

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF SAN MIGUEL DUEÑAS, SACATEPÉQUEZ

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In 2003, several archaeological reconnaissance were conducted around the town of San Miguel Dueñas. The municipal capital is approximately 8.5 km away from Antigua Guatemala, to the southwest, following national highway 10. This route communicates with the higher grounds where some of the rural establishments examined were located.

Observation shows that the territory under study is divided into two sections: a lower area, at an average height of 1500 m above sea level, and a higher area, at 2100 m, with a few hills that climb beyond 2400 m. The lower part has coffee plantations for the most part, with a predominance of gravilea trees that provide shade to the coffee trees, and leguminous plants. Here, the landscape has been dramatically transformed as a consequence of the agro-industry of this aromatic bean. Today, there are large sheds that protect the production of flowers and several greens, as well as poultry. Probably the finca San Sebastian is one of the largest estates existing in this area, sown with coffee trees, pear trees, and peaches, amidst a cypress forest (*Cupressus lusitanica*).

The town of San Miguel is crossed by the Guacalate River, main water source that skirts most of the villages settled in the valleys of Panchoy and Almolonga. Probably, in prehispanic times, there were abundant brooks that were a part of the Guacalate basin. Just a few of them survived due to the serious deforestation suffered by the mountains, though a very significant one for the area, known as Ramaxal, is still there. This brook, considering the basin it uses and the rocks on its banks, must have been plentiful. But now, even in the rainy season, it is nothing but a thread of water that flows into the Guacalate. *El Libro Viejo de la Fundación de Guatemala (The Old book of Guatemala's Foundation)* (1991: XVIII) is clear in pointing that there where the first city was established in the valley of Antigua Guatemala (the Almolonga valley), many springs and rivers existed. Therefore, one may infer that an identical environmental situation likely existed in the vicinities of San Miguel Dueñas.

According to the physiographic classification for the Republic of Guatemala (Holdridge 1983), it is possible to observe at least two life areas in this region: one in the lower part that comprises an altitude of 1300 m to 1600 m, a very humid warm subtropical forest, where rainfalls last longer, thus greatly influencing the floristic composition and the appearance of the vegetation. The predominant vegetation

includes the so-called Myrobalan, or *volador*, (*Terminalia oblonga*), the conacastes (*Enterolobium cyclocarpum*) the redhearts (*Sickingia salvadorensis*), the mulatas (*Tripalis Sp.*), the *palo blanco* (*Cybistas donnel smithii*), and the lumbers or red almonds (*Andina inermis*). The second is found at an elevation ranging between 1600 m and 2400 m; its vegetation is typical of the highlands, and is represented by oak tress (*Quercus Sp.*) usually associated with the so-called *pino triste* (*Pinus pseudostrobus*) and torch pines (*Pinus montezumae*). As indicators in this area, there is an occurrence of mountain cherry trees (*Pronus capuli*) and madrones (*Arbustos xalapensis*).

As to the fauna, colonial chronicles state this was abundant, and that it included great mammals such as the tapirs, jaguars, pumas and deer, mainly found at the piedmont of the volcanoes known as Agua, Acatenango and Fuego (Fuentes and Guzmán 1932:53). AT the time of interrogating peasants who occasionally go out hunting, they claim that today none of these animals no longer exist in the whereabouts. As a special observation, the presence of some mountain trogons (*Trogon mexicanus*) related to the quetzal was noticed; other varieties of birds were drastically reduced, due to the gradual disappearance of the arboreal species that once fed them.

As to the soils, and according to the terminology defined by Simmons (1959), there are two that may be noted: the one denominated of the Central Highlands, of a volcanic origin and present in ravines, and the one known as alluvial or miscellaneous, mainly found in the lower lands, that is, in the valley. It is possible that the soil was of a better quality in prehispanic times, and that it became eroded because of the intensive use given to it in this century, as crops are grown with chemical fertilizers. Even if this was so, the agricultural potential of the mountain slopes is evident, as it is there where the different crops sown every year by the peasants come from, and where most archaeological remains from earlier times were found.

It is important to note the presence of the Quilisimate Lagoon (which is dry, presently), as one of the main water sources adjacent to San Miguel Dueñas. Settled on the margins of that which once was the lagoon are the villages of San Andrés Ceballos, San Antonio Aguas Calientes, Santa Catarina Barahona and Santiago Zamora. The role played by this major water source in ancient times poses no doubts, as it was crucial for many eatable products such as fish and plants.

The recent discovery of mural paintings at the finca Urías, on a granite wall that runs parallel to the Guacalate River and very close to the lagoon, reinforces the notion that this lagoon was once essential to the life of the settlers who once inhabited the surrounding areas. These murals depict over 300 animal and anthropomorphic figures with a possible magical and religious sense. According to Navarro (1874), in the XIX century the lagoon extended to the slopes of the Agua volcano. In the Chimaltenango map, 1:50.000, page 2059 IV, we observe that its extension covered approximately 5 km², although, like Navarro explained, this lagoon was merely three varas deep in its deepest part.

Studies carried out around this issue (Chinchilla 1991: 4-5) show that the Quilisimate Lagoon might have dried as a consequence of an accelerated eutrofization process due to different causes such as the presence of sands from volcanic eruptions, the disappearance of the woody cover on the surrounding hills, etc. In that which still remains of the lagoon there is a reed or narrow-leaf cattail (*Typha angustifolia*) that still grows in the wild, which is used for the manufacture of mats, a still important industry for some San Antonio locals (Annis 1987:47), and probably very relevant in the past, when considering the Indian habit of using them to rest and to sleep at home.

THE RECONNAISSANCES

The methodology for the search of archaeological indicators was primarily focused on mounds and pottery on the surface. The reconnaissance were initiated in the low portion of the region of San Miguel Dueñas, with very poor results, because of two reasons:

- In the first place, the zeal of finca owners who would not allow strangers to poke in their lands no matter the reason. In the few places where survey could be conducted, the presence of few ceramic indicators, mostly coarse and micaceous ones, was corroborated.
- In the second, the recent eruptions of the Fuego volcano, like the one occurred in 1999, left sand over these lands, burying all the vestiges that may have existed.

Besides, the experience from previous investigations (Benítez 1991, 2003; Matas 2000) showed that the valleys in these regions were not intensely occupied, like the slopes and summits of the adjacent mountains were. One important reason why the settlements proved unsuccessful was provided by chroniclers like Fuentes y Guzmán (1932), Navarro (1874), Tobilla (1960), and Ximénez (1967), who reported the countless spates and floods of the river, which dragged sand, burying and sweeping along everything that was found on the way. This provides some hint of why the indigenous chose not to occupy the valleys. The Spanish, on the contrary, settled in the plains, where they constantly suffered the destruction of their cities as a consequence of the sudden water currents that rushed down the mountains, mainly during the rainy season.

The reconnaissance at the high parts of the region were more encouraging, and yielded amazing results. Around the finca of Concepción Calderas –which is rather a village where several families live permanently- and at one side of the road, there are several mounds. One of them is a platform approximately 50 m long and 20 m wide. Apparently, this was a ritual hill later modified. Very close to where the inhabitants of the finca reside, there are some additional mounds, and the Catholic Church devoted to the Virgin of the Conception seems to be resting on a hill. From this place and up to the center of the other finca known as San José Calderas, located 1 km away, there is a *continuum* of ceramic deposits that covers the entire area. In this region, hills such as that of Sanai, 2648 m above sea level, and a twin

one that has no name, yielded no archaeological remains. Both these hills are very close to the agrarian land plots of La Soledad.

No samples of ancient pottery were observed in the village of San José, probably because the streets were bulldozed and the townspeople refused to authorize our access to their patios to investigate. This town features a modern layout with wide avenues and new houses built with bricks or blocks; at west, very close to the town, there is a small hill with a view to a broad semi-undulated landscape that opens to the east. In this center, the amount of archaeological material found was overwhelming. Research suggests that this was probably the epicenter of what was happening throughout the area. The finca Concepción grows peaches and pears on the north end of the Acatenango volcano. Quite a lot of ceramic was found up to a height of 2100 m, and it was the only place in this volcano where habitation remains were found. The reason was probably the proximity to the gully, where waters run in the past.

The investigation was also focused on places such as El Rosario, Tampico, El Pozo and El Tigre. The first three were villages that disappeared for different circumstances, while the last maintained a small group of settlers; all these places proved very rich in ceramic remains. Reconnaissance was accomplished in two directions; first, it was initiated at the town of San Miguel Dueñas in a place known as the ford, because it was here where the tiny rivulet of Ramaxat passed by. The climb is tiring and time-consuming, as there was abundant ceramic at both sides of the trail; then the walk was made the other way round, using the road that communicates Parramos with Yepocapa, at a place with a path that leads to the village of La Comunidad; the walk to gradually descend to San Miguel took four hours, approximately.

All of these mountains had ditches that may have been permanent rivers in ancient times, not too strong but with enough flow for not drying in the summer. This is the main reason why settlements existed since the very earlier times. One current example is represented by the village known as El Tigre, where there is a brook that does not dry during the summer; besides, this is one of the places that yielded the most abundant ceramic sample.

Again, like in previous investigations conducted in this region of the Guatemalan highlands, the work of peasants at their plots made our research easier. This is because of the land movement they cause year after year with their seasonal crops, as fortunately, the use of mattocks prevents the absolute destruction of all the remains.

THE CERAMIC

Surface investigations were concentrated mostly in ceramic deposits. They were the indicatives that would lead to the attainment of a temporality, an affiliation, and finally, the history of the place. Most samples collected correspond to pottery of the utilitarian type, with thick walls, no slip, and appliqués on the walls. The oldest sample included several samples of the Sacatepéquez type, a very rare one for its

white and polychromatic paste, generally with details painted in red. These items were collected in the lands occupied by the village of El Tigre, as well as in several other places on the way to this location. Some were also found at Concepción and San José Calderas.

These samples were already reported at Parramos, San Juan Alotenango, and San Andrés Izapa, in former works (Benítez 2003; Matas 2000, 2002). They were also mentioned by Robinson (1998) for the site of Chitak Tzak, where they were known as Alotenango Cream, Alotenango variety, characterized by a white, hard slip, in contrast with a fine red paste. Tabacal White on Red, Tabacal variety, is a white painted ceramic type with zoomorphic and geometric designs in bowls and jars. According to Wetherington (1978), the white ceramic tradition appeared in Kaminaljuyu in BC 500.

Nell (1990) notes that the probable origin of the white pottery known as Sacatepéquez may have been the site of Zacat, located west of Kaminaljuyu and north of the territory of San Miguel Dueñas. Likewise, the samples of Amatlé pottery were abundant, characterized by button appliques present in the vessels' necks. They were found mainly in the vicinities of El Tigre. Borhegyi (1950), who reported them at the time of investigating the north slope of the Agua volcano, called them Tejar Ware. Also notorious are the remains of a ware known as Esperanza Flesh, identified with the Early Classic period (Hatch 1997:113). The sample of micaceous pottery was poor, and was collected mainly in lands close to the town of San Miguel Dueñas.

OBSIDIAN ARTIFACTS

The sample is rather poor, with total 35 pieces recovered. They consist of chips, some prismatic blades and derived fragments, ten from El Chayal and the others from San Martín Jilotepeque.

THE MOUNDS OF CONCEPCIÓN CALDERAS

Because of their location, that is, in a totally open space, they may well have dated to Preclassic times. They might represent the first site, showing great affinity with the settlement pattern of two sites observed at Parramos. The location is strategic, as it dominates the pass to the Almolonga valley. This is a natural canyon that was formed between the northeast slope of the Acatenango volcano and a mountain that runs parallel and ends precisely where the ford across the Ramaxat begins, a river that farther ahead is known with the name of Blanco.

CONCLUSIONS

The archaeological study of San Miguel Dueñas was made after the pattern of the town boundaries established by the present national government. No doubt, this pattern was different in ancient times, and the reason is given by the empirical data

collected in this investigation. On one side, there is a low zone with a rather warm climate and a varied flora, and on the other, there is a very cold region, a consequence of its altitude, with vegetation that includes mountain pine trees. That is the origin of the division into an upper and lower region as a natural indicator. The both offer different opportunities for their inhabitants. The lower region may have been associated with the societies that settled in modern San Juan Alotenango, Los Terrenos and Pompeya, located on the west and south slopes, respectively, of the Agua volcano (Benítez 1991). The upper region housed the peoples that inhabited the mountains of modern Parramos.

The archaeological indicators for the lower zone are quite limited, though this does not necessarily point to a scarce or non-existent population. The environmental factors such as volcanic eruptions, floods, earthquakes and heavy rain periods, may have had a remarkable effect for hiding the remnants of the populations that inhabited these heights. One modern example of this was observed when in 1998 hurricane Mitch swept the area, causing severe damage in the villages of the highlands. The earthquake of 1976 was an additional event that changed the morphology of many mountains in the highlands. The blasts of the Fuego volcano occurred at the end of the XX century have also made that many places located close to this colossus changed. During pre-Columbian times, populations probably were scarce, due to the reverses caused by calamities such as those noted above, though possibly, moving elsewhere to run away from these sufferings might have made things easier.

On the other hand, the populations that settled in the higher sectors were probably able to easily dodge some of these phenomena. During the rainy season rivers do not flood, the mountain slopes are not necessarily exposed to the sands belched out by volcanoes, or dragged by turbulent rivers fed by other quieter ones, turned into rough torrents by a rainy winter.

The archaeological indicators, such as ceramics, obsidian and residential mounds, were more notorious in the higher areas. They show a better state of preservation, because there was no natural extremely powerful phenomenon to bury them. Edwin Shook (1952), during his investigations in the Panchoy valley, stated that most probably mounds had to exist here, now covered by the obstructions transported year after year by the Pensativo River.

The climate in the higher region of San Miguel Dueñas is not as harsh as that of Parramos, for example, at a similar altitude. It is less windy and warmer. This is probably due to the very special geographic characteristics of this region, and that is why all places visited presented such an abundance of pottery. In other words, settling down there was easy at all times. This is not the case of Parramos, where no archaeological features were observed in much extended areas. On the other hand, the ceramic collected points to a specialized trade, as is the case with the Sacatepéquez ware, which, as noted by Neff, was a luxury item under the control of the ruling elite of Kaminaljuyu.

It is probable that during the Formative period, settlements existed at the higher areas only. And that the societies that inhabited those areas controlled the trade not

only directed to the Almolonga valley, but also to the Coast, across the modern town of Yepocapa. This could have been accomplished jointly with the people that around that time had settled in the mountains of Parramos. Towards the Classic period, this may have become a powerful chiefdom that left behind the mounds presently observed in Concepción and San José Calderas. The finding of Early Classic and Late Classic ceramics shows that occupation was uninterrupted throughout at least 1200 years. The Postclassic period is represented by some micaceous pottery, mostly in the lower area. This situation is consistent with the areas examined at Parramos, adjacent to the upper portion of San Miguel Dueñas, showing that the population at that time was scarce in both regions.

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