Fieldwork in Brazil

Petrullo’s Visit to the Yawalapiti

Preface

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Matto Grosso was first entered, by way of the Paraguay river, in the latter part of the sixteenth century by Spaniards. Soon afterwards the Portuguese came from the east, succeeding in traversing the southern portion and even reaching the Andes...In the early eighteenth century, towns were founded on the banks of the Cuiabá and the Paraguay rivers. Following the establishment of these settlements, the southern portion of the state underwent gradual exploitation, and its aboriginal peoples inevitable subjugation...But generally the north resisted penetration, so that at the beginning of the twentieth century it still remained largely unknown.

Petrullo 1932:94
Brazil. The story of Siemel's prowess captured the attention of John Clarke, Jr., who was interested in utilizing the developing art of motion pictures for educational purposes. Together, the three decided to mount an expedition to the Malo Grosso for the primary purpose of filming Siemel in the act of killing a jaguar. They also wanted to document life as it was then in a remote and relatively untamed area of Brazil. The film was to be scripted and to combine pictures with sound.

The project captured the imagination and support of a number of young Philadelphians, most prominently E.R. Fenimore Johnson, who added a more formal scientific focus to the proposed adventure. It was through Johnson that The University Museum and eventually the Academy of Natural Sciences took part in the Malo Grosso Expedition. Vincenzo Petullo, a graduate student in the University of Pennsylvania's Anthropology Department, was a scientific advisor and Museum representative; he was to conduct archaeological as well as ethnographic explorations. James Reho, who joined the Expedition as the Academy's representative when it was already in the field, was to make comparative faunal collections. Other personnel included writers, sportsmen, and technical experts. Among the latter were two very talented photographers: Floyd D. Crosby, winner of an Academy Award in cinematography for Tabu (1931), and his assistant, Arthur P. Rossi. Together they provided the Expedition with an unusually lively and extensive visual record.

First Explorations

Expedition members set sail by steamer from New York the day after Christmas 1930. To reach the Malo Grosso with all their equipment they had to take the circuitous but comparatively easy river route through Argentina rather than the arduous overland trail from São Paulo in Brazil. Their journey took several weeks because they had to transfer to increasingly smaller (and slower) boats as they progressed, often passing without waiting for a steamer going in the right direction. By the time they arrived in Corumbá, Brazil, it was the height of the rainy season after all, and the flat savannah countryside was completely flooded for miles around (see Fig. 5). Water that was often breast-deep severely limited their activities and the possibilities for exploration. Petullo timed the time waiting for the flood to recede by applying to the Brazilian government for exploration permits. Meanwhile other Expedition members moved on to Descalvados (Figs. 2-4), a cattle ranch located some 250 miles from Corumbá that was to be their base of operations. There, life settled into a predictable routine. The Expedition members met as a group for meals in the morning and in the evening, but otherwise, each person followed his own pursuits. Most spent their days hunting the abundant wildlife in the area (Fig. 5). Particularly prized were the big cats, jaguars and pumas, both for the danger of the hunt and the value of their pelts (Figs. 6, 7).

"the longer the plane and its occupants sat and waited, the less fear and the more curiosity those living nearby felt."
Figure 7. The Expedition camera was only the second one ever manufactured combining sound and image. Several attempts were made to film Siemel spear-throwing a jaguar, but it always happened too fast to capture on film. The crew finally decided to build a wooden corral with a fixed camera station high up on the side to film the fight under controlled conditions. A jaguar was caged and brought to the enclosure. The story goes, however, that despite repeated predating the beast (no fool) refused to leave the comprehensive safety of his cell and the project failed.

UM neg. 54-57345

Figure 6 (opposite page). Vladimir Petroff and Alexander Siemel with dead jaguars and puma. UM neg. 54-19020

Once Petroff and Rehn joined their companions in Descavallos, they set hard to work collecting scientific data. Rehn prepared specimens for the Academy's collections from animals the hunters brought in (Fig. 8). Petroff, although harnessed by the waterlogged countryside, nonetheless conducted archaeological excavations at two prehistoric cemeteries, one within the settlement of Descavallos itself and one on a nearby knoll (Fig. 10). As the flooding subsided, he was also able to travel with a few other Expedition members to a Bororo da Campanha village. They found the Bororo impoverished and half-starved, with few of their old customs left; most of their cultural heritage seemed to have been forgotten. Petroff then and there resolved to go as far into the interior as he could to reach groups as yet unaculturated to western ways. He chose to explore the headwaters of the Xingu River, northeast of Descavallos, an area that was then little known.

The Xingu Expedition

By May the ground had begun to dry. Equally importantly, an amphibious airplane donated to the Expedition by Emlridge Johnson, Fenimore's father, arrived in Descavallos (see Fig. 19). With the arrival of the plane, Petroff and other Expedition members were able to travel easily to the town of Guyabá to obtain final permits from the authorities, as well as information on the Xingu area. The use of the plane also permitted them a rare bird's-eye view of the terrain Petroff proposed to travel. The area was considered quintessential "wild country" by Brazilians and foreigners alike. The way to the Xingu lay up a dramatic escarpment that rose some 2500 feet straight up from the lowlands of the Paraguay River to a plateau that
fell off gently northward. Indeed, the almost southern face of this formation, known as the chapadas, had given rise to legends of a “lost continent” and a “lost civilization” (Fig. 11).

Petrallo made two reconnaissance flights over the chapadas and the Xingu area. He and his companions tried to identify known rivers and locate likely native settlements to visit. They found, however, that the village clearings were so insignificant in comparison to the surrounding rainforest that the dwellings were invisible. On the second trip they landed the plane on a clear stretch of water at the junction of two rivers, got out, ate their lunch, and waited for natives to appear. No canoes materialized, however, and after several disappointing hours of inactivity they were forced to take off in order to return before dark, leaving behind some trinkets in sacks attached to bushes. That trip, however, was not entirely fruitless. On the way back they happened to fly right over a village, thereby discovering that there were settlements to be found, but only from directly overhead. They circled around for a closer view and were met by a hail of arrows from a group of men standing beside the central house of the village. They dropped more bags of gifts and continued on their way.

That second trip also helped establish an exploration plan and a rendezvous. It was decided that Petrallo would set out from Cosabé for the chapadas with a contingent of men that included some Expedition members and some locals. Once up and across the plateau, be was to proceed by river to the junction where the plane had landed and there wait for Johnson to appear by air. This plan would probably have worked well had they gotten their geographical coordinates right. As it was, they mistakenly identified the river junction

Figure 8. Jaguar dancer, Bororo village. Contact with European civilization had had disastrous results for the Bororo. Petrallo and his companions were appalled by the conditions they found in the village where the remains of the Bororo de Campanha were gathered. For example, the Bororo staged a jaguar dance for their guests, but could not explain the original meaning of the performance or the context behind it.

Figure 9. Jaguar dancer, Bororo village. Contact with European civilization had had disastrous results for the Bororo. Petrallo and his companions were appalled by the conditions they found in the village where the remains of the Bororo de Campanha were gathered. For example, the Bororo staged a jaguar dance for their guests, but could not explain the original meaning of the performance or the context behind it.

Figure 10. Large urns, many with hooded covers, found during Petrallo's excavation of Cemetery II. Some of these urns were empty, while others contained poorly preserved skeletal remains.
as the culmination of the Kuleuene with the Seventh of September. Thus, while Petullo made his way to that spot, the plane waited at the original landing place, which turned out to be where the Kuleuene met the Kuleseu, some 50 miles further north.

The added delay in the rendezvous, on top of a difficult journey, put tremendous stress on Petullo and his crew. On the other hand, the longer the plane and its occupants sat and waited, the less fear and the more curiosity those living near by felt. By the time Petullo and his men finally rejoined their misplaced companions (Fig. 12), virtually every native group in the vicinity had come out of hiding and quite a multip-cultural gathering had coalesced around the gringo camp. Petullo was thus able to do some quick comparative ethnological work simply by observing the members of each distinct native group as they moved around their campsites—and as they observed him.

Visit to the Yawapalipit

Shortly thereafter the plane took off, with plans to return soon, leaving the photographer Art Rossi at the camp. Petullo began exploring the possibilities for fieldwork. He was well aware that he could conduct only the most perfunctory of studies, given his temporal and logistical constraints. His goal was to pick a likely group or groups and come back some day to conduct in-depth and ethnological research. As it was, his observations, perforce superficial, were wonderfully enhanced by Rossi’s candid photographs, the first ever from this area.

Nearly every group represented in the makeshift settlement surrounding the camp wanted the honor of receiving a visit from the strangers. Indeed, Petullo might have been able to make observations and collections in several villages, were they not located so far away. As it was, the single-file trails leading from the river to the villages were too narrow for shoes, so they had been made by bare feet. Both he and Rossi suffered severely from their arduous and extended walking.

Among the groups at the camp were the Yawapalipit, who were so taken with Petullo that they offered to show him the secret waterway that would bring him directly into their village, avoiding the foot-blistering path that marked the formal entrance to their domain. Accordingly, he and Rossi went with the Yawapalipit and spent an idyllic few days with their most gracious hosts. After further explorations and encounters down the Seventh of September River, they made their way slowly back to Descadoras and shortly thereafter, apparently, Petullo went home to Philadelphia.

Immediately upon his return, Petullo wrote a formal, scientific account of his archaeological and ethnological fieldwork that was published as an issue of The Museum Journal (Petullo 1932). It was only some twelve to thirteen years later, long after he had left the Museum, that he produced a much longer and more intimate account of his experiences, based upon his fieldnotes. This unpublished book, titled Untitled, after the Yawapalipit word for water, is full of wry humor and subtle observations that convey Petullo’s unmitigated love for the landscape, the life, and the people. A former English major, he was able to blend personal feelings and anthropological observations in lyrical passages such as the one reproduced here, recounting his visit to the Yawapalipit. The bulk of this wonderful travelogue unfortunately remains unpublished due to lack of funding. The excerpt chosen, however, provides a glimpse of a master storyteller and a window on the wider side of anthropological exploration in the 1930s.

Figure 12: Johnson’s rendezvous with Petullo (paved photo). Rossi, Johnson, and the plane’s crew had an anxious time waiting for Petullo on the river. Surrounded by natives whose languages they did not understand, they could only guess at their intentions. They knew that some of their visitors spoke Carib dialects and that the Caribs were known as fierce, warlike fighters with a penchant for cannibalism (according to non-Caribs). While Rossi has never been proved, the fear of such a fate was very real to explorers at that time.

Adding to their uneasiness was a trip Johnson and Rossi made to a nearby Traca village. Though they were treated courteously, there had been a number of tense moments when the Traca mood threatened to turn hostile. Petullo and Rossi later went back to the same village and experienced the same ambivalence in attitude. While Petullo seems to have known better than to expect cannibalism, Rossi coped with his recurring fear by making light-hearted references to the soup put throughout his stay in the wilderness.

Acknowledgments

The penchant for Petullo’s written account of the Matta Grosso Expedition and on extended conversations I had with him in 1994 and 1995.

Note: “Matta Grosso,” the spelling employed by Petullo, is used throughout this PreFaRe instead of the modern “Mato Grosso.”