

# BENEATH THE SURFACE: THE EXCAVATIONS AT SITIO CONTE

BY LUCY FOWLER WILLIAMS



Curator J. Alden Mason led the excavations with a Penn Museum team of five and a large crew of Panamanian workmen. John Corning analyzed the human skeletal remains, and Robert Merrill served as surveyor, draftsman, and photographer. UPM image #36922.

The Penn Museum's excavations at Sitio Conte began in 1940 with an invitation from private landowner, Miguel Conte. Since discovering a Pre-Columbian cemetery on his property in 1927, Conte had encouraged professional archaeologists to help record the history of the ancient Coclé people who once lived there. Associate Curator J. Alden Mason took the lead on the project and, at the onset of the dry season in late January, sailed to Panama City with a budget of \$4,000. After

establishing a formal contract with Conte and gaining the necessary approvals from the Panamanian Government, Mason set to work on a ten-week investigation.

The five-acre burial site was situated on the banks of the Rio Grande de Coclé. With the hired help of 35 of Conte's workmen who hauled lumber, gasoline, food, and supplies through the forest by oxcart, Mason established his field camp. In a matter of days, the workmen cleared the campsite and constructed a wooden pier, built two

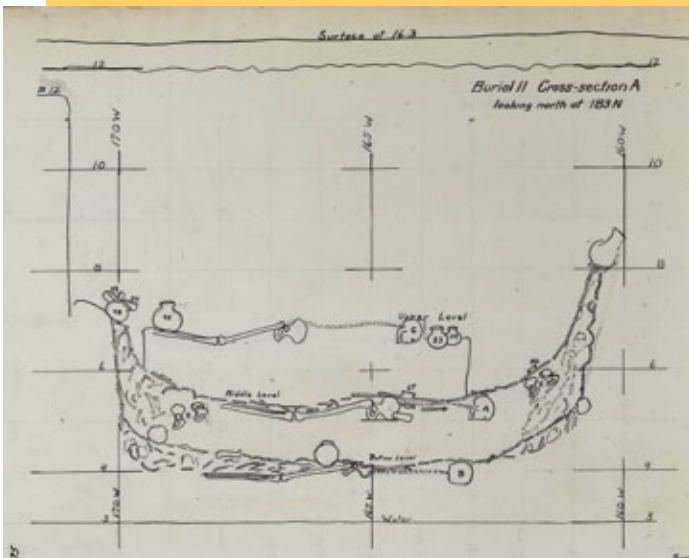


thatched roof cottages with wooden floors, dug the latrines, pitched three tents, set up a kitchen and laundry, and built the camp furniture.

Mason worked closely with colleague Samuel Lothrop of Harvard University's Peabody Museum who had dug at the site for three seasons in the 1930s. With Lothrop's advice, and the aid of nine Panamanian workmen plus a foreman, the team dug two trenches more or less simultaneously. The edge of a burial was found in the first smaller trench. Dug by one or two men at a time over a period of nine days, this trench had a depth of four meters—just above the water table in the dry season. Working with shovels, trowels, and small picks, the team uncovered five human burials and six separate caches of artifacts. Robert Merrill, the project's surveyor, draftsman, and photographer, developed a system of excavation and documentation to carefully plot, number, and catalogue objects in space.

The second trench was positioned in the center of the large burial and measured 16 x 8 x 4 meters deep. Dug by eight to ten workmen at a time, this trench revealed a total of 30 human burials and caches. The graves yielded numerous artifacts, but on March 16, one month before their planned return to Philadelphia and just as Mason's field funds were dwindling, the team discovered a massive burial, which produced the most spectacular finds.

Distinguished by its deep oval and concave bowl shape, Burial 11 contained a large, complex burial of 23 individuals situated in three distinct layers and accompanied by a vast array of grave objects. A thick wall of pottery vessels and sherds lined the north and south walls of the first two layers.



TOP, LEFT: Field Camp: Mason's diary describes life in the field. From January to April, the crew lived in a fairly comfortable field camp established with the help of Miguel Conte's local workmen. The camp included a main house with thatched roof, a kitchen, storehouse, sleeping tents, his and her latrines, and a shelter for the laundry. A Panamanian cook made the meals, which were served by a table boy. Supplies ordered in the morning arrived that afternoon by oxcart and the camp received letters, magazines, and newspapers. The weather was hot, yet with a strong breeze, and most days brought short rain showers. UPM image #36938. TOP, RIGHT: Map of the Sitio Conte region. ABOVE: The largest of the burials, Burial 11, included 23 human remains situated in three distinct layers. According to Mason's diary, his draftsman Robert Merrill worked continuous long hours, day and night, recording precise locations of objects and features. UPM image #246203.

By March 25, the crew had carefully excavated the upper layer, which held eight human skeletons in extended position, face down with heads oriented to the east. Due to high water levels for eight months of each year, the human remains were poorly preserved and difficult to identify. John Corning, the project osteologist, was able to sex and age only a few in this layer, including five adult males and a sixth male of an uncertain age. A necklace of gold bells accompanied the men, and ceramic vessels, agate pendants, stone projectile points, and celts were positioned at their feet.

Less than half a meter beneath the upper layer of Burial 11, the team uncovered an even larger group burial of 12 individuals. Paired with one on top another, nine of these individuals were positioned along the north-south axis with their heads facing east. Three individuals surrounded the central group at the east, north, and south. Corning again had difficulty aging and sexing these remains, but felt confident in his identification of one female, a young male, and a child. Hundreds of painted ceramic vessels and gold objects were associated with these individuals. The most spectacular objects were positioned on the central figure, which Mason concluded was the principal occupant. Thought to be a male, this individual was found with five large gold plaques, an emerald and gold pendant, dozens of gold and stone ear rods, gold arm and leg cuffs, and dozens of gold beads. An adjacent female was positioned on the north side with offerings of ceramics, a gold necklace and ear rods, a garment decorated with gold sequins resembling shark teeth, and a probable apron or waist belt decorated



TOP: Polychrome Ceramic Plate; 4,579 artifacts were brought back from Sitio Conte, including three tons of ceramics like this example. Members of the Coclé community placed thousands of ceramic vessels as offerings inside the graves alongside the human remains. Pottery vessels and sherds were used to line many of the burials. UPM object #40-16-1709 (UPM image #246070) measures 5.1 cm h x 33.2cm diam. MIDDLE: Several whale tooth ivory and gold pendants were recovered from Burial 11. From the left, UPM object #40-13-120 is 5.6 cm l; #40-13-124 is 5.4 cm l; #40-13-132 is 6.5 cm l; #40-13-133 is 6.4cm l. UPM image #246031. BOTTOM: Five large gold plaques were found in association with the adult placed at the center of the middle layer of Burial 11. Coclé metal smiths excelled at advanced gold working. To create the embossed low relief image, the sheet metal was pressed onto a softer leather surface using a small stone tool or chisel, then treated with a technique called depletion gilding to create a thin surface of pure gold, which was then polished. UPM object #40-13-4 (UPM image #246032) measures 22.9 cm w.

with dog teeth. The entire burial had been wrapped or lined with a layer of bark cloth, and positioned on top of a layer of broken pottery.

Now in early April and working at an all-out pace to beat the coming rains, Mason and his team continued to excavate and found a third and lower burial layer, which included three individuals. The central male rested on his side and was accompanied by one large gold plaque, ear rods, a bat effigy pendant, an array of ceramic vessels, and stone celts.

After completing the excavations on April 8, Mason and his team took another eight days to complete their

documentation and wrap up. The workmen quickly back-filled the trenches. They packed three tons of ceramic and stone artifacts allowed by the contract with Conte, which were loaded onto oxcarts sent to the town of Penonome, where they were transferred to trucks and delivered to Panama City for shipment to Philadelphia. After weighing and dividing the gold with Conte, Mason and his crew packed their bags and set sail for Philadelphia. ●

*Lucy Fowler Williams is Associate Curator and Sabloff Keeper of Collections, American Section.*

## A TREASURE AMONG THE SHERDS

BY LYNN GRANT, HEAD CONSERVATOR

The treatments done by Penn Museum conservators usually relate to a current exhibition or loan. For our interns, however, we often seek out specially challenging or interesting projects that might otherwise not be treated. In the spring of 2009, when *Beneath the Surface: Life, Death, and Gold in Ancient Panama* was just a glimmer in the curators' eyes, I asked American Section Keeper, William (Bill) Wierzbowski, to find a nice ceramic project for our pre-Program intern, Keshia Talbert. As Bill surveyed the shelves containing bags of sherds from Sitio Conte, an intriguing shape was visible through the dusty plastic. "Why, that looks like a leg," he thought. The Sitio Conte excavation produced many, many bags of sherds and we weren't sure whether the bag's contents would be a mendable pot or not, but we presented it to Keshia to make sense of. Which she

did: her report notes 98 separate sherds, most of which belonged to one vessel. And what a vessel it turned out to be. The "Fat Shaman," as he was affectionately known, quickly became a lab favorite. Keshia got the experience of a complex mending and filling treatment, and we got a tempting glimpse of what undiscovered treasures those bags of sherds might produce. Five years later, Conservator Julia Lawson has been heading up a team of conservators making sure all the artifacts selected for the exhibition have received the same loving attention.



LEFT: The sherds after cleaning and sorting. RIGHT: Intern Keshia Talbert with the completed vessel (UPM object #40-16-75).