

Integrating Conservation and Field Archeology

Insights from Central America

The over-arching reason to foster the integration of conservation and archeological field practices is to ensure that newly excavated materials, both moveable and immovable, are safeguarded for the future as meaningful sources of information about the past. While it would seem a natural fit, this collaboration has in fact been all too rare in field archeology in Central America until relatively recently. My experiences as an artifacts conservator with U.S.-sponsored projects in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala¹ have given me an opportunity to reflect on the integration process, which in these cases began from scratch. Several factors that appeared to affect progress are presented and matched with some suggested strategies to increase the level of conservation-mindedness in field archeology. Although focused on the situation in Central America, many of these strategies are appropriate for excavations elsewhere, including the United States.

Copán, Honduras. Structure 16 showing tunnel access to excavation areas.



Factors Affecting Integration

Team structure. Most U.S.-trained archeologists working at Mesoamerican sites come out of a strongly anthropological tradition, grounded in a practice that emphasizes scientifically valid method to produce a fresh, well-controlled data set. As a result, the professional team may be composed primarily of research area specialists, without individuals specifically designated to carry out coordinated research functions such as artifact registration and conservation, as it was initially at Cerén (El Salvador) in 1989. Such a team structure may take a cue from funding sources that only support research.

Field preparation. The typological and chronological sequences underpinning current research in Central America have typically utilized ceramics and lithics, for these are the materials that survive in abundance in the American subtropics. Their relative hardness, however, may have served to give archeologists a false sense of preparedness, when faced with particularly fragile examples or unexpected materials in complex deposits. Conservation approaches are still not regularly part of an archeologist's field training, either in textbooks, techniques classes, or field school situations, where new archeologists typically learn the practice. So, it is not surprising that they might rely on out-of-date sources for stabilization solutions or reconstruction materials, such as molten paraffin wax or white glue, without understanding the consequences.

Conservators, meanwhile, are still often trained with a bias toward singular items deserving specialized attention. This can be a limitation for a conservator working on site, who may be unaware of, choose to remain isolated from, or be ill-equipped to deal with, the full artifact inventory and its research needs, site preservation issues, or project information systems of which conservation records should be an integrated part.

Copán, Honduras. Conservator stabilizing basketry remains in a royal burial offering chamber within Structure 16.

Governmental guidelines. All of the Central American countries have endorsed cultural patrimony preservation and protection, e.g., by ratifying various conventions of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in national legislation. The specific application of these concepts to archeological practice is generally articulated in the permit regulations, drawn up by governmental authorities overseeing excavations (typically a national institute within a ministry). Currently, the regulations primarily address architectural actions, but thus far guidelines are not provided for situations necessitating conservation *in situ*, and curation standards for lifted artifacts are rarely mentioned.

It is notable that a heightened awareness of preservation issues exists at sites with World Heritage designation, such as Cerén and Copán (Honduras). UNESCO specifies that a management plan be developed, which balances the preservation needs of the site's cultural property, with tourism development and on-going research; but it offers no direct assistance to governmental authorities in formulating or implementing details of such a plan.

Conservation resources. The primary conservation resource in most Central American countries is a central laboratory, typically part of the national institute and often in the national museum. Since most projects lack a participating conservator, central laboratory personnel may be brought in to provide advice when conservation issues arise in the course of excavation. Generally, more expertise is available for architectural issues, in part because of a longer history of focus on this aspect and the existence of professional architecture programs. Conservators of other materials are typically apprentice-trained, with occasional access to regional workshops whose focus is museum practice, such as aesthetically-driven approaches to ceramics conservation. As a result, recommendations in an archeological setting may not be framed with regard to their impact on research priorities, and experience in dealing with issues posed by material *in situ* is still limited.

Strategies to Promote Integration

On-site integration. The particular issues presented by archeological materials should be part of a conservator's training, just as conservation issues should be part of an archeologist's training. Courses and workshops may be adequate to convey specifics, as a starter, but it has



been my experience that the lessons and benefits for both sides are best realized through sustained contact during the course of a field season.

At the outset, planning the finds processing path—from excavation, handling, bagging, washing, and reconstructing to packing away in storage—offers an important opportunity for dialog between archeologist and conservator. Because choices made at each step have the potential to impact research value, by alterations (good or bad) that are potentially introduced, this is a chance to clarify research goals and procedures for every type of material, as well as priorities for more focused conservation attention.

The project's information system is another arena for integration. Details about how an artifact was processed should be part of its record, along with provenience and other technical observations and analysis; all of these form its research value. An integrated documentation system, along with a well-thought-out finds processing system, and project documents that report these aspects,² promote awareness of the conservation component of responsible archeological practice at a time when ethics and curation standards are increasingly being discussed.

Collaborative research. A conservator brings considerable diagnostic skills to a preservation problem, which include characterizing component materials, elucidating technology and recognizing traces of use in artifacts that have altered significantly with time and burial. This information, often more extensive because specialized lifting techniques were used, forms the basis of one of the most powerful strategies for promoting integration on site: materials-based research that is carried out and published collaboratively by archeologists and conservators.³

Copán,
Honduras.
Conservator
working in a
royal tomb
within Structure
26.



Funder priorities. Those who have experienced the benefits of such collaborations might consider advocacy at the funder level for active support of conservation as part of project budgets. An argument could certainly be made on the basis of research contribution, such as the Cerén, Copán, and Aguateca (Guatemala) projects have found, until such point as responsible archeological practice is acknowledged by granting agencies as reason enough to provide support.

Governmental standards. One final strategy involves working with key personnel in the national institutes that oversee archeology activity. Countries such as El Salvador and Guatemala have negotiated bilateral agreements with the U.S. to impose import restrictions on cultural material. These agreements include facilitated access to technical expertise and training related to cultural patrimony protection and preservation. With assistance of U.S. conservators, the national institutes could develop improved standards for projects seeking permits, such as artifact curation requirements or mandated conservation participation. Conservators working in the field, in turn, would be positioned to train others whose access to knowledge about field conservation may be limited.

Conclusion

The ripple effect of any of these strategies should never be underestimated. Whether from visits to projects that happen to have conservation labs, talks at professional meetings, chapters in field season research reports, or co-authored publications, those archeological projects without

conservators often find parallels with their own excavation situations—ones that could have been handled differently or could be anticipated—and thereby discover a resource network to tap. These new opportunities increase the number of available work sites for field conservators. Ultimately, it is the excavated materials that benefit from the integration of our work, through improved recovery, enriched research, safer display, and better storage, for a longer future as sources of meaningful information about the past.

Notes

- ¹ Archeological projects cited, with principal investigators, and dates of authors involvement: Cerén Research Project, Cerén, El Salvador [Dr. Payson D. Sheets, University of Colorado/Boulder], 1989-1997; Early Copán Acropolis Program, Copán, Honduras [Dr. Robert J. Sharer, University of Pennsylvania Museum], 1992-1997; Copán Acropolis Archaeological Project, Copán, Honduras [Dr. William L. Fash, Harvard University], 1993-present; Aguateca Archaeological Project, Aguateca, Guatemala [Dr. Takeshi Inomata, University of Arizona], 1998-present.
- ² Examples of conservation chapters in field season research reports: Beaubien, H., S. Hornbeck, and E. Robertson, "La conservación de artefactos." In T. Inomata, ed., *Informe del Proyecto Arqueológico Aguateca: La Temporada de 1998* (Instituto de Antropología e Historia de Guatemala, December 1998), 67-72; E. Kaplan and H. Beaubien, "Artifact Conservation 1994." In P. Sheets and L. Brown, eds., *Preliminary Report of the Cerén Research Project, 1996 Field Season and 1994 Study Season* (Boulder: Department of Anthropology, University of Colorado, 1996), 18-25.
- ³ Examples of published research collaborations between archeologists and conservators: Fash, W., H. Beaubien, C. Magee, B. Fash and R. Williamson, "The Trappings of Kingship among the Classic Maya: Ritual and Identity in a Royal Tomb from Copán." In P. Drooker, ed., *Fleeting Identities: Perishable Material Culture in Archaeological Research* (Carbondale, IL: Center for Archaeological Investigations, Occasional Paper No.28, 2001), 152-169; Beaubien, H. and M. Beaudry-Corbett (forthcoming spring 2002), "Artifacts Made from Plant Materials." In P. Sheets, ed., *Before the Volcano Erupted: the Ancient Cerén Village in Central America* (Austin: University of Texas Press), Chapter 17.

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Photos by the
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