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ARCHAEOLOGICAL SALVAGE AT EL CHIQUIRÍN, GULF OF FONSECA, LA UNIÓN, EL SALVADOR

Marlon Escamilla
Shione Shibata

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The salvage archaeological investigation at the site of El Chiquirín in the department of La Unión was carried out as a consequence of an accidental finding made by local fishermen in November, 2002. An enthusiast fisherman from La Unión –José Odilio Benítez- decided, like many other fellow countrymen, to illegally migrate to the United States in the search of a better future for him and his large family. His major goal was to work and save money to build a decent house. Thus, in September 2002, just upon his arrival in El Salvador, he initiated the construction of his home in the village of El Chiquirín, canton Agua Caliente, department of La Unión, in the banks of the Gulf of Fonseca.

By the end of November of the same year, while excavating for the construction of a septic tank, different archaeological materials came to light, including malacologic, ceramic and bone remains. The finding was much surprising for the community of fishermen, the Mayor of La Unión and the media, who gave the finding a wide cover.

It was through the written press that the Archaeology Unit of the National Council for Culture and Art (CONCULTURA) heard about the discovery. Therefore, the Archaeology Unit conducted an archaeological inspection at that residential place, to ascertain that the finding was in fact a prehispanic shell deposit found in the house patio, approximately 150 m away from the beach. The materials previously recovered consisted of a lot of 20 ceramic polychromatic pieces that included vases, bowls and pots, as well as an abundant lot of ceramic sherds and bone remains. All archaeological materials were taken to the storage rooms of the “Dr. David J. Guzmán” National Museum of Anthropology, for custody and analysis. Based on all this, it was decided to conduct a salvage archaeological investigation at the place of the finding.

GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Located in the southeast sector of the Mesoamerican cultural area, the current territory comprised by the Republic of El Salvador constitutes a dense region in concentration of archaeological sites, which are distributed among the five different geographic units of the country. The archaeological site of El Chiquirín is located at the southeast end of El Salvador, in the lowlands that form the coastal plain and skirt the Gulf of Fonseca, approximately 160 km east of San Salvador. Located

specifically in the village of El Chiquirín, in the Agua Caliente canton of the borderline department of La Unión, the site is 8 km south of the modern city of La Unión, in a terrestrial bay of the Gulf of Fonseca known as point El Chiquirín. The topography in this area is not uniform, and the plain is interrupted by two mountain portions that constitute the terminal ends of both the Central Range and the Coastal Range. The Conchagua volcano is an exponent of the Central Range, and constitutes the one single portion of the cordillera that skirts the sea, with an approximate height of 1243 m above sea level.

The Gulf of Fonseca is a tropical estuary system, the perimeter of which is shared among the countries of El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. The entrance to the estuary features a southeast-northwest orientation, and an average length of 35.5 km. The gulf has four bays: the bay of La Unión, which belongs to El Salvador, the bays of Chismuyo and San Lorenzo at east, which belong to Honduras, and a last bay located southeast, which belongs to Nicaragua. The surface represented by the mass of sea water has an approximate area of 2.02 km2, without considering the wetlands. The gulf area that belongs to El Salvador has twelve islands, being the most important, because of their territorial extension, those of Meanguera, Zacatillo, Conchagüita, Perico, Martín Pérez and Ilca. These islands occupy 27% of the gulf area (Gómez 2002).

This area is comprised in the climatic classification of Warm Tropical Savanna, with much higher temperatures here than in any other area of the country, climbing up to 45º as an absolute maximum, and with an average of 27º. The geological characteristics are varied, though alluvium predominates. The dominant form of plain with intrusions of hills and cliffs that are a part of both the Central Range and the Coastal Range, results in varied geological characteristics in the area. Geomorphology shows mainly ancient plains, alluvial plains and floodplains, being the latter one the area where the site of El Chiquirín is located. The floodplains are areas with no dissection, with slopes that vary from 0 to 2%, skirting the banks of the Gulf of Fonseca. The soil is constituted by lower layers of alluvium, such as non fractured talpetates, pumices or basalts of a poor permeability. Besides, the main rivers in the area are two: the Sirama and the Goascorán rivers, the latter of which forms the eastern borderline with Honduras; both empty in the Gulf of Fonseca. Today, the use of the soil in the floodplains is destined to agricultural activities, with maize and Cuba grass being the main crops.

EASTERN ZONE: RESEARCH BACKGROUNDS

Unfortunately, the eastern portion of El Salvador has been an area with a poor development of archaeological research, compared to the western portion of the country. Nowadays, it surprises that in spite of the modern existing communication routes, the major river in the country, the Lempa River, and apparently, still is a natural and probably a cultural frontier just as it used to be in prehispanic times.

The first investigations in the eastern area were accomplished by John Longyear in 1941, and comprised a broad reconnaissance of the area, including excavations at the site of Los Llanitos, located south of the city of San Miguel (Longyear 1944).

Apparently, Longyear was the first archaeologist to publish information an archaeological sites located in the Gulf of Fonseca. By the mid-1950's, Wolfgang Haberland conducted research at the site of Río Gualcho, located in the department of Usulatán (Haberland 1960). One of the most important projects for the eastern region was carried out towards the end of the 1960's at the archaeological site of Quelepa, located in the department of San Miguel. The project was directed by Wyllys Andrews, who provided a chronological sequence for the area (Andrews 1986). During 1979 and 1980, Hamed Posadas carried out salvage excavations at the site of Asanyamba, located in the Gulf of Fonseca, which consisted of a shell deposit from the Classic period (Fowler 1995). The investigations provided data on the production and trade of salt, as well as an important ceramic analysis and classification elaborated by Marilyn Beaudry-Corbett (1982). During the 1980's, the archaeological investigations were interrupted as a result of the armed conflict that affected the country. It was only in the mid 1990's that Elisenda Coladán carried out investigations on the graphic and rock art of the archaeological site Gruta del Espíritu Santo, located in the department of Morazán (Coladán 1996). In 2002, Esteban Gómez conducted an archaeological reconnaissance in the Gulf of Fonseca, providing the record of new archaeological sites located in the Gulf islands, together with an analysis of their present state of preservation (Gómez 2002). In 2003, the Archaeology Unit of CONCULTURA recorded the site Plan de La Montaña, consisting of a concentration of 17 low shell deposits located in the town of Conchagua, department of La Unión (Erquicia 2003).

RECORD OF SHELL DEPOSITS

The archaeological traits known as *"concheros"* (shell deposits) may be considered as shell-made mounds (Gendrop 2001) which probably were used as food and subsequently deposited. Presently, the records of the Archaeology Unit include 25 archaeological sites, nation-wide, showing the characteristics of shell deposits. Of the 25 sites, 24 are located at the Gulf of Fonseca, in the frontier department of La Unión, located at the eastern end of the country.

EXCAVATION WORKS

The excavation works took place between December 12, 2002 and February 23, 2003. The main purpose of the excavation was to document and record archaeological traits associated with the "conchero", through controlled excavations that would allow us to define the form how the malacologic material was deposited, the *in situ* location of traits and their temporality.

Based on the above, the first activity carried out consisted in a short surface reconnaissance of the area, during which several elevations were identified, probably suggest the presence of prehispanic structures. However, the presence of additional structures could not be corroborated. Later, the topographic mapping of the site was continued, including the localization of the benchmark, approximately 2 km away from the site, so as to obtain an absolute height. Due to the extreme closeness of the site to the sea, the shell deposit was covered with an approximately

0.80 m thick layer of sand, so that we first proceeded to its removal, together with the extraction of dirt, rocks, and the loose and scattered malacologic material resulting from the unofficial excavation conducted by the land owner, measuring 4.50 m long, 2.50 m wide, and 1.50 m deep, located at the center of the shell deposit.

Once the structure was cleared, a grid was created with units of 1 x 1 m, while the decision was made to excavate a total of 6 units corresponding to quadrants 12H, 12I, 12J, 13H, 13I and 13J, placed pm the southeast side. In the first excavated levels, at a depth of 0.10 m from the present surface, a trait, Offering 1, was documented, mainly consisting of one monochrome zoomorphic vessel with slightly globular walls and with the representation of a bird, probably an owl, adhered at the height of the neck.

Units 12J and 13J exposed a stone wall with an approximate length of 8 m, which was denominated East Wall. Due to instability at the edges of the hole previously opened, and to the action of night visitors, new collapses were found on a daily basis, which contributed to broadening the hole, a situation that in a way facilitated the discovery of additional traits. During the excavation and clearing of these collapses, the presence of several additional limestone walls was observed on the north and west sides of the shell deposit. Therefore, it was decided to conduct excavations at both sides of it.

The north trench led to the discovery of the North Wall remains, oriented on an east-to-west axis and with a length of 1 m. The excavations in the west trench provided information about the thickness of walls, as both faces of the West Wall were discovered oriented on its north-to-south axis with an approximate extension of 3 m and a width of 0.90 m. Alternately, excavation works in the 6 units continued, and the decision was made to take samples of the malacologic materials in arbitrary lots of 0.10 m for further analysis, with a total collection of 281 bags of one arroba each.

Less than one week prior to concluding the salvage works, units 12H and 12I yielded a burial with several offerings at the bottom of the shell deposit, so that it was decided to expand the excavation to units 11H and 11I. The trait was denominated Offering 2, and consisted of a secondary burial that included human bone fragments with no skull and a poor state of preservation. The human bones were found associated with an offering placed in a semi-circle around the bones, composed of nine ceramic pieces, a mass of red pigment and fragments of volcanic rock.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The salvage investigations in the archaeological site of El Chiquirín have provided interesting information about the use and meaning of shell deposits within the area of the Gulf of Fonseca. The considerations below are of a preliminary character, because analysis of some of the excavation materials is still in progress.

As to the construction system, and based on the data obtained on the field, it may be inferred that the construction of the stone walls was carried out with the purpose of delimitating an enclosed and probably rectangular space (although the south sector

could not be excavated because the land owner denied his authorization, and for time restraints on our side), creating some sort of “box”, with approximate dimensions of 6 m in length and 3 m in width. The reason for building this “box” remains unknown, for the moment, considering that this is the first example documented in El Salvador of a shell deposit associated with stone walls; however, it may be argued that the “box” was built with the purpose of creating an exclusive space for the burial documented during the excavations, suggesting that after the construction of the walls, the burial and the offerings were put in place, and that the malacologic material was deposited later.

As to the burial documented, it may be concluded that it was of the secondary type and that the bone remains probably belonged to some important lord of those times. Unfortunately, the bones have not been analyzed for the moment, which makes it difficult to identify aspects such as sex, age and pathologies, to mention just a few. Considering the very abundant amount of sherds recovered, together with the 20 ceramic pieces and the bone remains identified earlier, it is inferred that probably the finding constituted a multiple burial.

Based on the analysis of ceramic materials, El Chiquirín has been chronologically placed in the Late Classic period (AD 600-900). Ceramic types corresponding to the Lepa ceramic complex were identified, based on the ceramic classification produced by Wyllys Andrews in Quelepa (1986).

The malacologic sample includes shells, oysters, abalone shells and snails, among others. A total of 90% are oysters. The analysis of the malacologic sample materials is about to be initiated and will be conducted by biologists from the Museum of Natural History at El Salvador.

In short, the final investigations at El Chiriquín will contribute to the understanding of the cultural development that unfolded at the Gulf of Fonseca in prehispanic times. Presently, the development of salvage archaeology and research projects largely depends on the leading role played by the residents that live in the vicinities of archaeological sites. These communities must be a part of a regional strategy aimed at safeguarding and rescuing the cultural patrimony from imminent destruction. The idea is to make local residents who share their whole lives with the sites, participants of their preservation. Archaeology is a lifeless science if one is unable to cultivate in the minds of local residents the need to rescue and protect our cultural patrimony (Escamilla 2002).

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