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## THE HIEROGLYPHIC STAIRWAY RUINS OF COPAN

### ARCHITECTURE.

ON the extreme northern end of the Main Structure at Copan, rising to a height of about eighty-five feet above the Great Plaza which extends from its base northward, is the pyramidal foundation No. 26.\* On its southern side it is attached to the great pile of which it forms a sort of wing, while the northern and eastern sides rise in terraces which were probably seven feet high, five feet broad, and faced with neatly cut oblong blocks of stone; the top of each

forming a smooth firm floor of mortar cement (Fig. 1). These terraces have nearly all fallen, exposing the interior of the structure, which consists of rough blocks of stone and clay firmly packed together. On the east side there is nothing to indicate that this falling away of the terraces was due to other agencies than the growth of trees and the pressure of the material fallen from above which caused a gradual disintegration of the outer casing. On the northern side, however, there has been a

landslide by which the whole of that side, except the very lower part, was scooped out and the debris piled on the bottom of the slope and on the plaza. At the time of the arrival of the first expedition, in 1891, the whole structure was covered with heavy timber trees, some of them very large. In its present

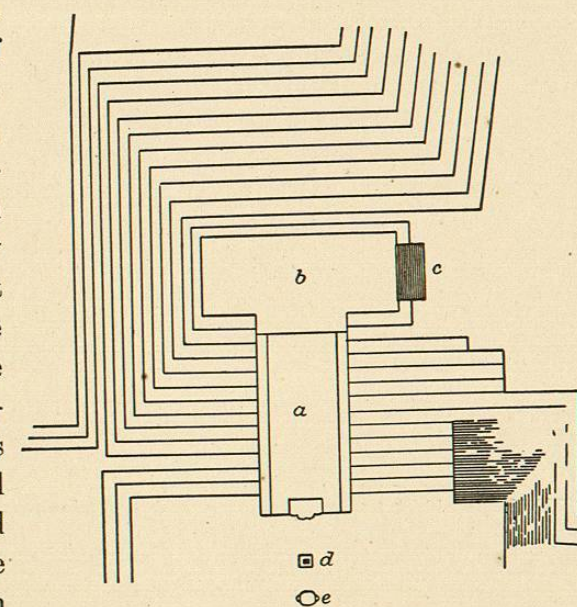


FIG. 1. — PLAN OF MOUND 26, RESTORED.

*a*, Hieroglyphic Stairway. *b*, Platform on which the Temple stood. *c*, Flight of Plain Steps leading to Temple from Elevation on South Side. *d*, Stela M. *e*, Altar M.

\* See Memoirs Peabody Museum, Vol. I, No. 1, for plan of the Main Structure.

condition the pyramid rises almost to a point, leaving apparently but little space on top for a building; but as the top has been reduced in size by landslides, and building stones as well as sculptures were found overlying the slopes and the level ground below, there is every reason to believe that a building of some sort once stood there, though not a trace of it remains in position, not even of the foundations (Plate I).

The western side of this pyramidal structure presents the ruins of the greatest architectural feature that has yet come to our knowledge at Copan, — the Hieroglyphic Stairway.

Stephens,\* although he refers to this slope and speaks of quantities of sculptures, does not mention any stairway. He mentions "rows of death's heads" and the "trunk of a colossal ape," from which it is evident that he has confused two localities in his description. The death's heads, one of which he figures on page 135 of Vol. I, are on the western slope of Mound 16 and not on Mound 26.

Maudslay, who was the first to direct attention to the stairway and to the excellence of its design and workmanship and who gave it the name by which it has since become known, ascertained, by means of excavations in the summit of the mound, that no portion of a building remained on that elevation. He rightly concluded, however, that a building once stood there. A fragment of the inscription on the steps is figured on page 32 of his text.†

As has already been mentioned, the north side of this same pyramid has been destroyed by a landslide; so on this western side also, where the stairway ran from the base to the summit, a similar accident has taken place. The whole upper part of the stairway from the top to more than half-way down was thrown from its place, and, together with a large quantity of the filling underneath, was precipitated to the bottom, covering the lower steps, which still remained in position, with a heap of débris, burying them to a depth of twelve feet and completely hiding them from view. In this downward journey fifteen only of the displaced steps retained to some degree their identity and relative positions, the topmost of these coming to rest at about fifty-six feet from the ground below. These are the steps that Maudslay described and which he believed to be in position.

It is impossible to tell from actual conditions at what time in the history of the city these landslides took place. The localities where they occurred were well wooded in 1891; but the growth of trees in that climate is of little value in determining lapse of time. There are a few historical references, however, that, if they are worth anything at all, would seem to indicate that these accidents took place in comparatively recent times.

\* Incidents of Travel in Central America.

† Compare Plate XII of the present Memoir, G, 1st block. The drawing on page 16 of Maudslay's work (*Biologia Centrali Americana; Archaeology*) represents the opposite side of the sculpture shown on Plate 9, *b* (Maudslay), and not part of a step of the Hieroglyphic Stairway as it is labelled.

Palacio, in his letter to the King of Spain (1570), spoke of "a grand stairway descending by a great number of steps to the river."\* At the present day there is no stairway whatever on that side of the structure next the river, nor is there any sign of one having existed. It is true that this side has been entirely destroyed by the river, but this had been accomplished at least in part at the time of Palacio's visit, and while a great stairway may at that time have existed on the river side, the absence of any evidence leads to the suggestion that Palacio may have meant the Hieroglyphic Stairway, the only one corresponding to his description that has come under our observation. If so, it must have been at that time entire, reaching from the plaza to the summit of the pyramidal structure, for in its later condition after the landslide, in which condition Stephens failed to notice it, although he described adjacent monuments, it could hardly have elicited the comment of Palacio already quoted.

Furthermore, in 1854 the German traveller Dr. Carl Scherzer was on his way to visit the ruins, but having arrived at Santa Rosa, he was warned by the padre and others against proceeding on a journey so dangerous to life and property. He has recorded that the padre at Santa Rosa informed him that "a recent landslip had much injured the effect of the ruins."†

Now, the two landslides just described are the only ones of which I have any knowledge at Copan, and the one by which the Hieroglyphic Stairway was destroyed is the only one that has materially injured the effect of the ruins. Before its destruction the Hieroglyphic Stairway was probably the feature that most of all attracted the attention and excited the wonder of the natives, and it is not surprising that the padre said the landslide had spoiled the effect of the ruins. The priest spoke (in 1854) of the landslide as recent, but the stairway must have been thrown down before the time of Stephens' visit (in 1840), as otherwise it would hardly have escaped his notice.

In December, 1892, Mr. Owens, supposing the steps which were then visible on the slope to be a stairway in position, began clearing them of the débris that partly hid them, but found that they stopped suddenly some distance from the bottom of the slope. Here he began to dig, and encountered a confused mass of broken sculptures.

At this stage of the work Owens left the ruins on the journey that proved to be his last. After his return he was anxious to have the excavation continued, though unable to superintend it himself on account of his illness; and the survey that I was engaged in making was suspended that this work might be carried on. During this time the altar and bottom steps were reached, and Owens made an attempt to inspect the

\* See *Memoirs Peabody Museum*, Vol. I, No. 1, for the part of Palacio's letter which refers to Copan.

† *Travels in the Free States of Nicaragua, Honduras, and Salvador*, Vol. II, p. 95.

work, but his strength failed before he reached the site and he had to be assisted back to his cot, from which he never rose. We have not therefore the benefit of his mature opinion respecting the evidence of a landslide. I feel sure, however, that had he lived to weigh the evidence there would have been no doubt of it in his mind. Following are given in full the few brief notes left by Owens respecting the stairway:—

“Field notes on the excavation of Mound 26:—A few workmen were put clearing what is known as the Hieroglyphic Stairway for the purpose of taking moulds of the best sculptures. In a few hours they had uncovered so many nice pieces of sculpture that I considered it worth while to continue work in that place.

“For several days the work has been going on, and we have found a good many fine pieces of workmanship. At the bottom of the stairs sculptured stones were found below what must have been the line of the steps when in position. A few of the surfaces show signs of burning. To-day, Dec. 28th, we found a fine head and later part of the bust of what must have been a very fine figure [Plate XIV]. The decoration is much like Stela I. The decoration of the shoulders is exceedingly fine. But more odd is a death's head much destroyed across the breast. This is the first and only case of this kind that I have seen in the ruins.

“Dec. 29 & 30. Work was continued on this mound, and many fine pieces of sculpture were encountered, many of them surely below the line of the steps. It would seem as though the steps had been built up on these. To-day, 30th, another torso [shoulders with death's head on breastplate, Plate XV] was found with a death's head exactly like the one mentioned above.

“Jan. 5th. During the present week work has been continued on the mound and we have removed many fine sculptures from the region of the stairway. One very interesting piece resembles a rattlesnake [Plate XIII, A].”

Here the notes stop abruptly. From the time that I took charge of the excavation until within a few days of Owens' death, when the work was stopped, many sculptures were removed, mostly loose blocks from the broken steps. A view of the stairway as it appeared when work was discontinued is given in No. 1 of this volume of Memoirs (Plate V, Fig. 1).

Should it be asked what is the nature of the evidence pointing to the occurrence of a landslide, and how it can be proved that one stairway was not built upon the other, it may be answered that the general condition of things pointed unmistakably to a landslide (Fig. 2).

The sculptures removed during the excavation were, for the most part, of a fragmentary nature. In some cases several parts of a figure or other object were found and fitted together, as in the statue shown on Plate XIV and the coiled serpents on Plate XIII, A, but in the great majority of cases only mere fragments were found. The remaining portions must either have been ground to powder by the landslide or have been reduced by disintegration to unrecognizable shapes. A large proportion of the sculptures removed from this mass of débris consisted of blocks

which had once formed parts of steps, their relative positions no longer preserved. In many instances it is possible to recognize blocks which occupied adjacent positions in the stairway by correspondence of lines; but where the carving is indistinct or the joint falls on a blank space, the blocks will have to remain in their disorganized condition until some other method shall have been devised for their restoration.

The excavation of the stairway was resumed in 1895. The steps that had been carried down bodily by the landslide and still occupied the middle of the slope were lowered down block by block and arranged in their proper relative positions on the level floor of the plaza, in which position photographs and moulds were made of the carvings on their faces (Plates II and V).

Few of these steps are complete, blocks are missing from the ends or from other parts, and the carvings, having been exposed to the weather and to the impact of loose stones falling from the upper part of the slope, are much damaged. Many of the characters are so indistinct that they can be identified only by careful comparison with others, if at all, while many more are among the best and most perfect examples of hieroglyphic carving at Copan. It was not until 1899 that the final work of excavation was done and the lower part of the stairway cleared.

It was found that only ten entire steps remain in position. The next two steps are almost complete, while portions

of three more retain their places, making in all fifteen steps with hieroglyphs, that are not entirely displaced. This does not include the lowest step of all, which is lower in the rise and wider in the tread than the others and without hieroglyphs (Plates III and IV).

A large altar (Plates VII, VIII, and IX), built into the stairway at the base, rises to the level of the top of the fourth step (not counting the first step). This altar was very elaborately carved over the entire surface, which however was very badly defaced when uncovered, much of the carving being entirely destroyed. The top of this altar consists of four large slabs let into the steps (Figs. 3 and 4). A photograph of a cast of the upper surface is shown on Plate XI. The carving here, being directly exposed to the

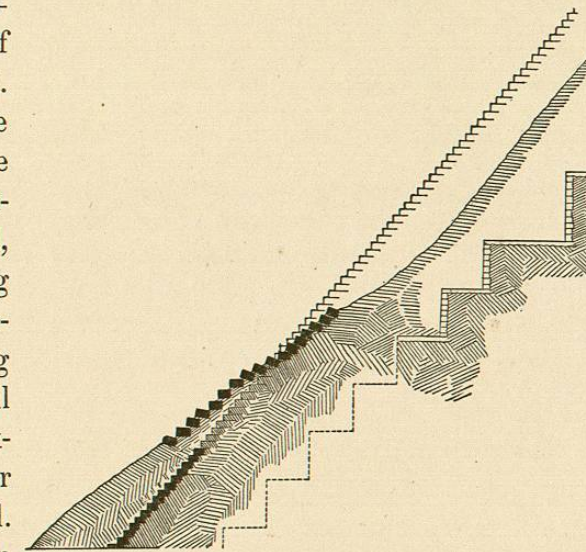


FIG. 2.—CROSS SECTION THROUGH WESTERN SIDE OF MOUND 26, SHOWING LANDSLIDE, STEPS IN POSITION, AND TERRACES IN THE INTERIOR OF THE MOUND.