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Shouting Down the Chief: How a Corporate Group Replaced Hierarchical Authority at the Pre-Columbian Community of El Coyote, Honduras

William John McFarlane

Johnson County Community College, mcfarlane@jccc.edu

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Shouting down the chief:
How a corporate group replaced hierarchical authority at the
pre-Columbian community of El Coyote, Honduras

Abstract:

Using a research design that posits power as an interpretive framework, I apply a multiscalar approach to individuals, groups, communities, and interaction networks. Used here, power, or the ability to advance one's interests, is garnered through the strategic use or manipulation of socio-political ties, material resources, or ideological paradigms. In this paper, I draw upon evidence from the site of El Coyote in northwestern Honduras. This pre-Columbian community is well-suited for a consideration of power due to its remarkably well-preserved and robust ninth and tenth-century remains, which document the relocation and reorganization of the ceremonial and administrative center for the community. This transformation represents a break from the personalized hierarchical rule of the Late Classic, and the adoption of a less stratified corporate political organization. Moreover this study reveals a picture of power relations wherein power, status, and prestige inequalities are not always indicated by marked material differences in the archaeological record.

Dr. William J. McFarlane
Johnson County Community College, KS
mcfarlane@jccc.edu

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Introduction

As demonstrated by the quality of the papers presented at this conference, studies of power and power relations can be quite productive for modeling historical and processual changes in the past. I hope to contribute to this trend as I consider how we might operationalize these approaches using archaeological evidence. Here, I will present the results of my investigations of the Northeast Complex of El Coyote, a pre-Columbian community in western Honduras (Figure 1). During the ninth-century, this complex became the new locus for administrative and ceremonial functions following, or perhaps leading to, the abandonment of the Late Classic monumental core of El Coyote.

My primary argument is that the Northeast Complex represents a break from the personalized hierarchical rule of the Late Classic, and a move towards a less-stratified corporate political organization. This new political system was a result of the transformation of the interregional interaction network, which shifted away from the exchange of prestige goods and towards the exchange of commodities and goods indicative of an incipient market system. As such, the sociopolitical and economic changes at El Coyote were part of a broader Mesoamerican pattern (Friedel 1986; Masson 2002; Rice 1987; Sabloff and Rathje 1975).

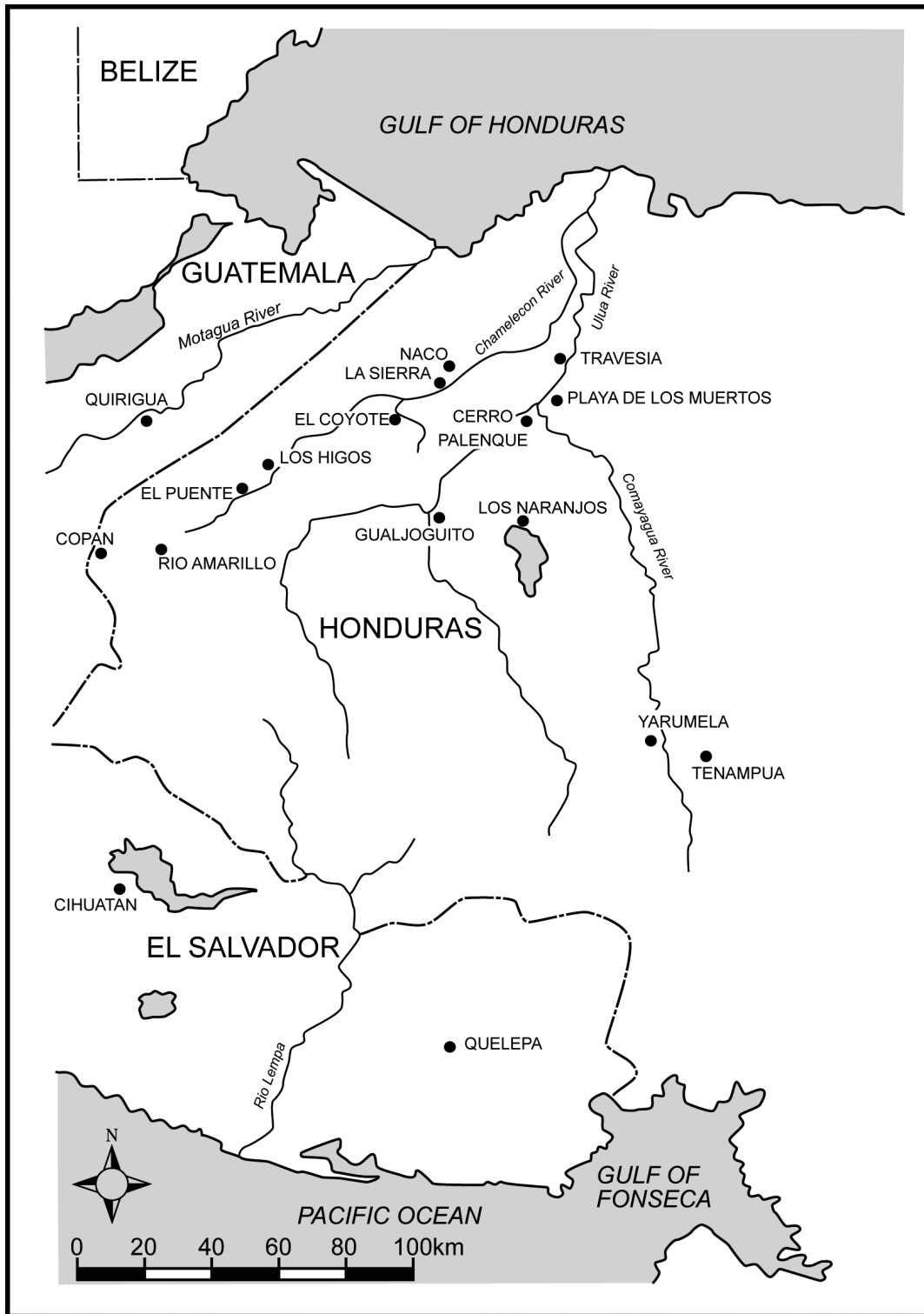


Figure 1. Location of key sites in western Honduras.

Although these results are drawn from a very specific data set, I believe my findings address the broader issues of human interaction and political organization during a time of dramatic pan-regional change. This research is based on a model of human interaction developed by social theorist that portrays the relationship between agency and structure as dynamic, negotiated, and multi-faceted (Bourdieu 1977; Dobres and Robb 2000; Giddens 1979; Holtorff and Karlsson 2000; Ortner 1984; Sahlins 1985:145). Although this approach is not unique, many archaeological models of political evolution have ignored these developments (Roscoe 1993:111), and the recent break in archaeology from social theory is perhaps due to the difficulty of accounting for the multiple dimensions of past society. Research tends to segment aspects of human interaction into social (Brumfiel 1992, 1994; Joyce and Gillespie 2000; McAnany 1993), economic (Brumfiel and Earle 1987; Inomata and Aoyama 1996; Jackson and Love 1991; Kepecs and Kohl 2003; Price 1977; Renfrew 1987; Santley and Kneebone 1994; Schortman and Urban 1992) and ideological categories (Ashmore 1991; Ashmore and Knapp 1999; Barrett 1994; Flannery 1968; Leone and Hurry 1998; Marcus 1974; Miller 1988; Richards and Van Buren 2000).

I argue that approaches that focus on power (Anderson and Collins 1992; Balandier 1970; Cheater 1999; Dirks et al. 1994; Donham 1999; Knauff 1996; Mann 1986; Pauketat 2007; Scott 1985; Wolf 1999) crosscut these different dimensions and place the individual at the center of the interpretation. As I use it here, power is the ability to advance one's interests and is garnered through the strategic use or manipulation of socio-political ties, material resources, or ideological paradigms. Structures, such as polities, ideologies, economic systems, trade networks, communities, or households are dynamic entities and should be recognized as unbounded and permeable; individuals have considerable leeway in their decision to participate or not participate

in these structures. This approach, therefore, includes powerful individuals who lead centralized societies as well as those individuals who are lead. Moreover, I argue that we can reframe our analyses more widely and include developmental trajectories that lead not only to increasing complexity, centralization, and hegemony, but also to those developments that lead to heterarchy, power sharing rather than control, and egalitarian social arrangements.

Most importantly, modeling individual and group interaction within this fluid structure is possible through the use of archaeological evidence (Binford 1983; Trigger 1974:96, 1991; Wylie 1992). Michael Mann (1986) and others suggest that the nature of power is rooted in the strategic manipulation of resources or sources of power (Blanton et al. 1996; Earle 1997; Mills 2000; Roscoe 1993:114). Some examples of these resources or sources of power include: oral and written history, the curation of heirlooms, or control over utilitarian goods and the means of production.

Research based on this perspective moves beyond earlier attempts to document or describe past power relationships as simply the unequal distribution of goods and considers the constellation of social, political, and economic resources used, rather than the quantities of goods alone. I therefore argue that the architectural and artifactual evidence from Early Postclassic El Coyote can tell us much about ancient political economies in southeastern Mesoamerica.

My approach was to identify the strategies utilized by individuals at pre-Columbian El Coyote as they sought to draw upon disparate sources of power to advance their interests. In practice, this is similar to the Dual-Processual theory put forth by Richard Blanton, Gary Fienman, and others. I should mention that the application of a strategies approach was not without difficulty. The identification of a particular strategy practiced by a single individual, especially in a context in which many conflicting or competing strategies may have been

implemented, is problematic. To that end, I sought to identify a patterned political economy that would emerge from a set of similarly structured strategies.

I would anticipate specific archaeological correlates as indicative of exclusionary strategies. For example, aspiring leaders, or aggrandizers, might seek to win prestige through the manipulation of social connections to acquire exotic goods and the display or distribution of the goods to create social distance and mobilize surplus staples or labor. These strategies promote individual advancement and lead to marked differences in the political economy. The accumulation of non-local items, the production of non-utilitarian items, and evidence for feasting leave material patterning in the archaeological record and serve as correlates to this form of political economy.

On the other hand, group-oriented or corporate political strategies will emphasize social solidarity and suppress individual advancement. Leaders are organizers and their status is derived from their office. As a result, leaders are rarely depicted as named individuals and the generally even distribution of economic resources and prestige goods makes leaders difficult to identify in the archaeological record.

Two characteristics of the corporate political economy are especially relevant to my research at El Coyote. First, corporate leaders do not need to engage in the network exchange of socially relevant goods and knowledge to seize and maintain power. Therefore, corporate strategies are viable options if network strategies based on the exclusive exchange of prestige goods falter. Second, corporate groups respond in a variety of ways to suppress the political impact of intrusive merchants. The outcomes of merchants' actions are regulated in such a way to maintain social solidarity and suppress individual advancement. Or, as Eric Wolf observed, merchants are "kept in their place" and not allowed to dominate the local political economy

(Wolf 1982:84-85). When successful, these strategies allow for the exchange of goods without dramatic alteration to the corporate nature of the political economy.

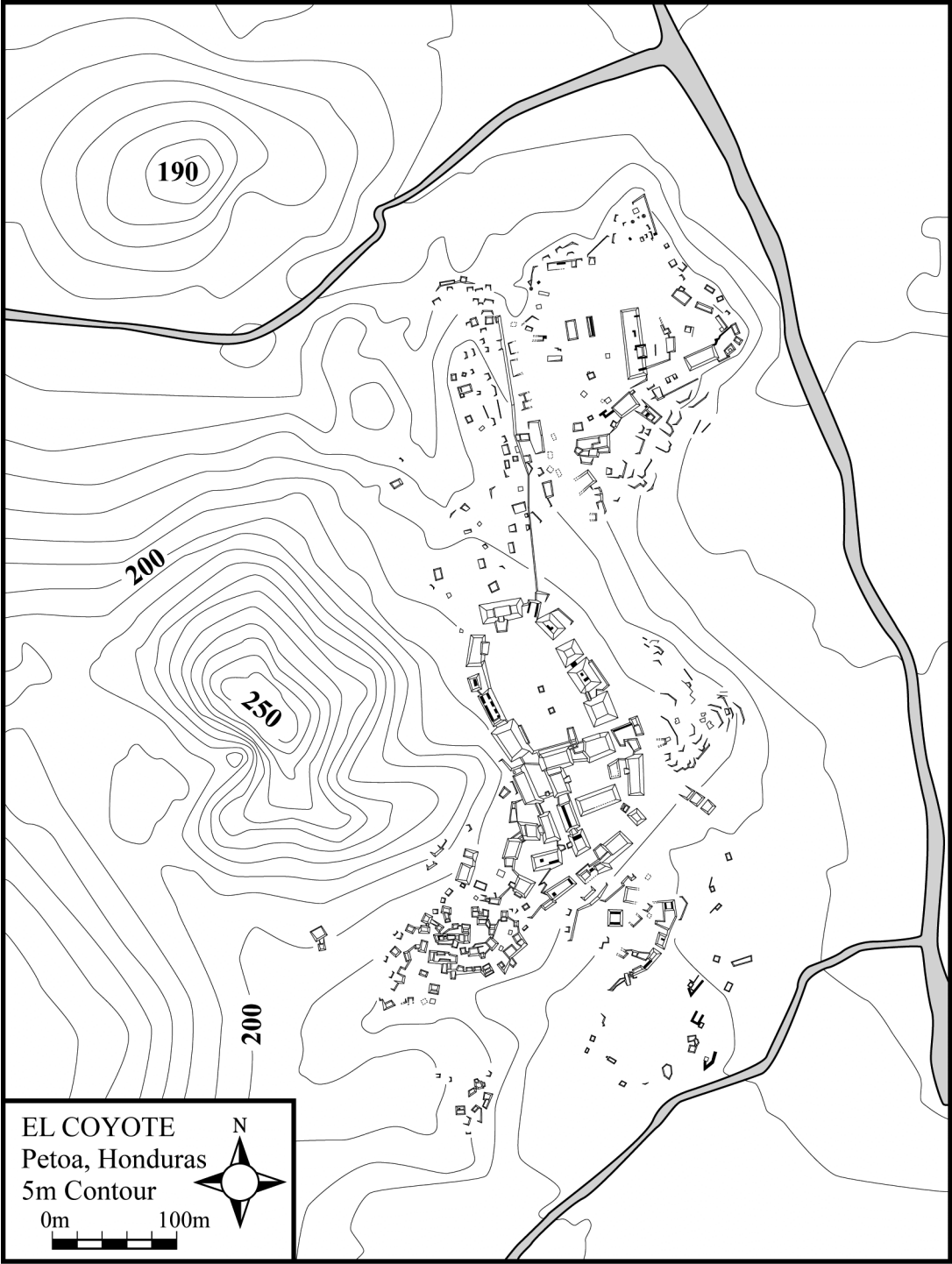


Figure 2. The site of El Coyote and surrounding topography.

Research at El Coyote

Investigations of the site of El Coyote, in the Department of Santa Bárbara were undertaken between 1999 and 2004 (McFarlane 2001, 2002, 2005; Urban et al. 1999; Urban 2000, 2002; Wells 2003). The site is positioned on a narrow, high terrace above and west of the Cacaupala River (Figure 2) and sits near the latter's junction with the Chamelecon River. These two waterways facilitate communication with the Copán, La Venta, and La Florida valleys to the southwest, the middle-Ulúa drainage to the south, the Sula Plain and Naco valley to the northeast and the Quimistan valley to the west

Radiocarbon designations and ceramic analysis indicate that El Coyote was continuously occupied for well over a millennium (200 B.C. to A.D. 1050). The site was a monumental center dominating the local Late Classic (A.D. 600 – 800) to Early Postclassic (A.D. 900 – 1050) settlement hierarchy and was more than twelve times the size of the next largest community in the valley (Urban et al. 1999). The center is a series of related architectural complexes with discrete foci that were constructed, utilized, and modified during succeeding cultural phases (Figure 3).

The Main Plaza, South Plazas, Southwest Residential Area, and Southeast Group, represent the initial florescence of cultural development in the lower Cacaupala valley. Several points characterize the site layout of Late Classic El Coyote. The monumental core of the site (Main Plaza and South Plazas) is generally representative of templates identified throughout southeastern Mesoamerica (Ashmore 1991; Ashmore and Sabloff 2002): the ceremonial complex is composed of an orthogonal plaza, the tallest buildings are found to the east, and the north-south axis is clearly marked as is the division of ceremonial buildings to the north and elite residential buildings to the south. The control of movement between these zones is restricted

both architecturally and through the use of topography. In short, the built environment was meant to elevate the elite and to discipline the movement of everyone else, thus emphasizing distinctions in power, authority, and status.

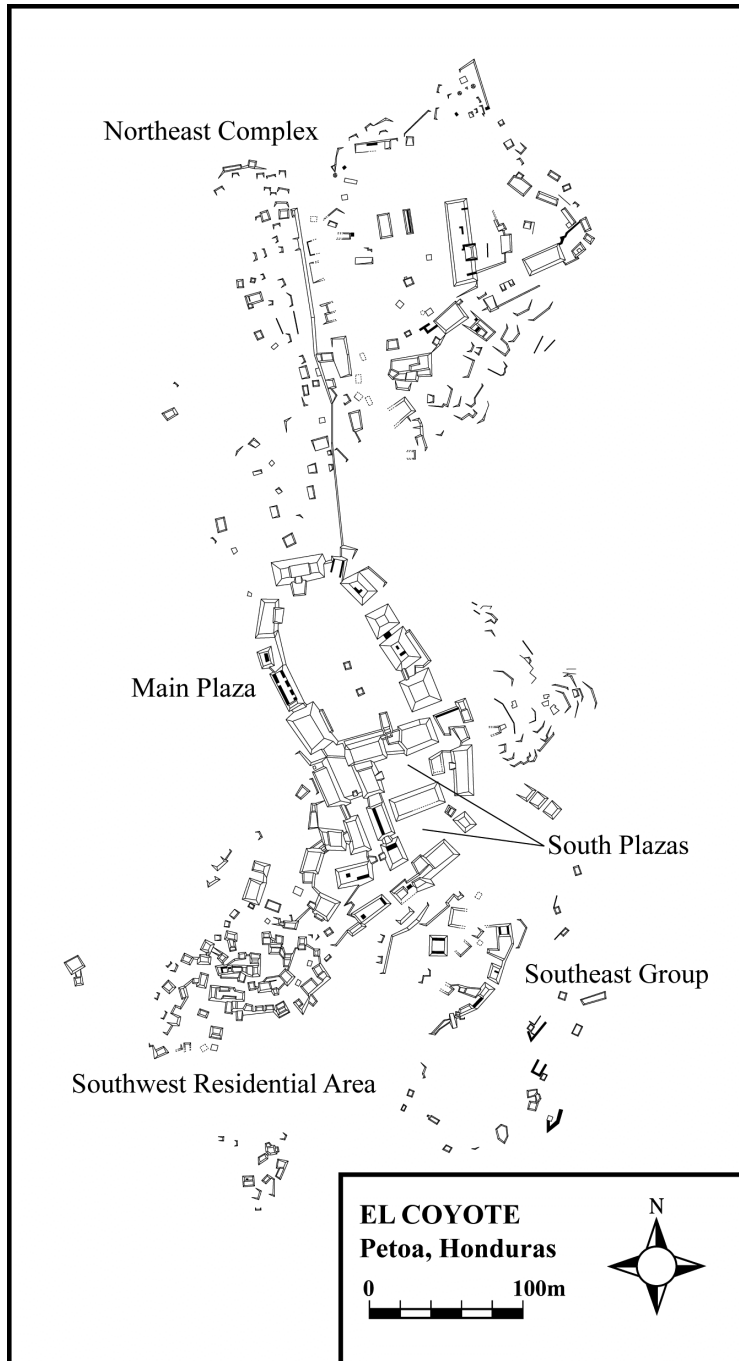


Figure 3. Map of El Coyote identifying architectural complexes.

The Northeast Complex is made up of 131 surface-visible structures, none of the remains rise more than two meters above the ground surface and most have an elevation of less than half a meter (Figure 4). This complex was clearly organized on a different set of site-planning principles from those defining the Late Classic monumental core of El Coyote. Paramount among the differences is the abandonment of closed orthogonal plazas to structure space.

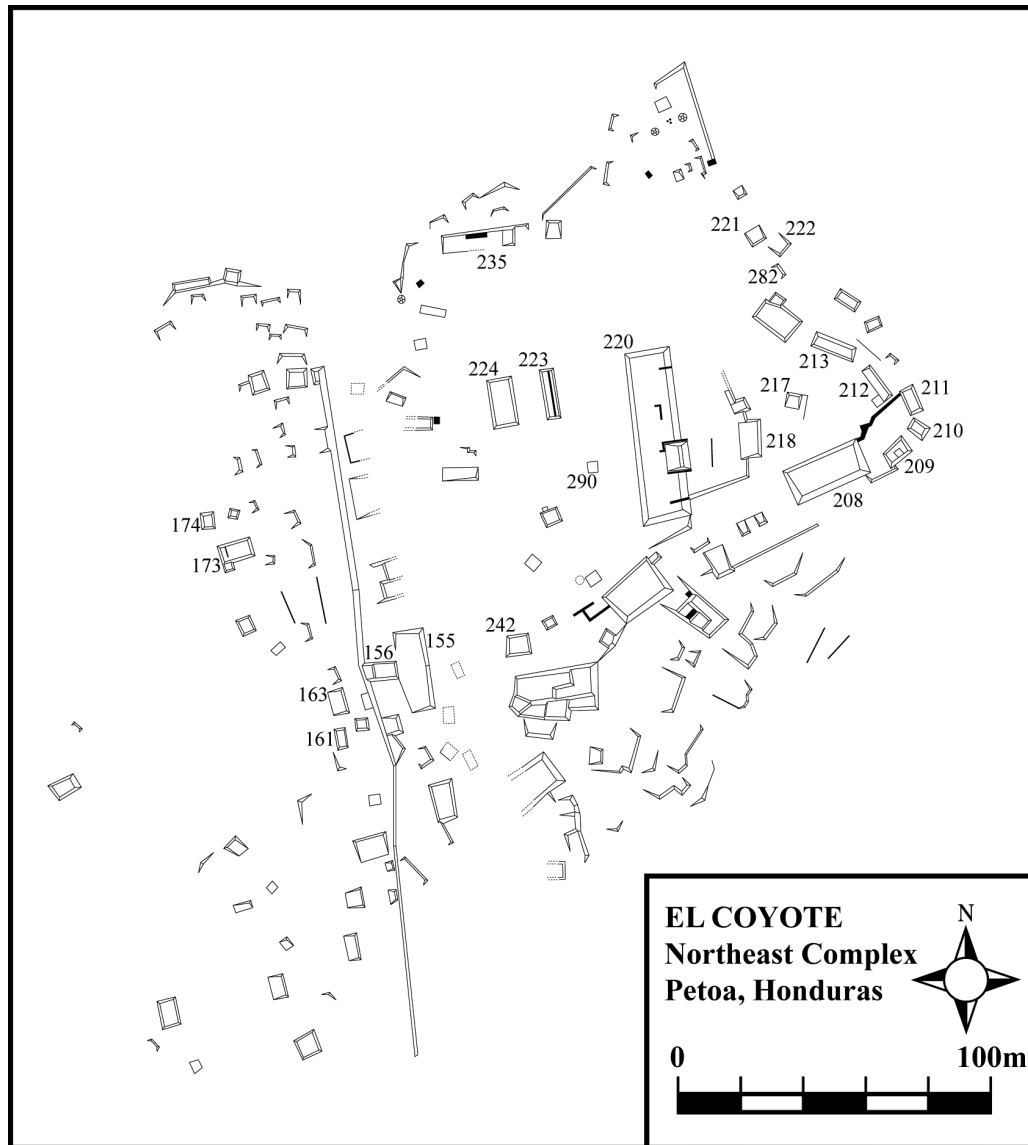


Figure 4. Map of the Northeast Complex, El Coyote.

The open site-plan gives the impression that the Northeast Complex was designed to accommodate all members of the community without the use of imposing architecture or secrecy, reinforced by closed spaces. Although the organization of the constituent parts differs from that of the Late Classic elements of El Coyote, many of the analogous functional units are present. Ceremonial architecture, a ball court, plaza-like spaces for congregation, and large-scale construction efforts are integral elements of the Northeast Complex.

Compared to Late Classic remains from El Coyote and neighboring sites, there was a paucity of material recovered from the Early Postclassic contexts of the Northeast Complex. While space does not permit an extensive overview, a short presentation of the essential evidence follows. The Northeast Complex is a remarkably well-preserved Early Postclassic community. The structures were shallowly buried and therefore easily exposed through areal excavation. Residential and non-residential buildings were simply built with stone foundations for wattle-and-daub walls (Figure 5).

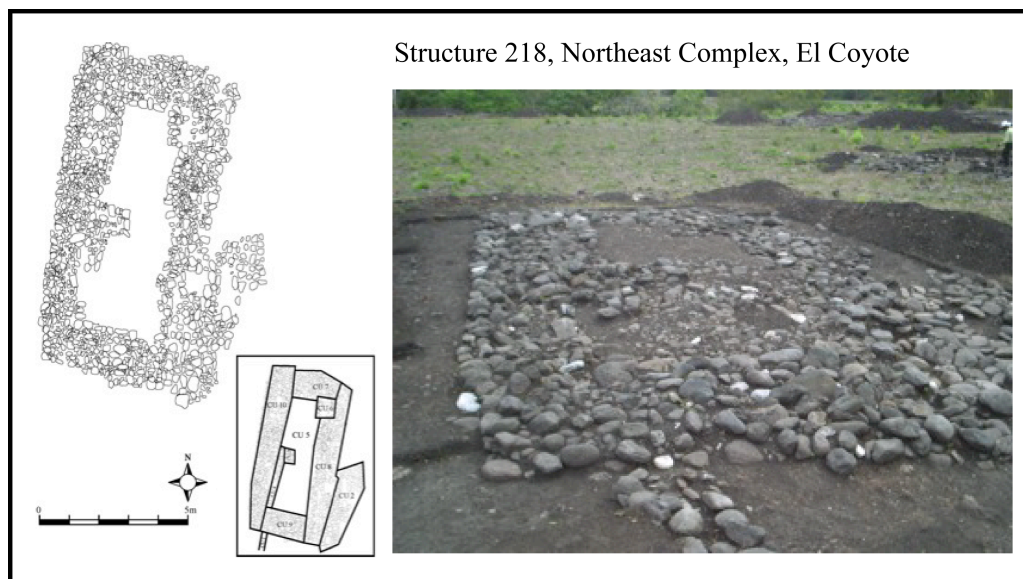


Figure 5. State of preservation typical of architecture in the Northeast Complex.

Most construction techniques were expedient and building materials consisted to river-rounded cobble and the occasional cut-stone block robbed from the abandoned Main Plaza. Rarely were basal platforms constructed and interiors generally consisted of one or more rooms with permanent furniture such as benches.

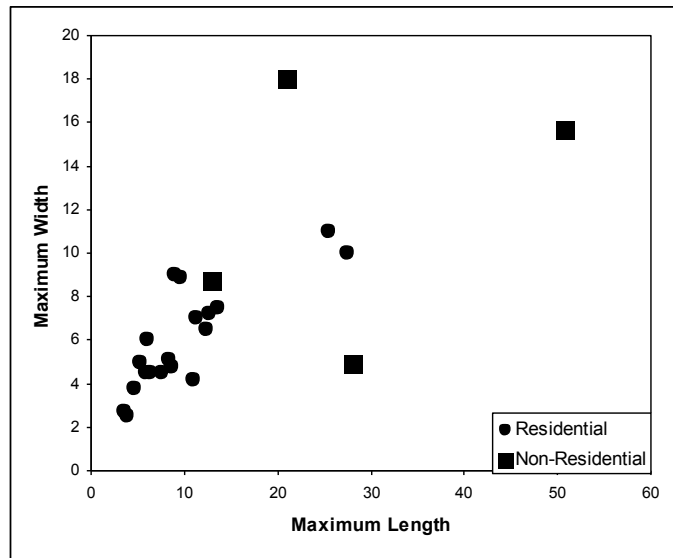


Figure 6. Scatterplot of basal dimensions for residential and non-residential structures

Given the shallow overburden, 26 of the 131 structures were exposed revealing little differentiation in the investment of labor and resources in residences. A scatter plot of investigated structure basal dimensions reveals that residences were relatively small and homogeneous (Figure 6). Most construction efforts in fact measure less than 10 meters by 15 meters. The two outliers both have earlier platforms that were combined to form a larger substructure and represent an extensive construction effort drawing on labor from multiple time periods rather than a single intensive effort drawing on a much larger labor pool for a short period of time.

The largest construction in the Northeast Complex is Structure 220. Structure 220 was built as a range structure with a large western room, the floor of which was surfaced with a bright yellow-clay plaster (Figure 7).

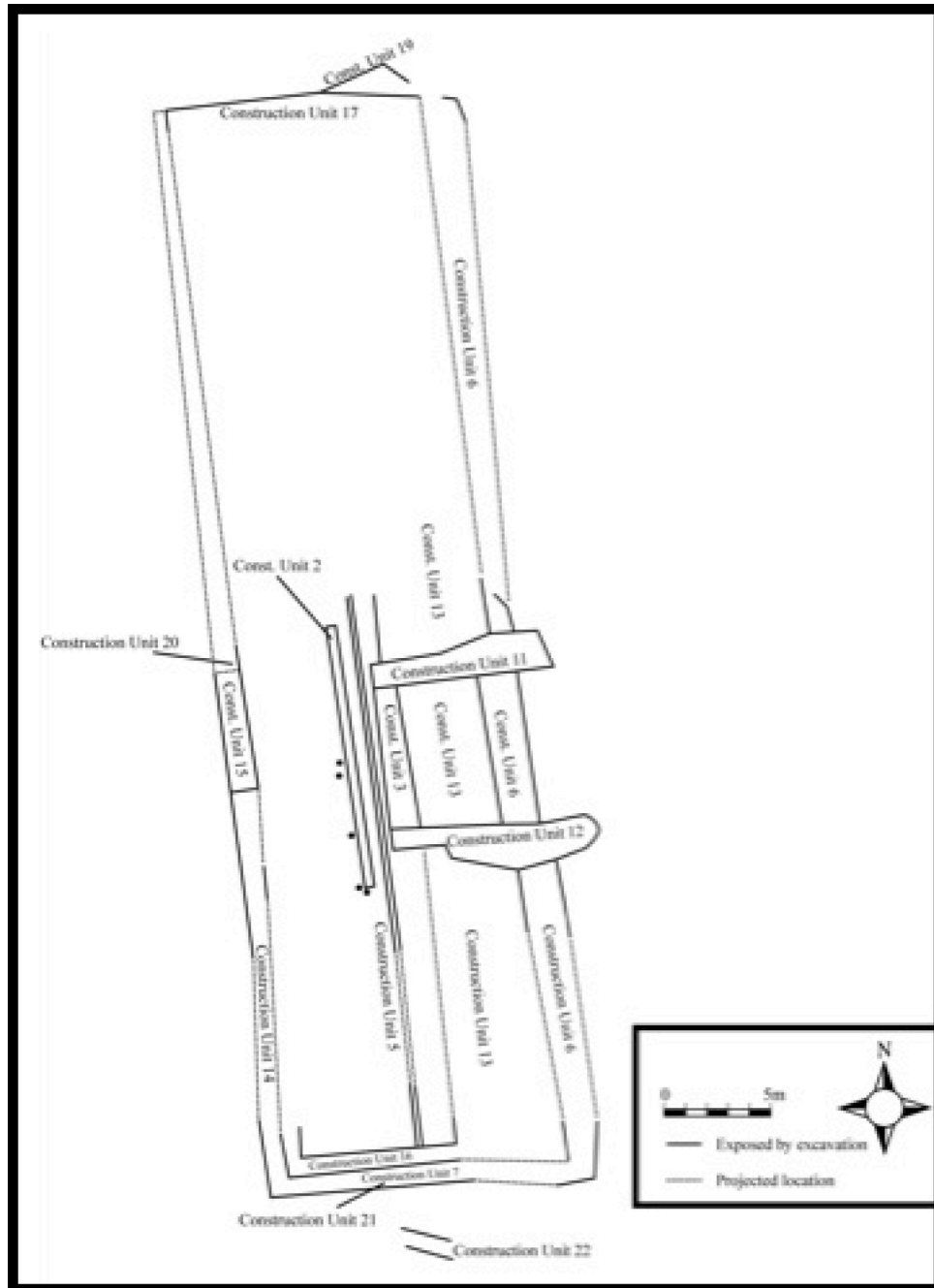


Figure 7. Plan drawing of Structure 220, Northeast Complex

This western room opened onto the ceremonial plaza via a 6.6-meter-wide stair. This inset stair was constructed of L-shaped cutstone blocks and backed by an interior construction unit manufactured of broad cut stone, thus creating a formal entry to the summit. The illusion of a cut-stone edifice was continued by the creation of a façade of robbed cut-stones backed by cobble fill (Photo 1). The total basal footprint of the structure measured 50.7 m to the north and south and 15.7 m to the east and west, thus occupying an area of 796 m², making this the largest known Early Postclassic structure in Western Honduras.



Photo 1. Cut-stone step, west side of Structure 220, Northeast Complex.

Throughout its occupation, Structure 220 served as a defining feature of the Northeast Complex built environment. The range structure divided the Northeast Complex into public-

ceremonial space to the west and a more private-residential space to the east. The close association with the ceremonial plaza – indeed it defines the eastern margin of this space – and broad western room calls attention to the public nature of those activities conducted in and around the edifice. The wide range of artifact classes recovered from Structure 220 contexts was far less surprising than the low density of cultural materials. Apparently swept clean, Structure 220 had no large associated midden deposits. Overall, the quantity and quality of materials considered in conjunction with the spatial organization of this edifice speak to the civic – administrative functions of the building.

Certainly, some individual or small group was able to direct the erection of this and other public buildings, but the question is to what end? Exclusionary strategies, common employed during the Late Classic, were based on the premise that large segments of the community became indebted to an aspiring or extant elite minority once the lowly populace received scarce resources. After the establishment of these debt relations, the populace was obligated to offer up labor for the benefit of the elite. The materialization of these strategies is posited as architecture for the private use of the elite. What is interesting here is the manifestation of seemingly public spaces without physical obstacles to restrict access. Indeed, the result of this community-wide directed labor seems to benefit the entire society rather than celebrate or elevate some minor segment above the rest of the populace.

Moreover, artifactual assemblages reveal little disparities in wealth or access to exotic or local resources. All contexts yielded foreign commodities or trade goods. Of some importance are the high amounts of Early Postclassic temporal markers such as *Tohil Plumbate* vessels and obsidian blades from the Pachuca source in Hidalgo, central Mexico. Investigations at neighboring sites in the Naco Valley and in Santa Barbara have revealed trace amounts of these

goods (Pat Urban and Ed Schortman report one to two sherds of blade fragments from each area), suggesting a different pattern of participation in exchange networks.

Analysis of the ceramic assemblage has revealed that a significant portion of the fine-wares originated along the Pacific coast of Guatemala, the lower Motagua valley, and Central Honduras. These imports are noted in small amounts in the Northeast Complex assemblage, but the overall counts are slightly higher than those reported elsewhere.



Figure 9. *Tohil Plumbate* vessels from the Northeast Complex.

Perhaps the most closely comparable assemblage was reported in the Ejar Complex at Copan. Here, Manahan (2003:175) reports a total of 173 sherds and 2 whole vessels, classified as *Tohil Plumbate*. To date, a total of 314 sherds and 5 whole (or nearly whole) vessels of *Tohil Plumbate* have been identified in the Northeast Complex (Figure 9).

It is interesting that although there is evidence for imported vessels, there appears to be little evidence for the use of these vessels to create or maintain social distance in the ninth and tenth-century community. They are ubiquitous and although the mechanism of distribution is not yet clear, the relatively equal distribution of fine wares is suggestive of open access to these imports.

The lithic assemblage is known through the analysis of 22, 229 individual chipped stone specimens collected during the 2000 and 2002 seasons. I'll limit my discussion to the presence of large amounts of obsidian from Central Mexico and the absence of evidence for blade production. Obsidian from the Pachuca flows was found in abundance in the Northeast Complex. It was the third most commonly recovered toolstone after locally-acquired chert and imported obsidian from the Ixtepeque source in southeastern Guatemala. In sum, 1,684 pieces of the green volcanic glass were recovered in the Northeast Complex and by weight, Pachuca obsidian makes up 17 percent of all obsidian in the collection (Table 1). Germaine to my discussion here, obsidian from this source was widely distributed in all contexts, and it appears as though it was treated no differently than more accessible source materials.

Structure	Count	Mass (g)	Exc. Area (m ²)	Density (#/m ²)	Density (g/m ²)
217	323	264.2	102.5	3.15	2.58
242	171	137.37	91	1.88	1.51
209	196	142.5	100	1.96	1.43
213	283	192.71	139	2.04	1.39
155	55	51.04	66	0.83	0.77
174	3	9.82	13	0.23	0.76
208	67	46.05	61	1.10	0.75
218	136	84.8	113.5	1.20	0.75
165	32	21.99	31	1.03	0.71
212/282B	79	62.9	149	0.53	0.42
290	14	8.35	21	0.67	0.40
210	31	26.3	67.5	0.46	0.39
156	46	32.39	85	0.54	0.38
282	9	7.8	22	0.41	0.35
220	190	136.76	467	0.41	0.29
222	8	5.1	34	0.24	0.15
Wall	8	5.8	48	0.17	0.12
173	8	4.67	41.5	0.19	0.11
221	6	4.25	41	0.15	0.10
235	10	6.59	66	0.15	0.10
211	9	4.55	76.5	0.12	0.06
Total	1684	1255.94	1835.5	0.92	0.68

Table 1. Distribution of obsidian from the Pachuca, Hidalgo source.

Given these lines of evidence, it appears that individuals were engaged in corporate or group oriented strategies during the ninth and tenth-centuries at El Coyote. In accordance with the corporate group model, intra-group status distinctions were seemingly suppressed in favor of inter-group markers of identity. Corporate practices avoid all mechanisms that promote individual aggrandizement, thus individual identity is likely drawn from gender, age, kinship, occupation, and community membership rather than one's position in a sociopolitical hierarchy (Hendon 1999; Mills 2004). The overwhelming abundance of data from the Northeast Complex reflects a society embedded in regional interactions yet focused on local cooperation. Imported "prestige goods" were widely distributed, thereby removing the status-promoting value of these

objects. Productive practices were open and the economy was, for the most part, unspecialized. Finally, a variety of evidential lines suggest that distinctive elite leaders were abandoned while community-wide events were adopted or developed.

I do not argue, however, that leaders who drew from centralized sources of power were unknown in the Northeast Complex. It appears that the maintenance of a ritual storehouse, Structure 217, provided an ideological anchor for the community. Given its size, this small structure in the southeastern corner of the complex yielded surprising concentrations of imported fine wares, heirlooms, ritual paraphernalia, and other commodities. This evidence corresponds well with models of communal storehouses in corporate groups (Earle 2001; Peregrine 2001).

There is evidence in the form of censer fragments, an ash deposit, and restricted entrance to the building to suggest Structure 217 was the locus of private rituals, perhaps conducted by ritual specialists. Control over entry to this structure, and the knowledge of practices conducted within its walls, would provide a centralized source of power for these specialists. These centralized sources of power are in opposition to the diffuse sources of power that are fundamental to corporate groups. It is clear from the Northeast Complex evidence that these slight differences in prestige and status did not become long-term structures of inequality. Furthermore, these data suggest that power, status, and prestige inequalities are not always indicated by marked material differences in the archaeological record.

Regional Context

While the identification of a corporate political strategy may be noteworthy (the non-powerful power strategy) explanations for its development must account for regional events. Or,

what Tim Pauketat refers to as the X-factor (2007:129); that is, the historical context upon which these developments at El Coyote were contingent.

To do so, we must begin in the Late Classic. During this time, southeastern Mesoamerica can be characterized as a tightly linked elite interaction network within a broader and more loosely integrated economy. Elite power was centralized or concentrated, drawing on ideology and supra-local personal connections. Late Classic chiefs led through public ritual, participation in exclusive trading relationships, and sponsored feasts. These sources of power were centralized and created distance between the rulers and the ruled, while simultaneously binding all levels of the community through the reproduction of the social order. Leadership, therefore, was personalized because an individual was promoted due to his interregional ties, local strategies for advancement, and charisma.

During the early ninth century, communities across southeastern Mesoamerica underwent dramatic transformations. Those polities most closely tied to southern lowland Maya centers suffered dramatic decentralization and population decline. Polities south of the Maya frontier exemplified a second pattern whereby hierarchical organization was replaced by decentralized societies and population continuity.

So, how did these interregional changes impact the power strategies at El Coyote? Without exclusive access to exchange partners, elites lost their primary source of power. This new restraint would have rocked the foundation of structural power in the lower Cacaupala valley. Reigning chiefs would have been hard-pressed to maintain control over surpluses and labor without the ideological capital imported from quickly vanishing trade partners (Kipp and Schortman 1989).

Contemporary with (or immediately following) the failing elite networks was the intrusion of a burgeoning pan-Mesoamerican mercantile economy. This new economic system resulted from structural changes at the point of production for trade wares and commodities. Two examples are the intensified production of *Tohil Plumbate* pottery from the Soconusco region and the extraction of obsidian from the Pachuca source in central Mexico. These and other commodities were given wide and rapid distribution because trade networks were gravitating towards waterborne commerce.

In the Cacaupala valley, the exchange of commodities was conducted between individuals, but there is no evidence to suggest that partnerships were exclusive; quite the opposite appears to be the case. Access to imports was generally open and there is no division between elite and non-elite assemblages in terms of non-local commodities. The accumulation of wealth occurred beyond the region, suggesting that the foreign merchants, not the local Cacaupalans, profited from this interaction. During previous eras, possession of imports was representative of ties to the supernatural or, at the very least, ties to powerful allies beyond the region. It was the exclusivity of these elite goods and the cost of acquiring them that gave them their value (Masson 2002:6). This source of power was kept beyond the grasp of the common Cacaupalan and the mercantile economy provided no such leverage for chiefly endeavors.

In the absence of centralized sources of power the only sources remaining were diffuse and structured at the household level. Perhaps as a response to the failure of prestige interaction strategies, exclusive sources of power were not sought. In their place corporate strategies were implemented. The corporate group offers a substantially different model of organization and is not simply a Late Classic hierarchy with the elite-veneer removed. All households in the Northeast Complex reveal evidence for participation in the mercantile economy. Productive

endeavors were managed at the household level for household consumption. The religious needs of community members were met within the structure of the household or, were attended to by a ritual specialist (who evidently could not exchange his ritual authority for political power). Community-wide ceremonies, festivals, and public works show no evidence for individual aggrandizement. In sum, the principles that promoted sociopolitical inequality were negated at Early Postclassic El Coyote.

Conclusion

During the Early Postclassic, political organization in the lower Cacaupala valley was remarkably non-hierarchical. Survey and excavation data indicate that local and imported resources were equally distributed, and more importantly, concentrations of resources, be they staple surpluses or exotic preciosities, were not identified in association with private residences. Within the Northeast Complex, discrete households show little variation in terms of construction technique and materials or internal organization. Communal labor was directed to public endeavors, and individual families seemingly had little sway over organized labor. These evidential lines suggest that whatever distinctions existed in prestige and status did not convey outright control over the labor and resources of the community. Therefore, power may not have been equally shared, but perhaps control over labor and resources was.

In this paper I have sought to illustrate the utility of forming archaeological interpretation from the perspective of power strategies. This approach recognizes that societies of the past – as well as those of today – are not constructed of bounded, impermeable units. Societies are formed by the actions of knowledgeable agents who were influenced by varied and conflicting forces. These interactions form a changing set of power imbalances as actors strive to negotiate their

roles through time and context. Moreover, it draws attention to societies without marked differences in power, whether in so-called post-collapse societies or communities that fail to conform to narrowly defined Neoevolutionary trajectories.

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