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PVN Op 31 2018 Field Season Excavation Report

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Operation PVN 31, 2018 Field Season

Work at the site of La Sierra during the 2018 field season consisted of digging six test pits that were placed along the lower slopes and base of the high terrace that defines the settlement's north edge (6.25m² excavated in all). As with all of the work pursued during 2018, these investigations were designed to recover samples of pottery vessels, in this case from a known workshop, that were to be subjected to Instrumental Neutron Activation, X-Ray Fluorescence, and petrographic analyses. These studies were ultimately designed to assess whether ceramics pertaining to particular taxa could be assigned to specific production areas and, if so, to explore how this information could be used to describe ancient modes of pottery manufacture and exchange. Investigations conducted atop that terrace in 1990 and 1995 uncovered a sizable stone-lined kiln (Str. 120) that was in use during the Terminal Classic (CE 800-1000) along with fragments of earlier firing facilities dating to the Late Classic (CE 600-800; the results of this work are summarized in: <http://digital.kenyon.edu/honduras/21487/>). Though much of the terrace's northern summit had thus been cleared in previous years, its slopes had not been intensively studied. Digging along these ascents, it was hoped, would produce artifacts derived from ceramic production in the Op. 31 workshop from contexts that had not been disturbed by our earlier work. This slope was also not been significantly disturbed by the large-scale cultivation of sugar cane that has disturbed prehistoric deposits across much of La Sierra.

Test Pits

Suboperation 31CA

Suboperation 31CA is a test pit measuring 1m on a side that was set near the base of the high terrace below Str. 116. The latter was investigated during the 1990 field season. Digging here reached a maximum depth of 1.4m below modern ground surface and retrieved large quantities of ceramics (F.1) that were likely jettisoned from the Op.31 workshop.

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	F.1, 2	LCL/TCL*
2	-	-	1, 2	-	TCL

* Within S.3, the materials associated with F.2 seem to date primarily to the Late Classic, those covering the putative constructions pertaining to the Terminal Classic.

Time Span 1

The earliest activity attested to in Subop. 31CA is the deposition of at least 0.75m of a fine-textured, softly compacted, tan-to-gray ash (S.3; its base was not revealed). Stratum 3's upper surface was relatively flat over the limited area it was exposed. Embedded in S.3 is a dense concentration of pottery fragments, most of which are quite large and have uneroded edges (F.1). Ash was found adhering to most of these sherds. Mixed in with the ceramics are large numbers of small to medium-size cobbles. A construction (F.2) made using these river-rounded rocks was tentatively identified within S.3. Feature 2 consists of what may have been the west

corner of an earthen-floored room that is bounded by 0.1m-tall by 0.1m-wide stone walls on the southwest and northwest. Feature 2's southwest wall is oriented 305 degrees, the area of the exposed earthen-floored interior encompassing 0.5m by 0.7m northwest-southeast; if the compartment had northeast and southeast boundary walls we did not expose them. This potential construction sits 0.14m up from the base of excavation within S.3 and is blanketed by 0.3m of the densest concentration of sherds and stones. As the 'feature' designation implies, the architectural reality of F.2 remains in doubt. Its component rocks may well have been parts of the general debris found concentrated in the upper 0.3-0.5m of S.3.

In general, Stratum 3 likely represents detritus jettisoned from the Op. 31 pottery workshop. The density of the ceramics, their association with ash, and their uneroded breaks together imply that these pottery fragments had not traveled far nor been exposed long to the elements before arriving at the high terrace's base. It seems, therefore, that the vessel pieces included in S.3 came from the nearby production area soon after breaking, probably as the result of several episodes of dumping.

Time Span 2

Fully 0.37-0.52m of a fine-textured, moderately hard-compacted, brown clay (S.2) now accumulated atop S.3. Subsequently, a 0.12-0.17m-thick humus horizon (S.1) formed on top of S.2. Stratum 1 is distinguished from the latter soil by its greater concentration of small roots. Artifacts were found throughout S.1 and 2 though in densities lower than those recorded in S.3.

Suboperation 31CB

Suboperation 31CB is a 1x1m test pit. An additional area covering 0.25m² was cleared southwest of the original excavation's west corner to clarify some of the construction units uncovered in the initial investigation. The excavation is 4.2m northwest of Subop. 31CA, roughly north and below Str. 117, the latter situated atop the high terrace. Digging here was pursued to a maximum depth of 1.2m below modern ground surface. Remnants of four building phases were identified in the course of this work.

Time Spans

<u>Time Span</u>	<u>Construction Phase</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Strata</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Date</u>
1	-	-	S.4, 5	-	LCL?
2	Str. 31CB-Sub1	U.1	-	-	LCL
3	Str. 31CB-Sub2	U.2	-	-	LCL
4	Str. 31CB-Sub3	U.3	-	-	LCL
5	Str. 31CB-Sub4	U.4	-	-	LCL
6	-	-	S.3	-	TCL
7	-	-	S.1, 2	-	TCL

Time Span 1

The earliest event chronicled in Subop. 31CB is the deposition of at least 0.11m of a fine-textured, moderately softly compacted, brown silt that contains numerous carbon flecks (S.5; its base was not found). Stratum 5 is a lens that extends 0.46m north from beneath U.1 before leaving excavation limits. Encompassing S.5 and covering it by 0.11-0.15m is a coarse-textured, soft-compacted, gray-brown sand (S.4). Stratum 4 is at least 0.25m thick, maintains a more-or-less even upper surface in the area it was exposed, and contains some artifacts. As with S.5, S.4's base lies beyond our excavation limits.

Time Span 2

Structure 31CB-Sub1 is represented by a 0.1m-high by 0.25-0.32m-wide cobble footing that was traced for 0.83m over which distance it was oriented ca. 19 degrees. Only two rocks were identified as parts of U.1, 0.13m separating them. The flat-laid disposition of the rocks coupled with their relatively close spacing tentatively suggest that the stones were part of a purposeful construction. What that construction was is uncertain; U.1 may have been a foundation for a perishable upper wall, the latter possibly defining one flank of a surface-level building. The two river-worn stones comprising U.1 were not chosen for their flat faces.

Time Span 3

The portion of Str. 31CB-Sub2 revealed within Subop. 31CB consists of a 0.1m-high by 0.12-0.32m-wide wall that is aligned ca. 261 degrees (U.2). Unit 2 sits on U.1 and may have been the foundation for yet another perishable upper wall associated with a surface-level building that postdates Str. 31CB-Sub1. The stones used in making U.2 are cobbles set in a mud mortar, their flat faces are directed outwards to northwest.

Time Span 4

Unit 3, a 0.1m-high by 0.11-0.18m-wide wall, runs at an angle of approximately 276 degrees in front (north) of U.2 and comprises the only known segment of Str. 31CB-3. Unit 2 is partly covered by a dark gray-brown soil that backs U.3 to the south (included in U.3). Unit 3 seems to have been a footing from a surface-level building the construction of which postdated the use of Str. 31CB-2. The stones used to make U.3 are set in a mud mortar and have their flat aspects directed to the north. Most of these rocks are cobbles though one is a faced block.

Time Span 5

The final construction (Str. 31CB-Sub4) recorded in this sequence, U.4, consists of two faced blocks that are set atop U.2 and preserve the latter's orientation (261 degrees). These rocks are 0.08m thick and appear to be parts of a disturbed late foundation the builders of which took advantage of U.2 and 3, using them as foundations for U.4. The exposed part of U.4 measures 0.08m high, is 0.35m wide, and was uncovered for a distance of 1m.

Time Span 6

Structure 31CB-Sub4 and its predecessors were now covered by 0.32-0.56m of a fine-textured, moderately hard-compacted, dark gray-brown clay that is mottled with white ash inclusions (S.3). Stratum 3's upper surface is fairly flat over its exposed extent. A few rocks are scattered throughout S.3 and this earth does contain artifacts.

Time Span 7

It was during this interval that 0.29-0.51m of a fine-textured, moderately hard-compacted, brown soil (S.2) that contains numerous small (0.02m or less in diameter) pebbles was laid down. Stratum 2 slopes down 0.23m across 1m from south-to-north away from the northern terrace face. This drop-off mirrors the form of the current terrain, a pattern that was not replicated with S.3 and 4. A 0.17-0.23m-thick fine-textured, hard-compacted, dark gray-brown humus horizon subsequently formed on top of S.2. Artifacts are found throughout S.1 and 2.

Suboperation 31CC

Suboperation 31CC is a 1x1m pit that was dug 17m northwest of Subop. 31CB and 12.3m west of Subop. 31CE, below and north of Str. 118. The latter is situated atop the bordering terrace. Digging here reached a maximum depth of 0.84m below modern ground surface; no architecture and relatively few artifacts were recovered in the course of this work.

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, 4	-	LCL
2	-	-	S.1, 2	-	LCL/TCL

Time Span 1

The earliest activity attested to in Subop, 31CC is the laying down of at least 0.15m of a fine-textured, moderately soft-compacted, light brown clay that lacks pebble inclusions (S.4; its base was not encountered). Stratum 4 retains a relatively flat upper surface over its exposed extent. Subsequently, 0.21-0.3m of a coarse-textured, soft-compacted, brown sand (S.3) was deposited atop S.4. Stratum 3 was observed to drop 0.14m across 1m from south-to-north. This descent mirrors the rate at which modern ground surface descends in this direction. As with S.4, S.3 contains no pebbles.

Time Span 2

Fully 0.3-0.34m of a coarse-textured, softly compacted, brown sand (S.2) now blankets S.3, its top falling 0.24m across 1m south-to-north. Stratum 2 contains numerous pebbles that are 0.01m or less in diameter. A 0.12-0.16m-thick, fine-textured, hard-compacted, dark gray-brown humus horizon (S.1) subsequently formed on S.2. Artifacts were recovered from

throughout S.1-2 but were especially prevalent on S.1. The ground surface that S.1's top defines drops 0.2m across 1m from south-to-north.

Suboperation 31 CD

This suboperation was used to designate a general surface collection that was made in the areas covered by the test pits (9m north-south by 30m).

Suboperation 31CE

Suboperation 31CE is 1x1m pit located 12.3m east of Subop. 31CC and 4.5m northwest of Subop. 31CB at the toe of the south-to-north descent from the upper terrace. Digging here reached a maximum depth of 1.17m below modern ground surface. No architecture was recorded in Subop. 31CE though a fair amount of artifacts, mostly pottery sherds, were recovered here.

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	-	TCL
2	-	-	S.1, 2	-	TCL

Time Span 1

The earliest activity identified within Subop. 31CE is the deposition of at least 0.62m of a fine-textured, moderately soft-compacted, dark gray-brown soil that contains numerous pebbles that are 0.01m or less in diameter along with some charcoal flecks (S.3; its base was not identified). Also embedded in S.3 is a moderately dense concentration of small to medium-size cobbles; there is no evidence of any architecture from which these stones might have come. Stratum 3's upper surface is relatively flat over the area it was uncovered. Artifacts, especially pottery sherds, were retrieved from S.3.

Time Span 2

Stratum 3 was now covered by 0.28-0.4m of a fine-textured, hard compacted, brown soil that includes within it a few small (0.01m or less in diameter) pebbles (S.2). Stratum 2 also contains artifacts and was observed to drop 0.17m over 1m from south-to-north. A 0.14-0.17m-thick humus horizon (S.1) subsequently formed atop S.2. Stratum 1 is identical to S.2 save for the greater concentration of small roots and the absence of pebbles in the former. The ground surface formed by the top of S.1 also drops from south-to-north, in this case descending 0.2m across 1m in this direction.

Suboperation 31 CF

Suboperation 31CF is a 1x1m pit that is 3.14m northeast of Subop. 31CA and 4.5m east of Subop. 31CB. This probe was initiated in hopes of determining the north-south extent of the ash-and-sherd deposit (F.1) that was identified in Subop. 31CA. Digging here reached a maximum depth of 1.02m below modern ground surface. No architecture was recorded within this excavation nor was Subop. 31CA's F.1 noted here.

Time Spans

Time Span	Construction Phase	Units	Strata	Features	Date
1	-	-	S.4	-	LCL?
2	-	-	S.3	-	TCL?
3	-	-	S.1, 2	-	TCL?

Time Span 1

The earliest event chronicled within Subop. 31CF is the laying down of at least 0.45m of a fine-textured, moderately hard-compacted, brown clay (S.4; its base was not uncovered). A few artifacts, mostly pottery fragments, were recorded within S.4 along with a small number of small cobbles. Stratum 4's upper surface descends 0.1m over 1m from south-to-north.

Time Span 2

Fully 0.16-0.2m of a coarse-textured, moderately soft-compacted, gray-brown sand (S.3) subsequently accumulated over S.4. Several artifacts were retrieved from this deposit the top of which descends 0.14m across 1m from south-to-north.

Time Span 3

A fine-textured, hard-compacted, brown soil (S.2) now collected to a depth of 0.17-0.26m over S.3. Once again, a few artifacts, primarily ceramic sherds, were recovered from this level which was also characterized by small amount of pebbles that are 0.01m or less in diameter. Unlike its predecessors, S.2's upper surface ran flat within the confines of Subop. 31CF. A 0.1-0.18m-thick humus horizon (S.1) formed atop S.2, the ground surface supported by S.1 descending 0.08m across 1m from south-to-north. Stratum 1 is distinguished from S.2 by its greater density of small roots and lack of pebbles.

Suboperation 31CG

Suboperation 31CG is a 1x1m pit that is 1.9m southeast of Subop. 31CF and 3.3m northeast of Subop. 31CA. Digging here was designed to test for the presence of the ash-and-sherd deposit located in Subop. 31CA (F.1) and to locate more of the clay (S.4) identified in Subop. 31CF. Suboperation 31CA's F.1 was not identified here though Subop. 31CF's S.4 did seem to continue here. A sample of that clay were taken for inclusion in the Instrumental Neutron Activation, X-Ray Fluorescence, and petrographic analyses that were part of the

general ceramics project briefly described at the beginning of this section. Digging reached a maximum depth of 0.86m below modern ground surface. No architecture was uncovered within Subop. 31CG.

Time Spans

<u>Time Span</u>	<u>Construction Phase</u>	<u>Units</u>	<u>Strata</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Date</u>
1	-	-	S.4	-	-
2	-	-	S.3	-	LCL
3	-	-	S.1, 2	-	TCL

Note: Late and Middle Preclasssic sherds (1200-400BCE) comprise a significant minority of the materials collected from the test pit excavations.

Time Span 1

The initial activity identified within Subop. 31CG is the deposition of at least 0.18m of a fine-textured, hard-compacted, light brown clay (S.4; its base was not revealed). Stratum 4's upper surface declined 0.04m over 1m from south-to-north.

Time Span 2

Fully 0.24 to 0.32m of a coarse-textured, moderately soft-compacted, gray-brown sand (S.3) now accumulated atop S.4. Stratum 3 yielded very few artifacts and maintained a level upper surface in the area it was exposed within Subop. 31CG.

Time Span 3

A fine-textured, hard-compacted, dark brown soil (S.2) accumulated to a depth of 0.2-0.27m on top of S.3 during this interval. Stratum 2 was ultimately capped by the 0.14-0.17m-thick humus horizon (S.1) that formed on the former earth level. Stratum 1 is set apart from S.2 solely by the presence of numerous small roots in the former. The ground surface formed by S.1's top descends 0.04m across 1m from south-to-north. A light scattering of artifacts, mostly pottery sherds, was noted in S.1 and 2.

Suboperations 31CF and CG Summary

The brown-to-light-brown clay (designated S.4 in each case) that was identified as the basal layers in these two excavations may have been parts of the extensive clay deposit that extends for over 200m north of the site of La Sierra. Given their proximity to the Op. 31 workshop, this clay might well be representative of the material that was mined for ceramic production at that manufacturing site.

