ANNUAL REPORT: BRAZIL-CLAUDIO CUTIÃO AMAZONIAN INTERFLUVIAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT 2015 FIELD SCHOOL

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IFR student Emily Weisenerger shows off a fragment of the base from a large ceramic vessel found in the dark earth deposits. (Credit: Aaron Cathers, IFR student)

The Amazonian Interfluvial Archaeological Project seeks to explore human occupation in a little known ecoregion of the Amazon – the headwaters of the river drainages. Our 2015 field season, from June 28 to August 1, 2015, included three students from the Institute for Field Research.

After a tour of archaeological sites near Manaus, our team headed out to our base at a farmhouse in the forest. From Monday to Friday and half days on Saturday we crossed the small river to excavate at the site of Claudio Cutião which dates to between approximately 1500 and 500 BP. Our lab activities and lectures were held at the base in the afternoon or evening.

In 2014 we observed microtopography that might correspond to mounds and house floors so one of our 2015 goals was to better understand these formations. We established five, one by one meter, excavation units at different elevations along a ten meter transect crossing one of these subtle rises. Mounds in the Amazon are known to occur naturally, in relation to midden deposits, construction associated with residential contexts, and other artificial constructions.

After excavation, the unit profiles demonstrated that the difference in elevation was artificial and one of the most recent modifications of the site. Due to the black tones of the sediments, excavation was controlled in artificial levels, but the keen eyesight and attention students paid to stratigraphic detail permitted them to separate distinct cultural deposits within the levels during excavation. The resulting samples will better enable us to interpret site chronology and changes in utilization. We also have a very representative sample of small sized artifacts as all
excavated sediment was wet screened at the river's edge to recuperate charred plant remains, small lithic flakes, and stone beads. In the laboratory we began the process of washing ceramic and lithic artifacts and sorting wet screening samples. Working with the ceramics, students noticed that some decorative motifs and techniques correspond to accepted regional tradition and phase classifications while others may be distinct. And from this, they began to suggest and explore possible cultural relationships between interfluvial regions and the areas along the principal river courses.

Students were also integral to the field activities that sought to determine the site boundaries and its internal variability: topographic mapping of the site, post hole tests to better understand the distribution of artifacts, and an excavation unit near the site perimeter. The fine scale topographic mapping revealed six possible mounds arranged in a circle, a configuration encountered in other regions of the Amazon.

The IFR students, through field, lecture, and laboratory activities, broadened their horizons to the potential of research in unexplored regions of the Amazon. Over the course of the field season students excelled at team work and took on the diverse functions of excavator, recorder, wet-screener, and surveyor. The team also entered in the spirit of adventure possible in this remote area, adapting well to our weekday distance from modern communications by telephone and internet.

We are committed to disseminating information to both the academic and local communities. One spotlight of this season was our trip to the local elementary school to share about our work in archaeology through games, comic books, and coloring pages. The program director and teaching assistants are preparing a report for Brazilian authorities and the director will be presenting our work at professional conferences and meetings.