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PVN OP 487 Excavation Report

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Site 487

Site 487 occupies relatively level terrain atop the second terrace overlooking the Rio Manchaguala which runs ca. 600m to the southwest. The Quebrada El Pital, a perennial tributary of the Manchaguala, lies 450m to the northwest and Sites 123 and 320 are located 325m northwest and 125m southeast of the settlement, respectively. The land drops gradually down from northeast to southwest, away from the foothills of the Cordillera de Merendon, that border the Naco Valley on the north, and towards the Rio Manchaguala. The former ascents lie a scant 275m to the northeast.

Site 487 contains a single building (Str. 487-1), a massive earthen platform rising 3m above the surrounding terrain and with a diameter of approximately 41.5m. There are hints of a projection extending roughly 1m from the building's south flank, though whether this is the result of purposeful construction or differential erosion could not be ascertained from the surface. Structure 487-1's summit is an irregularly shaped oval covering 7m east-west by 9m north-south. Very few artifacts and construction debris (i.e., stones) litter the platform's surface and we originally entertained the possibility that Str. 487-1 was a natural eminence, possibly modified to some small extent by human action. No signs of looting were recorded at Site 487 nor is there evidence that the settlement had suffered significant disturbance in recent years.

The field containing Site 487 was devoted to cattle pasture in 1996, land to the northwest and southeast being devoted to commercial cultivation of pineapples and tobacco at that time. Both of the above crops had been intensively grown on the Manchaguala's second and, in the case of tobacco, lower terraces for at least six years prior to and including 1996, hinting at the high fertility of local soils.

Structure 487-1

Excavations at Site 487 began with two, cross-cutting trenches oriented 245 degrees (Subop. 487B) and 155 degrees (Subop. 487C). Suboperations 487B and 487C met on the summit near the platform's approximate center and extended at least half way down the building's flanks. Subsequent digging (conducted within Subop. 487D, 487E, 487F, 487G, and 487H) pursued construction elements revealed in these initial trenches, primarily on the summit and the building's upper southwestern face. Lots from contexts with particular relevance for reconstructing ancient behavior were screened through 1/4" mesh (e.g., from Bu.1 and on/near floors), soil samples for flotation processing being retrieved from fill units spanning the entire construction sequence and other appropriate settings (e.g., postholes).

A total of 360 person-days of labor was invested in clearing 106m² at Site 487 from mid-April through mid-May, 1996. The maximum depth below surface reached in these excavations is 3.36m in a 1x1m probe carried down within Subop. 487C and below the summit to expose as much of the occupation sequence as time would allow. All work was directly overseen by Michael Knepler and Mary Morrison.

Time Spans

<u>Time</u> <u>Span</u>	<u>Construction</u> <u>Phase</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Strata</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Date</u>
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1	-	-	S.1	-	-
2	Str. 487-1-8th	U.1	-	F.1	MPrecl
3	Str. 487-1-7th	U.2,3	-	-	MPrecl
4	Str. 487-1-6th	U.4,5	-	-	MPrecl
5	Str. 487-1-5th	U.6,7	-	-	MPrecl
6	Str. 487-1-4th	U.8,9	-	-	MPrecl
7	Str. 487-1-3rd	U.10-20	-	-	MPrecl
8	Str. 487-1-2nd	U.21-25	S.2	Bu.1	MPrecl
9	Str. 487-1-1st	U.26	-	F.2	LPrecl, LCLI, LCLII, LCLIII
10	-	-	S.3	F.3	-

Time Span 1

Stratum 1 is a light brownish gray soil (10YR-6/2) that was exposed to a maximum thickness of 0.06m at the base of the aforementioned deep summit probe dug as part of Subop. 487C. The very small portion of S.1 revealed in Subop. 487C leaves open questions concerning the nature of its origin (artificially or naturally introduced) and whether or not it is actually devoid of cultural debris. Stratum 1 runs level over its 1m north-south extent uncovered in Subop. 487C.

Time Span 2

Unit 1 is a 0.02m-thick, white (5Yr-8/1), charcoal-flecked floor set directly on S.1. Resting on this surface are three river cobbles that apparently fell from some undisclosed location (F.1). If S.1 is a naturally deposited soil, then Str. 487-1-8th would seem to be a building raised directly on ancient ground surface. Should S.1 turn out to be a fill unit, U.1 would then likely be the remnant of a platform's summit.

Time Span 3

Fully 0.28m of dark yellowish brown soil (U.2, 10YR-3/6), containing some artifacts, buries U.1 and serves as the foundation for U.3. The latter is a 0.04m-thick floor composed of two sequentially deposited elements; a 0.02m-thick level of dark reddish-brown soil (5YR-3/3) immediately overlain by an equally thick deposit of yellowish-red earth (5YR-5/6). Both

components appeared to have been fire-altered, possibly to increase their hardness and durability. Bearing in mind that Str. 487-1-7th was only visible near the base of a 1x1m test pit, it seems that this building is a 0.32m-high (measured above U.1) earth-filled platform capped with a fired earthen floor.

Time Span 4

Unit 3, in turn, is covered by 0.16m of dark yellowish-brown soil (U.4, 10YR-4/6) in which a small amount of cultural material was found. Resting atop U.4 is yet another earthen floor (U.5). Unit 5, like its predecessor in the sequence, consists of two levels: a basal 0.01m-thick element composed of yellowish-brown soil (10YR-6/6) capped by a yellowish-red earth (5YR-4/6) that is 0.03m thick. This surface, like all of floors comprising versions of Str. 487-1, seems to have been burnt. Str. 487-1-6th, therefore, raised the height of its immediate antecedent by 0.2m, creating an earth-filled platform that stood roughly 0.52m high.

Time Span 5

A dark yellowish-brown soil (U.6, 10YR-3/4), incorporating small amounts of cultural material, overlies U.5 by 0.26m and is topped by the next floor in the sequence, U.7. The latter consists of three sequentially deposited elements: a basal level of red soil (2.5YR-4/8) covered by a dark reddish-brown to black ash-filled earth (5YR-2.5/2), the floor sealed by a yellowish-red earth (5YR-5/8). Each flat-laid segment is 0.02m thick and the entirety of U.7 seems to have been intensively burnt. These modifications raised Str. 487-1-5th 0.32m above its predecessors, creating an earth-filled platform approximately 0.84m high (once again, as measured above U.1).

Time Span 6

Unit 8, a dark yellowish-brown soil, in which a few artifacts were found, covers U.7 by 0.2m and is capped by a fire-hardened earthen floor (U.9). Unit 9 is 0.04m thick, equally divided between a dark yellowish-brown bottom layer (10YR-3/6) and an upper soil that is light brownish-gray in color (2.5Y-6/2). Structure 487-1-4th, as exposed within the 1x1m test, rose 0.24m above Str. 487-1-5th, thus making for a platform with a total height of 1.08m.

Time Span 7

Structure 487-1-3rd marks a considerable change in the platform's appearance. As opposed to the previous pattern of growth through small vertical increments, 0.98-1.02m of earthen fill (U.10) were introduced to initiate TS.7. Unit 9 was covered by 0.22-0.24m of yellowish-brown soil (10YR-5/4) which was, itself, sealed by a 0.06-0.12m thick lens of dark yellowish-brown sandy earth (10YR-3/4). Rising above the latter element is 0.64-0.74m of brown soil (10YR-5/3) in which numerous pebbles, calcium carbonate and sand deposits, as well as bajareque fragments, were found (all three levels are included in U.10 and incorporate small numbers of artifacts). Unit 11, a 0.08-0.14m-thick earthen floor, caps U.10 and marks Str. 487-1-3rd's summit. This surface consists of three superimposed levels: the lowest is a reddish-yellow soil (7.5YR-6/6), 0.04-0.06m thick, overlain by 0.02-0.06m of reddish-brown earth (5YR-5/3). Capping the sequence are 0.02m of light brownish-gray soil (10YR-6/2) that may

preserve fragments of a lime plaster on its uppermost surface. Unit 11 is a very hard-packed floor, its durability attributable, in part, to its having been intensively burnt. An effort was made to trace U.11 out to its full extent, thereby gaining some appreciation for the size of Str. 487-1-3rd's summit. Except on the northeast, floor margins were difficult to identify, the surface tending to be well defined in the center and fading out towards its edges. We, therefore, estimate that U.11 originally covered 10.4m northeast-southwest by 8.7m northwest-southeast, comprising roughly 90.5m².

Several fragments of Str. 487-1-3rd's construction were preserved atop or sunk into U.11. Units 14-17 are four postholes, measuring 0.2-0.35m in diameter, that together delimit a quadrilateral figure near the center of U.11's southeast margin. The figure so defined encompasses 1.1-1.2m northwest-southeast by 1.4-1.5m northeast-southwest (measured between the approximate centers of the postholes) and parallels the reconstructed east edge of U.11. Approximately 3.7m southwest of this grouping is an apparently isolated posthole (U.18) with a diameter of 0.45m. Located near U.11's south corner, this entity may have held a wooden upright that helped support a roof sheltering most of the summit (the other corners were not investigated, so we cannot say whether comparable post holes would be found in these locations). Unit 19 is a 0.1m-thick arc of earth, possibly coated with a thin lime plaster, that stands ca. 0.06m above U.11's approximate center. The figure curves north to south over 1.6m and is open to the west. No materials or architectural elements that might hint at the behavioral significance of U.19 were clearly associated with this element. A relatively late addition to Str. 487-1-3rd is a U-shaped cobble wall rising directly above U.11 near that floor's eastern edge (U.13). Unit 13 is 0.24m high, open to the southeast, and covers roughly 1.1m northwest-southeast by 1.3m northeast-southwest (the full length of the northeastern U.13 wall was not uncovered). The southwestern and northeastern arms of U.13 measure 0.3m across, the northwestern element that connects these two elements is 0.2m wide. Unit 13 is the only stone construction recorded on Str. 487-1-3rd and its behavioral significance continues to escape us. The unit's location, overlapping U.16, the southern posthole in the U.14/17 grouping, indicates that this cobble entity was built after the posts comprising this aggregate had been raised.

Excavations off U.11's flanks did not usually reach depths sufficient to uncover other, lower segments of Str. 487-1-3rd construction. Unit 12, on the northeast, is a dark grayish-brown soil level (10YR-4/2) that is 0.32m below the top of U.11 in this area and extends for at least 4m beyond the latter's apparent northeastern margin. Unit 12 drops 0.36m over the above distance. It may be that this earth level marks a penultimate summit terrace; it does not correspond with earlier construction units (e.g., U.9 of Str. 487-1-4th) in either depth or composition. No sign of how U.11 and 12 might have articulated survives.

Unit 21, 0.8m southwest, and ca. 0.6m below the top, of U.11's reconstructed margin, may be the remnants of another lower terrace. This entity consists of a posthole, 0.3m in diameter, situated in the approximate center of an irregularly shaped burnt, ashy soil (10YR-5/2, grayish brown) deposit that covers 1.52m northwest-southeast by 1.35m northeast-southwest. Principal signs of burning form a cruciform with the posthole at the nexus of the intersecting arms. No other traces of the putative southwestern terrace were noted. The sole evidence for such a construction, therefore, is the fortuitously burned and preserved segment represented by U.21. It is possible, however, that U.21 represents part of an earlier building phase. Though the evidence is not strong, two observations argue against such an interpretation. First, U.21 sits ca. 0.52m above the presumed summit of the next earliest building (U.9 of Str. 487-1-4th) exposed in the deep summit probe approximately 5m to the northeast. Second, evidence of burning

continues northeast as far as, but not below, U.11, tentatively suggesting that U.21 and 11 are contemporary. Crucial information on how U.21 and 11 articulated remains elusive, however.

Overall, Structure 487-1-3rd stands ca. 2.2m high (above U.1) and is capped by a fire-hardened earthen-floored summit covering roughly 90.5m² above which rose perishable construction supported by sizable wooden posts. The building was most likely ascended via earthen terraces on all flanks, remnants of the uppermost northeastern and southwestern examples of which may be represented by U.12 and 21. The latter is associated with another posthole, hinting, perhaps, at an extension of the superstructure's eaves well beyond the summit. Minimally, Str. 487-1-3rd measures 15.5m northeast-southwest (between the outermost revealed portions of U.12 and 21), though it likely extends further in both directions. The platform's orientation is difficult to reconstruct, given the poorly preserved state of measureable construction lines. It seems clear, however, that Str. 487-1-3rd was not cardinally aligned and may have been oriented between 291-305 degrees. Stone seems to have been used sparingly in raising this platform; not only are rocks limited to a single summit construction (U.13) but excavations uncovered few stones that might have tumbled from deteriorating architecture.

Time Span 8

No clear living surfaces are attributable to this interval, making it difficult to say how high Str. 487-1-2nd rose and what the limits of its summit might have been. Very likely, this phase witnessed the raising of Str. 487-1 to very near its full height seen today, any architecture and living surfaces that originally graced its summit having eroded away centuries earlier. Unable to make finer distinctions, therefore, we presume that Str. 487-1-2nd assumed its final form through the addition of roughly 1.1m of earth fill, as measured above the summit's approximate center (U.22-25). Unit 22 is the thickest surviving fill element (0.78m deep near the center of the edifice's summit), composed of a dark grayish brown to brown (10YR-4/2 to 5/3) sandy clay loam containing numerous calcium carbonate and bajareque fragments along with pebbles. Portions of this layer closely resemble the upper segment of U.10, the earthen fill underlying Str. 487-1-3rd's summit floor (U.11). Presumably, similar materials, incorporating some cultural debris, were mined for both fills. Units 23-25 essentially represent gradations of the same basic material, a very dark brown to dark brown (10YR-2/2 and 7.5YR/4/2) silty loam containing substantial quantities of cultural material. Most of the latter items were found off all four structure flanks, probably the result of final-phase occupation debris intermingling, over the centuries, with objects originally deposited as fill.

Unit 21, a posthole with diameter of 0.28m, is located 0.1m below current ground surface (in U.23) near what was probably Str. 487-1-2nd's southwestern summit margin. This entity is 0.64m deep and has fairly vertical sides for the first 0.48m, tapering to a rounded point thereafter. The base of U.21 is 0.11m above Str. 487-1-3rd's summit floor, U.11. Unit 21's preserved top may be close to at least one version of Str. 487-1-2nd's summit.

Stratum 2, on the platform's northeast side, poses certain interpretive challenges. That level, a light brownish-gray (2.5Y-6/2) silty sandy loam stained dark brown with organic material, slopes down over what would have likely been Str. 487-1-2nd's northeast flank. The level pinches out at current ground surface and slopes down 1.07m over 4.4m from southwest to northeast (its northeastern terminus lies beyond the 1996 excavation limits). Stratum 2's base rides over the northeast edges of U.11, 22, and 23, resting on U.12. The large quantities of cultural material recovered from S.2, coupled with its apparent high organic content, suggests

that it is a midden dumped unceremoniously over the edge of Str. 487-1-2nd near the end of that building's use-life. Its thickness, 0.7m at the deepest point, implies a prolonged period for this deposition. No comparable debris levels are associated with earlier versions of Str. 487-1 and it is hard to imagine why so much detritus would have been left to mar the appearance, not to mention the olfactory impact, of so impressive a building. It may be, therefore, that S.2 accumulated over a long span during which Str. 487-1-2nd was still occupied but was no longer being kept clean and otherwise maintained. *If* this is the case, then we can surmise that: Str. 487-1-2nd's summit rested very near current ground surface (supported by the proximity of U.21 to that level); said summit's northeast edge was coterminous with that of its immediate predecessor (U.11, U.22, and U.23 all terminate at about the same point where they are buried by S.2); and U.12, Str. 487-1-3rd's northeastern terrace, remained exposed and in use during TS.8.

Found scattered within U.22 at about 0.16m above U.11 are what seem to be fragments of a fired earthen floor. These possible floor remnants are concentrated immediately southwest of U.19 above Str. 487-1-3rd's summit and may be all that is left of either a version of Str. 487-1-3rd or an earlier manifestation of Str. 487-1-2nd. Too little of this putative surface survived to determine its reality and, if accepted, how it fit within the construction sequence. What data is available, however, gives us pause in attributing the raising of Str. 487-1-2nd to one relatively short building effort.

Burial 1 is a dispersed concentration of small, largely unidentifiable, human bone fragments located within U.24 at a point 0.2-0.28m below current ground surface. This interment lies 0.32m northeast of a 0.4m-long arc of small stones that is open towards Bu.1 and situated at the same depth as the remains. The only artifact clearly associated with the bones is a green stone hacha (adze) placed in the approximate center of the concentration. Burial 1's relation to the construction sequence is unclear; it is located in what would have been the east quadrant of Str. 487-1-2nd's summit but, in the absence of clear pit lines and more temporally diagnostic artifacts clearly associated with the interment, it is impossible to decide whether the introduction of Bu.1 occurred in TS.8 or a later interval.

Structure 487-1-2nd, therefore, is inferred to have been a 3.3m-high (measured above U.1) earthen platform that and supported a perishable superstructure the walls of which incorporated sizable wooden posts. Stone was used sparingly in this construction and it is very likely that the substructure was topped with an earthen floor. Achievement of Str. 487-1-2nd's full height probably took place in stages, the earliest versions of which barely survive in the form of scattered floor remnants. Structure 487-1-2nd's use-life was apparently long and varied. The building's considerable size implies that it was, for a while at least, a physically salient feature of the landscape associated with high prestige activities and/or people. Near the end, however, it apparently fell into disrepair, trash collecting against its upper northeast facade. There is no evidence that any subsequent architecture encapsulated Str. 487-1-2nd and elevated the building. Time Span 8 marks the last period of substantial construction at Site 487.

Time Span 9

This interval is, based on temporally diagnostic artifacts found in deposits attributable to the span, a prolonged period of sporadic use of and construction on the eroded remnants of Str. 487-1-2nd. The only architecture assignable to this period is found on the platform's southwest flank (U.26, F.2). Unit 26 is a 3.5m-long by 0.2m-wide cobble wall, located just southwest of Str. 487-1-2nd's summit, and oriented 307 degrees. This wall stands approximately 0.3m high

and extends no more than 0.15m into the underlying fill (U.23). Feature 2 is a concentration of relatively small cobbles and angular stones found just beneath, as deep as 0.36m below, current ground surface 4.8-5.7m southwest and downslope from U.26 (most of the rocks are embedded within the upper 0.3m of U.23). Feature 2 has no clear northeastern limit (the only side exposed) but terminates in an irregular, ill-defined line ca. 5.2m southwest of U.11's southwest margin. The behavioral significance of this stone scatter is equivocal; quite possibly it represents the disturbed remnants of a floor laid directly on, and pressed down through use into, the platform's surface. Feature 2 occupies the upper slopes of the aforementioned southern projection. This extension might have been added onto the platform during TS.9 or, perhaps more likely, later occupants chose this area of relatively shallow inclines to raise their own constructions. Most of the later material, and all of the known architecture, associated with TS.9 is, in fact, concentrated on the Str. 487-1's southwest side. Though not located in the southwest, the person found in Bu.1 (described under TS.8) may also have been interred in TS.9. As noted earlier, it is not possible to definitively place this event in either TS.8 or 9.

Structure 487-1-1st is, therefore, a gloss covering an array of disparate constructions that are in close proximity to each other on Str. 487-1's southwest flank and which are characterized by the casualness of their architecture. Both F.2 and U.26 seem to have been parts of two distinct buildings raised directly on the platform's surface. Their addition to the sequence did not elevate the platform's summit. Debris associated with these constructions, and other post-TS.8 settlement at Site 487, was found mixed in with the uppermost Str. 487-1-2nd fill levels (U.23 and 25). This combination, probably the result of a deflating upper platform surface combined with the downward progression of materials across permeable boundaries, produced temporally mixed collection lots in the uppermost 0.3m of most excavations.

Time Span 10

Feature 3 is a very dispersed collection of variably sized cobbles found scattered over Str. 487-1's summit and across all flanks within 0.3m of current ground surface. These few cobbles are likely tumbled remnants of relatively insubstantial, now completely deteriorated, architecture. Said constructions probably pertain to TS.9, during which time stone was extensively used in small-scale constructions erected on Str. 487-1. Stratum 3 is a very dark brown soil that covers S.2 on the platform's northeast side by up to 0.46m. Cobbles, part of F.3, rest on the S.2/3 boundary, tentatively suggesting that S.3 was laid down over a long period following the abandonment and deterioration of Str. 487-1-1st stone architecture. The source for S.3 is, most likely, the hills lying immediately northeast of the settlement. Stratum 3 does not continue up on to the platform's summit.

Chronological Summary

Structures 487-1-8th through 487-1-2nd were all erected during the Middle Preclassic, based on temporally diagnostic artifacts and a single organic sample, submitted to C-14 analysis, recovered from the excavation of these sequential buildings. Following Str. 487-1-2nd's abandonment, small-scale use of the platform continued through the Late Preclassic and Late Classic I, though no architecture can be linked to these intervals. The diminutive stone constructions grouped under Str. 487-1-1st are dated to the Late Classic II and III based on the recovery of artifacts, primarily ceramics, diagnostic of these periods associated with U.26 and

F.2. There is no sign of occupation postdating Late Classic III at Site 487.