

The Skyband Group, Copán Honduras



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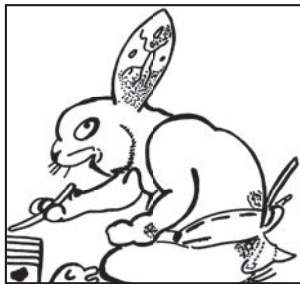
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The Skyband Group, Copán Honduras

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David Webster



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With contributions by:

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Dedicated to our Friend and Colleague William Scott Zeleznik

Preface

David Webster

Many years ago Dumbarton Oaks published *The House of the Bacabs*, a volume I edited (Webster 1989) that described excavations at a Late Classic Maya palace at Copán, Honduras.¹ “House” referred both to a single imposing elite structure and to the sprawling set of courtyard compounds that it dominated. Later, in 1990 and 1997, I directed projects that investigated the nearby elite-rank Group 8N-11, nicknamed the *Skyband Group* after a carved throne that we found in one of its principal buildings. What follows is a companion piece to *The House of the Bacabs*, but with a more comprehensive presentation of our Skyband operations. Its main objective is to understand the character and functions of the Skyband complex and how they relate to Copán’s culture history, built environment, and sociopolitical organization. It also provides updated perspectives about the House of the Bacabs and some predictions about what future research will reveal concerning both elite and non-elite occupation of the valley. Originally intended as a short report, the volume has expanded into a long rumination on many Copán and Maya issues, including research history, methodology, chronology, and collapse, while retaining at its core our research at the Skyband Group. In short, it is an old-fashioned monograph of the kind Stephen Houston and Thomas Garrison (2018: Preface) lamented is no longer a traditional product of Maya archaeology.

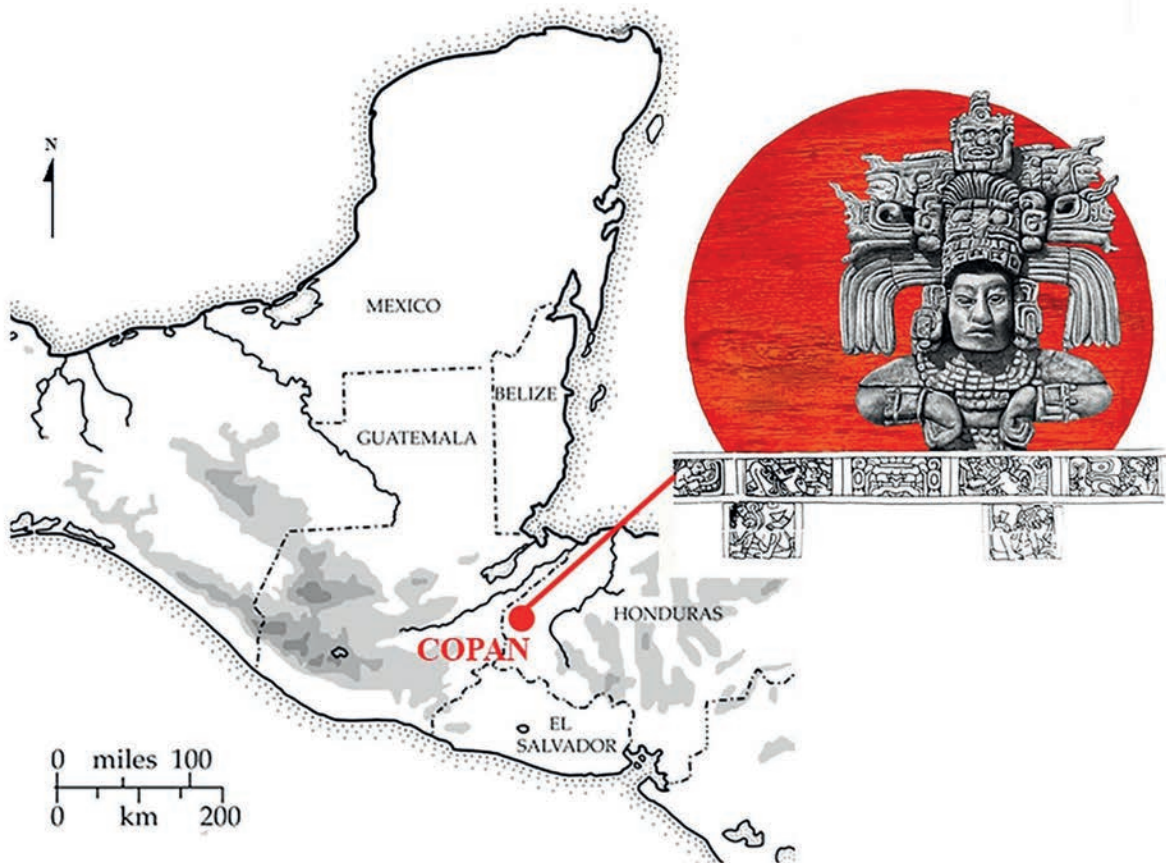


Figure P-1. Location of Copán and the Skyband Group.

¹ “Bakab” is the newer spelling; I use it throughout except when referring to the DO publication or specifically to Str. 9N-8-82C.

We have used the Skyband nickname in publications since 1993 but it might be superseded by events. A Chinese project directed by Li Winwei and Jorge Ramos began new research at the site in 2016 in cooperation with the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia and the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Li and Ramos 2017; Yang and Qu 2017; Li 2018, 2019; Chen *et al.* 2021). As of this writing I know only a little about their impressive discoveries, but I have patched whatever information I can into the following descriptions and interpretations. Except for a few comments about the Chinese work, what follows is accordingly focused on our Penn State University explorations of parts of the Group 8N-11 complex. Our research in some respects resembled and foreshadowed that of the Chinese, but in other ways was quite different.

Sub-royal elite identities are best attested by inscriptions in the western Maya Lowlands, but nowhere do we have better information about elite residences than at Copán. Architectural scale and stratigraphy, burials, inscriptions, sculpture, artifacts, and chronometric dates all indicate an apex of noble power and assertion in the mid-to late 8th century. Although nobles and/or titled people were present earlier, the real florescence of this important social component strengthened after the inglorious demise of the 13th ruler in AD 738, and Group 8N-11 is one of the most impressive groups in Copán's densely settled urban core. Whether lords prospered with the approval of later kings, with their grudging acceptance, or in competition with them, is unknown. The prevailing view emphasizes royal/elite competition and status rivalry that weakened the royal dynasty shortly before the collapse (see Sanders 1989: 102-103; Webster, Freter and Gonlin 1998; Webster 2005; Fash and Fash 1990; Fash 1991; Barbara Fash *et al.* 1992). Just how the Skyband Group might accord (or not) with this perspective is examined in the concluding chapter.

I considered three titles for this volume. *House of the Skyband Lord* had a dramatic cadence and conjured up the image of a titled person sitting on a celestial throne while overlooking his palatial household.² It seemed a bit of a stretch, though, because our research turned up no inscriptions that named such a person, nor any title, nor did we find a burial that might contain him.³ *Skyband House* was more cautious and better echoed our “House of the Bacabs” volume. Whether or not we could identify a particular noble person, at least what we found was consistent with an elite-level domestic establishment as we knew them from other sites. But unlike some of its neighbors the Skyband group has no inscriptions naming any building as a “dwelling” or “house” in Maya emic terms (*otoot* or *na*). The more I wrote, the less certain I was that 8N-11 was in fact functionally equivalent to Group 9N-8 or other palatial residences we had explored, especially in the absence of the *otoot* glyph that does appear at the House of the Bacabs.⁴ I settled on *The Skyband Group*, a prosaic but innocuously neutral hedge that best captures my current thoughts about how to interpret Group 8N-11 and some other Copán elite sites. It signals my ambivalence of about two alternatives that I call the “default” vs. the “something else” models that are explored in Chapter 12. During PAC II we regarded Group 8N-11 as probably another of the many elite residences in the Las Sepulturas enclave – at its core a palatial dwelling. Even as early as 1983 however, we had misgivings about this interpretation, as will become clear in Chapter 2. The default palace/residential presumption that dominates the following discussion might prove to be incorrect, especially as new information from the Chinese project is published.

Like *The House of the Bacabs*, this volume provides detailed descriptions of the architecture we exposed at the Skyband Group, its complex sculptural programs, and site chronology and its implications. Many kinds of information not contained in the *Bacab* volume, including overviews of burials, artifacts, and features, are also included. I present an unusually long and detailed analysis of chronology. The Skyband Group has the largest number of chronometric dates (169) associated with any elite residence in the Maya Lowlands apart from its neighbor Group 9N-8. One hundred and sixty-seven of these are obsidian hydration dates generated by AnnCorinne Freter, supplemented by two recent radiocarbon dates provided by Douglas Kennett, which have important implications for the social, political, and population collapse at Copán and at other centers and polities in the southern Maya lowlands. Because of the controversy surrounding application of the hydration method, I break the discussion into the traditional *short chronology* in Chapter 10 and the alternative *long chronology* in Chapter 11. Readers can make up their own minds about which they prefer.

² I recognize the sexist presumption in my use of pronouns here. There were powerful, titled, sub-royal Maya women elsewhere, but I know of none at Copán, although noble ladies are named in inscriptions. One such person, as described below, is identified as the mother of a titled person on the hieroglyphic bench we found in Group 9N-8.

³ Unless he is in one of the tombs found by the Chinese. Even so, they seem not to have found inscriptions with names or titles either.

⁴ See Chapter 12 for extended discussion of these terms. Nor is there any evidence that 8N-11 is the center of a larger corporate “house” in the Levi-Straussian sense.

We worked at the Skyband Group with the permission and cooperation of the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia and with generous funding from the Annenberg/CPB Project and the Pennsylvania State University. Our 1990 effort was an outgrowth of three previous projects: Harvard University's between 1975 and 1977, Proyecto Arqueológico Copán Fase I (PAC I) directed by Claude Baudez between 1978 and 1980, and the Fase II Project (PAC II) directed by William T. Sanders and me between 1980 and 1984 (Sanders (1986-1990)). Our 1990 season coincided with production of the Annenberg/CPB Foundation/Penn State University *Out of the Past* television series, also directed by Sanders and me, that provided funds for excavation and restoration.⁵ The 1990 research raised new questions that prompted our second NSF-funded field season in 1997.⁶ These two sets of excavations have enlarged our Copán settlement sample, rendered Las Sepulturas richer by the addition of impressively restored buildings and sculpture, and enhanced the visibility of Copán as an archaeological site and tourist attraction. Ours was a fortunate case of being able to carry out sound and essential research while enjoying the benefits of restoration and media exposure. Several *Out of the Past* video programs feature our investigations at 8N-11, including the discovery of the Skyband bench. Probably no excavations of palace-scale structures in the Maya Lowlands are so well-documented on film.⁷

We produced a lengthy preliminary report for the Annenberg/CPB Project and the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia (Webster *et al.* 1992) and final reports to the Hondurans and to NSF on the 1997 season. Only brief summaries of our excavations and sculpture have otherwise been formally published (Webster *et al.* 1998; Webster *et al.* 2000; Barbara Fash 2011). Hasso Hohmann (1995) unfortunately lacked sufficient information to include our 1990 work in his comprehensive analysis of Las Sepulturas architecture. Shannon Plank (2004) featured Group 8N-11 in her textual and iconographic study of elite Maya otoot buildings.

This is not an edited volume like *The House of the Bacabs*, but one that I mainly wrote in collaboration with several colleagues, so some chapters accordingly have two narrative “voices”. Readers will encounter abrupt and disconcerting shifts between the first person singular (I) and plural (we). In chapters with multiple authors I often use the first person singular to avoid cumbersome circumlocutions such as “the senior author”. These shifts are appropriate because I wrote (or sometimes rewrote) most of the prose and because as project director I heavily interject my own interpretations and comments, with which other contributors might not agree, especially in Chapter 12. The alternative “we” usage is only fair because, authorship aside, my role is that of manager, compiler, coordinator, and editor given the communal effort of our research. I planned the structure and formatting of the monograph relying on earlier publications, reports, notes, and personal communications contributed by my colleagues. I also chose and prepared most of the illustrations.

Chapters 3, 5, 7, 8, and 9 are true joint efforts and so have listed co-authors, although most of the prose and many of the interpretations are mine. Except for Barbara Fash, with whom I co-wrote Chapter 5, other listed authors were Penn State-related participants in our research. We contracted Fash as a paid consultant to analyze, illustrate, and curate the abundant sculpture from the 1990 excavations. Her salary was generously provided by the Penn State University Graduate School and her long technical report, which includes many illustrations, is on file at the Penn State University Anthropology Department and at the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia. Her short overview of the sculpture, now somewhat dated, was included in our 1992 preliminary report. Fash (2011) wrote a more recent summary, and thanks to her efforts the reconstructed façade of one of our buildings is displayed in the Copán Sculpture Museum.

Chapters 8 and 9 depend heavily on work done by William Scott Zeleznik, a graduate student in our anthropology program. Scott (as he was invariably called) was indefatigable in mapping, excavation, general record-keeping, and the analysis of burials and artifacts during and after the two main field seasons in 1990 and 1997. His dissertation was to focus on Copán's political and social organization, particularly the role of Copán's elites, and Group 8N-11 was intended as a centerpiece of his presentation. Until about 2007 Scott worked vigorously on data analysis and produced extremely useful catalogues and statistical overviews of ceramics, lithics, features, burials, site locations, and other basic information pertaining not only to 8N-11 but to other Copán projects. He also submitted preliminary

⁵ Our main focus for the video project in 1990 was excavation of an elite residence. We also needed footage of the of small rural sites for contrast. Richard Paine accordingly excavated small structures in the Petapilla region of Copan (Op. 52). His work is included in our 1992 report and videos, but is not considered here. Coincidentally, the Tulane University excavations in Group 10L-2 also began during our 1990 season.

⁶ Residential Elite Compound Excavation at Copán. National Science Foundation Grant SBR-9514267. David Webster PI, 1997.

⁷ A huge amount of archived footage from this project never appeared in the finished video programs. The *Out of the Past* telecourse was adopted by many archaeologists for their classes and it continuously streamed on television between 1993 and 2018. Today it remains available on YouTube.

drafts of seven dissertation chapters to me and to William Sanders. Scott became seriously ill shortly thereafter and for this and other personal reasons he was unable to finish his dissertation. I held off writing this monograph for many years because I always hoped he would come back to it. Alas, this was not to be --- Scott died prematurely in 2017. His widow, Prof. Nancy Burns (Warren E. Miller Collegiate Professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan) graciously sent me digitized copies of additional materials Scott had produced, and I have made extensive use of his various notes, images, tables, and catalogues throughout this volume, which we dedicate to him. I reference his unpublished dissertation chapters in the bibliography and in text references as Zeleznik (n.d.) and list him as co-author of the burial and artifact discussions in Chapters 8 and 9. David Reed, an old Copán hand and a close friend of Scott's, contributed heavily to constructing and maintaining our Copán computer database and the spatial information in the accompanying GIS, so he is also co-author of these two chapters. Along with Scott, David made important analyses of Copán burials, including those from Group 8N-11. Penn State graduates Randolph Widmer and Rebecca Storey (both faculty at the University of Houston) followed up our main 1990 field season by trenching in and around the main 8N-11 buildings as they were reconstructed by Rudy Larios and his crew. Their many insights and discoveries are discussed in Chapters 3, and Storey was instrumental in the burial analysis reviewed in Chapter 8, so they are co-authors of both. My role of project director and senior author is most obtrusive in Chapter 12. The conclusions discussed there are my own and my co-authors might not agree with them.

Many people provided other valuable assistance. So abundant was the façade sculpture that we hired Melvin Virgilio Espinoza to assist with field recording during the 1990 season. AnnCorinne Freter generated the obsidian hydration dates presented in Chapter 11, and Elliot Abrams kindly provided estimates of construction costs. Others who participated in our research included Amy Kovak, Richard Paine, Philip Scarr, and Helen Warren. Pamela Ryan made computer reconstructions of some of the architecture, and Laura Stelson made the chronology charts in Appendix A. Evelyn Rattray and her crew of Mexican students explored the plaza of 8N-11 in 1982 as reviewed in Chapter 2. Nancy Gonlin read the manuscript and her editing and other suggestions are much appreciated, as are those of Eric Taladoire, who flagged many small errors.

We are indebted to the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia, and especially to its local representative, Oscar Cruz, who greatly facilitated our fieldwork. The late Arturo Sandoval, who worked with us throughout PAC II, was indispensable to our field research, carrying on an archaeological tradition in his family that began with his father and the Carnegie Institution. We hired Guillermo Murcia to do a breakdown of our ceramic collections into the standard categories established by Rene Viel, who also provided much valuable advice. Finally, our crews of Honduran field workers performed with their usual cheerfulness and professionalism. One of the great joys of working at Copán was returning for one field season after another to find these splendid people – who eventually became old friends and comrades – ready and eager to work and to lend their own archaeological expertise, often garnered over many years, to our efforts. I name them below.

Rudy Larios Villalta, the dean of Maya architectural conservators, worked with us during the 1990 excavations. He and his skilled team stabilized walls and other architectural elements and quickly produced the beautifully restored set of buildings at Group 8N-11 shown in many of the following photographs. Stonemason Orlando Lara helped to record and consolidate the architectural remains before restoration even as the main field season proceeded. All of us who worked at the Skyband Group benefitted immensely from the comments and suggestions of Prof. William T. Sanders, who remained closely involved in the succession of Penn State projects at Copán after PAC II ended. Bill unfortunately died in 2008 and did not see this monograph, but his influence permeates our work.

I make extensive use of chapter footnotes and ancillary material found in appendices. This information supplements the main text and conveys many important details and asides, particularly about Copán archaeology, which would otherwise clutter up the narrative. Non-English words (mainly Spanish or Maya) are italicized the first time they appear and thereafter are rendered in plain text. Tables below show the standard ceramic and dynastic sequences used throughout the monograph, although I note various refinements during discussion of specific issues, and I realize that both might undergo significant future modifications.

This is an illustration-heavy volume. Most of the drawings, photos, tables, graphs etc., derive directly or indirectly from our own PAC II and later Penn State projects. I digitized or otherwise made or altered most of them, many provided by co-authors such as Widmer, Storey, Reed, and Barbara Fash, to fit the formats of the discussions

and the publication. Those responsible for these illustrations are usually not credited individually. Uncredited illustrations should simply be regarded as products of our project. A few others, such as the map of the Copán urban core shown in Fig. 1-1, have been used by me and by others so often that they have become standards in the field, and they are similarly uncredited. Sources of illustrations provided by people not directly part of our projects are given in the image or in an footnote. Jennifer Taschek-Ball, whose wonderful drawings grace so much of the Maya literature, supplied the superb Young Lord sculpture that appears on the cover and in this preface.

Table 1. The Copán ceramic sequence (after Viel 1993a, b).⁸

General Mesoamerican Periods	Copán Ceramic Complexes	Calendar Dates of Complexes
Postclassic	Ejar 2	AD 950-1000
Epiclassic	Coner/Ejar 1	AD 800-950
Late Classic/Epiclassic	Coner	AD 600-800
Middle Classic	Acbi	AD 400-600
Early Classic	Bijac	AD 100-400
Late Preclassic	Chabij	300 BC- AD 100
Middle Preclassic	Uir Phase (with Gordon funerary sub-complex)	900-300 BC
Early Preclassic	Rayo	1400-900 BC ⁹

Table 2. The Copán Dynastic Sequence (mainly from Martin and Grube 2008).

Succession Order	Name and/or Nickname	Dates (all AD)
1	K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'	426-c. 437
2	K'inich Popol Hol	About 437
3	K'ahk'??-Ajaw? (Ruler 3)	?
4	K'altuun Hix (or Tuun K'ab Hix*)	?
5	Yu-?(ku?)-a (Ruler 5)	?
6	Muyal?-jol? (Ruler 6)	?
7	Bahlam Nehn (Waterlily Jaguar)	524-532
8	Wi' Yohl K'inich (Ruler 8)	532- 551
9	Sak-lu (Ruler 9)	551-553
10	Tzi?-Bahlam-ma (Moon Jaguar)	553-578
11	Butz Chan	578-628
12	K'ahk Uti'Witz' K'awiil (Smoke Imix)	628-695
13	Waxaklajuun Ubaah K'awiil	695-738
14	K'ahk'Joplaj Chan K'awiil (Smoke Monkey)	738-749
15	K'ahk'Yipyaj Chan K'awiil (Smoke Shell)	749-761
16	Yax Pasaj Chan Yopaat (Yopaat Dawns Anew in the Sky). ¹⁰	763-c. 820
Pretender?	Ukit Took'	822 ¹¹

*This name is used by Law *et al.* (2013).

⁸ Table 1 summarizes the general sequence published by Rene Viel (1983, 1993), who has been principal ceramist to various Copán projects since the 1970s. Later publications such as Willey *et al.* (1994), Maca (2002), Bill (1997), and Bill, Canuto, and Sharer (2004) give slightly modified versions of this sequence. Sharer, Canuto, and Bell (2011) following an earlier suggestion by Viel, call the interval of AD 100-400 the Protoclassic rather than the Early Classic. Bill (1997) subdivided the earlier part of the Coner phase into shorter segments based on the ceramic collections at Group 10L-2. Katherine Miller (2014: Table 1) has a variant chronology that I briefly discuss in Chapter 10. I have not yet seen a well-published, inclusive new sequence that integrates ceramic data from all the projects that followed ours and that might be used as a standard. Chapters 9-11 provide detailed discussion of the ever-evolving Copán ceramic sequence, its several variants, and its culture-historical implications.

⁹ After publication of his 1993 article Viel came the conclusion that the Rayo complex began at least by 1400 BC (personal communication to Webster in 1997) and I use that date here. William Fash (1991:66) reported a calibrated radiocarbon date of 1390±60 BC for Rayo/Uir deposits.

¹⁰ This king's name is given with variable spellings. Here I have used the most recent one I can find – see Taube and Zender (2009: 186).

¹¹ The identity of this shadowy individual is still controversial. Most epigraphers think he was a late pretender or unsuccessful candidate for the throne, but see Baudez (1994: 8) for other possibilities. Yax Pasaj Chan Yopaat is last attested at Quiriguá, which he apparently visited in AD 810 (Looper 2007: 38). He was the last well-attested dynastic ruler and he probably died not long after that date. In the absence of a firm death date for him, we can only say that dynastic rule ended sometime between AD 800 and 822, and probably earlier rather than later in that interval.

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