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Living on the Edge: Residential Structures in and Around El Cafetal, El Paraíso Valley, Honduras Anthropology

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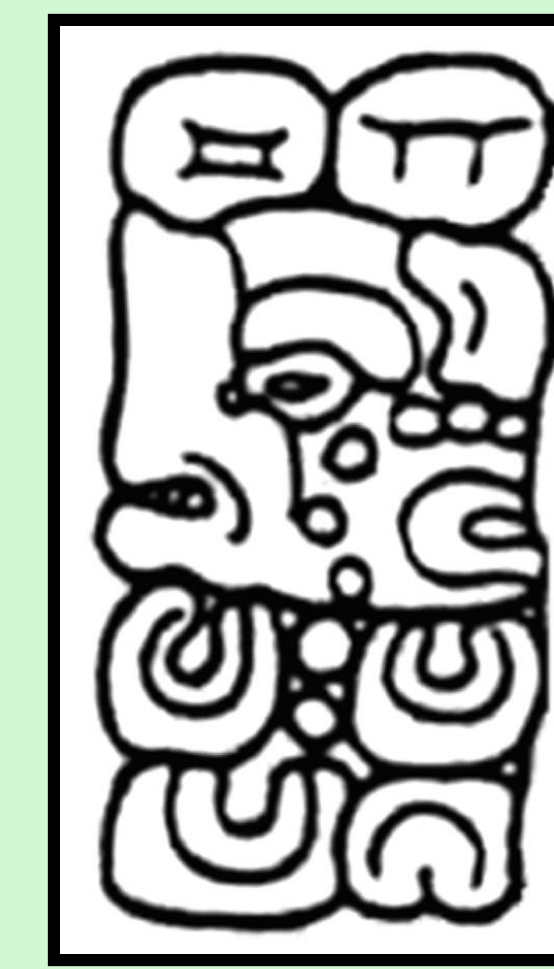
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Living on the Edge: Residential Structures in and Around El Cafetal, El Paraíso Valley, Honduras



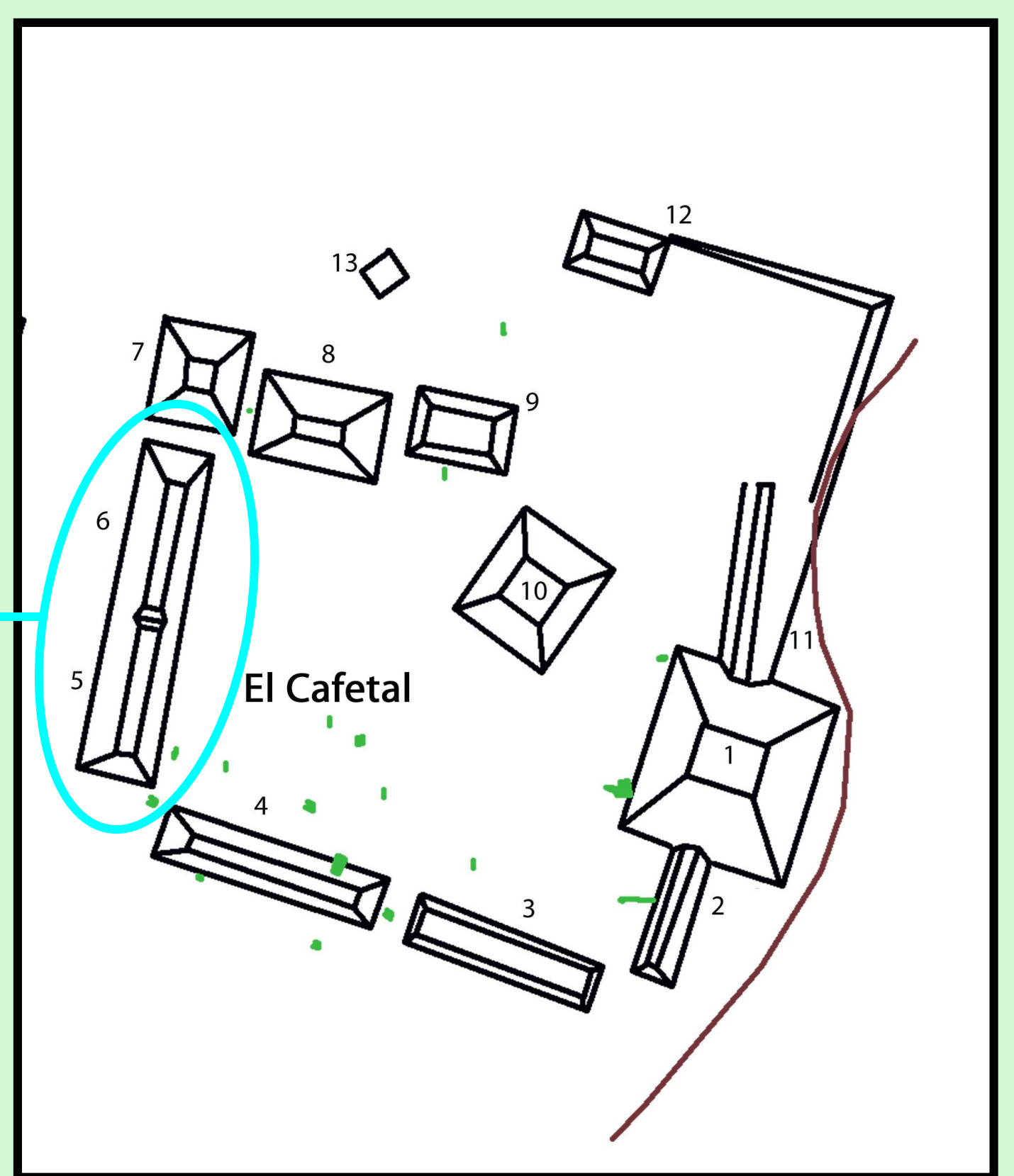
By Thomas J. Gonyea

Abstract
In the summer of 2007 I went to the El Paraíso Valley in western Honduras to investigate the site of El Cafetal as part of the El Paraíso Regional Archaeological Project (PAREP), directed by Ellen E. Bell and Marcello A. Canuto (Bell, et al. 2000; Bill, et al. 2006; Canuto and Bell 2007; Canuto et al. 2006). My excavations focused on a building known as Structure 5, attempting to discern the composition the final phase architecture as well as to explore the "saddle," or depression, connecting it to the nearby Structure 6. After excavating four Sub-Ops, I obtained a view of what the building would have looked like. I also came to the conclusion that the two structures were physically attached to one another by a dirt connector and over time fluctuated between being visually associated and dissociated with one another by their builders.

Introduction
In spite of being located only 27 km northeast of Copan and 30 km south of Quirigua, the two largest Classic period Maya centers in Southeast Mesoamerica, residents of El Cafetal, located in the El Paraíso Valley, Department of Copan, Honduras, constructed the center in the style employed by their non-Maya central Honduran neighbors. Structures found in the site core and beyond follow these patterns, suggesting a strong tie to local traditions in the valley. This pattern contrasts strongly with that at the neighboring site of El Paraíso, located less than 1.5 km northeast of El Cafetal, and even with remodeled structures that date to the end of occupation at El Cafetal itself.

The site of El Cafetal is organized around two open plazas, the North Plaza and the Main Plaza, to the south. Range structures, long, narrow buildings that tend to define an open space, form the east, south, and west sides of the Main Plaza, while the northern margin is formed by large pyramidal structures. Structure 2 forms the eastern boundary of the plaza, Structures 3 and 4 are located along its southern side, and Structures 5 and 6 bound the Main Plaza on the west.

Structures 5 and 6, which form the western edge of the Main Plaza, are quite obviously different from the other range structures of the Main Plaza, if only because their increased scale. They also seem to have been connected to one another, with a depression or "saddle" demarcating the junction between them. In my second field season I sought to better understand the nature of the apparent connection between the two buildings as well as develop a better understanding of Structure 5's overall architecture and construction.



Results 02/75
This Sub-Op examined the saddle between Structure 5 (Str05) and Structure 6 (Str06). We dug a single EU slightly east of the saddle's center and found what appeared to be a soil-filled connector between Str05 and Str06. We then through to the original surface layer between the two buildings. Atop the connector two walls (the dotted lines) were found, demarcating a floor on either side. The floor on the side of Str06 was stuccoed while the floor on the side of Str05 was cobbled.

North of the stucco floor we discovered a south-facing wall. It was very well constructed, fitting with the construction style of Str06 and may have been built at the same time.

At the same time we followed the cobble floor south. We found more stucco, apparently laid down some time after the floors original construction. A later floor was found further above the stucco layer along with a wall that was probably part of the superstructure. (The solid line)



02/79
To investigate the center of the building's east slope, we started with a 1x1m test pit which uncovered a wall and a floor in front of it. We followed the floor to where it formed a terrace, dropping down into a wall at the base of which there was another floor. Banana trees prevented further eastward extension, but the floor probably went out into another, lower terrace. We then went west, finding another floor at the top of the original wall we found, creating a third, higher terrace. These were may have been the building's staircase.

02/76
This trench started just east of the building's east wall and continued most of the way across the summit with the intention of examining the final phase architecture. On the east side of the building the plaza surface was revealed. This surface ran up to the eastern most of the structure's walls, the top of which was not preserved. Presumably it rose to a floor creating a terrace which extended to the next wall we exposed. The second wall rose to a floor that seems to have been the summit and extended the rest of the way west to the last EU of the trench. No superstructure walls were found.



Discussion
It would seem the building had two large terraces facing east towards the Main Plaza with stairs set into it at the buildings center. The top terrace led up to the structure's summit where there is some evidence of a stone superstructure.

It seems that originally Str05 and Str06 were originally separate and joined later by the earth-filled connector. At some later point, (and this could have been hours or years) floors were constructed on either side of the connector. On the side of Str06, the floor was stuccoed, a style more common at El Paraíso and Copan, while the floor on the side of Str05 was cobbled, more in keeping with local construction techniques. Later still this floor was also stuccoed and at some point a superstructure wall was built atop Str05, in line with the front of Str06's superstructure.

If indeed the buildings were originally separated, connecting the two would suggest some sort of association, and yet in the next phase of construction the two were made visually separate by the use of different floor styles and low border walls. Shortly thereafter the two were made visually similar when the cobbled floor was stuccoed and the facades of the two buildings were brought in line with one another.

An image emerges of this saddle as a point of interaction between two cultures, one influenced by a distant polity, the other based on more local traditions. The fluctuation of associating and dissociating the two may then reflect fluctuations in the interactions of the two cultures over time, giving us a hint of how these people dealt with one another in an area where cultures came together.

Methods
Excavations at the site of El Cafetal are cumulatively referred to as Operation 02 (or Op 02) within the PAREP recording system. The individual excavations are known as Sub-Operations (Sub-Ops) and are often referred to in shorthand by the Op number, a slash, and then the Sub-Op number. For instance Sub-Op 23 of Op 01 would be referred to as 01/23. Each Sub-Op is excavated in 1 meter by 1 meter squares known as Excavation Units (EUs). These EUs are laid out next to one another as needed, and are dug in increments known as lots. Any artifacts found in a lot are bagged and labeled according to its Op, Sub-Op, EU, and lot so that we know exactly where it was found and how far down it was. Documentation is of the utmost importance. The excavator takes constant notes and photographs, noting everything from the artifacts and architecture uncovered to soil color and soil type.



02/78
This 1x1m test pit was set up to explore a visible line of stones. We revealed a wall that seems to have connected the fronts of Str05 and Str06. Removing a few pieces of tumble revealed the remains of a floor in front of it, suggesting that there were terraces in front of the saddle connecting the two buildings.

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