2018

# PVN Op 27 2018 Field Season Excavation Report

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Operation PVN 27

As with all of the excavations conducted during the 2018 field season, work here was devoted primarily to collecting samples of ceramics and clay for testing by Instrumental Neutron Activation, X-Ray-Fluorescence, and petrographic analyses. The goal in all of these instances was to use the named assessments to reconstruct how members of certain ceramic taxa that were widely distributed across the neighboring Naco, middle Chamelecon, and lower Cacaulapa valleys were made and distributed from known or suspected ceramic workshops dating to the Late and Terminal Classic (CE 600-800 and 800-1000).

Excavations in Operation 27 took the form of three test pits (Suboperations 27AB, AC, and AD) dug within a dense concentration of artifacts located along the east margin of the Central Depression in southern La Sierra. That extensive pit was investigated in 1995 and 1996 as part of an effort to understand its possible relation to pottery production during the Late and Terminal Classic in southern La Sierra. During 1995 a large pottery workshop was unearthed in work that was directed by Dr. Christian Wells. That atelier lies west of the Central Depression within Operation 43 (these investigations are described here: https://digital.kenyon.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=59121&context=honduras). At that time, we wondered if the Central Depression had been dug by artisans from the Op. 43 production area in order to obtain clay for use in pottery making. Excavations conducted within the depression indicated that it had been originally dug during the 7th through 10th centuries and was used then as both a source of clay and a place for dumping trash. Having come to this conclusion, we went on to assume that the large Central and Southern Depressions, which are located within 30m of each other, were both dug by potters operating out of the Operation 43 workshop. Consequently, we were prepared to treat pottery sherds that were recovered from the Southern Depression early in the 2018 field season as part of the debris generated by artisans affiliated with the Operation 43 workshop. The discovery in March, 2018 of another pottery kiln (Str. AH-18) in Operation 21 immediately south of the Southern Depression suggested that our original interpretation was wrong. This work also strongly implied that the ceramics recovered from the Southern Depression in 2018 did not reflect the array of vessels made in the Operation 43 workshop. Instead, they pertained to the newly discovered southern production facility. We, therefore, conducted two different but related programs in Operation 27 during 2018 to obtain ceramics likely produced in the Operation 43 workshop and thrown into and around the Central Depression. This work involved conducting a systematic collection of artifacts found on the surface of the Central Depression's east margin (Subop. 27AA) and the excavation of the aforementioned test pits.

It should be noted that the extent of the Operation 27 debris field only became obvious after the sugar cane which had covered it was cut in late April, 2018. We, therefore, had to compress its study into the limited time we had available at the end of the field season. Work here was concentrated between April 19 through 21, 2018, only one day being devoted to excavating the three test pits (4m2 cleared in all).

Suboperation 27AA, Surface Collections

The area on the east edge of the Central Depression with the highest density of artifacts on the surface covered 48m north-south by 20m east-west. We gridded this zone into 240 blocks each measuring 2x2m and collected all cultural materials found on the surface from each of these units. The goal here was to assess the varying densities and nature of the cultural materials scattered across this area as a guide for future work. Especially intriguing was the recovery of slag, apparently resulting from copper working, in the northern part of the debris

field. Slight evidence of copper processing had been recorded at La Sierra during previous field seasons. There had never been enough, however, to be sure that this activity was practiced here in antiquity. The large fragments of slag seen on the surface of northwestern Operation 27 were the first clear signs of this industrial practice at La Sierra. Hopefully, we or other investigators will follow up on this evidence in the future. The surface collections were designed to help guide that future work. In general, by far the vast majority of the material retrieved as part of Subop. 27AA consisted of large ceramic fragments. Almost all of the 7,420 sherds analyzed from these collections date to the Late (CE600-800) and Terminal Classic (CE800-1000).

Test Pits

The three test pits were dug in the northern part of the gridded area. They are located 6m from each other and reached a maximum depth of 1m below modern ground surface. Though artifact densities declined with depth to some extent, large quantities of cultural material were still being found at 1m below modern ground surface when excavations ceased. The investigations were primarily intended to obtain samples of ceramics that were likely associated with the Central Depression and, hence, the Operation 43 pottery workshop. Very high densities of artifacts were recovered from all three test pits, strongly suggesting that the east edge of the Central Depression was largely built up through the deposition of cultural debris, mostly pottery sherds.

Suboperation 27AB

Suboperation 27AB is a 1x1m test pit located 3.5m northwest of Subop. 27AC and 5.9m northwest of Subop. 27AD. Digging here reached a maximum depth of 1m below modern ground surface; no architecture was identified in the course of this work.

Time Spans

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

Note: A few sherds diagnostic of the Middle Preclassic were identified among the ceramics analyzed from Subop. 27AB. In general, however, pottery dating to this early interval was not recorded in the other two excavations or the surface collection.

Time Span 1

The earliest activity for which evidence was uncovered in Subop. 27AB was the laying down of at least 0.2m of a fine-textured, softly compacted, red-brown soil that contains a few small to medium-size cobbles (S.4; its base was not encountered). Stratum 4's upper surface runs flat within the portion of it that was revealed within Subop. 27AB.

Time Span 2

Stratum 4 was now covered by 0.4m of a fine-textured, softly -compacted, brown soil that is mottled with many orange flecks and contains numerous pottery sherds (S.3). Stratum 3's upper surface runs float over its exposed segment.

Time Span 3

Fully 0.21-0.3m of a fine-textured, moderately hard-compacted, brown soil (S.2) was now laid down over S.3. Like its antecedent, S.2 contains a great many orange flecks along with pottery sherds. Stratum 2's upper surface drops 0.09m over 1m from east-to-west. A 0.12-0.15m-thick humus horizon (S.1) formed atop S.2 at the end of this sequence. What sets S.1 apart from S.2 is the paucity of orange inclusions in the former along with the greater density of small roots embedded in it.

Suboperation 27AC

Suboperation 27AC is a 1x1m pit that was dug 3.5m southeast of Subop. 27AB and 3.2m west of Subop. 27AD. Digging here was greatly slowed by the recovery of so many large pottery sherds within the excavation and the fact that only one person could be allocated to conducting the excavation (his work partner was absent due to illness on the one day allocated to excavations in Op. 27). Consequently, we only reached a depth of 0.4m below modern ground surface within Subop. 27AC.

Time Spans

| Time Span | Construction Phase | Units | Strata | Features | Date |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Str. 27-Sub1 | U.1 | - | - | LCL/TCL |
| 2 | - | - | S.1, 2 | - | TCL? |

Time Span 1

Structure 27-Sub1 is a block of stones (U.1) that measures 0.5m north-south by 0.25m wide, by 0.24m high and was oriented very approximately 347 degrees. Unit 1 was best represented in the east trench wall and did not continue across the entire east-west width of the excavation. As far as we could tell, U.1 was a free-standing construction that was set among, and eventually buried by, a dense deposit of ceramic fragments. Unit 1's behavioral significance is unknown. No signs of burning were noted in U.1's immediate vicinity.

Time Span 2

Following Str. 27-Sub1's abandonment, at least 0.28m of a fine-textured, moderately hard-compacted, brown soil that, in addition to the many pottery sherds it contains, was mottled with orange flecks (S.2; its base was not found). A 0.14m-thick humus (S.1) subsequently formed atop S.2. Stratum 1 is distinguished from S.2 by its relative paucity of orange inclusions and much greater concentration of small roots it contains in comparison with S.2. The soil levels recorded in Subop. 27AB and AC are nearly identical.

Suboperation 27AD

Suboperation 27AD is a trench that measures 1m by 2.1m northwest-southeast, digging here reaching a maximum depth of 0.5m below modern ground surface. This excavation is 3.2m east of Subop. 27AC and 5.9m southeast of Subop. 27AB. Two phases of construction were noted in the course of this work.

Time Spans

| Time Span | Construction Phase | Units | Strata | Features | Date |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | - | - | S.2 | - | LCL |
| 2 | Str. 27AD-Sub2-2nd | U.1 | - | - | LCL |
| 3 | Str. 27AD-Sub2-1st | U.2, 3 | - | - | LCL/TCL |
| 4 | - | - | S.1 | - | TCL? |

Time Span 1

The earliest activity for which there was evidence within Subop. 27AD was the deposition of at least 0.12m of a fine-textured, softly compacted, dark brown soil that contained many artifacts, especially pottery sherds (S.2; its base was not encountered). Stratum 2 closely resembles earth levels bearing this designation in Subop. 27AB and AC.

Time Span 2

The sole remnant of Str. 27AD-Sub2-2nd is a 0.1m-tall by 0.2m-wide stone wall (U.1) that was set on S.2 and traced for 0.6m at an angle of very approximately 340 degrees. Unit 1 was likely part of a foundation for a perishable upper wall that was incorporated within a surface-level construction. This footing was made of cobbles the flatter sides of which were directed out to the southwest. There were no clear signs of a surviving mud mortar, the rocks making up U.1 being very loosely set against each other.

Time Span 3

Structure 27AD-Sub2-1st is represented in Subop. 27AD by a 0.2m-tall by 0.15-0.23m-wide wall (U.2) that was traced for 2.1m at an azimuth of ca. 346 degrees. A niche measuring 0.3m deep north-south by 0.5m across its open west side was noted in U.2 at a point 1m south of the wall's north-most exposed point. Unit 2 is set on 0.1-0.2m of earth (U.3) that is identical to S.2 (see TS.1) and which buries U.1. Unit 2, like U.1, was probably a stone foundation that supported a perishable upper wall. It may have defined the east side of an earthen-floored, surface-level building, its niche looking into that enclosed space.

Time Span 4

Following Str. 27AD-Sub2-1st's abandonment, U.2 was almost completely covered by the 0.12-0.14m-thick humus (S.1) that formed atop U.3. Stratum 1 is distinguished from S.2 and U. 3 by its greater concentration of small roots.

Note: It became obvious during excavations that it would have been difficult for anyone to live on the debris pile constituted by S.1-4. In particular, the fine soils that make up these layers quickly become airborne when dry and make breathing difficult when they are disturbed, the latter being very easy to do. Most likely, therefore, the constructions identified in Subop. 27AC and AD were not permanent residences but served as work stations built at different points in the accumulation of this detritus. The source of all of the pottery sherds that were so evident in these investigations was likely the Op. 43 pottery workshop located on the west side of the Central Depression. The considerable quantity and density of this debris hints at the considerable volume of pottery vessels that were produced at that locale.