

Revealing Ancestral Central America

Edited by
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The Smithsonian Latino Center
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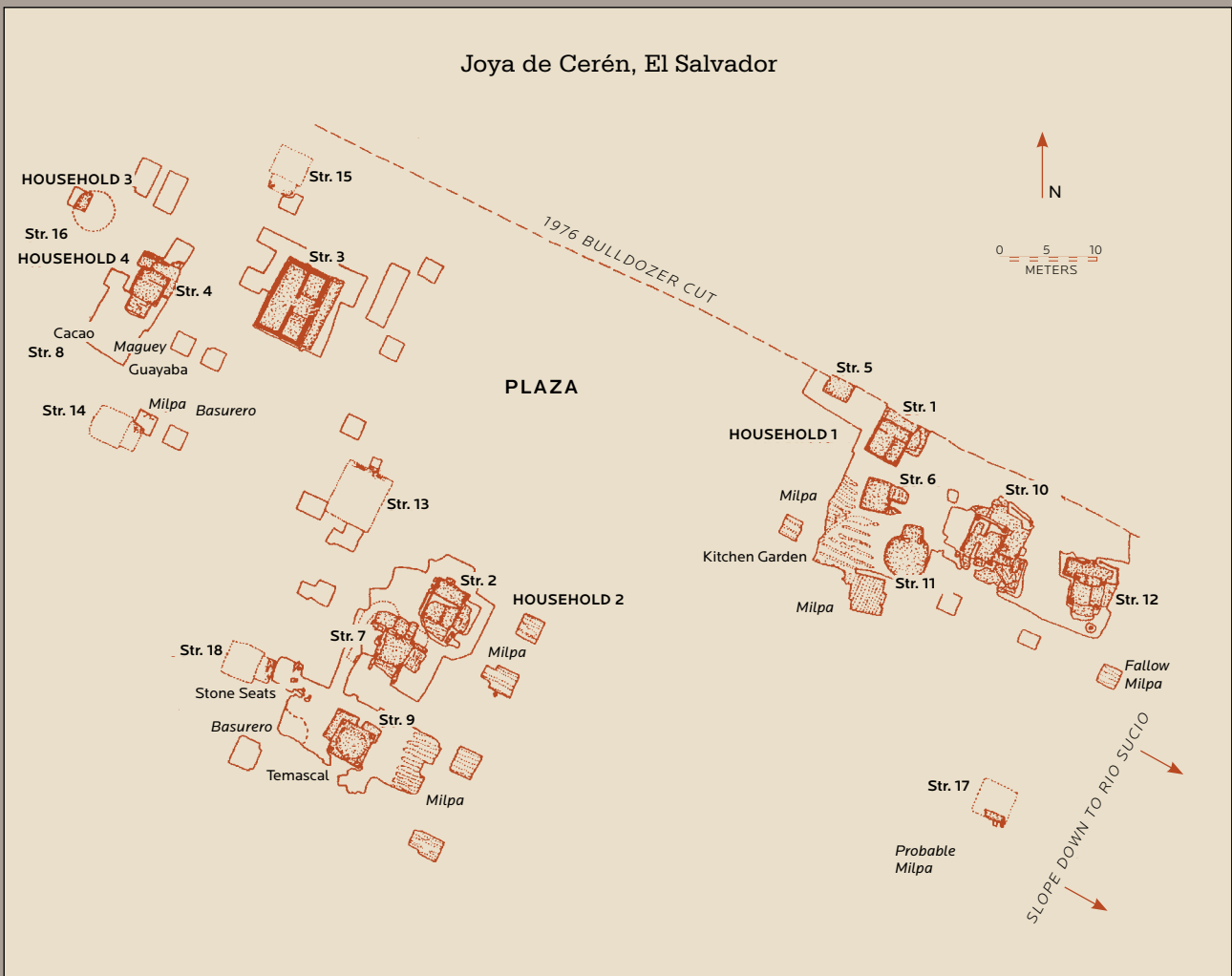


Fig. 22



Dwelling in the Ancestral Joya de Cerén Village

Payson Sheets

About 1,400 years ago a village of some 200 commoners lived along the banks of a large river in what is now El Salvador (Sheets, 2002). They were much like hundreds of other small villages dotting the landscape in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. When a village undergoes the usual form of abandonment, people remove all their usable artifacts and take them to their new location. Then the elements of rain, sun, vegetation growth, and other disturbances reduce the abandoned village to a faint echo of its former self. Archaeologists normally try to reconstruct ancient behavior and belief based on very fragmentary remains.

Only rarely do archaeologists discover a settlement that is unusually well-preserved, providing abundant evidence of dwelling that was not degraded by the passage of time. The Roman city of Pompeii is the best-known example. It was buried by volcanic ash from Vesuvius, thus preserving buildings and artifacts extraordinarily well. The Joya de Cerén village (Figure 22) was also buried by volcanic ash, and that is where our story begins.

Unknown to the villagers living there around AD 630, from deep underground a hot magma was gradually forcing its way upward only 600 meters north of the village (Sheets, 2002). When that magma finally broke loose right under the large river, it caused a violent

steam explosion. There was some warning, as a horrible shrieking noise was caused by the magma first contacting the water. Evidently the villagers headed south, away from that danger. A cloud of hot steam, fine-grained volcanic ash, and gases blasted into the village and coated the buildings, trees, and plants growing in their fields. That deposit was followed by many other layers until the village was entombed by four to seven meters of volcanic ash.

Although we regret the villagers' crisis, the remarkable preservation the volcanic ash produced allows us to understand the surprisingly high quality of life that they experienced before the eruption. Archaeologists knew that ancient nobles lived well in their palaces, but we did not know that commoners also lived as well as they did at Joya de Cerén. There, each household constructed and maintained three structures: a domicile for sleeping and living, a storehouse, and a kitchen. They had ample space inside the wattle-and-daub walls of these buildings, and abundant space outside the walls yet still under the roof, for comfortable work areas. These walls and thatch roofs were one of the most earthquake-resistant forms of architecture ever invented, as they were flexible, and if they failed in a super-earthquake only small pieces of daub would fall, causing minimal

Fig. 22. Plan of Joya de Cerén. Courtesy of Payson Sheets.

Fig. 23. Classic period Maya metate in the form of an animal and mano, AD 250–900. Chiltiupán, La Libertad Department, El Salvador. Stone. Collected or excavated by Samuel K. Lothrop, 1926.



Fig. 23

Fig. 24. Maya digging stick weight, 900 BC–AD 1500. El Salvador. Basalt. MAI purchase by Marshall H. Saville, 1920.



Fig. 24

Fig. 25. Maya spindle whorls, 900 BC–AD 1500. Estanzuelas, El Salvador. Pottery. Collected or excavated by Samuel K. Lothrop, 1924.



Fig. 25

Fig. 26. Salúa bowl with human design, AD 700–900. Hospicio excavation near church of San Jacinto, San Salvador, San Salvador Department, El Salvador. Pottery, clay slip, paint. MAI purchase by Marshall H. Saville, 1920.



Fig. 26

Fig. 27. Salúa bowl, AD 600–1000. Hospicio excavation near church of San Jacinto, San Salvador, San Salvador Department, El Salvador. Pottery, clay slip, paint. MAI purchase by Marshall H. Saville, 1920.



Fig. 27

Fig. 28. Salúa vessel with bird design, AD 400–900. Izalco, Sonsonate Department, El Salvador. Pottery, clay slip, paint. Collected or excavated by Samuel K. Lothrop, 1924.



Fig. 28



Fig. 29

problems. Each household produced more of some commodity than it needed for its own consumption and used the surplus to exchange for other households' production. For instance, Household 1 overproduced groundstone items such as metates (Figure 23) and "doughnut stones," which may have been used as digging stick weights (Figure 24), as well as cotton thread, evidenced by abundant spindle whorls (Figure 25).

The high quality of life is clear inside the buildings. Each household had about seventy complete pottery vessels. Some were used for food storage, processing, and cooking, while bowls and cylinder vases were used for serving foods and drinks (Figures 26–28). Utilitarian vessels were made in the village or nearby. Food and drink serving vessels that made up almost a quarter of their collection, beautifully painted in many colors, evidently were made in the Copán Valley, 120 km to the north (Figure 29). Villagers would take surplus foods or other items to the marketplaces in centers near the village to obtain these fancy vessels. Their abundance in the households is a clear indication that the people of Joya de Cerén were "wealthy villagers." Other items obtained in the marketplace included knives and scrapers made of obsidian (a volcanic glass), jade axes and beads, mineral pigments (reds made from iron ore

and mercuric oxide), and seashells (Figures 30, 31). Jade and obsidian also came from the north, and likely were transported by the same traders who brought the fancy pottery. Because villagers could choose which market to visit among many in the valley, nobles did not control everything and to some degree would have to compete for the labor or production of commoners.

Clear evidence of a well-developed religious life was found in the village. First we look at religious activity within each household. Then we explore the activities and beliefs that involved multiple households and those that involved the entire village. Not only each household, but each household building

Fig. 29. Classic period Maya bowl with design of a shaman in flight, AD 700–800. Chalchuapa, Santa Ana Department, El Salvador. Pottery, clay slip, paint. Gift of Dr. Benjamin Levine, 1974.

Fig. 30. Maya blade core, 900 BC–AD. 1500. El Salvador. Obsidian. Gift of Dr. Joseph S. Somer and Judith Somer, 1965.

Fig. 31. Maya celts, 900 BC–AD 1500. Estanzuelas, El Salvador. Stone. Collected or excavated by Samuel K. Lothrop, 1924.



Fig. 30



Fig. 31

Fig. 32. Classic period Maya incense burner with ceiba-tree spikes, AD 250–900. Quelepa, San Miguel Department, El Salvador. Pottery. Collected or excavated by Samuel K. Lothrop, 1926.



Fig. 32

Fig. 33. Classic period Maya female figure, AD 600–1000. Nekepia, Usulután Department, El Salvador. Pottery. Gift of Francis E. Ross, 1962.



Fig. 33

had an incense burner (Figure 32). These evidently were made within the household, and were used to burn copal incense, the quintessential method the ancient Maya used (and contemporary Maya use today) to connect with the supernatural world of spirits, deities, and ancestors. Figurines also probably played a role in household religious life (Figure 33).

Household 2 maintained a sauna (*temascal*) for multiple-household use (Figure 34). The contemporary Maya use saunas for physical as well as spiritual and occasionally medicinal cleansing, and it is probable that the ancient one in Joya de Cerén was used for those functions as well. The ample bench inside the walls, around the firebox, would seat ten to twelve people. It is likely that the composition of the sauna users changed as the principal objective changed from physical to spiritual cleansing, or medicinal use, helping resolve respiratory problems as the Maya do today. The Maya rinse off after leaving the sauna, and we found an unusual number of large *ollas* (ceramic pots) for water in the nearby storehouse that probably were used for that purpose. We also found evidence that water was poured over the dome-shaped firebox in the center of the space, so it was a steam rather than a dry sauna. Household 2 stored considerable firewood, including pine, presumably for the fire in the firebox.

The sauna had solid earthen walls and a dome of wattle and daub. Books on the history of architecture that claim domed architecture was introduced into the Americas by Europeans in the 16th century need to acknowledge that Maya commoners built domes centuries before.

A consistent Maya tradition, from the greatest cities to the smallest settlements such as Joya de Cerén, has been to locate the most spiritually powerful buildings at the highest elevation. The principal pyramids with temples on the top were in the highest location in cities, to better communicate with the supernatural domain. At Joya de Cerén two special religious buildings were at the highest point, the eastern end of the village, overlooking the river. Both shared the Maya characteristic of many different levels of floors, from the secular outside through successively higher floors to the innermost, highest room. Both had walls painted white with pigment made from fine-grained, white ash from the immense Ilopango volcanic eruption that occurred a few decades before the village was founded, with some red decorations.

One of these buildings, Structure 12, is a complex and delicate edifice where a ritual diviner practiced, but did not live (Figure 35). The evidence for divination is in three collections of items that could be cast onto



Fig. 34

Fig. 34. Sauna maintained by Household 2 at Joya de Cerén. Photo by Payson Sheets.



Fig. 35

Fig. 35. Structure 12, a special religious building where a female diviner/shaman practiced (tourist in the foreground). Photo by Payson Sheets.

Fig. 36. Classic period Maya blades, AD 250–900. San Miguel de Mercedes, Chalatenango Department, El Salvador. Obsidian. Collected or excavated by Samuel K. Lothrop, 1926.



Fig. 36

the floor in the innermost (highest) back room and “read,” then interpreted, for a person standing outside listening through a lattice window. Another lattice window is in the front of the building, where a villager could approach and discuss with the diviner what he or she needed. If an agreement was reached, the client would often leave an artifact for payment. While many of the artifacts left could be used by both genders, there were no predominantly male-use artifacts, and there were frequent female-use artifacts such as spindle whorls for making cotton thread for weaving, and grinding stones for food processing. Therefore it appears the diviner was a woman.

Structure 10, adjacent to the diviner’s building, was also clearly religious, with successively higher rooms, white-painted walls, and red decorations, but it functioned in a very different fashion. It hosted ceremonies for the village, with a focus on deer as symbolic of the fertility of nature and a successful harvest. The front and lowermost room is large and held more food than any other building in the site excavated so far. That room also processed food, with grinding stones and hand stones called metates and manos, like those found at other sites in El Salvador. A hearth here was used for cooking. The foods were dispensed to participants over a half-height wall. Outside the building the ground was

kept clear of artifacts, trash, and vegetation, and was very hard-packed by use.

The Maya have a deep belief in cyclicality, linking the rising and setting of the sun, planets, and stars with the cycle of maize. Maize for planting is stored dormant/dry during the half-year dry season, and then springs to life as it is planted and grows during the rainy season. It is a powerful metaphor for human reproduction. Mature maize drying in the field, mature guayaba fruits, and other seasonal indicators excavated at Joya de Cerén point toward August as the time of the volcanic eruption. Today the Maya village ceremony for fertility and harvest, called *cuch*, is celebrated in August.

The two uppermost and innermost rooms stored special artifacts, including a large pottery vessel, decorated with a caiman head and legs and loaded with achiote seeds. These seeds provided a bright red pigment that probably symbolized human blood, as it still does today. A typical obsidian knife (Figure 36) stored on the shelf above the seeds had human hemoglobin on it, and was surely used in bloodletting. The Maya still believe that human blood is the most religiously charged substance in the body, and when it is shed in ceremony it is the most effective way to communicate with the supernatural domain. Beside the knife was a deer skull headdress that retained white, red, and blue paint, and



Fig. 37

Fig. 37. Salúa bowl with monkey design, AD 400–900. La Asunción (Hacienda Asunción), Cuscatlán Department, El Salvador. Pottery, clay slip, paint. Collected or excavated by Samuel K. Lothrop, 1924.

even some string that was used to tie it onto the head of a performer or religious specialist. Traditional Maya still use such headdresses in rituals as symbols of the fertility of nature when giving thanks for a successful harvest.

Authority within the village was dispensed from Structure 3, the largest and most imposing building of the settlement, facing the town plaza. It had two large benches in its front room, in contrast with the household domiciles, which had a bench in the innermost private room, for sleeping. When the Maya build a bench in a front room it is a symbol of authority. Town elders could sit on the bench and listen to disputes between families or individuals. In place on one bench was the largest pottery vessel ever found in the village. It likely contained a beverage, perhaps a beer now called *chicha* made from fermented maize or manioc (Sheets et al., 2012). Above the bench, on top of the wall, was a polychrome vessel that would serve very well to scoop a serving of drink to “seal the deal” and end the controversy. Befitting a public building, artifacts were scarce beyond the two ceramic vessels.

Household 1 supported the harvest rituals of Structure 10 by loaning special implements such as maize huskers made of deer antlers. Beyond the maize-grinding stone (metate) on the kitchen floor that the household used regularly, it maintained another four metates for

grinding during the harvest ceremony. Tracy Sweeley (1999) argues that different levels of authority within the household and village among the women using these metates can be detected based on the implements' placement and visibility.

Some people refer to Joya de Cerén as unique, but that can isolate it from being useful for comparison with other archaeological sites that are not as well preserved. When a village like Joya de Cerén is abandoned, the people usually leave carrying all their valuables, even making multiple trips. Once abandoned, others may take away artifacts, construction materials, or other items they find useful. Thatch roofs need to be replaced at least every two decades in the tropics, and once the thatch starts to fail, the rains “melt” the clay daubed onto the poles and vines that provide the walls' internal reinforcements. The elements, along with decay of organics, reduce the buildings to sad remnants of their former condition. Trees recolonize the environment, and their roots disturb subsurface remains, especially when wind blows them over and the root-ball rotates and scrambles large amounts of artifacts and fragmentary building materials. People and animals can dig below the surface for a variety of reasons. The net result is a greatly impoverished record of what people did when the community was thriving.

Fig. 38. Classic period Maya bowl with glyph design, AD 700–800. Tazumal, Santa Ana Department, El Salvador. Pottery, clay slip, paint. Gift of Francis E. Ross, 1962.



Fig. 38

Fig. 39. Salúa bowl, AD 450–850. Hospicio excavation near church of San Jacinto, San Salvador, San Salvador Department, El Salvador. Pottery, clay slip, paint. MAI purchase by Marshall H. Saville, 1920.



Fig. 39

Fig. 40. Salúa tripod vessel, AD 450–850. Hospicio excavation near church of San Jacinto, San Salvador, San Salvador Department, El Salvador. Pottery, clay slip, paint. MAI purchase by Marshall H. Saville, 1920.



Fig. 40

Fig. 41. Salúa bowl with Huehuetéotl (Old God/God of Fire) design, AD 450–850. Atiquizaya, Ahuachapán Department, El Salvador. Pottery, clay slip, paint. Gift of Theodore T. Foley, 1971.



Fig. 41

Fig. 42. Salúa jar, AD 450–850. Hospicio excavation near church of San Jacinto, San Salvador, San Salvador Department, El Salvador. Pottery, clay slip, paint. MAI purchase by Marshall H. Saville, 1920.



Fig. 42

Fig. 43. Salúa tripod bowl, AD 450–850. Hospicio excavation near church of San Jacinto, San Salvador, San Salvador Department, El Salvador. Pottery, clay slip, paint. MAI purchase by Marshall H. Saville, 1920.



Fig. 43

Unfortunately, that impoverished record has unwittingly manifested itself in the minds of scholars as indicating that commoners lived impoverished lives. Joya de Cerén provides a compelling corrective to this mistaken vision of village life. Households had multiple buildings for particular uses, ample spaces inside the walls and under the eaves for a wide range of activities, and their architecture was highly earthquake-resistant. Each household had a wide range of vessels, including many gourds (most plain, some highly decorated) and about seventy pottery vessels typical of western El Salvador (Figure 37). Of those, almost a quarter were manufactured at a distance, imported into the area (Figure 38), and obtained by Cerenians at marketplaces by means of negotiated exchanges for goods they produced. Households also owned baskets. Every household had numerous cutting and scraping tools made of obsidian, and at least one jade ax. Those likewise were obtained by market exchanges, and commoners had choices in which market they would visit.

So how can Joya de Cerén be used to better understand the more commonly found ancient dwelling site? At the usual site the remnants of individual houses can be discovered and mapped as “housemounds” and some broken artifacts collected. The ratio of complete metates to whole vessels at Joya de Cerén could be used as a rough way to estimate the original number of vessels at less-well-preserved sites, since broken metates are not normally removed when villages are abandoned. The ratio of broken and discarded metates to pieces of broken pottery is known at Joya de Cerén, as well as the ratio of whole metates and complete ceramic vessels, and those ratios can be used as rough indicators at sites where only broken artifacts are found. The fragments of wattle-and-daub walls and

mounds of eroded architecture at the usual site can be reconstructed using the known and well-preserved architecture at Joya de Cerén as the model.

Thus a different picture of life is emerging. Commoners should not be assumed to be passive recipients of orders from the nobility, living in a hardscrabble world and barely getting by. The abundance and variety of foods found was impressive and the architecture sophisticated. Like other small villages across Central America, the spiritual life within the household and the community were highly developed, reflected in the images seen on serving vessels recovered at other places in El Salvador (Figures 39–43). Commoners exercised authority in the household, the village, and even in choosing the nobles for whom they would work and with whom they would trade. Looking through the first clear window—provided by Joya de Cerén—into Maya commoner life educates us to the fact that the quality of life was strikingly high.