Ethnohistory and Archaeology in Colonial Antigua, Guatemala

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INTRODUCTION
The visitor to modern Antigua, Guatemala, receives the impression that he is stepping back into the Colonial period. The rains left by the fateful earthquake of 1773, the Colonial-style homes, and the cobblestone streets testify to the physical grandeur of Antigua's past. Many cultural elements, less visible than the rains but equally significant, developed during the important formative sixteenth-century are evident today. Anthropological interest in the process of the transplantation of the Spanish culture to the New World and its accommodation to the indigenous population prompted me to establish a program for research in which the methods of ethnohistory, archaeology, and ethnography could be combined to provide a total, unified picture of the origin and growth of the Colonial urban society of Antigua. At this point in our research we can only discuss some preliminary results of the studies underway and suggest the areas in which our future work will be concentrated.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
What kind of image does the anthropologist receive of Antigua from the chronicles and documents? Although one finds a very complicated picture of a developing city, the main lines of this development are clearly visible. When Pedro de Alvarado invaded Guatemala in 1524-1525, he

Antigua and Volcán de Agua. The first Spanish capital, Ciudad Vieja, was located about three miles from Antigua on the northwest slope of this volcano, at an altitude of 5000 feet.

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established his first capital at Iximché, the Maya\nCalchiqul Indian political-religious center near\npresent-day Tecpan. A short time later he moved\nthe provincial capital to the valley of Panchoy in a\nplace now known as Ciudad Vieja. The year\n1541, which saw Alvarado’s death, also saw the\nend of his city. A mud slide caused by heavy\nrains in September of that year buried part of the\ncity and some of its inhabitants. Several months\nlater the survivors founded a new city, not too\ndistant from the old, and they employed the ser\nces of the Italian architect, Juan Bautista An\ntonielli to plan the new provincial capital, Santiago\nde los Caballeros, now known as Antigua.

For the previous fifteen years the Spaniards\nhad been busy pacifying the countryside, and by

in the time Antonelli was laying out the grid pattern\nof the new city, most of highland Guatemala had\ncome under Spanish control. The conquistadores\nthen laid down their swords and picked up, not\ntheir plowshares, but their repartimientos (land\nand Indians granted in trust for use by the colo\nnists). Not all the conquistadores shared equally\nin the profits of war; some were left penniless,\nsome went off to Peru, while others received the\npotentially profitable tracts of land for exploitat\nion. An aristocracy, in fact if not in name, came\nto existence. Those who succeeded in getting\nand hanging on to repartimientos formed the upper\nclass of a developing society centered in Antigua.\nWhen the Audiencia was established there in 1544,
the officials of this administrative body brought in members of the Spanish educated class. Craftsmen also came from Spain to build the new city and finally a labor force was created from the Indian population through the encomienda system by which native labor was assigned by Royal decree.

When the first Audiencia of Central America was established in 1543, it was located at Gracias a Dios in Honduras, founded a few years before. But Gracias a Dios was inconveniently located and in 1548 the royal officials moved to Santiago. The capital of the province of Guatemala now became an important city of New Spain. The needs of the developing capital required certain innovations. Antigua was relatively isolated in the highlands of Guatemala; Atlantic trade with Spain was constant but slow. Traffic with the mother country had to pass through Vera Cruz in Mexico and Puerto Caballos in Honduras. Clothing, cooking utensils, furniture, and other necessary articles could have been supplied by Spain but only with great delay, uncertainty, and considerable cost. As a consequence of slow communication and increased demands, much material now had to be made by local industry. Thus Spanish technology was diffused and an innovative force in the arts and the crafts created.

During this time not only were the Spaniards strengthening their political and economic hold on the countryside, but they were also pursuing the spiritual conquest of the people and their control over the province of Guatemala. In the decade following the foundation of the new city, friars of the Dominican, Franciscan, and Mercedarian orders established houses in the capital and Doctor (centers for evangelization) elsewhere in the province. The importance of the friars should not be underestimated, for besides bringing a new ideology to the Indians, in many cases they served as their defenders. The Dominicans especially were responsible for the abolition of Indian slavery and for the pacification of the province of Verapaz, which the Spaniards had tried unsuccessfully to subdue by force of arms. The monasteries in Antigua became schools for the Indians where they learned not only Christian doctrine but also Spanish civilized ways and technology. Indians were in the employ of the monks as well as of the craftsmen of the city. Consequently, the influence of the religious orders touched all levels of Guatemalan society from the top administrator to the lowest Indian. They, perhaps more than any other group, served as the middlemen in the transfer and accommodation of the spiritual as well of the material culture, and the principal center for this transfer was Antigua.

**Archeological Background**

For the anthropologist, however, transfer is too simple a term. Complete or even partial replacement of cultural traditions is not easily effected, not even when the means are as foreboding as conquest. Innovation does come initially from the conquerors, but once immediate decisions have been made and a framework for the new situation has been established, innovations tend to become conventionalized. Whether geographic isolation provided the pressure, or the expediency of institutionalizing economic and religious traditions set the tone (or a combination of both), life
Indian families live today in the nave of the Church of Santo Domingo. Among these sixteenth century buildings, Mrs. Weinor conducted an intensive archaeological survey. The photographs on pages 23 and 26 illustrate the variety of artifacts that were uncovered.

and to have observed the construction of a city, to have seen the old Roman grid system spread out on the plain 5000 feet above sea level at the foot of the great Volcán de Agua, to have explored the influence that radiated into the city from the monasteries and convents that anchored its limits, to have watched the Indians travel down the steep mountain paths leaving their villages for their new role in, yet distinctively apart from, the hastily forming Spanish city. Although documents describe these events and tell of the decisions made, the descriptions were not written from an anthropological point of reference, and therefore in order to understand the dynamics of the birth of this new city, another procedure in addition to the archival work is needed to help us interpret the behavioral dimensions that provided the cultural model for the centuries which followed.

Religious site. With this objective, we undertook archaeological excavations in Antigua in the summer of 1969. Although analysis of this material has only just begun, a preliminary survey of some of the excavations can help to illustrate the technology that existed in Antigua during the Colonial period.

We learn from the Acts of the Cabildo that in 1542 the municipal government assigned an area in the northeastern part of the city to the friars of the Order of Santo Domingo, and by the next year Friar Pedro de Angulo had petitioned the government for four additional building sites so that the Order could build the most magnificent edifice possible. In this, the Dominicans were completely successful, for according to the accounts of both historians and travelers, Santo Domingo became the most extensive monastery in the city.

Sadly, the majesty of the great towers of Santo Domingo rising above the city and the brilliance of the elaborately decorated altars and chapels can now only be glimpsed through a lens here and there in the documents. Although a series of earthquakes throughout the eighteenth century caused considerable damage to the religious structures, it was the earthquake of 1773 (the effects of which caused the capital itself to be moved to its present location, Guatemala City) which left Santo Domingo in ruins.

Today, only some walls and piles of stones remain, but many of these walls are still in use. Lower-class families of Ladino and Indian descent live amongst the ruins, probably much as they did after the earthquake, often incorporating a Dominican stone wall into part of their own house structure. On our first visit to this site, many of these people brought out pieces of religious sculpture and pottery they had found in the area. Our own subsequent surface collection produced a variety and abundance of sherds. The presence of these artifacts together with the fact that Santo Domingo was one of the earliest monasteries in Antigua suggested that this would be a most appropriate place to begin archaeological excavations.

In the interior side of one of the few remaining monastery walls, we discovered a narrow space 1.25 x 3.00 meters (about 4 x 10 feet). Although the original function of this small room remains unknown, pending further soil and architectural analysis, the top layer indicated that this had been a refuse pit. The surface was packed with trash, debris: stones and rocks from the convent walls, pieces of rusted metal and tin cans, and potsherds of green and yellow ware. It is interesting to note that this well-known Antigua-ware pottery was produced by at least six potters during the Colonial period; today, only one family has preserved this tradition.

The levels below 20 cm. of the trash pit produced examples of other ceramic types illustrating the mixture of locally produced and Spanish material. The monks had ordered ceramic ware for monastery use either from their own craftsmen or from native workers trained in the Spanish tradition. Plates and bowls were monogrammed with the letters “DO” identifying Dominican use. (In excavations at the Franciscan Monastery nearby, we found identical pottery painted with the letter “F.”)

For a depth of 1.20 meters the trash pit at Santo Domingo continued to produce a vast amount of pottery from the Colonial period. In addition to the ceramics described, pieces of majolica were also found. Majolica is distinguishable from other pottery by the use of a lead glaze to which tin oxide has been added. This material is applied to the surface in the same manner as regular glaze, but the tin oxide produces an opaque coating.

John M. Goggin, prior to his death in 1963, had undertaken an intensive study of Spanish majolica in Mexico and in the Caribbean. From Goggin’s work it was apparent that our majolica...
samples had had a long and diversified history. According to Coggin, the technique of tin-enamelled ware was originally practiced in the eastern Mediterranean prior to the Christian era, where it became an important ceramic tradition. Its presence in Spain had been attributed to Moorish invaders who brought this technique from the Mediterranean. For five hundred years majolica was produced in Spain, and then in the sixteenth century, a new style of tin-enamelled ware was introduced from Italy. During the Renaissance Italian maiolica potters had developed the use of elaborate styles and colors. It was this new technology in combination with the original Moorish influence that flourished among the potters of Talavera de la Reina, Spain. With the conquest of the New World, Spanish maiolica traveled and influenced yet another ceramic center. Poebla, a town south-east of Mexico City, became an important area for the production of this pottery, and sherds representative of Puebla Polychrome and Abo Polychrome (both examples of Spanish maiolica manufactured in Puebla) were found in the Santo Domingo refuse pit.

In the hope of obtaining stratigraphic control of the pottery from the trash pit, we dug a test pit along the outside wall measuring approximately 2 x 4 meters. We continued excavation in twenty-centimeter levels, and in the third level potsherds of the monogrammed Dominican ware appeared. At a depth of 80 cm, the area was covered with a layer of ripio (building debris) which continued for an additional 64 cm. When the ripio had been cleared away, further digging produced great quantities of utilitarian redware and blackware pottery directly under a layer of charcoal. The next 30 cm level was filled throughout with whole or nearly complete clay pots, flat plates, pieces of some ramares and clay bowls of various sizes and shapes. Although analysis of this pottery has not yet begun, the superficial characteristics indicate that this was a special find. The pottery was very finely made and the shapes as well as the use of micaeous material all strongly suggest that this pottery is of another tradition, perhaps of a pre-Conquest period. The material collected in both pits at Santo Domingo, therefore, seems to give us a fairly good sequence of pottery produced in and imported to Antigua during a period of at least 400 years. Nowhere in the other fifteen test pits dug last summer, was there any evidence of this kind of ceramic.

Domestic Site. Last summer’s field work did not, however, focus only on religious sites. It was felt that even an initial survey would not be complete without some comparative information from domestic areas. Therefore, in addition to three monastic buildings, Santo Domingo, San Francisco, and Las Capuchinas, several domestic sites were surveyed.

During the seventeenth century, the northern limits of the city became a very fashionable district in which to live. Beautiful homes were built along the Platerias Almendra de Santa Rosa. One of these palatial mansions was built by Bartolomé de Gálvez y Corral, a nobleman from Sevilla, Spain.
The Gálvez estate has long since crumbled, leaving only walls, doorways, and arches scattered about the property. With the permission of the present owner, Mr. Charles Farrington, we dug four test pits in the original kitchen and dining areas and located one pit along the most northern edge of the property away from any architectural remains.

Our hopes of finding artifacts that would reveal the elegant style of the seventeenth century elite class were dissipated when it became apparent that most of the pits within the interior of the house showed evidence of intrusion. (The present day folklore is that the lure of buried treasure had attracted many secret digging expeditions to the Gálvez mansion.)

There were, however, places under floors or under wall foundations where undisturbed material was found. The assemblages from these strata included obsidian blades, manos, crudely made red clay animal figurines, utilitarian Chimaltenango pottery and painted cajíxes. Many of the cajíxes were found unbroken and two were found filled with pieces of charcoal, soil, and the skull bones of small birds or chickens. The Indian-type assemblages that were found beneath the construction of the house and in the pit which was dug away from the house seem to indicate that prior to the development of this wealthy suburb, Indians lived in the area. Also, archival documents allude to an Indian market one block further on the Plateras.

In the back patio of the Gálvez mansion, Dr. Reina uncovered many cajíxes in one pit. These small bowls measure 15 cm. in diameter and are completely decorated on the bottom and sides with a deep red and brown color.

After many generations, Antigua continues to be a pottery center of great importance in the market system of Guatemala.

Decorating the gardens of many Antigüeño houses are Spanish olive and wine jars like the one pictured here. A great number of shreds from jars of this type were found in most of the excavations.
Alameda de Santa Rosa and to barrios settled by Indians.

The most significant aspect of this domestic site is the abundance of cajetes of a ware which Edwin M. Shook has named “Chinautla Poly-chrome.” Although we have found cajetes in the context of the Colonial time period, they have previously been found in pre-Conquest sites in the central and southern Highlands. The fact that the ceramic assemblages in Farrington’s property are different from those of Santo Domingo, together with the fact that the northern edge of Antigua was originally an Indian barrio during the sixteenth century, seems to suggest the stability and continuity of Indian technology into the Colonial period.

CONCLUSION

The excavations in Antigua and the work in the Archivo de Indias in Seville have produced preliminary results by confronting us with the basic processes of a colonial society in its formative period. Many questions have been raised regarding selection, adoption, and adjustments of both Indian and Spanish culture elements. It is evident that in order to understand what took place in Antigua, every aspect of socio-cultural life must be studied. The immediate data point out the significant role of the Religious Order upon technology and the role of the markets and trading routes in the economic system of Antigua and in its relation with New Spain and the Iberian peninsula. These data also provide an orientation of the social class and ethnic distinction as a principle for the organization of an urban society.

Why is this relevant and important in the context of Guatemala today? From the early part of the century, archaeologists have exclusively concentrated their efforts in pre-hispanic sites for the understanding of Mayan cultures, while ethnographers have been studying contemporary villages and pueblos for the understanding of Guatemalan culture. The absence of ethnohistorical studies and historical archaeological research prevents us from furthering our understanding of the continuing processes of culture change through the centuries. Not only does the ethnographer need the ethnohistorical background for theoretical reasons, but archaeologists need a reality of recorded history for testing the criteria of classifications. In Antigua we have a complete laboratory which can take us from the pre-Colonial through the Colonial period into the present without measurable breakdowns. Antigua thus provides a reality seldom found by anthropologists who truly need in this way to understand man’s accommodation to his environment as he develops a cultural system which will allow him predictability and survival.

SUGGESTED READING


Ruben E. Reina has been associated with the Anthropology Department and University Museum since 1957 and is presently Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania and Curator of Latin American Ethnology in the Museum. His research has taken him from Argentina to Guatemala and more recently to Spain. His Law of the Saints, a study of a group of Maya Indians in Guatemala, is one of his many contributions to the ethnography of that country. Presently he is directing operations of the Hispanic American Research Project, sponsored by the American Philosophical Society and the University Museum.

Annette Weiner received her B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania (1968) and is currently pursuing her doctoral studies in anthropology at Bryn Mawr College. Mrs. Weiner participated in the expedition to Antigua last summer and as co-director of the archaeological investigation, contributed the archaeological section in this article. She will continue her work in Antigua during the coming summer. The convent of Santo Domingo will be the subject of Mrs. Weiner’s dissertation.

Edward O’Flaherty, S.J. received his M.A. in anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania (1964) and is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the University’s Anthropology Department. Fr. O’Flaherty spent the academic year 1968-69 in Seville, Spain, pursuing ethnohistorical research at the Archives of the Indies. He is preparing his doctoral dissertation on the role of the Church in the development of 16th century Guatemala, and co-directing the ethnohistorical section of the Hispanic American Research Project.