Q&A with Alejandro Figeroa

Short Biography:
I am a Ph.D. Candidate in Anthropology at Southern Methodist University. My research focuses on examining how humans interact with and give meaning to their surroundings over long spans of time. I have approached this topic from a variety of perspectives including the paleoenvironmental reconstruction of ancient landscapes and human-environment dynamics, the geoarchaeological analysis of living surfaces, and landscape studies of modern placemaking. My methodological strengths include the analysis and integration of geospatial data, faunal remains, and sedimentary records. I am passionate about teaching and mentorship and am committed to engaging with local communities and the broader public through work that is socially relevant and impactful.

1. As an Honduran archaeologist, how do you feel about the presence of the maize god statue in the British Museum?
As an archaeologist, I am conscious that many objects held by and displayed in museums, outside of their original context and away from the peoples who produced them and/or to whom they rightfully belong, are largely devoid of a depth of meaning beyond an aesthetic value dictated by western norms. As a Honduran, the presence of this maize god statue in the British Museum is a painful reminder of the long-term consequences of neocolonialism and foreign influence in our country still felt to this day. Specifically, this and other artifacts were given to diplomat and explorer Alfred P. Maudslay as payment for his mapping and excavation work at Copán. The Honduran president at this time, Luis Bográn, sought to modernize the country by attracting foreign investors, engineers, and scientists such as Maudslay, and encouraged research at Copán by granting such concessions. However, history shows that an act can be legal and unethical at the same time. This concession, and others like it given to museums such as the Peabody at Harvard, are examples of such acts. By permanently gifting invaluable cultural heritage to foreign institutions, president Bográn deprived Hondurans of tangible aspects of our past and culture, all while showing that foreign interests stand above local cultural, and social ones.

2. Do you think there is any public or academic value in the British Museum retaining the maize god statue, or do you think that it should be returned to Honduras?
I do not see any public or academic value in the museum retaining the statue. There is simply justification that can be given that justifies this. The public value of this particular piece of cultural heritage will be enhanced upon returning to its place of origin, Honduras, where it can be displayed alongside other sculptures that originated from Structure 10L-22 at the site of Copán. Academically, there is no value associated with this sculpture residing in the British Museum. There is no archaeological research, specialized or otherwise, that cannot be conducted safely and properly in Honduras, for example at the Regional Archaeological Research Center (CRIA) in Copán, a fully equipped facility designed explicitly for this type of work. Although this statue was obtained legally through concessions granted by the Honduran
government, its presence in the British Museum goes against what we know about the social, cultural, and scientific value of cultural heritage and the ethical practice of archaeology.

3. Even though there were multiple cultures across ancient Honduras, objects such as the maize god statue tend to focus people’s attention on the ancient Maya. Does the over-emphasis on sites such as Copán, and the general disregard of other archaeological sites in Honduras, have any impact on the public’s understanding and awareness of Honduran ethnicity and history?

This maize god statue, while a remarkable example of the craftsmanship of Copán’s artisans, collapses Honduran culture and history to a particular time and place – the Classic Period Maya world, which at Copán is further reduced to the dynastic era (approximately AD 426-950). Yet existing and ongoing archaeological and anthropological research throughout Honduras shows our territory was a rich mosaic of cultures and peoples who interacted in various ways across hundreds of kilometers and for at least eleven thousand years. This sculpture and many others were given as a concession to foreign explorers by then Honduran president Luis Bográn, who sought to encourage research at the site of Copán as part of a broader agenda aimed at modernizing the country.

However, by focusing the attention and resources of the country on the Maya at Copán, I believe Bográn was initiating a state-sponsored process that invisibilized indigenous diversity and simplified the history of the country that we now call “mayanization”, a term first coined by Honduran historian Dario Euraque. This concept refers to a government agenda that began in the 1930s and 1940s and was aimed at creating a unified national identity based on a shared “magnificent past” anchored in the ancient Maya at Copán, whose civilization disappeared long ago and needed to be rescued by the state. However, the concession of archaeological artifacts like this maize god sculpture at the end of the 19th century suggests the mayanization of Honduras began much earlier. At this time, foreign interests were put ahead of national ones and a particular indigenous group was highlighted at the expense of many others, past and present. This process is still ongoing, and despite decades of archaeological research across the country, Copán continues to affect how Hondurans think about our history and the mosaic of cultures that have inhabited our land. Although Hondurans are keenly aware of and value their cultural heritage and the archaeological sites and artifacts they often live amongst, the state policy of mayanization has often led them to believe all of these archaeological materials are Maya. Most importantly, these state policies, which still today talk about “lost civilizations”, have created an artificial break in Honduran history by promoting the idea that these great civilizations of the past disappeared, and that the indigenous and afro-caribbean peoples who inhabit the country are “others” with no past and no heritage.