

2002

PVC-El Coyote-Op 23-Excavation Report

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Operation 23

Operation 23 encompasses the structures found along the west side of El Coyote's northern monumental plaza. This architectural core was intensively investigated by Christian Wells as part of his dissertation research during the 2000 and 2001 field seasons (Wells 2003). As part of these investigations in 2001, Wells directed the excavation of a 1m-wide by 22m-long trench (Subop 23G) that cut across Str. 128 from northeast to southwest near the center of that edifice. The results of that work are described in Wells' dissertation (2003). The research reported here, direct by L Schwartz in 2002, built on Wells' study, clearing a larger portion of Str. 128 than he had time to do. What led to renewed efforts at Str. 128 was the evidence Wells recovered of the significant damage this building had suffered in antiquity. We had rarely seen an edifice that had been so heavily disturbed prehistorically and wanted to get a better sense of the extent of the vandalism and the original form of Str. 128 as well as its construction history. The system of construction units, strata, features, and time spans used here is specific to the 2002 research. The reader is directed to Wells' dissertation for the particular findings of his investigations. It should be noted that the results from the 2001 and 2002 excavations vary somewhat. This is due, in part, to the different parts of the structure they uncovered. The greater part of the divergence, however, has to do with the challenges of interpreting the disturbed remains of architecture in the area of most intense study, i.e., the center of the building's northeast face. Being able to clear more of this portion of the edifice in 2002 helped us to expand and contextualize Wells' original investigations so that, hopefully, the picture presented here is clearer for the contributions made to it by all parties.

Structure 128

Structure 128 is part of a line of sizable, stone-faced platforms that together delimit the west side of the northern monumental plaza. Structure 123, which closes off the plaza's southwest corner, lies immediately southeast of, and is connected by construction to, Str. 128. Structure 129, in turn, is immediately northwest, and linked by construction to, the latter building. What appears on the surface to have been an artificially faced contour rising from east-to-west extends 20m north from Str. 128's northeast corner to join the southeast corner of Str. 130. The latter edifice is the northernmost building in the western line of monumental platforms. Structure 127 is 60m northeast and across the plaza from Str. 128. The ground over which Str. 128 was built rises markedly from east-to-west, ascending about 3m over 13.5m in that direction. Digging here in 2002 within Subop. 23AA-AF uncovered ca. 115m², excavations being pursued to maximum depths of 1.28m and 0.9m below modern ground surface outside and within architecture, respectively. One major construction episode comprised of at least two principal building phases was identified in the course of this work that was overseen by L. Schwartz from February 18-May 14, 2004.

Time Spans

| Time Span | Construction Phase | Units | Strata | Features | Dates |
|-----------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------|----------|-------|
| 1* | - | - | S.3 | - | |
| 2 | Str. 128-1 st | U.3-16, 18, 34-35, 38 | - | - | |

| | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------|-------|
| 3 | Str. 128-1 st | U.1-2, 17, 19-33, 36-37, 39 | - | F.2 |
| 4 | Str. 128-1 st | - | - | F.3-4 |
| 5 | - | - | S.1-2 | F.1 |

* Note that Wells identified a sizable concentration of burnt earth and carbon at 0.25m below the base of Str. 128-1st's southwest basal wall (U.12). These remains were sealed by a thin layer of loosely compacted, sandy silt of likely colluvial origins. This material, as he suggests, points to a significant human occupation in the environs of Str. 128-1st prior to the constructions chronicled here.

Time Span 1

The earliest activity attested to in the environs of Str. 128 during the 2002 studies is the deposition of at least 0.35m of a moderately soft-compacted, fine-textured, tan soil (S.3) that contains numerous small and a few medium-sized rocks (the base of this layer was not uncovered). Stratum 3 was revealed in a deep probe dug off Str. 128-1st's southwest flank. The recovery of artifacts from S.3 points to a human occupation in the area while this soil was being laid down.

Time Span 2

Structure 128-1st's core platform was, during this interval, defined by vertical stone facings on the northwest (U.14), southwest (U.12), southeast (U.13), and northeast (U.11). These walls are 1.35-2.6m wide; we exposed only 0.3m of U.13's southeast, exterior flank so its 2.6m girth is an estimate. Unit 12 was revealed to its full height of 1.32m on the building's southwest, uphill flank. Though not completely exposed, we surmise that U.11 on the northeast originally stood 3.6m tall. The differences in the heights of U.11 and 12 owe a great deal to the upward slope of the terrain from east-to-west over which Str. 128-1st was raised. There is insufficient information to infer the heights of the building's northwest and southeast basal walls.

Whereas U.12-14 seem to have risen directly to the summit, U.11 on the northeast was fronted by 10 steps (U.3-10, 22, and 38). Only the top of the basal riser, U.22, was exposed. It measures 0.36m across and terminates on the southwest at U.3. The latter rises 0.27m above U.22's tread and extends 0.35m back to U.4. Unit 4 looms 0.27m above U.3 and is 0.34m wide. Unit 5 succeeds U.4 on the southwest and is 0.32m high by 0.37m wide. Unit 6, in its turn, ascends 0.35m above U.5 and runs 0.38m southwest where it ends at U.7. The latter measures 0.18m high by 0.45m wide. Its successor, U.8, rises 0.38m above U.7 and ends 0.19m to the southwest at U.9. Unit 9, the next ascending riser, stands an estimated 0.37m tall and measures 0.67m across. Unit 10 vaults 0.31m above U.9 and encompasses 0.5m across. Unit 38, the last step in the sequence, is 0.35m tall and fronts the core platform's northeast facing (U.11) by 0.38m. Units 9 and 38 were not well preserved and so their measurements are estimates based on the surviving remnants of these constructions. The full northwest-southeast extent of these steps was not determined as they were exposed over a maximum distance of 2.2m in this direction. We do not know, therefore, if the 10 risers described here once ran the length of Str. 128-1st's northeast side or if they were limited to its central section.

Structure 128-1st's superstructure consists of one large room that is delimited by the tops of U.11-14 and which encompasses 4.45x21.9m. The northeast wall (U.11) is breached by three doors. Door 1, the northwestern-most opening, is 2.9m southeast of the enclosure's north interior corner and measures 2.45m across. Door 2, 3.9m to the southeast, is 3.15m wide and 4.6m northwest of Door 3. The latter encompasses 2m across and is 2.6m northwest of the summit compartment's east interior corner. A stone pavement (U.18) fills the northwestern 1.35m of Door 1, extending 0.25m northwest of that passage within the summit enclosure. Another smaller stone surface (U.16) is 0.55m northwest of U.18, measures 0.55m northeast-southwest by 0.65m northwest-southeast. The architectural significance of this localized prepared floor is unclear. A low stone-faced and –surfaced construction (U.15) is built against the summit room's southwest wall (U.12) at a point 1.9m southeast of the enclosure's west corner. Unit 15 is 2.2m wide northwest-southeast and projects 3.1m (maximally) northeast from U.12. This construction ends in a point on the northeast, a form rarely seen in other architecture at El Coyote. Door 1 is directly opposite U.15. Remnants of a white plaster floor (U.35) were found in various parts of the summit enclosure, especially along its southeastern edge (bordering U.13), next to the northwestern room boundary (U.14), and running next to U.11 northwest of Door 1. While much of the room may have been surfaced in this way fragments of what seems to have been a burnt-earth floor (U.20) were traced along the compartment's southwest margin (defined by U.12). A white plaster floor (U.34) was identified extending 0.6m southwest from U.12 near the center of that southwest basal wall. Remnants of a comparable surface (included in U.34) were recorded 11m to the southeast where it fronted U.12 at the platform's south corner. Unit 34 was not identified fronting U.12 where it joins U.14 to form Str. 128-1st's west corner. Digging was not carried deeply enough on the northeast to ascertain if the edifice was fronted by a plaster surface on this, its patio-facing flank.

By the conclusion of TS.2, Str. 128-1st was a stone-faced platform that stood 1.32m and 3.6m tall on the southwest and northeast, respectively, measured 11.2x25.8m, and was aligned roughly 334 degrees. The height differences noted here are due largely to the edifice having been built over a considerable east-to-west rise in the terrain. The building's core platform encompasses 7.1x25.8m and is bordered by substantial vertical facings that are 1.35-2.6m wide. The northeast side of that core is fronted by 10 steps that are 0.18-0.38m tall and 0.34-0.67m wide. They lead to a summit that supports a superstructure composed of one room that is bounded by the tops of the core platform's facings. The compartment encompasses 97.5m² and could have been entered through three doors in its northeast wall. The central passage directly overlooks the exposed portion of the aforementioned steps; we were not able to establish if these risers fronted the entirety of Str. 128-1st's northeast flank. If this was not the case, then the entryways flanking the central door may have been accessed by traversing the 0.38m-wide summit surface that runs along the room's northeast side. A stone floor partially fills the northwestern door in the triad; no comparable surfacing was clearly identified within its two southeastern counterparts. A low stone-faced and –surfaced, 2.2m-wide construction projects 3.1m northeast from the room's southwest wall. Located 1.9m southeast of the room's west interior corner, this entity is opposite the northwestern door and might have served as a bench or shelf. Remnants of plaster and burnt earth were found within the summit room, suggesting that the compartment was variously surfaced with these materials. The burnt earth was concentrated primarily along the edge of the enclosure's southwest wall whereas the plaster was found mostly on the room's northwest and southeast edges. A plaster floor extended 0.6m southwest from the base of the southwest platform facing, especially in its central and southeastern segments. This surface does not seem to have

extended to Str. 128-1st's west corner. Whether there was a formal floor fronting Str. 128-1st on its northeast, patio-facing side is unknown.

The core platform's facings were largely made of river cobbles set in a mud mortar. The flatter faces of the rocks that formed the exteriors of these walls were generally directed outwards. A few cut white (possibly limestone) blocks were recorded among the more common river cobbles that make up U.12. The northeastern steps were almost invariably made of white (possibly limestone) faced blocks.

Time Span 3

The form, dimensions, and orientation of Str. 128-1st's superstructure and the core platform likely remained unchanged during this interval. The major transformations seen now were visited on the building's northeast side where the U.3-9 and 22 steps were covered by a brown earth fill (U.33). The aforementioned risers were replaced by seven stone-faced terraces (U.1, 2, 21 and 23, 25, 26 and 27, 31, and 39). These constructions are generally not well preserved and are especially disrupted near the center of the building where they overlay the earlier stairs. At least parts of these TS.3 constructions were apparently dismantled in antiquity, ancient digging being carried down to the level of TS.2 architecture. Consequently, it was often difficult to reconstruct the forms and dimensions of the TS.3 terraces from their remnants and what follows is a tentative reconstruction of Str. 128-1st's final form.

The 0.45m-tall basal riser (U.1) was traced for 23.7m at an alignment of, very roughly, 334 degrees. Evidence for a plaster floor (U.29) was found fronting U.1 over its northwestern-most exposed 8.5m. Signs of a comparable surface treatment (U.36) were noted bordering U.1 over its southeastern-most uncovered 3.45m. It may be that Str.128-1st was originally bordered by plaster flooring along its entire plaza-facing side. A 0.2m-tall stone-faced outset (U.19) projects 0.32m northeast of U.1 near the building's center. Unit 19 was followed for 0.6m to the southeast when digging ceased. The relation of U.19 to U.1 is unclear as the former may run out from under the latter. If this is the case, U.19 might be the remains of a construction predating TS.3 and, possibly, TS.2 architecture.

Ascending the northeast face of the platform, U.1 is succeeded 0.32m to the southwest by U.2. The latter is 0.25m tall and was cleared for a distance of 4.05m northwest-southeast near the platform's center. It is not clear if U.2 originally continued beyond these limits. Unit 24, a ca. 0.25m-high riser, is 0.8m back from (southwest of) U.1 northwest of U.2. Unit 24 does not line up with U.2 but sits 0.48m southwest of the latter's northeast, exterior face. Units 2 and 24 might have originally formed one continuous terrace facing that jogged back (southwest) 0.48m at the point where U.2 is now perceived to have stopped. The 0.8m-wide tread separating U.1 and 24 was apparently surfaced with a white plaster (U.30). No such flooring was noted covering the tread between U.1 and 2. Remnants of a third ascending terrace (U.25) were found 0.5m southwest of U.2. Unit 25 was uncovered for a northwest-southeast distance of 0.5m over which it was poorly preserved. The riser's original height is an estimated 0.3m. Unit 25 was apparently succeeded ca. 0.7m on the southwest by Units 21 and 23. These two wall segments, separated by 3.5m, were probably parts of the same continuous terrace line during TS.3, their central section where it overlay U.22, 3, and 4 having been removed during ancient digging. Units 21 and 23, taken together, were followed for 10.4m northwest-southeast, are roughly 0.8m tall, and front a tread that measures 0.71m across. The southeastern-most 4m of this terrace (corresponding to most of U.21) was fronted by a plaster surface (U.37) that filled the 1.5m separating it from U.1 on the northeast (U.2 and 25 were not identified in this area).

The U.21 and 23 terrace is succeeded on the southwest by U.31. This 0.5m-tall riser was uncovered for 2.1m northwest of the disturbed central section of the platform and it is not clear if it continues southeast of this area behind (southwest of) U.21. Excavations in the latter area were not extensive enough to explore this possibility. The next ascending riser, composed of U.39, is 0.7m southwest of U.31 and is ca. 0.4m tall. It was traced for 1.3m running northwest-southeast atop the U.7 step. The tread backing U.39 extends for 0.4m where it ends in the ca. 0.5m-tall terrace facing defined by U.26 and 27. The remnants of the U.26 and 27 riser rest atop the U.8 step, 0.6m separating them. That gap is due, in part, to the poor preservation of these constructions. Taken together, U.26 and 27 were exposed for 9.7m northwest-southeast. It seems that U.10 and 38 remained exposed during this interval, providing the final two ascents to the summit. Remnants of plaster (U.28) were noted filling the space between U.39 on the one hand and U.26 and 27 on the other. Another plaster surface (U.32) backs U.31 and runs up to U.39. Though it is far from clear, it seems that at least the treads of the fifth and sixth ascending terraces were formally surfaced with plaster.

The only other modification made to Str. 128-1st during TS.3 was the addition of a low outset (U.17) to the building's southwest basal facing (U.12). Unit 17 intersects U.12 at a point 0.4m southeast of the platform's west corner, projects 0.3m southwest of the basal facing, and runs for 0.7m northwest-southeast.

As TS.3 drew to a close, Str. 128-1st was a stone-faced platform that stood 1.32 and 3.86m tall (on the southwest and northeast, respectively), measured 12.55x25.8m, and was oriented ca. 334 degrees. The slight increase in the platform's height on the northeast results from the expansion of the platform further into the plaza, and hence downslope, during this building effort. With the exception of a low, stone-faced outset against the building's southwest flank, the core platform and its summit remained largely unchanged. The aforementioned outset is located 0.4m southeast of the edifice's west corner and encompasses 0.3m northeast-southwest by 0.7m northwest-southeast. Most of the changes made to Str. 128-1st occurred on its northeast flank where all but the uppermost two stone steps were covered by an earthen fill. That fill, in turn, supported seven stone-faced terraces that are 0.25-0.8m tall by 0.32-0.8m wide. The top-most steps in the TS.2 staircase (U.10 and 38) seemingly remained visible and in use during this interval, providing access to the summit. Altogether, therefore, there seem to have been nine stone-faced terraces that ascended at least the central, and most intensively investigated, portion of Str. 128-1st. Several of the terrace treads were surfaced with white plaster and it is possible that they were all paved with this material. At least the portion of the plaza bordering Str. 128-1st's northeast flank also seems to have been surfaced with a white plaster. Unit 34, the plaster floor bordering at least the central and southeastern portions of U.12, the platform's southwest basal wall, was likely still exposed during this interval. As excavations concentrated in Str. 128-1st's center, we cannot say for sure how extensive these later terraces were. The disruption visited on these architectural elements during TS.4 also makes reconstructing their dimensions difficult. The description provided here, therefore, is but an approximation of what the edifice's northeast side looked like.

The majority of constructions raised now were fashioned primarily of river cobbles that were set in a mud mortar. The flatter aspects of those rocks fronting these risers and walls were generally directed outwards. The central 4.55m of U.1, the northeast basal riser, was fashioned largely from large pieces of columnar basalt that were purposefully modified to create flat faces. The same was the case with U.2, the next ascending terrace to the southwest. The small preserved segment of the next riser to the southwest, U.25, was made from a combination of faced tuff blocks and shaped columnar basalt.

Parts of U.1 and 21 retained plaster on their exterior faces. It may be that this material was originally applied more widely to terrace facings than the surviving remnants of this treatment would suggest.

Time Span 4

During TS.4, Str. 128-1st was almost certainly abandoned but it still bore signs that it was subject to the attentions of some who continued to reside at El Coyote. One form those attentions took was the deposition of a dense concentration of stones (F.4) against the platform's southwest flank. Feature 4 is maximally 0.78m thick where it borders U.12, the building's southwest basal wall, tailing off to 0.4m thick at a distance of 2.2m southwest of that facing. The rocks comprising this concentration are small to large cobbles that are generally flat-laid and are set in moderately soft-compacted, fine-textured, tan to brown clay. A similar, but more limited, deposit of flat-laid rocks (F.3) buries the northeast face of U.10, the penultimate riser in the system of risers that ascends Str. 128-1st's northeast flank.

As has been noted throughout this report, it appears that the terraces raised in TS.3 were dug through and disrupted during TS.4. This excavation revealed the TS.2 risers in the center of the platform where the damage was localized. It may well have been at around this time that the columnar basalt blocks that grace U.1 and 2 on the edifice's axis were damaged by chipping off parts of their exterior faces. The damage was especially severe on U.2 where the outer facings of the exposed stones looked to have been sheared off and a stone in the center of this line was missing. While the latter rock may have simply fallen from its original position, no sign of such a distinctive block was found nor were any of its compatriots dislodged from their original positions. In sum, the removal of portions of the TS.3 terraces along Str. 128-1st's axis on its plaza-facing side, taken together with the damaging of its prominent and distinctive surviving basal risers, tentatively suggest that those living at El Coyote after Str. 128-1st was abandoned returned to the building to vandalize it and search for something(s) they knew were buried on its axis. It seems reasonable to infer that they were looking to disinter ritually charged objects that were originally deposited as parts of caches. As we found no evidence of such materials it seems likely that their search was successful

Time Span 5

A fine-textured, moderately soft-compacted, gray to dark gray soil (S.2) accumulated over the evidence of Str. 128-1st's interment and vandalism during this interval. Stratum 2 is as much as 0.45m thick. This layer was, in turn, blanketed by 0.2-0.3m of a loosely compacted, gray, silty sand (S.1). Embedded in S.1 and 2 is a moderately dense concentration of rocks (F.1) that fell from final-phase architecture.

Reference

Wells, E. Christian

2003 Artisans, Chiefs, and Feasts: Classic Period Social Dynamics at El Coyote, Honduras. PhD. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Arizona State University, Tempe.