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1988

PVN OP 261 Excavation Report

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Site 261

Site 261 covers 21,131m² and consists of 18 structures that define two plazas set in a north-south line. The 10 monumental platforms at the settlement delimit a large patio measuring 150m north-south by 20m east-west. The remaining 8 buildings are relatively modest in size and are either grouped around a much smaller plaza (19x30m) immediately north of the monumental example (Strs. 261-12, 15/18) or are scattered to the north and west of these patios (Strs. 261-8, 13, and 14). The settlement is located ca. 2km southwest of Site 168 and 850m southeast of Site 169. Site 261 occupies the relatively flat surface of a river terrace situated 1.8km south of the Rio Chamelecon and 150m east/northeast of the Quebrada Las Tintas. Digging here from May 10-18, 1988 uncovered ca. 54m² under the direction of T. Neff and L. True. In all, six structures were tested in the course of this work; Strs. 261-2, 3, 7, 9, 14, and 17. All but Str. 261-3 were investigated *via* 1m-wide trenches set against one of the building's flanks. Structure 261-3 was more thoroughly studied, a trench located near the building's center being dug up to its summit while three of its corners were revealed to permit reconstruction of the edifice's basal dimensions.

Structure 261-2

Structure 261-2 is located on the south edge of the monumental plaza, ca. 4.5m south/southwest of Str. 261-3 and 9.5m east of Str. 261-1. Excavations here within Subop. 261G cleared 3.4m² on the edifice's south flank. Digging was limited to exposing Str. 261-2-1st's southern basal wall and was pursued to a maximum depth of 0.97m below modern ground surface outside construction. The investigations were directed by T. Neff and L. True.

Time Spans

<u>Time Span</u>	<u>Construction Phase</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Strata</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Date*</u>
1	-	-	S.2	-	LCLII?
2	Str. 261-2-1st	U.1, 2	-	-	LCLIII/II?
3	Str. 261-2-1st	-	-	F.2	LCLIII?
4	-	-	S.1	F.1	

* No temporally distinctive artifacts associated with Str. 261-2 were analyzed. The dates assigned here are estimates based on general chronological patterns recognized for Site 261 as a whole.

Time Span 1

Stratum 1, a moderately fine-textured, hard-compacted, light brown soil, accumulated in the environs of Str.261-2-1st before the erection of any revealed architecture. At least 0.57m of

this soil was deposited during TS.1 (its base lies beyond our excavation limits). Stratum 1 rises gradually and unevenly for 0.22m over the 2.57m it was exposed from south to north. The recovery of considerable quantities of artifacts from S.2 points to a significant human presence in the immediate area during this soil's deposition.

Time Span 2

The only portion of Str. 261-2-1st revealed in Subop. 261G is a segment of its back (south) basal wall (U.1). Unit 1 stands a preserved 0.53m high (above S.2), is sunk 0.17m into that layer, and is at least 0.8m wide (its northern end was not revealed). Built using a combination of unmodified river cobbles and what appear to be roughly shaped cut blocks set in a mud mortar, U.1 is aligned roughly 54 degrees. A fill composed of dark brown soil and cobbles (U.2) backs U.1 on the north.

Time Span 3

During this interval a 0.2m-high, stone-faced construction was appended to U.1 (F.2). Feature 2 projects 1.42m south of U.1, rests on S.2, and was casually fashioned of unmodified stones set in a mud mortar. The fill of this addition consists of small to medium-size cobbles set in a dark brown soil (included with F.2). Feature 2 was so poorly preserved that it was not discerned during excavation; its former existence is suggested by patterned relations among flat-lying rocks found resting on S.2 and against U.1.

Time Span 4

Following Str. 261-2-1st's abandonment the platform's south flank was largely covered by the natural deposition of a moderately fine-textured, moderately soft-compacted, root-rich, dark brown soil (S.1). Stratum 1 collected to a maximum thickness of 0.38m and contained a light scattering of stones tumbled from final-phase architecture (F.1). Feature 1 was traced for 1m south of Str. 261-2-1st.

Structure 261-3

Structure 261-3 bounds the monumental plaza's southeast corner, lying 4.5m north/northeast of Str. 261-2 and ca. 12m south of Str. 261-4. Digging here within Subop. 261F, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, and O uncovered ca. 34m² in the course of exposing the platform's southwest, southeast, and northeast basal corners and clearing a trench up the approximate center of the edifice's west side (Subop. 261F and N). Excavations were pursued to maximum depths of 0.65m and 1.21m below modern ground surface within and outside construction, respectively. The excavations were directed by T. Neff and L. True.

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.2	-	MPC, LCLI, II
2	Str. 261-3-1st	U.1-12	-	-	LCLIII/II, III
3	-	-	S.1, 2	F.1	

Time Span 1

At least 0.4m of a coarse-textured, light gray, sandy soil containing small white particles (S.2) was laid down prior to the initiation of construction dating to TS.2. The base of S.2 was not encountered and there is no clear indication of its upper limit in TS.1. We surmise that this soil came up to and covered the basal 0.06m of Str. 261-3-1st's western facing (U.1) based on the outward (eastward) tilt of that construction. The few artifacts associated with the lower portion of S.2 imply a slight human occupation of the area when this soil was accumulating.

Time Span 2

Structure 261-3-1st is ascended by seven terraces (U.1-7) leading to a stone-faced step-up (U.8) on its west side. The basal riser, U.1, stands an estimated 0.58m tall, 0.52m of which probably projected above ancient ground level. The bottom-most 0.34m of U.1 consists of cut blocks set vertically. Though the evidence is far from clear, it appears that U.1 stepped back (east) 0.35m roughly 2m north of where it forms the platform's southeast corner at its juncture with U.11. At Str. 261-3-1st's approximate center U.1 is 0.44m wide and gives way to U.2 on the east. Unit 2 rises 0.62m above U.1's tread and extends an estimated 1.54m back to the east where it is succeeded by U.3. Unit 3 stands 0.34m high, is 0.23m wide and gives way to U.4. The latter ascends 0.31m and is 0.94m across. Unit 5 fronts the widest exposed terrace on Str. 261-3-1st's west side; it is 0.44m high and 2.39m across. This extensive surface was apparently surfaced with a pink plaster, fragments of which were recorded on and within the earth fill (U.9) backing the U.5 riser (said plaster is included in U.5). Unit 6 ascends 0.4m above U.5's tread and extends 0.57m back (east) to where it gives way to U.7. Unit 7 is 0.14m high by 0.75m wide and is succeeded on the east by U.8, a 0.28m-high step-up to the summit. Excavations on other portions of the platform revealed only segments of the basal wall (U.10, 11, and 12 on the north, south, and east, respectively). The fill comprising Str. 261-3-1st's core is made up of small to medium-size stones set in a gray soil (U.9).

By the conclusion of TS. 2 Str. 261-3-1st was a stone-faced, earth-and-stone-filled structure standing 3.05m high (on the west), measured 19.1x19.3m (not including the western basal outset), and was aligned approximately due north-south. The western, plaza-facing side was ascended by seven stone-faced terraces that lead to a stone-faced step-up to the summit. These risers ascend between 0.14-0.62m and are 0.23-2.39m across. The broadest terrace treads (U.2 and 5, 1.54m and 2.39m across, respectively) break up the pattern of relatively narrow terraces (0.23-0.94m wide), possibly providing ample spaces for public displays and other activities. At least one of these treads (U.5) looks to have been surfaced with a pink plaster. Fragments of plaster painted pink and purple were recovered from architectural fall (F.1), implying that at least some of the other terrace walls and treads were decorated in this manner as well. The summit step-up is 0.28m high; time did not permit further investigation of the superstructure. Most of the terrace step-up facings were made using unmodified stones though

those pertaining to U.1, 3, and 4 consisted of cut blocks. In the last two cases the stones are set horizontally while in the first they project vertically above ancient ground level. All of the rocks used in construction are set in a mud mortar.

Time Span 3

After Str. 261-3-1st ceased to be used, S.2 continued to accumulate eventually burying all but the upper-most 0.2m of U.1. Capping S.2 is a coarse-textured, loosely compacted, root-rich dark gray sandy soil (S.1). Stratum 1 is as much as 0.53m thick and incorporates a moderately dense concentration of stones and some pink- and purple-painted plaster fragments that derived from TS.2 architecture (F.1). Feature 1 was traced for 2.24m west of construction.

Structure 261-7

Structure 261-7 is located on the west side of the monumental plaza, ca. 30m south of Str. 261-10, 22m north of Str. 261-5, and 19m west and across the plaza from Str. 261-9. Excavations here in Subop. 261D exposed a 1m-wide swath of the platform's south flank. A total of 5m² was exposed in the course of this work, digging being carried down to 0.71m and 1.01m below modern ground surface within and outside architecture, respectively. Probes into construction fill were limited, most of the effort supervised by T. Neff and L. True being devoted to exposing final-phase construction.

Time Spans

<u>Time Span</u>	<u>Construction Phase</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Strata</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Date</u>
1	-	-	S.3	-	?
2	Str. 261-Sub1?	-	-	F.2	LCLII?
3	-	-	S.3, 4	-	LCLII?
4	Str. 261-7-1st	U.1-5	-	-	LCLIII/II, III
5	-	-	S.1, 2	F.1	

Time Span 1

The lowest exposed 0.19m of S.3, a fine-textured, hard-compacted, tan soil, was deposited during this interval; S.3's base lies beyond our excavations. The recovery of artifacts from this portion of S.3 points to a human presence in the vicinity while the soil was being laid down.

Time Span 2

An enigmatic construction (F.2) was raised at this time. Feature 2's uncovered segment is a floor composed of unmodified river cobbles 0.08-0.14m thick and running 0.87m north from Subop. 261D's southern margin. The full extent of this putative floor was not determined; its northern end was unearthed but F.2's remaining sides escaped detection. The architectural and behavioral significance of F.2 is uncertain; it may be the floor of a surface-level building (Str. 261-Sub1).

Time Span 3

Feature 2 is blanketed by 0.12-0.2m of S.3 which continued to accumulate after those activities associated with the stone floor ceased. A lens of sand (S.4), 0.08-0.1m thick, was noted extending 0.38m south across the top of S.3 from an unexcavated segment of the trench. Stratum 4's full extent is unknown.

Time Span 4

Four stone-faced terraces (U.1-4) were uncovered on Str. 261-7-1st's south side. Unit 1, the basal riser, is an estimated 0.58m high by 0.46m wide and is succeeded on the north by U.2. The latter is 0.18m high by 1.2m across. Unit 3 rises 0.19m above U.2's tread and runs back (north) 1.08m to where U.4 ascends an additional 0.4m towards the summit. Terrace treads generally consist of a mix of stones and earth save for that pertaining to U.3 which is paved with rocks. The fill backing U.2 is made up of small to medium-size river cobbles set in a brown soil (U.5).

By the conclusion of TS. 4, Str. 261-7-1st's south flank was faced by at least four stone-faced terraces that rose 1.35m over the course of 2.74m and was aligned ca. 357 degrees. The terrace risers are 0.18-0.58m high whereas the treads are 0.46-1.2m wide. All walls are made of unmodified river cobbles set in a mud mortar. The same material was used to make the U.3 terrace tread; the other terrace surfaces were fashioned from a mixture of stones and earth. The platform's fill, in the one area where it was exposed, consists of river cobbles set in an earth matrix.

Time Span 5

Following Str. 261-7-1st's abandonment S.3 and 4 were capped by 0.2-0.4m of a moderately fine-textured, moderately hard-compacted, brown soil containing many small pebbles (S.2). Stratum 2 slopes up towards U.1, leaving only the upper-most 0.18m of that basal facing still exposed. Stratum 1, a moderately fine-textured, moderately loosely compacted, root-rich dark brown soil, covers S.2 by 0.27-0.33m. Included in S.1 and, especially, S.2 is a moderately dense concentration of rocks derived from final-phase architecture (F.1). Feature 1 was recorded for 1.9m south of construction.

Structure 261-9

Structure 261-9 is on the east side of the monumental plaza, 5.5m north of Str. 261-6, 21m south of Str. 261-11, and 19m east and across the patio from Str. 261-7. Excavations here within Subop. 261E uncovered 4m² of the edifice's south side. Digging was pursued to

maximum depths of 0.56m and 0.92m below modern ground surface within and outside architecture, respectively. Primary attention was focused on uncovering final-phase architecture. The research was directed by T. Neff and L. True.

Time Spans

<u>Time Span</u>	<u>Construction Phase</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Strata</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Date</u>
1	-	-	S.2	-	LCLI, II
2	Str. 261-9-1st	U.1-3	-	-	LCLIII/II, III
3	-	-	S.1, 2	F.1	

Time Span 1

A moderately fine-textured, moderately hard-compacted, light brown soil (S.2) accumulated to a thickness of at least 0.34m during this span. The base of S.2 was not encountered nor was its upper-most limit during this interval clearly defined. The estimate of S.2's thickness at this juncture, therefore, is based on the distribution of architectural debris fallen from TS.2 architecture and the location of the bottom of Str. 261-9-1st's basal southern facing (U.1). Artifacts recovered from lower S.2 point to a human presence in the area while this soil was accumulating.

Time Span 2

The two southern terraces of Str. 261-9-1st (U.1, 2) are 0.42m and 0.23m high (going from the base towards the summit) while U.1, the basal riser, is 0.57m wide. The fill retained by U.1 is a brown soil containing some small cobbles (U.3). The walls are made of unmodified river cobbles set in a mud mortar and U.1's tread is a mix of cobbles and earth. The structure was oriented roughly 270 degrees.

Time Span 3

Approximately 0.26m of S.2 was laid down now, covering all but the upper-most 0.1m of U.1. Capping S.2 by 0.39-0.44m is a moderately fine-textured, loosely compacted, root-rich, dark brown soil S.1. Embedded in S.1 and the upper 0.26m of S.2 is a moderately dense concentration of rocks fallen from TS.2 architecture (F.1). Feature 1 was recorded as far as 1.87m south of Str. 261-9-1st.

Structure 261-14

Structure 261-14-1st is the northern-most recorded building at the settlement. It lies 14m north of Str. 261-17 and 4m west of Str. 261-13. Unlike the other investigated buildings, Str. 261-14 is not part of a plaza but is one of the three edifices noted as scattered around the two

patios. Excavations conducted within Subop. 261B exposed a 1m-wide portion of the platform's western flank. Fully 3m² were cleared in this trench, digging being pursued to a maximum depth of 0.85m below modern ground surface outside construction; no architectural fill was investigated. The Subop. 261B research was directed by T. Neff and L. True.

Time Spans

<u>Time Span</u>	<u>Construction Phase</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Strata</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Date</u>
1	-	-	S.2	-	LCLI, II
2	Str. 261-14-1st	U.1, 2	-	-	LCL II/III, III?
3	-	-	S.1	F.1	

Time Span 1

The earliest recorded activity in Str. 261-14's environs was the seemingly natural deposition of S.2, a moderately fine-textured, moderately hard-compacted, brown soil. Stratum 2 accumulated to as much as 0.48m thick, though its base lies beyond our excavations. The relatively few artifacts retrieved from S.2 implies a human presence in the area when this soil was being laid down.

Time Span 2

Two of Str. 261-14-1st's lowest western terraces (U.1, 2) were uncovered within Subop. 261B. The basal facing, U.1, projects 0.13m above S.2, 0.07m of that riser extending down into that soil level. Unit 1 runs 0.28m back (east) to U.2 which ascends an estimated 0.16m above U.1's tread. There are signs of additional terraces leading up to the summit that were not revealed in our excavations. Units 1 and 2 are made of unmodified river cobbles set in a mud mortar and are oriented ca. 348 degrees. Unit 1's tread was fashioned using a mix of stones and earth.

Time Span 3

Stratum 1, a moderately fine-textured, loosely compacted, root-rich, dark brown soil, blankets S.2 by 0.38-0.4m and completely covers U.1 and 2. Embedded in S.1 is a dense concentration of rocks that seem to have tumbled from final-phase architecture (F.1). Feature 1 is especially concentrated within 1.1m west of U.1. While some of these rocks, especially those on top of the feature, are tilting down and away (west) from Str. 261-14-1st the remainder look flat-laid. It may be that the portion of F.1 stretching for 1.1m away (west) from U.1 is part of a late, very casually built addition that lacked any clearly defined limits when excavated. A much lighter concentration of displaced stones was traced for 2.2m west of U.1 (1.1m outside the aforementioned concentration) and may have continued beyond excavation limits in this

direction.

Structure 261-17

Structure 261-17 is the western building in a triad of constructions (Strs. 261-15/17) that define the northern flank of the northern, non-monumental plaza. Structure 261-16 is 2m to the east, connected to Str. 261-17 by a low saddle, whereas Strs. 261-18 and 10 are 10m and 24m to the south/southwest and south across the plaza, respectively. A 1m-wide portion of the building's north side was revealed within Subop. 261C. Fully 4.2m² were cleared in the course of this work during which digging was pursued to a maximum depth of 0.75m below modern ground surface outside architecture; no construction fill was probed. T. Neff and L. True oversaw these investigations.

Time Spans

<u>Time Span</u>	<u>Construction Phase</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Strata</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Date</u>
1	-	-	S.2	F.2	LCLII/I
2	Str. 261-17-1st	U.1	-	-	LCLIII/II, III
3	-	-	S.1	F.1	

Time Span 1

Stratum 2, a moderately fine-textured, moderately hard-compacted, brown soil, was laid down during TS. 1. This soil accumulated to a thickness of at least 0.47m; its base lies beyond our excavation limits. Included within S.2 is a moderately dense concentration of medium to small cobbles (F.2) that do not seem to have derived from Str. 261-17-1st. These rocks do not form recognizable architecture but were found lying more-or-less horizontally. Most likely they relate to undetected architecture somewhere in the vicinity. The recovery of artifacts from S.2 supports this contention.

Time Span 2

The poorly reserved segment of Str. 261-17-1st's basal northern wall (U.1) stands an estimated 0.6m above S.2, having been sunk 0.18m into that layer. Unit 1 is made of unmodified river cobbles set in a mud mortar and is aligned very approximately 99 degrees.

Time Span 3

Following abandonment Str. 261-17-1st was at least partially covered by S.1, a moderately fine-textured, loosely compacted, root-rich, dark brown soil. S.1 is 0.22-0.35m thick and includes a light to moderately dense concentration of stones fallen from final-phase architecture (F.1). Feature 1 is recorded up to 1.87m north of Str. 261-17-1st.

Chronological Summary

The earliest period of occupation recognized at Site 261 dates to the Middle Preclassic. Several sherds diagnostic of this span were recovered mixed with later material from the vicinity of Str. 261-3. The paucity of Middle Preclassic remains points to a relatively slight occupation of the center during this period. Late Classic I materials were unearthed in the vicinity of Str. 261-3, 261-9, 261-14, and 261-17. Though markers of this span are relatively few, they are widespread, implying a more substantial settlement than had been the case during the Middle Preclassic. No architecture is datable to this chronological period. Late Classic II diagnostics are found in the environs of all investigated structures. At least two modest constructions that might pertain to this span were identified near and underlying Str. 261-7-1st and 261-17-1st. In general, it seems likely that use of the site intensified during Late Classic II, the distribution and nature of materials associated with this time period hinting at an increased population or more prolonged occupation of Site 261. The investigated platforms were all apparently raised during the Late Classic II/III transition and likely continued in use into Late Classic III. The very end of Late Classic II through the beginning of Late Classic III, therefore, apparently marked a peak in both population numbers and construction activity at the center. No material dating to the Postclassic was identified at Site 261.