

FRAGILE MEMORIES

Images of Archaeology and Community at Copan, 1891–1900



Altar U, located on the village square with two young boys.
Photo by Edmund Lincoln, 1893. pm 2004.24.249.

The spectacular ruins of Copan, Honduras, have engaged Harvard researchers for more than a century. Starting with five pioneering Peabody Museum expeditions in the 1890s and continuing today, archaeologists crossed seas, rivers, and mountains to reach the ruins of this great 5th- to 8th-century Maya city.

The expedition's 1890s photographs affixed to glass plates recorded a wealth of archaeological information. Recently digitized, these images reveal new information about Copan's early excavations, but also weave a visual narrative of the early archaeologists'

interactions with the budding local town and community, today called Copán Ruinas.

This exhibition of digital prints from the Peabody Museum's collection of 19th-century glass-plate photographs draws on the achievements of past and present expeditions and highlights the importance of photography in deciphering a field site. These images also trace the

development of archaeological practices, and show how archaeologists and communities continue to shape one another's lives.

The United States' fascination with Latin America's cultural heritage in the late 19th century grew with its economic and political interests in the area. By the time Peabody Museum Director Frederick Putnam first dispatched an expedition to Copan in 1891, ancient Maya writing, sculpture, and architecture intrigued scholars and the public alike. Their photographs, paper molds, stone sculptures, ceramics, maps, and notes established the Peabody Museum and Harvard University as forerunners in Maya and Central American archaeology and ethnology.

In 1893, a year and a half after the Peabody's expeditions to Copan began, the tiny hamlet of thatched-roof houses a kilometer from the main ruins and home to primarily Guatemalan immigrants was incorporated as the municipality of San José de Copán. Prominent community figures capitalized on the archaeological activity to promote their desire for new civic status. Today, the newly digitized images have been used to facilitate interviews with residents about the town's history.

Curated by Barbara Fash, Director, Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, assisted by Harvard students, Eve Mayer, History Ph.D. candidate, archival research; Katherine Brunson, '08, conservation treatment and research; and Laura Lacombe '09 community and archival research in Copan and Yesterday and Today video.



DON JUAN RAMÓN CUEVA

Don Juan Ramón at age 27 standing next to a sculpture from the Hieroglyphic Stairway. Shortly after this image was taken, the stone figure was shipped to the Peabody Museum in accord with the museum's contract with the Honduran government. In the 1940s when the stairway was reconstructed at the site, a gap was left for the missing figure. Today this gap reminds Hondurans that they hope to have this figure returned. Research for *Fragile Memories* led to the re-identification of Don Juan Ramón, a prominent figure in the community, appointed keeper of the ruins, and Honduran liaison for the Peabody expeditions.

Photo by Edmund Lincoln, 1893. PM 2004.24.289



A WEDDING AT THE RUINS?

It seems likely that this image portrays a wedding, with the gentleman on the left marrying the young girl on the right. Some years later they appear in another photo known from Lincoln's records with a young male child. The other two people in the photograph are probably family members. Behind them lies the Hieroglyphic Stairway, dismantled and awaiting reconstruction. Although the focus is on the event, this image is valuable to archaeologists as one of the few frontal views of the slumped section of steps in complete order. Thanks to these images and recent archaeological work, the original order of the stairway text is approximately 71 percent reconstructed today, and epigraphers can once again read the inscription.

Photo by Edmund Lincoln, 1893. PM 2004.24.452

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COPAN'S STELAE

Copan is greatly esteemed for the spectacular stone statues, or stelae, from its heyday in the 7th to 8th century. Stelae were generally erected to mark the completion of a *k'atun*—a period of 20 years. The rulers' portraits on the stelae are larger than life and heavily costumed, with elaborate headdresses, ear flares, heavy belts, loincloths, and ornate sandals. Hieroglyphic texts explain the ruler's semidivine status as personages that embodied sacred time. Plaster casts of the stelae made at the turn of the century were sent to world's fairs and early museums. Today many still stand in museum exhibition halls around the world.

Stele H. Photo by Marshall Saville, 1891–92. PM 2004.24.162