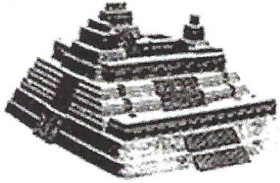


TERRACES, TUNNELS AND TRANSECTS: THE CARACOL PROJECT 1995



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Sponsored primarily by the National Science Foundation, the 1995 field season at Caracol lasted from the middle of February until the end of May. This was the second of two seasons of research focusing on the core settlement at Caracol. Work was particularly geared towards identifying settlement density and drop-off (if any) as well as the relationship(s) between Caracol's agricultural systems and settlement. As during 1994, investigation centered in the northeastern portion of the site.

Extensive mapping was carried out during the 1995 field season in a variety of locales. In the northeastern sector of Caracol, emphasis was placed on the time-consuming mapping of agricultural terraces as a means of placing residential plaza groups in the context of their associated agricultural systems. Two areas were intensively mapped — an area greater than 1 km² to the west of Puchituk Hill and an area half this size to the south of Puchituk Terminus. In spite of the detailed 50 m grid coverage originally employed, the more detailed terrace mapping increased the overall structure total by 9% for these areas; this is particularly significant given the already dense settlement noted in this core area. In accord with the original NSF research design, a 200 m wide by 4 km long transect was run due south of the

Royal Group (Pajaro-Ramonal Terminus) in search of settlement drop-off.

As with the 1994 Cohune transect, no drop in overall settlement density for Caracol was recorded along its entire distance. The transect did, however, encounter a new causeway leading to Round Hole Bank at a distance of 3 km from the Royal Group. Additional systematic mapping of structure groups was undertaken in a central "square" 6.25 km² area encompassing the site epicenter; this "block" kind of coverage will permit better comparisons to be made between Caracol and other sites such as Tikal or Calakmul.

Several epicentral investigations were undertaken during 1995. At the summit of Caana, a previously begun tunnel through Structure B19 was completed, resulting in the dating of major construction activity at this locus to the Late Preclassic era. The tunnels and trench were then backfilled and stabilization of the B19 stairway begun. The stucco-decorated building beneath the eastern side of Structure B16 was further investigated and revealed a stucco text recording Naranjo's war of independence for Caracol in A.D. 680. In the Central Acropolis, the frontal stair for Structure A39 was stabilized, as was the access area to the lower tomb in Structure A34. To the east of Caana, an excavation through Structure B64 revealed an extremely long sequence of construction that began in the Late Preclassic era and ended in the Terminal Classic Period. A series of burials and caches were encountered in this investigation, and a cist cut into bedrock at ca. A.D. 150 contained the internment of an adult female with over 34 vessels and 7,000 beads.

Excavations in the northeastern sector of Caracol consisted of both test-pits and intensive excavation of plaza groups. Two groups had the majority of their structures investigated: one revealed a construction history spanning the Late Preclassic to Terminal Classic Periods; the other produced the earliest remains yet encountered at Caracol dating back to 600 B.C. A series of more limited test excavations were carried out in an additional dozen groups in the northeast sector; for the most part, these excavations encountered the expected array of Late Classic material associated with Caracol's

"cult of the dead." One group close to the epicenter was also investigated; its eastern structure yielded an open tomb dating to the Early Classic Period and a central feature in its plaza contained almost 2 dozen associated caches.

One disturbing factor during the 1995 field season was new looting discovered in close proximity to the modern camp. We estimate that almost 25% of groups in the western part of Caracol have been looted recently by Guatemalans moving into Belize to farm. The eight caretakers installed by the Government of Belize during the 1995 field season will surely act as a deterrent to further damage in epicentral Caracol. However, more damage to the immense Caracol core will follow without a concerted effort to protect the site.

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