CHAPTER 10

Archaeological Salvage at the Central Group, Chocolá August 4, 2004

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Emergency Situation

The morning of the 4th of August began at PACH headquarters with the usual rush. The different work teams were preparing to be at their different excavation areas on time. Rafael Cambranes was getting ready for a solitary survey to take GPS references of architectural traits in the ancient settlement of Chocolá, in the current urban center. Federico Paredes Umaña had just finished delivering field materials to the excavators when one neighbor of Chocolá showed at the laboratory's door, to report that the works for water introduction that were being conducted in the central area were exposing archaeological materials. These water introduction works were carried out by different neighbor committees from Chocolá. Each neighborhood or sector was in charge of excavating a portion of trench of at least 0.40 m below the surface and 0.25 m in width, along the entire road located in front of their homes. These works began to gradually reveal sections of ancient canals that run across the site in a northeast-southwest direction. Given the urgency of the case, Dr. Jonathan Kaplan, the PACH director, asked Federico Paredes Umaña and Rafael Cambranes to spend a day inspecting the works to record any architectural trait revealed, as well as any associated materials. The archaeological salvage consisted in the first place in identifying ourselves with the local people, explaining the situation we were facing. The introduction of plastic pipes for the potable water supply was disturbing the soil. Each worker had to excavate as deep as it was required, while preserving the necessary drop so that the pipe allowed the water to flow by gravity. This activity, for the accomplishment of the mission entrusted by the water committee, involved the removal of all obstacles. These obstacles were frequently sections of ancient canals.

The task of communicating the problem to the community took plenty of precious time, as while we were discussing it with a local committee, just a few meters away, workers kept on removing materials. These works are carried out very quickly. The entire community is mobilized, and while some of the neighbors dig the trench, others measure the drop and still others introduce the pipe, they join it together, and then the trench is closed.

By the end of the day we had collected charcoal samples associated with one portion of the canal, and taken GPS references for the localization of 5 canal sections built with lateral stones, bottom stones, and lids consisting of irregular stones. Some examples were different from most of the flagstones that cover the canals of mound 15.

Below is a summary of technical specification of trait location, trait description, associated materials and work accomplished.

UTM	Description	Associated Artifacts	Work Accomplished
1616698N 669492E	Canal section that runs from northeast to southwest, with lateral stones and stones at the bottom. Lid with selected stone, uncut. Different to those of mound 15.	One bag of sherds. Some of them have already been photographed.	It was preserved by laying the plastic pipe below the bottom of this portion of canal. When PACH arrived to this place the stone lids had been removed. Once the laying of the plastic pipe was completed, the stones were put back in "place".
1616685N 669466E	Possible canal section running from northeast to southwest. A burnt area of 45 cm in diameter and 15 cm in height was found. This area was located below the stones. Approximate height from the surface, 45 cm.	One bag of sherds and obsidian was recovered, plus two abundant charcoal samples, one of them with a sherd in direct association. In this lot of materials a grinding stone fragment was included, although it was not directly associated with the stone trait described.	Charcoal samples were recovered. The pipes were introduced below the trait but preservation was not possible, as at the time of our arrival plenty of stones had already been removed.
1616682N 669457E	Stone possibly cut found in the trench opened to lay plastic pipes. Looks like a corner stone.	A fragment of incense-burner was recovered, which was not directly associated with this trait.	The potable water pipes were introduced under the stones, with no serious damage or disturbances.
1616749N 669525E	Portion of canal with lateral stones located on the road to Xojolaj. Upon our arrival in the place, the stones had already been removed, and there were flagstone fragments scattered on the ground. One stone still in place showed a yellowish color and a porous surface.	At approximately two meters, on the east border of the road and following the trench, we observed part of a flagstone exposed by the workers' excavation. A bag of sherds was recovered.	On the west border of this road, roughly six meters away from this stone canal, another canal section was identified, which was completely removed by the workers before PACH could arrive at the place.
1616774N 669577E	This reference was taken at the east side of the road to Xojola. The works for the introduction of plastic pipes crossed the road and headed east, towards the water reservoir. Here, a fragment of a mushroom-head stone and one sherd were recovered.	Five meters east of this reference a portion of a stone canal was identified, with a northeast-southwest orientation. When PACH arrived to the place it had already been destroyed.	The identified portion of the canal is located at the foot of a mound whose number must be found as of the nearest UTM. On that mound there is a potable water reservoir.

Conclusions

This unexpected incident, other than destroying several fragments of the canal, has shown that the ancient water management system in Chocolá was not limited to the north group, and this, in our view, represents the most significant contribution of the day.

It is peculiar, in a way, how these recent water introduction works have revealed the presence of the ancient water systems, and it will be even more peculiar for future researchers, to find a plastic pipeline below the prehispanic stone canals. In any case, this is the agreement we managed to make with the community in order to preserve some of the traits and allow the modern works to proceed.

The endeavors of the water committees are not directly supervised by the management of ECA Chocolá, but instead, by smaller local power entities and by the general foreman of the water works, don Favián Zapeta, who repeatedly mocks us whenever we try to explain to him the serious damage he is causing with his destructive and unplanned actions.