.

CONCLUSION

During the first millennium B.C., in western Honduras, we see important changes occurring in the political, economic, and social institutions. These bear the first hints of the emergence of Honduran chiefdoms. The evidence exists in the form of large-scale elite architecture, exotic burial goods, ranking, and restricted control of long-distance imported goods that were worked by craft specialists. An early, agriculturally based economy in the west resulted in a growing population, greater settlement densities, and incipient site hierarchies. There were approaches made, at least partly successful, to include these growing western and central Honduran communities in the emergent Mesoamerican economic network. Commodities such as jade, obsidian, marine shells, and ceramics were being exchanged.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that in addition to these durable commodities there were numerous other perishable goods exchanged between groups like the Maya and nascent Honduran chiefdoms. Presumably a variety of rituals, sets of knowledge, and beliefs were passed along, which led ultimately to a more Mesoamerican cast to early western and central Honduran societies.

In eastern Honduras, by contrast, the linkages to Mesoamerica in the first millennium B.C. are unclear and probably quite limited. Whether due to its geographic isolation caused by the rugged mountainous interior of Honduras, and therefore the difficulty of maintaining continuous trade and communication links, or because of the obvious sparseness of nucleated populations due to the delayed development of agriculture, is debatable. Indeed, during the succeeding first millennium A.D., we see signs that northeast Honduras, increasingly isolated from the western chiefdoms, instead commenced contacts with Lower Central American groups of the Atlantic coast, with Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and even regions of northern South America (Healy 1984c: 233-236).

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5

*The Search for Elite Personages
and Site Hierarchies in Greater Nicoya*

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INTRODUCTION

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SUBAREA OF MESOAMERICA originally defined as "Greater Nicoya" (Fig. 1) by Norweb (1964) is divided into a "northern sector," which corresponds to Pacific Nicaragua as far north as Managua, and a "southern sector," which generally corresponds to the Nicoya Peninsula in Costa Rica (Lange 1984a). Extensive research in the area has, through the years, resulted in a number of personal biases that should be made explicit at the outset.

1. The mere presence of aesthetically pleasing artifacts does not automatically demonstrate the presence of rank and status, either at the personal or community level.
2. The uneven distribution of natural resources resulted only in very localized advantages based on direct access and kinship and did not lead to strongly defined regional hierarchies.
3. The skillful elaboration of locally available materials can be carried out by related, but functionally independent household craftworkers.
4. A people's humanistic experience is not diminished, and may in fact be enhanced, by a lack of monumental architecture, large population densities, and other accoutrements of complex societies.

In even the most general evolutionary sense, some ranking of individuals and groups is inevitable, based on differences in individual abilities and access to resources. This paper distinguishes between what might be called "active" or "coercive" ranking on the one hand, and "passive" ranking on the other. For purposes of this discussion, passive ranking is viewed as kinship based, where one's position within the social group is defined by abilities such as age, knowledge, hunting prowess, and so forth. Active