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Julia A. Hendon
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

The site of Cerro Palenque, the largest settlement in the lower Ulua Valley (Sula Valley) in Honduras during the ninth and tenth centuries AD, was a locus of craft production of figurines and pottery, feasting, the ballgame, and other events associated with its ballcourt. Based on the analysis of imported obsidian, the evidence for ritual and craft production, and the layout of the settlement, Cerro Palenque maintained long distance trade connections with Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize. It also took part in local rituals and events with its smaller neighbors in the valley.

Keywords

Mesoamerica, Honduras, Ulua Valley, Cerro Palenque, ballgame, craft production, ritual

Disciplines

Anthropology | Archaeological Anthropology

Comments

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Local Interactions and Long Distance Connections in the Ulua Valley:

The View from Cerro Palenque

Julia A. Hendon
Dept. of Anthropology
Gettysburg College
Gettysburg, PA 17325

© 2009 *(Revised version of a paper presented at the 74th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, in the session, "Archaeological Research in Honduras: Understanding Ancient Lifeways in the Intermediate Area," in Atlanta, GA, in 2009).*

Cerro Palenque is a major settlement in the lower Ulua valley, Honduras, that reaches its maximum occupation in the Terminal Classic period (AD 850-1050). This means that Cerro Palenque develops late in the prehistory of the valley which was occupied as early as 1600 BC (Joyce and Henderson 2001). Excavations that I directed from 1998-2002 in a large residential area near the site center complement earlier survey and excavations carried out in the 1980s that studied domestic groups and monumental architecture (see Hendon 2002, 2007; Hendon and Lopiparo 2004; Joyce 1985, 1988, 1991). These two phases of research provide insight into how certain social practices created and sustained both a sense of social difference and of community identity among the people living at Cerro Palenque, and how these practices contributed to Cerro Palenque's relations with other communities in the lower Ulua valley.

Cerro Palenque is located in a range of hills at the southern end of the lower Ulua valley where the Comayagua and Blanco rivers merge with the Ulua. Its elevated setting led Doris Stone (1941), one of the first to write about the site, to assume it was a fort. While its location certainly makes it defensible, none of the excavations has revealed any evidence that it was built with defense in mind. Nor is there any sign of conflict either at Cerro Palenque itself or in the valley more generally, where the many contemporary sites on the alluvial plain would have been

much more vulnerable to attack.

The first occupation at Cerro Palenque begins about AD 500-600 and was built on the highest peak. This center, labeled CR-44, includes domestic and public buildings as well as a water reservoir. The buildings are built of worked stone and lime plaster. Some were decorated with architectural sculpture. The relatively small group of people living here (when compared to the later occupation) had access to such imported materials as *Spondylus* shell, obsidian, and jade. They used these materials as part of daily life and in socially meaningful rituals. Pachuca obsidian, stuccoed pottery, and talud-tablero architecture indicate that the residents of CR-44 were connected to long distance exchange networks reaching as far as the Basin of Mexico from the beginning of its occupation.

CR-44 was abandoned at the end of the Late Classic period, ca. AD 850. Occupation shifted to the lower ridges where some 500 structures have been found through survey. Projecting from the substantial increase in the size of the settlement, the population of Cerro Palenque grew substantially. The Great Plaza, a large and impressive area of monumental architecture, becomes the physical, social, and political focal point for the Terminal Classic settlement and society. The plaza itself is a large paved space approximately 300 meters long and is surrounded by monumental buildings with a ball court at its southern end. This is the first such court for Cerro Palenque although not for the valley as a whole. The ball court and plaza are built on top of a very large raised foundation platform that elevates the monumental area above the level of most of the houses around it. The northern extension of the Great Plaza is made up of another set of monumental buildings that are connected to the plaza by a raised walkway. The complex, taken as a whole, is larger and more varied than the Late Classic monumental architecture. The Great Plaza is also more accessible and provides a large space where people

could congregate to participate in ceremonies and public events, including the ballgames taking place in the ball court.

Cerro Palenque's domestic spaces, including houses and associated structures such as shrines or kitchens, surround the Great Plaza with the heaviest concentrations to its west and east. Other residences are located northeast and east of CR-44. Each of these clusters is built on top of a ridge that slopes down from the Late Classic hilltop. Occupation on the same ridge is thus separated by differences in elevation while the ridges themselves constitute discrete segments of the ancient settlement pattern. Smaller scale monumental architecture can be found in the settlement on ridges that are separate from the one where the Great Plaza is located.

During the densely populated Late Classic period, several cities flourished in the valley, including Travesía and La Guacamaya (Henderson 1992b). In the Terminal Classic, however, Cerro Palenque becomes much larger while these other centers decreased in size or were abandoned. The valley as a whole continues to support a substantial population. There is no evidence that Cerro Palenque ruled over the valley or exerted economic dominance. Studies of the pottery and figurine-whistles produced in the lower Uluá valley, including at Cerro Palenque, demonstrate exchange among the different settlements in the valley and with Cerro Palenque but do not support the idea that Cerro Palenque monopolized resources or craft production. Instead, Cerro Palenque's growth and social prominence reflects its incorporation into a religious landscape shared among residents of the large and small sites in the valley that gives great importance to the direction south and to mountain peaks (Joyce et al. 2009; Lopiparo 2003).

Cerro Palenque grew during a period of changing economic relations, distribution of population, and forms of political integration in the larger Mesoamerican world, and especially in the southern Maya lowlands known (inaccurately) as the Maya collapse. The closest Maya

kingdoms to Cerro Palenque are Copan and Quirigua. It is tempting to see the changes at Cerro Palenque and in the lower Ulua valley more generally as caused by the break down of centralized rule at Copan. This is not a good explanation, however, because the Copan kingdom did not control the lower Ulua valley politically. Nor was the lower Ulua valley dependent on Copan for its access to economic resources. People living in the valley, in fact, had a long history of interaction with societies in Belize, the Yucatan peninsula, the Guatemalan highlands, and, as noted earlier, the Basin of Mexico as well as with other areas of Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica (Hirth 1988; Joyce 1986, 1988; Luke and Tykot 2007; Sheptak 1987; Stone 1941). Thus, it is more appropriate to say that the changes at Copan may have affected some aspects of trade in the lower Ulua valley but that Copan was only one part of the networks of exchange that Ulua valley residents participated in. What people at Cerro Palenque were able to do is to adjust to the changing times in ways that continued to provide them with the kind of imported resources that they wanted.

One major change that marks the transition to the Terminal Classic period is the shift from Ulua Polychrome pottery to fine paste pottery (Joyce 1987). The use of Ulua Polychromes tapers off and their function is taken over by vessels that differ in appearance, decoration, and method of manufacture. These fine paste wares are locally made based on petrographic and neutron activation analysis (Lopiparo et al. 2005). The adoption of fine paste pottery underscores the far reach of Cerro Palenque's external connections. A similar change occurs around the same time in Guatemala, Mexico, and Belize where Fine Orange pottery replaces former polychrome traditions. This is not to say that people in the valley were "copying" or "imitating" these distant societies -- lower Ulua fine paste pottery is distinctive -- but that they were cosmopolitan in their interest in new techniques and styles that they incorporated into their own way of doing things.

At the same time, we find evidence for continuity in the forms and decoration of the basic utilitarian vessels used for cooking and storage, suggesting that the preferred way to display this cosmopolitanism was in the kinds of social and ritual practices that required fine paste serving vessels, such as feasts associated with the ball game or life cycle events.

Trading partners may have changed in the Terminal Classic but the importance of exchange remained. The residents of Cerro Palenque maintained social contacts with diverse groups of people and regions. The largest quantity of imported ceramics falls into the Blanco category and suggests on-going contacts with eastern neighbors in the Cuyumapa river drainage of the Department of Yoro. Other finds include Belize Red, Las Vegas Polychrome, and a possible El Salvador type.

Exchange relationships are also indicated by the presence of marine shells such as conch, clam, and *Spondylus*. Obsidian artifacts provide even more detail on exchange. Energy-Dispersive X-Ray Fluorescence (EDXRF) analysis was carried out at the University of California-Berkeley by Stephen Shackley using. Most of the obsidian imported in the Late Classic period came from the source of Ixtepeque, Guatemala. This remained the dominant source in the Terminal Classic. Other sources used in the Late Classic are four other Guatemalan sources, (El Chayal, Jalapa, San Martin Jilotepeque, and San Bartolome Milpas Altas). Small amounts from two Honduran sources, La Esperanza and La Union, also found their way to the site as did Pachuca obsidian from Mexico. During the Terminal Classic, only two other Guatemalan sources, Jalapa and El Chayal, are present besides Ixtepeque. At the same time, there is a small increase in the use of La Union obsidian, the set of sources closest to the site (Hendon 2004).

Despite the fact that Cerro Palenque looked very different and that some aspects of their

material culture changed, the archaeological finds from the site also demonstrate that its residents were very concerned to maintain ties to the past. This is reflected in the layout of the Terminal Classic city. The Great Plaza and surrounding settlement on the ridges are orientated in such a way that the highest peak, where the abandoned CR-44 was located, was in sight. In other words, the planning of the later part of the city was designed to ensure an unobstructed view of the CR-44 area from anywhere in the city. The Terminal Classic spatial arrangement and the physical relations among its clusters of buildings create an integrated layout that always leads the eye back to the hilltop center, making it a common point of visual and social reference. Furthermore, the Late Classic part of the city was never built over nor were the buildings looted for construction materials, suggesting that the area remained an important part of the landscape (Hendon 2002; Joyce and Hendon 2000).

Continuity is reflected most markedly in the continuation of ritual and social practices such as caching and feasting. Residential caches in both time periods include objects made out of exotic materials as well as fancy pottery and figurines (Hendon and Lopiparo 2004; Joyce 1991). During the Terminal Classic, everyday objects, such as manos, are also incorporated into such offerings.

Two good examples come from the large residential group just south of the ball court. The three main mounds of the ball court residential group (BRG) form three sides of a square with the northwest corner, closest to the ball court, open. A small mound is located roughly in the center of the patio. A cache associated with the eastern structure consisted of a shallow Santana Ulua Polychrome bowl containing a large, wedge shaped piece of worked green marble originally from some kind of vessel. Marble vessels were produced at Travesia during the Late Classic period and traded widely (Luke and Tykot 2007). Two *Spondylus* shells were also

included.

A ritual deposit associated with the western structure of the BRG represents a similar yet more intensive kind of place-making. Prior to the construction of the earliest of three platforms, people carried out ritual activities involving eating, drinking, and burning incense, at the end of which they broke the censers and fine paste serving and eating vessels and left the pieces lying on a paved surface. A notable design on at least one of the censers is that of bones tied with rope (Garrobo type). This deposit was then covered with about 16 centimeters of fill that contains more broken censers and vessels as well as figurine-whistles and other items that had their useful life deliberately and prematurely cut short by people's decision to break them and leave them behind in this place. At the top of the fill, a human femur from the body of a young, healthy adult was carefully placed on a bed made from large sherds broken from different pottery vessels. The stairs of the building covered the bone, which shows little signs of weathering, suggesting it was either removed from the body of someone who had recently died or had been conserved in a protected location until the people living there were ready to construct the building that would house it (Hendon 2007).

As this find suggests, the BRG was the main location for feasting. The greater frequency and variety of fine paste vessels and figural artifacts found here suggest that the residents of the BRG were hosting such events more often than other households at Cerro Palenque. They also crafted some of the objects used or exchanged at these events, such as fine paste bowls and figurines. My excavations found two pottery kilns at the southern end of the BRG, one in front of the southern mound and the other a few meters to the west behind the western structure. An associated low stone platform and pits specially dug to hold trash provide further evidence that the kilns were being used mainly to produce fine paste vessels and mold made figurines and

whistles. The majority of the sherds come from fine paste serving vessels from the Lasaní, Baracoa, Blanco, and Tacamiche ceramic groups. Forms include small bowls, often with feet, plates or small jars, forms used mainly for serving or consuming food and drink. In fact, almost 75 percent of all the fine paste sherds from my excavations came from these two deposits. Other special kinds of ceramics include Ulua Polychrome, Las Vegas Polychrome, and censers. The deposit also contains broken molds which are of the type used to make the fine paste vessels. In one case a piece of a mold corresponds exactly to the design on a piece of a fine past vessel. Other finds include obsidian tools, animal bone, and items of personal adornment such as a clay earspool and a clay labret.

Cerro Palenque was not some kind of industrialized center churning out mass produced objects. The intermittent or part-time nature of the production is like that found among its contemporaries and suggests that production of figural artifacts for exchange was part of the larger process of ritualized reciprocity that connected Cerro Palenque to its neighbors. Research at sites on the valley floor in the central alluvium provides further support for this network of ritualized reciprocity. These excavations demonstrate that similar gatherings took place at smaller and larger settlements (Lopiparo 2003; Lopiparo and Hendon 2009). At smaller sites these ritualized activities were more local whereas at larger ones, including a small-scale center known as CR-80 and the more substantial regional center of Cerro Palenque, periodic rituals of consumption focused more on establishing connections, affiliations, and shared social identities among more diverse social groups. The consumption and production of fine paste serving vessels would have formed an essential part of maintaining alliances and social relationships.

As the largest community in the valley and the possessor of the largest ball court, Cerro Palenque occupied a privileged but by no means controlling or hegemonic position during the

Terminal Classic period. Its prominence yet lack of political control echoes that of Travesia which played a similar role as the largest focal center in the Late Classic and speaks more broadly to the fact that social relations in the valley were characterized by less marked social inequality than found elsewhere in Mesoamerica (see Henderson 1992a). Differences between Cerro Palenque and its neighbors were expressed, for example, through the decoration of utilitarian material culture, such as water jars, and through the choice of motifs in the decoration of fancy pottery and figurines. Birds appear as a commonly used motif that contrasts with those favored at other sites producing and using these objects. Such shared themes reinforce a sense of community identification.

Nevertheless, it is possible to document an increase in social distance at Cerro Palenque, brought about in part by its growth and in part by the changes in the larger-scale political and economic landscape. BRG residents kept the majority of obsidian for themselves (Hendon 2004). Residents of other patio groups were more likely to use locally available chert, an effective alternative. Nor were marble or shell distributed beyond the BRG. The kinds of fine paste wares and the variety of their decoration are also greater in the BRG. Hosting feasts and making pottery set BRG residents apart from their neighbors as well. These differences do not seem to connect to the economic control of long-distance exchange. If the people living in the BRG were distributing it to other groups, it was on such a small scale as to have little practical consequences. Instead, they reflect a system of social distinction based on the control of ritual events and greater association with the ballgame.

Larger than all others mapped or excavated at the site, the BRG was built about 20 meters from the ball court on the same raised platform. No barrier inhibited movement between the two areas and a pavement created a walkway between the northern end of the residential area and the

southern end of the ball court's playing alley. This closeness and lack of any barrier pull the residential group into the orbit of the ball court. In a practical sense, games played in the ball court or other kinds of activities taking place there would not only have been very visible to the inhabitants of the group but would have made the group very visible to all the people participating in or viewing the events in the ball court. As a ritualized, periodic event that attracted people from within the city itself and from the region, the ballgame provides one way to materialize "imaginary" or conceptualized relationships that are considered appropriate or right according to a cultural system of reference and value. These relations include networks among individuals and social groups. By providing food and drink for consumption and to be taken away, hosts repay old social debts and create new ones. As the people most directly involved for the activities associated with the ballgame, the BRG's residents took on a responsibility for the community as a whole (Hendon 2003).

Throughout its occupation, Cerro Palenque was connected with distant parts of the Mesoamerican world. *Spondylus*, jade, and Mexican and Guatemalan obsidian all provide evidence for these networks as do the stylistic connections between local polychromes and fine paste pottery and those produced elsewhere. Terminal Classic regional instability led to some realignments of these networks in order to perpetuate certain interactions and to form new ones. While obsidian exchange continued to reflect residents' interest in relations with the people supplying Ixtepeque obsidian, fine paste ceramics and imported types suggest an increased focus on interaction with the Peten and Belize as well as with areas south and east of the lower Ulua valley.

The presence of obsidian from multiple sources reflects a desire to develop relations with a number of groups of people. It is possible that Cerro Palenque also maintained ties with people

using different trade routes to bring obsidian from the same source of supply. This is particularly likely given the wide areal expanse of some of these sources. It has been argued that the Copan polity controlled the movement of obsidian from Guatemala into Honduras and that areas like the lower Ulua valley received their obsidian from Copan (Aoyama 2001). The Copan valley, however, represents only one possible route by which obsidian could move from highland Guatemala to the lower Ulua valley, especially if part of the purpose of such networks is to diversify social connections. The minimal evidence for exchange with Copan in the lower Ulua valley during the Late Classic further discounts this assumption of hegemony (Hirth 1988). Moreover, Cerro Palenque's access to Ixtepeque obsidian remains strong in the Terminal Classic when the Copan polity was undergoing political and demographic stress and becoming smaller and less centralized.

Both social differentiation and community integration relied in part on the integration of long distance connections into a local setting. The differential consumption of materials brought these foreign connections into domestic space and everyday life. The actions in which these materialized connections play a role become the basis for social identities that are both intensely local, drawing on the spatial reflection of the history of the community and the continuation of social practices, and dependent on the maintenance of ties to the larger Mesoamerican world.

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