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THE SIGUA: SOUTHERNMOST AZTEC OUTPOST

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The fact that an Aztec colony existed in northwestern Panamá in the sixteenth century has been known to scholars for over half a century but the curious history of this group, scattered through various documentary sources, has never been brought together. As the vicissitudes of the Sigua typify larger movements of population and what must have been the fate of many other native tribes during the Colonial period, we shall follow the course of events which carried them from Anahuac to Panamá and ultimately to the Island of Jamaica.

The name Sigua is also spelled Segua, Zegua, or Çigua and it is thought that Xicagua, Chichagua, and Shelaba may be synonyms. Sigua signifies "stranger" in the language of Talamanca and is comparable to the Aztec words Popoloca and Chontal or the Greek βαρβαρος, which were applied indiscriminately to foreigners.

The earlier modern reference we have found to the Sigua is in Gabb's classical work, "On the Indian Tribes and Languages of Costa Rica." He did not, however, recognize their linguistic affiliations and merely states¹ that, when he visited the country, a tribe which he called Shelaba was extinct and that their language was lost. The fact that these Indians spoke the Aztec tongue apparently was first ascertained by the great Costa Rican scholar, León Fernández,² whose publication of a large series of documents has supplied the material on which this study is based. Brinton in 1891 and Peralta in 1893 both classified the Sigua among the Nahua tribes, but as recently as 1911 Thomas and Swanton thought it necessary to state that, although their existence had been denied, the historical evidence did not admit of doubt. This evidence we shall now examine.

The first hint that Mexican Indians were living in Panamá dates from the year 1541, when a soldier named Cristóbal Cansino declared that the cacique Coaza had said to him that Hernán Sánchez de Badajoz was a gentleman but that Rodrigo de Contreras was a *motolín*, a word which means "poor" in the Aztec tongue.³ Coaza had been taken prisoner in the valley known in

¹ Gabb, 1875, p. 487.

² Fernández, 1889, p. 107.

³ Documentos de Costa Rica, vol. 6, p. 188.

the sixteenth century as Coaza or Duy, which corresponds to the river basin now known as Tarire or Sixaola, located behind the Atlantic seaboard in north-western Panamá.

From additional testimony regarding the expeditions of Badajoz and Contreras, taken in 1546, we learn that the cacique Coxele, who was second in command to Coaza, spoke the tongue of Nicaragua, presumably meaning Nahuatl.⁴ Another chief was named Tamagaz which is a Nahuan name. In Nicaragua the creator-god was called Tamagastat and, among the Aztec, priests were known as tlamacasqui.⁵

In 1564, Juan Vázquez de Coronado pacified the region of which we write and received the submission of various chiefs. Among these was the cacique Yztolín who dwelt near the village of Hara in the Coaza valley. This chief is stated to have been "a Mexican, cacique of the Chichimecs" and his words were translated by one Lucas Descobar, who is described as a *naguatato*, a corruption of *nahuatlato*, the Aztec word for interpreter. After Yztolín had submitted, the Spanish general, it was said, "embraced him and spoke to him in his own tongue," which he had learned in México.⁶

The explanation of how the Aztecs happened to have travelled so far from their homes is contained in a description of Costa Rica written in 1572 by Juan de Estrada Rávago. After picturing the wealth of the country in gold, he states that the great King Montezuma sent his armies more than six hun-

⁴ Documentos de Costa Rica, vol. 6, p. 294.

⁵ Documentos de Costa Rica, vol. 6, p. 263. Lothrop, 1926, pp. 65, 66.

⁶ "En el pueblo de *Hara*, cordillera de la mar del norte, provincia del *Guayamí*, comarca del valle de *Coaza*, ques en las provincias del *Nuevo Cartago* y *Costa Rica*, en cinco días del mes de hebrero de mill é quinientos y sesenta é quatro años, antel muy magnífico señor Jhoan Vázquez de Coronado, justicia mayor y capitán general destas provincias del *Nuevo Cartago* é *Costa Rica*, justicia mayor, juez de rresidencia y visitador general de la provincia de *Nicaragua* por su magestad, é á su llamamiento, pareció presente el cacique llamado Yztolín, mexicano, cacique de los *Chichimecas*, comarca del pueblo de *Hara*, el qual dixo, por lengua de Lucas Descobar, naguatato, qué venía á ver lo que el dicho señor general le mandava; al qual el dicho señor general dixo, por la dicha lengua, que su merced venía, en nonbre de su magestad del rrey don Phelipe nuestro señor, á quél fuese christiano é su vasallo y le diese la ovidiencia devida y le tuviese por su rrey é señor, como lo avían hecho todas las demás provincias; y haciendolo así, le tendría el dicho señor general por amigo; al qual el dicho cacique, por el dicho naguatato, dixo que estava presto de ser vasallo de su magestad y de servir al dicho señor general en su rreal nonbre é le tener toda amistad; en señal de lo qual el dicho señor general le abrazó é le dió hachas, chaquira, cuchillos y otras muchas cosas; con lo qual el dicho cacique pareció quedar contento é le prometió de servir en lo que le mandase; y el dicho señor general le abrazó é le habló en su lengua é le dixo lo que le avía dicho por lengua del dicho yntérprete, y le rrecibió por vasallo de su magestad; testigos Antonio de Herrera é Francisco de Estrada y Bartolomé Alvarez; y el dicho señor general lo firmó de su nonbre; el qual dicho vasallage dió en su nonbre y de los demás *Chichimecas* mexicanos questán en el valle de *Coaza*, é así se le rrecibió = (f.) Ju°. Vázquez de Coronado = Pasó ante mí = (f.) Xpóval de Madrigal, escrivano."—Documentos de Costa Rica, vol. 4, pp. 297-98.

dred leagues to collect tribute consisting of many and very fine pieces of gold. "I have seen," Estrada adds, "the remnants of his soldiers and armies, who are called *Nahuatatos*."⁷

This picture is further amplified by a statement of Yñigo Aranza, governor of Veraguas in 1595. "There are in the land called *Duy*," he says, "more than six thousand Indian warriors, and it is reported that they have traffic with the Indians from México who remained there when word reached them of the first entrance of the Spaniards, they having gone there for the tribute of gold which that province used to give to Montezuma."⁸

The various sources cited indicate clearly that Mexican Indians speaking the Nahua tongue lived in the valley of Duy during the Sixteenth century. Peralta,⁹ on the basis of linguistic analysis, assigns them to the villages of Chicaua, Moyaua, Quequexque, and Corotapa. Fernández Guardia at one time believed that the Sigua perhaps were some of the four hundred "Chichimecs" from Nicaragua who accompanied the expedition of Rodrigo de Contreras in 1540, but later changed his opinion, probably on account of a document stating they were Mangues.¹⁰

In the year 1603, the warriors of Duy embarked on a series of raids against their neighbors which led in the following year to a Spanish punitive expedition and to the founding of a town called Santiago de Talamanca, in which a garrison was maintained. On July 29, 1610, the natives, including the Sigua, attacked the town, captured it and forced the Spaniards to abandon the region completely.¹¹ In spite of repeated attempts at pacification over the course of many years, the Spaniards were unable to reestablish effective control.

Military measures against the Indians during the seventeenth century having failed, the Church endeavored to Christianize them. Dated from 1697, we have a "Report of Fray Francisco de San José, Apostolic Missionary, to the President of the Audiencia of Guatemala, Concerning the Subjection of Talamanca and the Houses and Tribes of the Térrabas Indians."¹² This document is a careful analysis of the Indian population and includes certain information on the Sigua.

⁷ ". . . el gran rey Montezuma, que envió sus ejércitos, que son mas de seiscientas leguas, antes más que menos, en demanda de dicha provincia, de la cual tuvo muchas y muy especiales piezas de oro en su poder; y así queda hasta hoy día, como V. R. sabe, y ha visto reliquias de sus soldados y ejércitos, que se llaman *Nauatatos*.—Documentos de Costa Rica, vol. 3, p. 3.

⁸ Documentos de Costa Rica, vol. 5, p. 100. See also a letter from the Bishop of Panamá written in 1620.—*Op. cit.*, p. 243.

⁹ Peralta, 1893, p. XI. See also Gagini, 1917, pp. 37-52.

¹⁰ Fernández Guardia, 1913, p. 11, *fn.* Documentos de Costa Rica, vol. 6, p. 308.

¹¹ Documentos de Costa Rica, vol. 5, pp. 112, 218, 314.

¹² Documentos de Costa Rica, vol. 5, p. 369.

At some time between the year 1610 and 1697, the Sigua had abandoned the interior valley in which they lived and had moved to the Island of Tójar, known today as Isla de Colón, situated off the northern side of Almarante Bay. Fray Francisco states, "The people of the Island are more reasonable [than those of the mainland], of good appearance, and wear their hair down to the waist, both men and women; but they are very fierce, for it is said that this island was settled by a tribe of Mexicans who could not remain in *Talamanca*, being too turbulent; as well as by other similar tribes of the *Térrabas*, and the *Chánguenes*, *Torresques* and *Seguas*, all free-booters. So the language that prevails is *Térraba* mixed with *Chánguen* and some words of *Torresque* and *Segua*."

From the same source, we learn that there were four towns on the Island of Tójar: Coronuza, Puinsa, Quenamasa, and Urutisa. These contained ninety-two houses, each inhabited by fifteen or twenty people. Trade was maintained with the mainland, and hatchets and machetes were exchanged for necklaces and belts of shell. Food included plantains, fish, maize, yuca and pejibay, but green vegetables were scarce. Cultivation extended to other islands and to the mainland, as Tójar was not large enough to support the entire population. Little meat was eaten and drinking was carried to excess.

This picture of the Sigua at the end of the seventeenth century is about what we might expect. A group of warriors settling in a foreign land no doubt secured native women, with the result that succeeding generations, although proud of their ancestry, took on the culture of the locality, including the language.

In 1701, Fray Francisco de San José returned to Talamanca and landed at the Island of Tójar on November 21. His party was attacked by the natives who killed two soldiers and two negroes. The missionary, however, "miraculously escaped with a three-pointed spear thrust in the region of the kidneys."¹³ Thereafter the Island of Tójar was left strictly to itself and its inhabitants soon passed into the realm of the fabulous. Writing in 1709, Fray Antonio de Andrade and Fray Pablo de Rebullida solemnly reported¹⁴ that among the *Zeguas*, *Almirantes*, and *Gaymiles* "we believe, there are some that they say have tails."

On September 28 of the year 1709, there was a general Indian uprising in which the Sigua took part. This resulted in the death of the missionaries we have named and also of ten soldiers, a woman and a child. The following year, Governor Lorenzo Antonio de Granda y Balbín proclaimed that the rebels must submit voluntarily or be burned alive. Many submitted and others, defeated in battle, were transported to the vicinity of Cartago, but the inhabitants of Tójar

¹³ Documentos de Costa Rica, vol. 5, p. 399.

¹⁴ Documentos de Costa Rica, vol. 5, p. 452.

remained unpunished.¹⁵ Yet there had arisen in the Caribbean a new political power which soon was destined to destroy the Sigua, a feat which the Spaniards had failed to accomplish in nearly two centuries of intermittent warfare. This was the Kingdom of the Mosquitos.

The history of the Mosquitos is briefly as follows: In 1641 a shipload of negro slaves under charge of a Portuguese named Lorenzo Gramalxo was wrecked on an island known as Mosquitos off the coast of Nicaragua. Most of the negroes escaped and, organized as an army, they conquered various native tribes. With the women of the conquered the victors rapidly increased in numbers, creating a mixed race. Encouraged by the English in Jamaica, who formally recognized a Mosquito "king," they raided Spanish and Indian settlements, selling the men to the English as slaves and keeping the women for themselves. These depredations were extended as far north as the Petén and southward to Chiriquí and Portobello.¹⁶ Plans for the extermination of the Mosquitos were drawn up as early as 1711 and 1714, but nothing seems to have been accomplished, and in 1720 the King ordered the Spanish Minister in England to make formal protest over the sale of Spanish subjects as slaves in Jamaica.¹⁷

That the Sigua were taken in these raids comes to light as a result of an investigation ordered by the Spanish Crown in 1722. The Governor of Costa Rica, Don Diego de la Haya Fernández, reported on the 30th of September that over two thousand Indians had been taken from the Island of Tójar and the adjacent mainland. The greater part of these had been exchanged in Jamaica for "guns and munitions, iron and steel and coarse clothing, which traffic is current every year."¹⁸

We have found only one more historical reference to the Sigua, in a report on the Missions of Talamanca written in 1763 by Fray Manuel de Urcullu. "The strangest thing in the mountain region of *Talamanca*," he writes, "is that the Indians of the *Segua* tribe, who are upon the islands and shores of the North Sea, all or nearly all of them have a tail more than a third of a yard long; and doubtless on account of this monstrosity they do not mingle with the other tribes, but are only to be met with on the Island of *Thóxar*, whither the other tribes go to trade for cacao, the yield of which is there very good in quality and abundant. This island is very fertile and abounds in fruit such as plantains, pineapples, etc., but as I am informed it is already deserted on account of the repeated invasions which have been made by the *Zambos* and *Mosquitos* in league with the English, who carry away the people selling the men in *Jamaica* and making use of the

¹⁵ Documentos de Costa Rica, vol. 5, pp. 468 *et seq.*

¹⁶ Peralta, 1898, pp. 41, 117. Cockburn, 1735, p. 236.

¹⁷ Peralta, 1898, p. 93.

¹⁸ Arbitration Documents, vol. 1, p. 433.

women. The few that are left have withdrawn into the hills, where they have their settlements or *palenques* . . ." ¹⁹

We have dealt at length with the Sigua because they illustrate two great movements of native populations, one in aboriginal and one in colonial times. The first concerns the expansion of the Aztec.

It is a matter of general knowledge that a great migration of Toltecs from México had taken place several centuries before the Conquest, which brought Mexican settlers to Yucatán, Guatemala, Salvador and Nicaragua. The Aztec, however, although they founded no large colonies when they later rose to power, were ambitious travellers who reached and raided areas far beyond those listed in their tribute rolls.

The earliest of these journeys which has been recorded took place during the reign in México of the Emperor Ahuitzotl (1486-1502), who sent his troops southward to seek an alliance with one of the major tribes of Guatemala, a proposal which was everywhere rejected. It appears that previously there had been a penetration by Aztec "merchants" who had settled all over Guatemala and Salvador in order to act as spies. The Guatemalan chiefs cleaned up this "fifth column," which then moved to Salvador and to a place called Cuilonemihi on the north coast.²⁰ Various Aztec settlements in northern Honduras, dating apparently from just before the Conquest, have also been recorded.²¹

In Nicaragua there was a large Mexican colony of Toltec ancestry on the Pacific coast. "On the North sea and near the Desaguadero (Río San Juan)," wrote Torquemada,²² there is a town of these Indians, and they speak a Mexican dialect not so corrupt as that of Pipiles." The suspicion that this was an Aztec colony is based not only on this statement but also on a royal *cédula*, dated 1535, in which the Queen of Spain ordered the outlet of the San Juan River to be explored because gold was shipped thence to Montezuma by way of Yucatán.²³

Torquemada also wrote of Nahuá-speaking Indians who pushed down the San Juan River and then went to Nombre de Dios in eastern Panamá. Possibly the Sigua were part of this band. It is also possible that they formed the tribe of whom Andagoya²⁴ wrote: "In Nombre de Dios there was a certain race of people called *Chuchures* with a language different from that of the other Indians. They came to settle in this place in canoes from Honduras . . ."

These instances of Aztec penetration to the south from México which we have mentioned are isolated, to be sure, but apparently they represent a consistent

¹⁹ Peralta, 1890, p. 133.

²⁰ Fuentes y Guzmán, 1882, pp. 75-77.

²¹ Strong, Kidder, and Paul, 1938, pp. 9-10.

²² Torquemada, 1723, lib. III, cap. XL.

²³ Peralta, 1883, p. 117.

²⁴ Andagoya, 1865, p. 23.

scheme of expansion, conceived by the Emperor Ahuitzotl and continued under his successor, Montezuma II. Had not the Spaniards arrived, it seems quite possible that the Aztec in course of time might have conquered or made tributary most of Central America, yet it is doubtful that they possessed the political sagacity to consolidate their holdings as did the Inca dynasty. At any rate, the Sigua represent the process of expansion of a strong military state, arrested before it had attained maturity.

We may also note that the Sigua later formed part of a great forced migration from the American continent to the West Indies, where slaves were needed primarily to work in the mines and later on the plantations. The first Spanish settlers were very uneconomical in their treatment of labor and the Antillean population was rapidly exterminated. On the other hand, in parts of the mainland which produced no precious metals there was, from the Spanish point of view, a surplus of labor which could be sold for a profit. The extent of this trade has not been fully recorded, because the Crown soon made it illegal, but it must have been very large. It apparently has left little trace in the present population of the Antilles because the Indians died off rapidly under the combination of strange surroundings, bad food and hard labor conditions, which negro slaves were able to survive.

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²⁵ We have utilized the translations in this series when possible, but it is so rare that we have given also references to the more accessible *Documentos de Costa Rica*.

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