

THE MAYA SITE OF COPAN

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(In collaboration with Sebastian Safiano)

One of the most important cities of the Mayan Civilization was Copan. The archaeological remains of this great city are located in Honduras (see *Figure 1*) close to the border with Guatemala. The lands of the Mayan civilization reached from the highlands of Guatemala and neighboring Mexico, El Salvador, and Honduras through Belize and the broad plain of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. The heartland of this civilization was in the plains of the Yucatan Peninsula, where its most important city-states flourished. Copan was an outpost but a very important site, and flourished during the Classical Mayan period of 400 to 850 A.D.

Copan like many other city-states was built on a plan, consisting of a number of pyramidal mounds, often surmounted by temples or other buildings, grouped around open plazas. The pyramids, built in successive steps, were faced with cut stone blocks and had a step stairway built into one or more of their sides.

The Archaeological Park at Copan can be seen on a collection of Maximum Cards which our vice-president Sebastian Safiano realized during a visit to Honduras. Some of these Maximum Cards are depicted here, including the 'Pelota Ball Court' (see *Figure 2*), and the Great Plaza with its altars and Stelae (*Figure 3*).

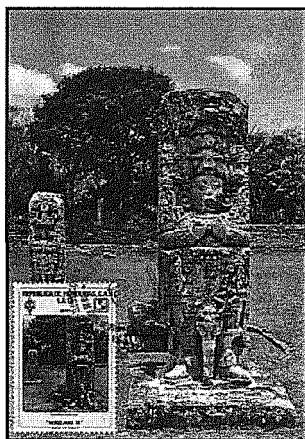
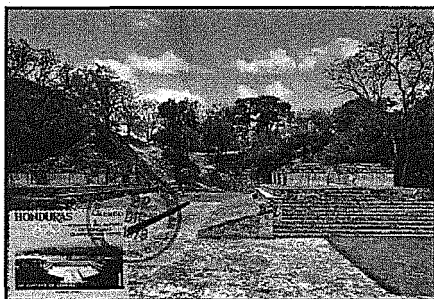
The Acropolis and the platforms, pyramids, stairways, and plazas that adjoin it are referred to as the 'Main Group' of Copan. On the valley below outside the 'Main Group' there are numerous mounds - overgrown ruins of buildings - in two areas: a) 'El Bosque' ('the Woods') to the Southwest is filled with flats, where the population of merchants, craftsmen, and farmers once lived; and b) 'Las Sepulturas' ('the Tombs') to the east and north with a large aggregation of mounds. This site was an elite residential zone and was linked to the 'Main Group' by a causeway. Seven feet beneath the surface of 'Las Sepulturas' lies a cemetery dating from the Pre-classical period.

The 'Acropolis' rises 100 feet off the old riverbed to dominate the 'Main Group'. On the north side of the 'Acropolis' lies 'Structure 11', with a staircase of enormous cut stones. It was erected in the late 8th century by 'Yax Pac' ('Rising Sun'). This structure conceals part of a deeply buried stairway of the first Copan building by 'Mah K'ina Yax K'uk' Mo' ('Great Sun Lord Quetzal Macaw') the founder of the Copan dynasty in 426 A.D.

Between 'Structure 11' and the 'Ball Court' lies the 'Hieroglyphic Stairway' on the west face of the pyramid known as 'Temple 26'. It was built in 755 by the ruler 'Smoke Shell'. The 50 foot wide stairway had 72 steps, each a foot and a half high

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Clockwise from Left: (Figure 1) *Map of Honduras*. Copan is located in the west (left-center). The map shows the 18 departments of Honduras, plus parts of the bordering countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and the Caribbean Sea. Issue: Mar. 27, 1972. For: 25th anniversary of National Cartographic Service Cancel: First Day, Tegucigalpa, regular. (Figure 2) *Pelota Ball Court*. Issue: Nov. 27, 1964. For: 18th Olympic Games Tokyo. Cancel: Dec. 22, 1979, Tegucigalpa, regular. (Figure 3) *Mayan Stelae, Great Plaza*. Issue: Apr. 28, 1978. For: 1st Nat. Philatelic Exhibition under the patronage of Interamerican Federation of Philately. Cancel: First Day, Tegucigalpa, special illustration (head engraving). (Figure 4) *Storm God 'Chac'*. Chac was the God of Rain and Lightning, he was especially important in popular ritual. Issue: Apr. 28, 1978. For: 1st Nat. Philatelic Exhibition under the patronage of Interamerican Federation of Philately. Cancel: First Day, Tegucigalpa, special illustration (head engraving).



between ornate balustrades. Its risers hold a text of more than 1,250 hieroglyphs chronicling the entire dynastic history of Copan up to 755. However, in the 1800's the 'Hieroglyphic Stairway' collapsed in the 1800's, and thus only 30 of its risers are in their original order.

On the south part of the '*Great Plaza*' near the '*Hieroglyphic Stairway*' lies the '*Pelota Ball Court*' (see *Figure 2*). In this Court the Maya played a Ball Game which may have had religious importance to them. The players bounced a solid rubber ball back and forth using their hips, thighs, and elbows - never their hands - aiming for the stone rings on the court walls. The privileged nobles must have cheered the action from atop the walls, while the ordinary spectators lined end zones.

On the north part of the '*Great Plaza*' stand a number of '*Stelae*'. These '*Stelae*' with figurative carving and inscriptions are the most characteristic examples of monumental free-standing stone sculpture of the Maya. Here on (*Figure 3*) we see first close-by '*Stela C*' probably one of the rulers of Copan. Behind it to the left we see the '*Stela B*' depicting the warrior ruler '*18 Rabbit*' who ruled from June 695 to May 738. His costume bears all the symbols of Maya power, such as the jade belt of ancestor heads, the loincloth with sacred elements, and the great head-dress with tiny figures and giant macaw heads.

On the summit of the '*Acropolis*' lies '*Structure 22*' across the Oriental Court. The ornate facade once depicted a huge monster mouth. The door of its inner chamber was flanked by crouching supernatural figures (see *Figure 4*). The outer corners are decorated with stacked countenances of monsters representing mountains. '*Structure 22*' was built by the famous ruler '*18 Rabbit*' who ruled Copan between 695 and 738.

Between the '*Oriental Court*' and the '*Western Court*' lies '*Structure 16*', the tallest building on the '*Acropolis*'. It was built shortly before 800 by '*Yax Pac*' the last ruler of Copan's dynasty. '*Structure 16*' conceals many earlier structures, starting with '*Hunal*' at the bottom built by '*Mah K'ina Yax K'uk' Mo*' the first ruler. This was covered by the '*Yehnal*' building with a panel of the Sun God. Around 450 the '*Margarita*' burial was built for an important woman, with beautiful stucco facade of the '*Quetzal Macaw*'. In 573 the '*Rosalila*' ('*Temple of the Sun*') was built with painted stucco facades of unique beauty, paying homage to the dynasty founder. This is the only completed preserved building, who facade replica adorns the Museum of Copan.

At the base of '*Structure 16*' stands '*Altar Q*' erected in 763 by '*Yax Pac*' Copan's final dynastic ruler. The sides of '*Altar Q*' have portraits of all 16 rulers of Copan. On the front '*Yax Pac*' is depicted receiving the ceremonial baton of office from Copan's first ruler (a metaphoric transfer of power). '*Altar Q*' is the most important monument at Copan.

Of all Maya sites, none exceed Copan in the magnificence of its ornate buildings and sculptures. Copan was recognized by the United Nations (UNESCO) in 1980 as a World Heritage Site.