

Vaca Plateau Agricultural Terrace Fieldschool Proposal

The proposed Vaca Plateau Agricultural Terrace [VPAT] Project, directed by L. Theodore Neff, is situated on the Vaca Plateau in the Maya Mountains, Belize, Central America. VPAT is designed to address questions pertaining to the morphological, functional, temporal, spatial and behavioral variability represented in ancient Maya intensive terrace agricultural practices (Neff, dissertation ms. in preparation).

Under the rubric of the VPAT Project, the proposed project represents a continuation of my research (Neff, in press) on the behavioral aspects of intensive terrace agriculture based on the material remains. This research deviates from previous Maya terrace research that has generally focused on following three issues: (1) the functional morphology of the different slope management strategies; (2) terracing as a form of intensive agriculture and its relationship to population pressure and, (3) terrace settlement patterns (Boserup 1965; Coultas et al. 1992; Doolittle 1990; Dunning and Beach 1994; Fedick 1988, 1989, 1994; Harrison 1993; Killion 1992; Malthus 1978; Neff 1995; Neff and Gifford 1996; Neff et al. 1995; Treacy 1994; Turner 1974, 1978, 1990; Turner and Doolittle 1978; Turner et al. 1977).

The above research questions answer the important questions of how do terraces work, how do they differ in function, what are the different intensive farming strategies, and what is that relationship with the overall community. Moreover, previous research that examines the social contexts of agriculturally-intensified space typically focus on infield versus outfield strategies -- how they compliment each other for maximum farming optimization, and what activities are associated with each.

This research recognizes a spatial continuum defined by the types, intensity and spatial locations of the different farming activities employed. Using a continuum as a guide -- near domestic space on through to "pure" agricultural space, I chose to explore the division of agricultural labor based on gender. In doing so, I identified the tasks associated with agricultural terrace gardening, who performed them, and what tools were used. Examining the spatial relationship of the tools and associated debitage in relation to the ethnographic, ethnohistoric, iconographic, and ethnoarchaeological data initiated a model building process for gender division of agricultural labor in the Dos Chombitos community (a small Pre-Columbian center situated on the Vaca Plateau). I presented the methods employed and the initial results from test excavations and artifact analyses from the Dos Chombitos Terracing Project (Neff 1995, 1998; Neff, in press).

In an effort to continue terrace excavations and to compliment terrace surficial research on the Vaca Plateau (Ashmore et al. 1994; Fedick 1989, 1994; Healy et al. 1983; Lundell 1940; Neff 1995; Ower 1927; Thompson 1931), I will examine the manifestation of intensive terrace agriculture in different spatial and temporal contexts through the artifact patterning.

Under L. Theodore Neff's proposed Summer 2000 post-doctoral research project, this proposal seeks funds for a Summer 1999 Reconnaissance Project to continue my research on ancient Maya Terrace Agriculture in Belize, Central America. Efforts for the Reconnaissance Project will be directed toward exploring areas of known agricultural terraces on the Vaca Plateau such as the Pine Ridge in the Mountain Cow Region (John Morris, Director/Commissioner of Belize) and the Minanha Region (Co-Directed by Giles Ianoane, Trent University and Samuel Connell, UCLA). Responding to an invitation to potentially work with Samuel Connell on the Social Archaeology Research Program at Minanha, the VPAT Project will explore the archaeological context for continued terrace excavations and research on the

Vaca Plateau. I hope to work out issues regarding site location, accommodations, potential work force and other project logistics.

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