

## CHAPTER 9

### Rescue Operations: Operation 15

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#### Emergency Situation

A number of archaeological salvage events took place during the second field season of the project. One such event, designated Operation 15, was initiated on August 5, 2004, and completed on August 11. Together with RC, JK was driving to Mound 5 to check how work was progressing. The road was small and bad, with mud and scattered stones –it currently serves as a local route to transport banana harvests- a local dweller asked us to stop, pointing to an object in the middle of the road. The location was roughly 75 m north of the rural path to the village of La Ladrillera. We stopped and examined a rim or border of an apparently very fine vessel visible in the mud. We decided to explore further, and having found other vessels we devoted the following three days to the recording and excavation of an apparent offering, partially destroyed; the possibility existed that this was the burial of some important individual, for the way how the vessels were placed forming half a rectangle. The operation concluded with the recovery of 11 complete vessels plus fragments of others [Fig. 9-1 a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j] (see Table 1). This finding, together with the discovery of Structure 5-1, a large stone platform (see Chapter 7), and jointly with the accidental discovery of other fragments of very fine ceramics in the same area (395 m NNW – up to UTM 1614871.744N 669576.213E from 1614494.103N 669692.756E), led us to reconsider the ancient function and meaning of the southern area. These ceramic artifacts were found within a distance of 0.396 km, with the following UTM specifications: 11 complete vessels, North 1614491 East 669680; fragment of elite dish, North 1614868 East 669564. These findings lead us to consider the possibility or probability of elite residences present in the area in the past, as it was not merely an area of common population, but it also included other social levels and ranks. Our current interpretation is that the platform probably functioned like an administrative building to monitor the agricultural work, maybe even the cocoa plantations. Thus, the presence of individuals from the elite may have been as bureaucrats, overseeing the work of common laborers. In any case, the finding of fine pottery presents a different aspect of the life and function of the southern area, in apparent contrast with the interpretation previously held, which considered that only dwellings for common people were present in this area.

#### Excavation

Considering that initially the evidence was limited to one rim, we decided to conduct a salvage operation, or in other words, to recover the vessel we saw; at the time we did not fully understand the meaning of the discovery, and the place where the vessel was located, right in the middle of the road, made us quickly consider the possibility of its loss, either as a result of the vehicles traveling along that road or by having it taken by someone else.

After the GPS points were recorded, when the vessel was excavated we realized that it was possibly complete. When the excavation continued the presence of other vessels was noted. At that point we decided to explore the context of the vessels excavating 2 x 2 m units to explore the finding as a formal deposit made in ancient times, mapping the artifacts *in situ* [Fig. 9-2], with the purpose of recuperating not only the visible artifacts but also those that were not visible at the moment, considering the entire context of the deposit.

We began by establishing a relative datum in a *coxte* tree located immediately on top of the road cut. An interview with the owner of the adjacent plot led us to conclude that the road had cut a mound or an ancient platform. We placed the datum near the top of the mound's surface, with an elevation to the excavation level of 1.20 m below it.

We believed that the time we had to proceed with the salvage intervention was limited due to the vulnerability of the finding, so we came to an agreement with ECA to close the access to that road, stipulating that we would proceed as quickly as possible; even though we had a conversation with the owner of the plot adjacent to the road, he approached the ECA officials to complain about our activities –with unjustified criticisms because the road belongs to the community; so once again we explained to him our reasons as archaeologists, specifically in regard to the ancient site of Chocolá and the significance of the project.

With the placing of Cartesian units of 2 x 2 m oriented towards the north, we began to work with one pit. The position of the first unit was restricted in order to place the pit within the road to avoid the deep ditches at its sides, while we were trying to place the first vessel finding, preferably, at the center of the pit. The proximity of the ditch gave us the opportunity to make a profile of the stratigraphy on the east side of the pit. We cleared and cut the profile to find a mud layer of an orange-brown color with abundant mica as the matrix of the vessels. We soon found that the two vessels found at a higher elevation consisted of a type with a black-brown slip and thin body [# 11], placed inside a tripod bowl with mammiform supports and appliqué decorations of a larger size and with an orange slip [# 10]. It should be noted that portions of the orange slip remained in the mud due to the gummy consistency of the matrix. This pair was carefully removed with special wooden tools. Other two vessels were exposed, one of them was upside-down: a tripod bowl with conical supports, orange slip and a surrounding incision below the rim [# 9], and a tripod bowl with an orange-red slip. The fifth vessel discovered the same day was a dish with an orange-red slip with three cake-type supports [# 7]. All vessels were found within a few centimeters of separation from one another, and all appeared at no more than 30 cm from the road's surface, while the first one was found [# 10] directly on the surface of the road. Six vessels were removed. When the explorations continued five additional vessels were found: three dishes and two bowls, apparently complete, with fragments of other incomplete ones. One of the dishes exhibited an everted rim and notched lip; another dish found presented a carved green stone in contact with the base. We observed that the soil around the center of the unit was softer than the soil outside the center, probably suggesting what was left of the activity of burying the contents of the offering or of the corpse. Proceeding with the excavation we cut a 0.50 m window to the east, to find two other vessels, # 5 and 6, forming half of the rectangular deposit with # 1, 2, 3 and 4. Providing additional evidence, besides the fact that this was a special deposit, in regard to the ideology and intention that originated it, vessel # 4 was placed immediately above # 1; both vessels were small bowls. We infer that originally these bowls, like the other vessels, contained some

substances, possible food for the gods or the deceased. By the end of the second day of work, we left a night watchman to protect the non-excavated findings (five vessels).

The following days, FPU collaborated in the efforts of drawing, mapping, taking pictures, and in the removal of the remaining vessels. Excavating 1.64 m below the datum, or approximately 1.60 m below the current surface of the mound, we noted that the matrix around the vessels presented an identical context, suggesting an ancient filling not mixed or disturbed at a later time. When we removed the soil down to the seat of the visible or existing vessels, we discovered a stone alignment, with stones of sizes averaging 10 x 15 cm, as well as other smaller stones. The alignment formed a "V" that widened to the north, still inside the non-excavated area.

As mentioned above, the vessels had been placed on a stone floor in the shape of a half a rectangle [Fig. 9-3]. This pattern led us to the excavation of another unit of 2 x 2 m, immediately north of the previous one, in an attempt to locate the apparent continuation of the rectangle. The new pit produced no other complete artifacts. With the exception of a number of sherds from a mammiform support probably belonging to a ceramic type similar to that of the already excavated vessels, this pit produced no important cultural materials. Significantly, the man-made stone floor did not continue. Oddly, the other edge of the pit represented the limit of the stone alignment. In support of the notion we were considering –that we were finding the south portion or one half of an offering or burial- the soil matrix in the pit immediately to the north changed dramatically to a context of a lighter orange color, remarkably granular and with the aspect of having been recently disturbed.

To make sure that there were no other archaeological remains, during the following two days we returned to the place of the findings, to excavate at the same level another unit of 2 x 2 m at the south of the first pit. Excepting for a few small sherds, no indication was found that pointed to the continuation of the deposit. The southern portion of the east window of the first pit was also removed, and again, just a few small sherds were found. The last day of Operation 15, JK went back to remove the stones present in the alignment to find out whether there were additional cultural traits and to further investigate the apparent intentional deposit of these stones, excavating 0.15 m below them. Nothing further was located.

The excavation was concluded when we reached another sand and earth matrix of a gray color, completely devoid of artifacts or evidence of human activity. We started to refill the three pits or trench that measured 2 x 6 m.

The vessels were taken to the laboratory and stored with their soil or natural, original context. Later, we transported all the complete vessels with their corresponding soils to the storehouse of the Miraflores Museum, in the capital city, under the supervision and care of Dr. Juan Antonio Valdés, co-director of PACH and curator of the Museum.

### **Preliminary Analysis**

With no other evidence, we must conclude that the findings represent a special offering or possibly the burial of an important individual, possibly disturbed at a recent time perhaps by the construction of the road. We speculate that during the

construction of the road, possibly the northern half of the deposit was accidentally uncovered. The elevation of this section may have been greater than that of the southern half, following the slope of the ground. The exposure of fine vessels and possibly other artifacts triggered the discoverers to take the artifacts, and refilled the hole again to level the road.

As we mentioned, this finding poses a number of problems regarding the project's previous hypothesis of three general divisions of the ancient site: 1) north area, with elite residences, 2) central area, large administrative and public activity buildings, for example religious ceremonies, and 3) southern portion, area of common residences, workshops, intensive agriculture or corporate works. We may still think that our notion is correct regarding the first two areas, and perhaps we should revise our view that the southern area only involved common people and common activities. The very fine quality of the vessels found in the deposit indicates a different conclusion.

**Table 1: List of Vessels Recovered**

Date	No.	Description	Provenience	Comment
6-8-04	1	Bowl with orange slip	PACH 15-1-1	Found above the bowl (# 4)
6-8-04	2	Dish with orange slip	PACH 15-1-1	Carved green stone associated with base
6-8-04	3	Dish with orange slip, everted rim and notched lip	PACH 15-1-1	Notches in lip
6-8-04	4	Bowl with orange slip and conical solid supports	PACH 15-1-1	Found under the bowl (# 1)
6-8-04	5	Dish with orange slip	PACH 15-1-1	Found in pit extension, west corner
6-8-04	6	Bowl with orange slip	PACH 15-5-1	Found in pit extension, northwest corner
5-8-04	7	Dish with orange slip and 3 cake-like supports	PACH 15-1-1	
5-8-04	8	Orange-red tripod bowl	PACH 15-1-1	
5-8-04	9	Tripod bowl with solid conical supports and orange slip; surrounding incision below rim	PACH 15-1-1	Found in an upside-down position
5-8-04	10	Tripod bowl with mammiform supports, orange slip, appliqué decoration	PACH 15-1-1	It contained the vase (# 11)
5-8-04	11	Black-brown vase, thin body, cake-like supports, decoration of <i>apotate</i> coating	PACH 15-1-1	The only black-brown artifact

## Figures, Chapter 9

Fig. 9-1a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, I, j. Excavation sequence and salvage operation





**Fig. 9-1a**



**Fig. 9-1b**





**Fig. 9-1c**



**Fig. 9-1d**





Fig. 9-1e



Fig. 9-1f





Fig. 9-1g



Fig. 9-1h

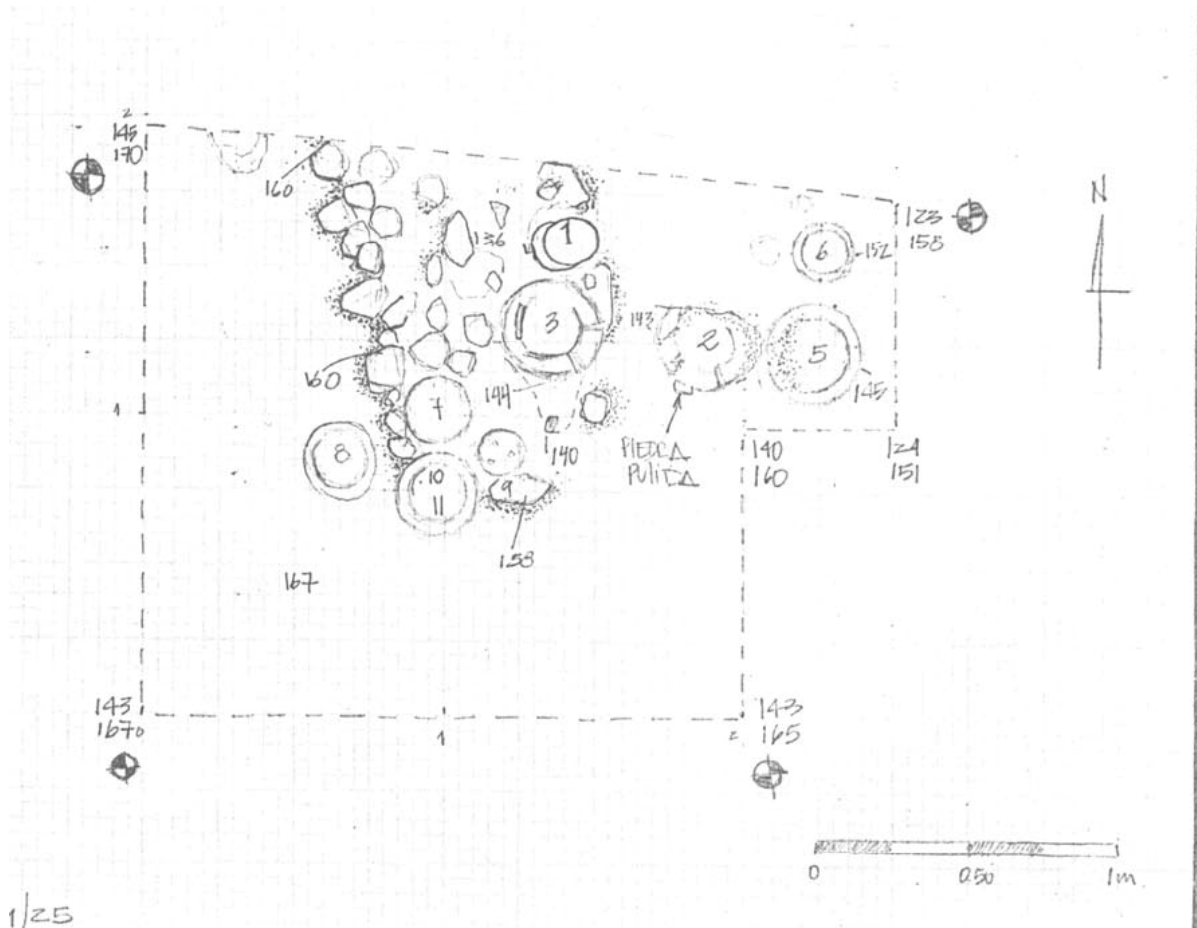




Fig. 9-1i



Fig. 9-1j



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**Fig. 9-2: Drawing showing point of origin of vessels. Not all vessels are present, as they have been already excavated. Because of the urgency to extract the vessels, some of the places must be reconstructed.**



**Fig. 9-3: Vessels placed on a stone floor forming half of a rectangle.**