



Sitio Conte Excavations Come to Life on the Web

“With due exaggeration, the gold glittering in this grave makes Schliemann’s treasure of—was it Agamemnon?—and that of Ecuador look like pikers. Every time we take up another potsherd or knife out another piece of dirt there’s another gold ornament...You get a great kick out of finding gold. Give it a wipe or a little scrape with a stick and it’s as beautiful as it ever was or ever will be.”

J. Alden Mason wrote this unabashed paean to the American Section’s Linton Satterthwaite when he was excavating at Sitio Conte, on the Pacific Coast of Panama, in 1940. Mason was ebullient about his exciting finds of gold objects in an elaborate burial. He led a team from the University of Pennsylvania Museum that excavated at this Pre-Columbian cemetery site for four months, uncovering great quantities of gold, painted pottery, and other artifacts dating to ca. AD 450–900. This work was a continuation of that carried out at the site by Harvard University’s Peabody Museum between 1930 and 1933. The efforts of these two institutions marked the first scientifically controlled archaeological excavations in Panama.



Screen view of Sitio Conte Web site.

The Museum Archives has completed a project to digitize and make available over the World Wide Web all the excavation records from Mason’s expedition. With funding from the National Science Foundation, the Archives staff has scanned all letters, photographs, and field notes to provide on-line access to the documentation from the site. This project complements the Museum’s blockbuster exhibition “River of Gold” that traveled the country (appearing most recently at the Metropolitan Museum of Art



Excavating burials at Sitio Conte in 1940. Photograph from Robert Merrill’s notebook in the UPM Archives.

UPM neg. 55-36795

in New York in 1996). Scholars and other visitors can direct their Web browsers to <http://www.museum.upenn.edu/SitioConte/index.html> to experience firsthand the excavations of pioneer archaeologists and to learn about the fantastic riches of a lost culture.

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