

## MAPS AND CULTURAL EVIDENCE IN THE VALLEYS OF CHIQUIMULA, SAN JUAN ERMITA, JOCOTÁN AND CAMOTÁN

*Carlos Batres*  
*Lucrecia de Batres*  
*Marien Garnica*  
*Ramiro Martínez*  
*Raquel Valle*

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In the past eight years, the School of History of the University of San Carlos in Guatemala has been in charge of the archaeological study of the department of Chiquimula. This does not mean that no previous studies were carried out in the area. Beginning with Edwin Shook, the record of prehispanic sites located in this department dates back to 1942; in addition, there are reports written by Gustav Stromsvik, Gustavo Espinoza, Antonio Goubaud, Rafael Girard, and more recently, by David Bansley. Of course, reports of monument inspectors appointed by the Institute of Anthropology and History are as well available.

With the purpose of corroborating the existing data, the Chiquimula Project devoted to the localization of a number of sites reported by these scholars, to establish their degree of preservation, to learn the correct toponymics of each one of them, and to draw the relevant plans in each case. Emphasis was placed on the work area comprising the so-called Copan-Ch'orti' basin, though works were conducted as well at the site of San Esteban de Chiquimula, already known by the project because of its size, with the consequent need of urgently drawing the corresponding plan.

Edwin Shook's diary refers to a trip he made on Friday, March 13, 1942. At 2.15 pm that day he refers he arrived in Chiquimula, and annotated that he was at kilometer 200.9, where he made a stop to meet with Filadelfo Navarro. Later, when he continued his journey, he arrived at kilometer 204 where he identified some ruins on the north side of the road, between the San José and the Xutaque rivers. He passed San Esteban and reached Vado Hondo, wherefrom he took the old unpaved road on his way to Copan. He passed the towns of Veguitas, San Juan Ermita, Jocotán and Camotán. At this point he mentioned his friends Charles Wisdom, Antonio Goubaud and Rafael Girard, because they all had studied the Ch'orti' people. Also, many other memories came to his mind, referred to his first trip to Copan in 1935. He reached El Florido, on the Guatemalan border at 5.35 pm, and entered Honduran territory around 6 pm. Half an hour later he was in Copan. Shook spent the whole following day at the site, taking care of the excavations that were being conducted there, and described his observations in detail. At 7.55 am of Sunday the 15<sup>th</sup>, he abandoned Copan and initiated his way back stopping to examine some "ruins" he named La Vegona, and briefly describing the settlement. In his view, this was a late site. When

he left the Vado Hondo road, prior to heading to San José La Arada, Shook's diary included a list of several sites that were known in Chiquimula, adding the site of Obraje, reported in a map drawn by Tulane University to the Copan-Ch'orti' basin (Shook 1942, 279: 45-49).

According to data obtained from different sources consulted, the sites included in the Chiquimula Project investigation are as follows (Databank, Department of Archaeology, UVG):

<b>SITE NAME</b>	<b>REPORTED BY/IN</b>	<b>TOWN</b>
San José/Xutaque	E.M. Shook	Chiquimula
Obraje	Tulane map, IDAEH	Camotán
Lela	David Bansley	Camotán
La Vega	David Bansley	Camotán
La Vegona, Vado Lela, Nuevo Camotán	E.M. Shook, IDAEH	Camotán
La Vegona	David Bansley	Camotán
San Esteban	IDAEH	Chiquimula
La Ruina	IDAEH	Chiquimula

The site of San José/Xutaque or Shutaque, according to information provided by Shook, is located in the UTM coordinates 281345 (Sheet 2260 II). Shook placed it *"3.5 km southeast of Chiquimula, on the north side of the road, approximately in km 204, between the San José and the Xutaque rivers"*. The index card of the Department of Prehispanic and Colonial Monuments, which does not include a sketch of the site, states that it is located *"2.5 km northwest of the school of the village of San Esteban, 3.2 km southeast of the Las Victorias stadium and 3 km north of the village of Obraje, in the lands of finca Esperanza"*. Notwithstanding the Chiquimula Project tried to find the site and verified with a number of neighbors its possible localization, to this day it has been impossible to fulfill that purpose. However, nowadays, there are abundant lot divisions in the grounds that present the characteristics specified above, and therefore it is possible that the site was destroyed by the development works (Index record cards, IDAEH). Efforts will continue, so that if the site is located, an adequate plan is drawn.

Obraje is a site that is reported in a Tulane map, mentioned as well in E. Shook's diary. According to the index cards of the Department of Prehispanic Monuments, it is located in the UTM coordinates 491427 (Sheet 2360 IV), La Unión), in the jurisdiction of a village called Lelá Obraje, Camotán, between the Camotán River and the CA-11 Highway. In fact, the reports of the different monument inspectors assigned to Chiquimula reflect the great confusion existing around its location, which has been mistook in most cases with that of La Vegona. According to those reports, at least two of the four mounds that form the site presented evidence of looting during the inspections conducted in the early 1990's. The Chiquimula Project has been unable so far to locate this small group of structures, as the recorded coordinates seem to be inaccurate. Actually, the last index card found corresponding to March, 1993, includes an annotation that reads: *"possibly it is a different*

*coordinate which might change the localization of the site*" (Databank, Department of Archaeology, UVG, index card record, IDAEH).

La Vegona is the largest site discovered in the Copan-Ch'orti' basin; it was first observed by Edwin Shook, who noted: *"it consists of many small mounds with no formal arrangement and was built with cobbles and dirt, and no masonry like that of Copan was observed, being settled on the valley 2 km away from the village of Lelá"*. The index cards of the Department of Prehispanic Monuments have recorded it with the alternate names of Vado Lelá and Nuevo Camotán, placed on the UTM coordinates 501433 (Sheet La Unión 2360 IV), on km 248 of the highway that communicates Vado Hondo with El Florido; however, this situation has changed, as the layout of the highway (Road CA-11) is different than it was in previous years. The site was also detected by David Bansley during 1993 in coordinates 51/440, corresponding to the site denominated Lelá by this scholar. This is located in the village of Lelá Chancó, in front of the school on the southeast bank of the Río Grande, in the lands of Margarito Manchamé. The site includes 18 mounds, not all of which are well preserved, as some show evidence of looting. The largest mound is 4 m tall, and is the one with the largest proportions found so far in the area. On the other hand, and because the entire place has now been turned into farmlands, there is an extended area covered with dispersed cobbles, suggesting that they were pillaged to use the land for crops. As to the looting, one of the owners informed this project that several months ago the place was visited by a number of foreigners (that he identified as Hondurans and Nicaraguans), claiming that they were there to conduct an "astronomical" work –which was interpreted as "archaeological"- in the largest mound, and that they refused to grant any authorization. Notwithstanding that mound shows evidence of looting, it is assumed that the presumed researchers actually had in mind to proceed with their looting activities. There is a map (with location) and several sketches elaborated together with the Department of Prehispanic Monuments, but the Chiquimula Project conducted a survey to ascertain their present situation (Index cards, IDAEH, Martínez 2002; Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Site of La Vegona.**

There are two sites reported by David Bansley (1993). The first is La Vegona, located at coordinates 511434, and the second is La Vega, located at 574443. The first seems to be a site mistook with La Vegona, though the localization is not consistent with this site. Anyway, if this is a site other than the latter, its position has not yet been established by the Chiquimula Project. Besides, La Vega was unsuccessfully traced. It is presumed that because the highway changed around 1999, the new layout may have destroyed the mounds that formed the site. In due time, the investigation in the area will be expanded, in an attempt to establish whether the evidence is still there (Databank, Department of Archaeology, UVG).

On the other hand, while investigating along the basin, other three settlements not described in any of the consulted sources were discovered by the Project. The first is La Vega de la Albina; the place is reached after passing La Vegona, proceeding along the dirt road that leads to the hamlet of Despoblado, of the Lelá Chancó village, Camotán. It is located in a plain abandoned by its owners; however, the original owner was a lady called Albina, deceased a long time ago. This small settlement has six mounds, built with cobbles and dirt, all of them presently covered with weeds, obviously endangering its preservation. The Project proceeded to draw

the corresponding map, as the site has not been previously reported (Martínez 2002; Figure 2).

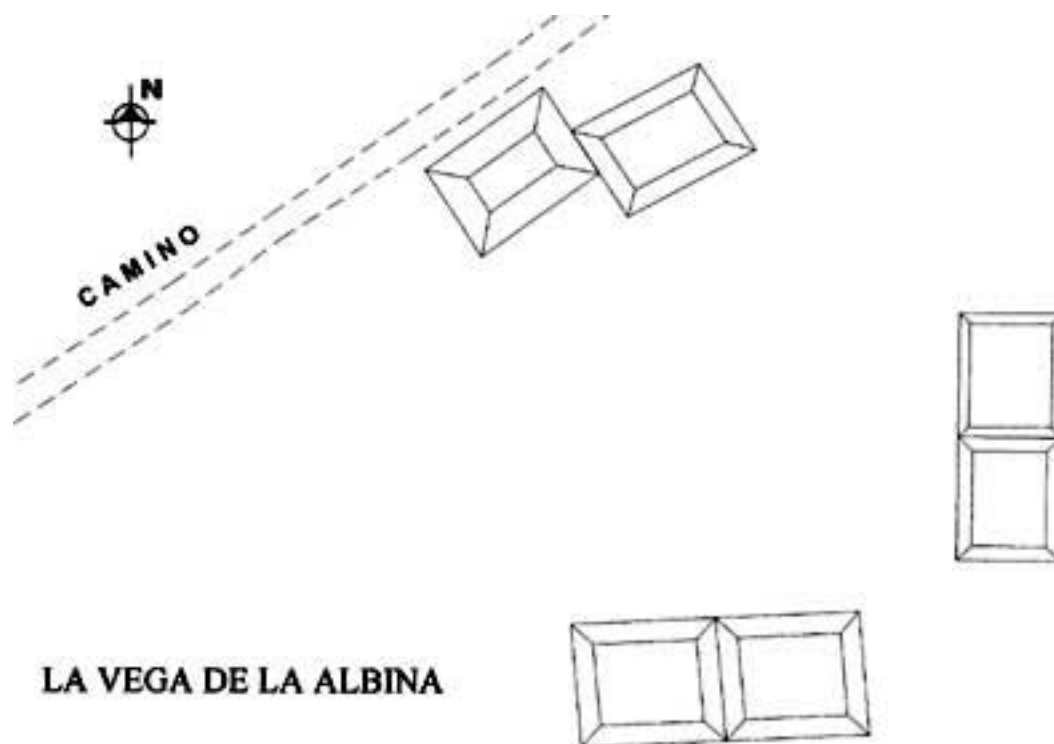


Figure 2. Site La Vega de la Albina.

The second site recently found is Ojo de Agua, located in the hamlet with the same name, in the jurisdiction of the Lelá Obraje village (coordinates 16249647E 1643539N). This is the site of Camotán, located in farmlands owned by Esteban Raimundo, north of the Río Grande and highway CA-11, which leads to Florido. It has four mounds that hardly exceed 1.50 m in height, and are in a general good state of preservation.

The third site is located in the Jocotán jurisdiction, in the village of Tierra Blanca. The site was given the name of Plan del Muerto, for being located in grounds known with the same name. Fourteen mounds in different states of preservation were surveyed. However, and supporting the notion that the site of La Vega may have been destroyed by the laying of the new highway, in this place there is presently a huge pit for ballast extraction, with a depth of approximate 10 m, a width of 30 m, and a length of 60 m. According to the arrangement of the mounds, it is almost certain that they were razed by the bulldozers used to obtain the materials (Martínez 2002; Figure 3).

Outside the Camotán river basin, work was conducted at San Esteban, Chiquimula. There, the Project attempted to evaluate the state of preservation of the sites known as San Esteban and La Ruina. Actually, it was found that these two sites are one and the same (Figure 4). The difference is that they are located in lands owned by different people: San Esteban belongs to Mario Díaz, and La Ruina/Nuevo San Esteban –first reported on October 12, 1979- to César Guzmán. In addition, mounds

not previously reported were also included, so that presently they are designated as San Esteban 1 and 2. During the mapping, the site unveiled the complexity of the settlement, and produced several surprises (Index cards, IDAEH).



Figure 3. Site of Plan del Muerto.

### SITE SAN ESTEBAN 1

The archaeological site San Esteban 1 has been recorded in the Department of Prehispanic and Colonial Monuments of the Institute of Anthropology and History on December 22, 1988. The first reports apparently corresponding to December-January, 1987 (we were unable to check this index card, only a reference was found in the 1988 card), show that the site consisted of just a few mounds (15, altogether); nonetheless, the 1988 record shows that it is the largest site in Chiquimula, with total 58 mounds. However, the significance of this site may not be properly established unless a plan using instruments is drawn. The plan elaborated by the Chiquimula Project proves that San Esteban 1 is a more complex site than expected, as it has several groups of structures, including one ceremonial group with long platforms and

a Ballgame patio. The groups adjacent to this one include tall mounds, suggesting that elite groups settled in this area for a better control of the ceremonial center (Figure 4).

Despite the fact that the mounds defined with the survey are in a relatively good state of preservation, many others, unfortunately, have been destroyed by the agricultural works conducted in those lands. It is assumed that the remains of mounds of smaller dimensions (less than 0.50 m in height) were removed from their original place by the plows to introduce watering pipes. Besides, the family who owns the site, which is the property of Mario Díaz, has built a farm (with a dairy of a considerable size, grazing fields, and *perigüeyes*, poultry, horses, etc), in the vicinities of the ceremonial center, so that it may be easily guessed that some of the mounds may have been sacrificed in favor of the building that houses the dairy).

Three mounds present in the lands of the Guzmán family (a site recorded as La Ruina) show evidence of looting. This sector, located in the easternmost part of the site, is covered with hawthorn weeds, and because it lacks any permanent surveillance, it is possible to infer that looters took advantage of the situation to perpetrate the looting. According to the IDAEH records, this looting apparently was already present in the 1988 report. The Chiquimula Project, nevertheless –according to the comparison established using the IDAEH’s sketch- believes that deterioration stopped at that time and that the state of the site is currently quite similar to that of 1988.

The structures are built with cobbles and boulders, and with no mortar. There is evidence that plazas may have also been paved, as many rocks used in the construction were removed from their original place and grouped to protect the watering pipes. However, the protection promontories of the watering ducts may have also been removed from the now destroyed small mounds. The San José River, in the surrounding area (which probably was even closer during the peak of the site), may have provided raw materials for construction. According to that which was established when the survey was completed, the site is located in coordinates 1622/269 E, 16333834 N, and includes 11 groups which altogether form 59 structures still visible. They shall be described below.

### **Group I**

It consists of four mounds, two of which are low though the one located farther north is 1 m high. However, the central structure of the group is 2.50 m high and is quite close to Group III, which might suggest that it probably was part of the same ceremonial complex but that it was kept somewhat out of it, so that the remaining mounds could have a better arrangement.

### **Group II**

This group of structures is located at the entrance of the lands owned by the Díaz family. Due to the poor state of preservation of one of the mounds and the presence of the watchman’s quarters, it is presumed that the group was disintegrated with the

lay of the road that leads to the dairy and the modern construction. For now, the group consists of three mounds which do not exceed a height of 0.50 m.

### **Group III**

Most certainly, this group constitutes the ceremonial center of the site. It is an open plaza, with two platforms 30 m long and 1.50 m tall, flanking a Ballgame patio located at the south of the group. The Ballgame patio features a northeast-southwest orientation; it is of the sunken type and is 33 m long, located approximately 1.10 m below the ground level. The south end of the patio is formed by a structure 2.50 m high, and there was a sculpture on its southeast end which was found on the surface and probably used as a marker. The structure that closes the north end of the patio is shorter, with just 1 m in height. A third mound abutting the latter completes the north sector of the patio. On the east end there is a small quadrangular structure formed by large rock blocks which probably was repeated at the opposite end, but it seems to have been destroyed by plowing (there is evidence of scattered rock blocks of similar dimensions). Between the east platform and the south end of the Ballgame, there is another mound, 1.25 m tall, whose function in the complex could not be properly established. The rest of the group is formed by two mounds with small dimensions, as shown in the plan.

### **Group IV**

*Located at the southeast of the one above, it consists of four mounds all with a height exceeding 1.25 m. The larger one shows a looting pit at the center, of a depth approximately similar to its height (2 m), though at least it will probably yield abundant ceramic samples for conducting a major analysis (particularly with those from the rock sites of San Juan Ermita, which have already shown similarities). The group was arranged in an enclosed plaza; the looted mound is the one with the larger dimensions and is located northeast.*

### **Group V**

Together with the preceding one, this group corresponds to the site recorded as La Ruina. It includes at least six still visible mounds, one of which has been looted. This is the one located southwest of an enclosed plaza, and even though it is only 2 m high as of the surrounding ground, the looting pit is 3 m deep. The other important mound with a height of 1.60 is located at the west of the complex. The remaining structures do not exceed 0.30 in height.

### **Group VI**

This group is located in the growing fields of Mario Díaz, and it is assumed it was seriously affected by a watering pipeline, as the faucets for water distribution are abundant in this area. For the moment, only four mounds were observed which do not exceed a height of 0.70 m and show no particular pattern of arrangement, suggesting that perhaps there were others, now destroyed.



## **Group VII**

Located in the same area than the preceding one and in similar condition, it is observed as a small grouping of small mounds not exceeding 0.60 m in height, and showing no particular arrangement.

## **Group VIII**

The group located on the southwest end of the site consists of five structures, all of different heights. The largest one in size, located towards the center and north of the group, is a particular structure, as its west end is taller than the east end (2.50 m and 2.40 m respectively), a trait denoting its significance, and with evidence of looting activities. Both the southeast and northwest mounds are 1.25 m and 1 m high, respectively, while the others do not exceed a height of 0.60 m. It is worth mentioning that the entire area dominated by this group presents abundant evidence of obsidian on its surface (with some presence of chalcedony), which allows us to suggest that this was there area where workshops devoted to the lithic production were located.

## **Group IX**

Forming an enclosed plaza with six mounds, it is dominated by a structure 2.25 m high located in the northern area of the complex; other mounds of 1.10 m and 1.25 m are at south. All the rest are structures of small dimensions.

## **Group X**

This group, at the northeast of the preceding one, is formed by seven mounds located in an area showing the constant use of land for crops and pasturing. It is probable that some of the mounds that were adjacent to the dairy were destroyed with the construction of its courtyard. Actually, there is one mound which underwent partial destruction caused by trench constructions presumably destined at a given time to cattle vaccination. This mound, precisely (located at the northwest end), does not seem to fit with the layout of Group X, but it was included in it because no other group existed to associate it with. Probably, the structures that complemented it disappeared with the modern construction, though the owner denies such fact. The rest of the structures form an enclosed plaza with six mounds, among which those of the west half are the largest, averaging a height of 1 m. The east half of the group is formed by low mounds.

## **Group XI**

The penultimate group includes the tallest mound of the entire site, with a height of 3 m from its base. It may be defined as the center probably occupied by the elite of that settlement, for being located at the southwest of the ceremonial center (described as Group III). Among the other mounds, the one at northeast is 1.30 m high, while the rest are structures of different heights, close to, or shorter than, 1 m.

As an exception, and probably acknowledging its significance, the Díaz family, owners of the land, fenced this group to prevent that visitors or grazing animals indiscriminately entered the mounds and caused damage. However, it has been observed that within its plaza, garbage is collected and subsequently burnt. Although we are not talking of a large amount of garbage, we have identified the residues of motor oil containers, pure water and other plastic bottles, which when burnt do obviously produce archaeological and environmental damage.

## **Group XII**

The last group is located at the northwest end of the site. It consists of three mounds that rise in the farmlands and grazing fields close to the farm, in any case, openly arranged. The structures have heights that vary between 0.50 to 1 m.

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE SCULPTURE RECOVERED AT THE BALLGAME PATIO**

The sculpture was carved in red rock with a thick porosity, it is 0.35 m high and 0.30 m wide; in addition, it has a tenon 0.05 m high. Both faces of the sculpture are carved with depictions of a skinned face with round raccoon-type eye masks, such as those of the Tlaloc type. The nasal hole was not identically represented in both sides, as one presents a concave upper arch and the other one shows a convex shape. That of the concave arch shows teeth defined by means of opposed lines, in a way that the upper and lower teeth are divided by a straight, horizontal line. On the contrary, in the convex arch representation, teeth are defined with alternate lines, in a way that the horizontality of the teeth is not well defined. The sculpture has a tenon, placed on the upper end of the face, and it was found on the surface in an upside-down position, that is, with the tenon buried in the Ballgame structure.

## **SITE SAN ESTEBAN 2**

Located in the farmlands owned by Ubaldino Díaz, the site lies approximately 200 m northeast of San Esteban 1, in coordinates 1622733 E and 1634034 N. It consists of two mound groupings, with no particular arrangement and with a type of construction already defined in the preceding site. Group I has a mound 2.50 m tall, and others of 1 m and 1.50 m in height. Group II is formed by very small structures, approximately 0.50 m high (Figure 4).

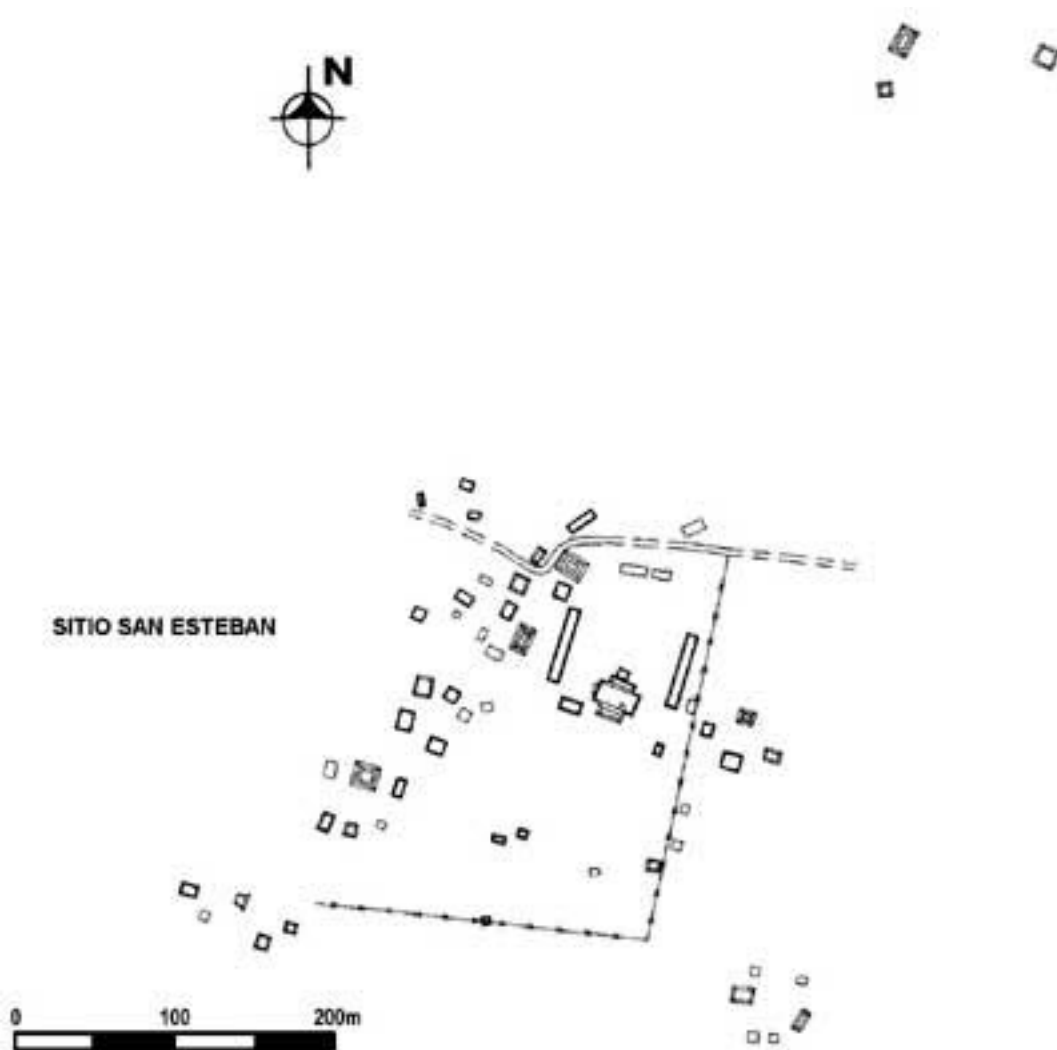


Figure 4. Site San Esteban.

## CONCLUSIONS

It may be posited that the elaboration of the plans of the sites found is contributing to establish that Chiquimula was a major agricultural area during the prehispanic period, a fact that could be anticipated considering its vicinity with Copan. On the other hand, integrating the true location of the sites and the corresponding plans to the records of the Department of Prehispanic Monuments will prevent further confusions of names and localizations. This will help the inspectors to concentrate their efforts in periodically auditing the state of preservation of the site and in the education of the owners, so that they may become fully aware of how valuable the remains found in their lands really are.

The situation of the site San Esteban 1 is fortunately different. Thanks to the good care provided by the owners, this is –in general terms- well preserved. The structures defined through the site survey and the surface material may give way to infer that an excavation could provide very interesting information for a department

that has practically not been archaeologically investigated and which requires to be temporally placed, as far as culture is concerned.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Figure 1 Site La Vegona

Figure 2 Site La Vega de la Albina

Figure 3 Site Plan del Muerto

Figure 4 Site San Esteban