WHY WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SALANGO?
or
WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENED IN SALANGO?
or
RESCUING ECUADOR'S CULTURAL HERITAGE: THE PRE-COLUMBIAN CEREMONIAL CENTER AT SALANGO

In an earlier article (Lunniss 2011a), I discussed some of the broader themes illustrated by the archaeological evidence recovered by the Programa de Antropología para el Ecuador at the Salango site on the south coast of the Province of Manabí between 1979 and 1989. My aim then was to indicate 1) the tremendous range of material and theoretical interest of the site over its complete 5,000 year span of pre-Columbian history, 2) what had already been done with some of the excavated data, and 3) what still awaited study. Now, I wish to focus on the ceremonial center that evolved through twenty main episodes of construction and use during 1200 years of Late Formative and Regional Development occupation (approximately 600 BC to AD 600), and emphasize that its full description, analysis and publication are not only desirable but, from social, as well as cultural, scientific and historical perspectives, quite necessary.

Let us start again with the excavation. When the first clay walls and tombs of the Bahía II funerary precinct were discovered in 1982, there was no existing account yet published of any excavation of ceremonial architecture of the relevant period for the Ecuadorian western lowlands. Since then, except for the results of the work at Salango, the situation has stayed basically unchanged.

But as a result of the Salango excavations, we now have at our disposal a detailed record of the complex, multi-dimensional settings constructed for public ritual in the Late Formative and Regional Development at a key, if small, site on the central section of the Ecuadorian coast. [1] Specifically, reports so far have described and discussed: the early stages of the excavations (Norton et al. 1983); the sequence of Late Formative (Middle and Late Engoroy), Early Regional Development (Bahía II and Early Guangala) and Middle Regional Development (Middle Guangala) buildings, and associated ritual features such as human burials and artifact offerings, as revealed in one rear quarter (Lunniss 2001; Lunniss and Mudd 1987); the Late Formative structures as evidenced in the front half of the site (Lunniss 2006); the complete configuration of these structures as reconstructed on the basis of the combined evidence available from the different areas excavated (Lunniss 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008); the pottery associated with the Late Formative (Lunniss 2001) and Regional Development (Lunniss 2004) occupations; and the ritual deployment of stone figurines at the site during the final phase of the Late Formative (Lunniss 2011b, 2011c).

Above all else, discussion of the Late Formative architecture has highlighted the fundamental role of offerings (in the form of human, mammal and bird burials, and depositions of artifacts of different types) in the creation of ceremonial space. Study of the ceremonial platforms at Real Alto had already pointed to the incorporation of dedicatory offerings in the Valdivia period (Marcos 1988). But when the full picture of the various Middle (600-300BC) and Late Engoroy (300-100BC) floors and platforms was achieved, the scale, order, complexity, and sheer variety of sacrifices made at Salango came as a total surprise. Simply put, there has been no such elaborate and extended image of the role of buried offerings in the making of sacred space recorded through excavation anywhere else on the coast of Ecuador, for any period.

These sacrifices were used in two principal ways. First of all, they were placed underneath or within the foundations of the floors, platforms, clay walls, and post-holes which in different combinations served as the architectural elements of the ceremonial center in each of its episodes. This placement followed strict rules concerning the division and orientation of space, and the offerings served to confirm and strengthen distinct sets of values attributed to each area and point in space. Though other dimensions of spatial differentiation were identified, it was especially fascinating to discover the presence of a main horizontal axis whose SW extreme (symbolized by *Spondylus princeps*) was associated with the setting sun, the female, death, and the color red, while its NE extreme (symbolized by a conch, *Vasum caestus*) was associated in complementary fashion with the rising sun, masculinity, birth (probably) and the color yellow.

Second, there were offerings made after the initial construction of the above-ground architecture. Their differential placement was also governed by the spatial values signaled by foundation or dedicatory offerings. Importantly, spatial and directional values were the fundamental determinants in the location and orientation of human burials and, in Late Engoroy, in the location of surface-level stone figurine depositions. Thus we can see, most spectacularly through the example of the Late Engoroy funerary platform and its associated figurine cult, how ceremonial architecture was conceived of, constructed, and used as a dynamic, ever-growing stage for elaborate programs of ritual action and interaction.

At the same time, however, we find that offerings were themselves highly ordered within their respective burial pits. The degree of precision, indeed, with which artifacts were set in place, is at times astonishing. This interior structure was itself tied both to the broader principles of spatial organization that governed the design of the site, and, most probably, to the structure and meaning of the mythical events registered in the ritual, though such specific meanings have yet to be a subject of study.

Finally, it became apparent during the analysis that surviving sacrificial offerings included not only larger, more complete or elaborate artifacts (i.e. the typical components of museum displays), but also fragments of artifacts, and even completely un-worked natural materials (which are never exhibited). [2] Thus, amongst the offerings there were also many instances of rather sea-worn shells probably picked up off the shore and buried without any further modification of their external form, as well as simple fragments of shell and pieces of rock.

Likewise, it became clear that even depositions, of individual artifacts or groups of artifacts, lacking both internal structure and (to the unaccustomed eye) intrinsic value, were also often, if not always, consciously sited offerings. Thus in Late Engoroy, for example, collections of pot sherds, common stone tools or fragments thereof, bones, shells and other material, which would otherwise probably have been interpreted as discarded “rubbish”, something of no worth or function which simply had to be disposed of, turned out to have been intentionally buried sacrifices made as part of more extended ritual events whose other archaeological indicators included not only human interments, but also fire pits. And given the general context of deposition at the site, even a single shell bead found in a small hole could also have originally been a deliberately placed offering.

The case of Salango, then, is significant as an example of how sacred space was constructed through the erection of surface architecture and the deployment of buried sacrifices, the disposition of both the visible, above-ground elements and the invisible subsurface offerings being in strict accord with a complex system of organization that represented, in turn, a no less elaborate system symbolic of cosmological values. It should serve then to alert us to the likely nature of other ceremonial sites on the coast and elsewhere, already excavated or yet to be investigated. In particular, it requires that future excavations pay more attention to the recording of the exact location of all artifacts discovered in structured settings.

Still awaited at Salango, however, are reports on the evidence for the front halves of the Regional Development ceremonial structures, an overall reconstruction of each of the Regional Development structures, and an account of the associated human burials. While the description of the Late Formative ceremonial spaces has already added a large new body of data to the published record, preliminary study of the 12 succeeding episodes of construction and use of ritual precincts and platforms, shows that 1) there was significant reconfiguration of the center and its function at the start of both the Bahía II-Early Guangala and the Middle Guangala stages, 2) the Bahía II-Early Guangala structures in particular represented a wholly new concept of funerary architecture, and 3) the re-invention of the ceremonial center in Bahía II times expressed a reordering of human society and its relationship with the spirit world.

Materially, the Bahía II-Early Guangala funerary enclosures consisted of clay walls set in trenches around a central square space accessed through an entrance way in the middle of the NE side. The enclosures measured up to around 13 m by 13 m, but beyond the walls, there was an extensive ceremonial floor surrounding the center proper in all directions. The walls rose above the surface of this outer floor by up to 50 cm, and in at least one case the wall was stepped on the outside, though vertical on the inside.

In addition to the walls, the central space was further defined by wooden posts placed around the outside, or on the top, of the front and two side walls. Just as the height, width and shape of the walls changed from one episode to the next, so the number, size and disposition of the posts changed too. In one moment, the fence consisted of parallel rows of smaller posts set more closely together. At another, the posts were a single row of massive columns rising perhaps 7 m above the floor and set in pits 2 m deep, spaced at up to 2.50 m apart. These larger posts were, in fact, pre-cursors of Manteño ceremonial posts such as those found by Cevallos (1995) at Cerro Santos and Cerro Las Negritas in the southern Cordillera Chongón-Colonche, and those indicated by pits (and wood remains) excavated by Marcos (1981) at Loma de Cangrejitos on the Santa Elena Peninsular.

But the erection of the massive Bahía II posts at Salango involved first the placing of a large worked stone at the bottom of each of their respective pits. The stones functioned, in strict material terms, as supports for the posts, whose great weight might otherwise have driven them deeper into the soft sandy matrix of the soils beneath them. But they also had a symbolic function or value.

For the stone artifacts were of two types. Those beneath the posts on the NW seaward side were all anchors, while those on the SE landward side were metates, and their symbolic reference is simple and powerful. Essentially, they establish a basic dualism at the foundation both of the architecture of the center and, by extension, of the society whose identity was incarnated in that architecture. This dualism, minimally, organized the world in terms of the sea on the one hand, and the land on the other, but doubtless unfolded into a series of related concepts which have yet to be extrapolated. It is also worth pointing out that this is the earliest recorded instance of explicit symbols of sea:land oppositional structure to have been discovered incorporated in pre-Columbian architecture on the Ecuadorian coast.

At the same time, however, these objects assert the new technological skills and capacities of Bahía II society. The anchors, rounded blocks with transverse grooves to hold the ropes, are of

the size of Manteño anchors associated with large balsa rafts, though the later anchors included triangular forms with a hole at one corner for securing the rope. I have noted that the posts supported by the stones were themselves ancestors of similar Manteño constructions, and it is clear that the Bahía II anchors were, in the first place, ancestral to those used by the Manteños. More importantly, however, the Bahia anchors were most likely part of the equipment of balsa rafts sailed off the Ecuadorian coast 1500 years before the Spanish conquest, and they represent, if not the advent of large balsa raft navigation, which may even have occurred earlier, then at the very least its emergence as a pivotal element of both economic organization and cultural identity on the coast.

Second, the Bahía metates are of a size and quality unmatched by earlier, Engoroy examples, and would appear to represent an advance in the importance of food processing, and thus agriculture, parallel to that seen in marine navigation. Third, the anchors and metates represent a new confidence and technical advance with respect to stone working. Together, then, the two types of stone artifact symbolize not only the two principal domains of the natural world, but also central aspects of development within those spheres of action.

This brief review of the Bahía II funerary enclosure architecture will, I hope, have given a flavor of the evidence available and of the quality of the history that can be gained from its study. The full and detailed account of the human burials set inside the enclosure will be no less rewarding. For although many Regional Development cemeteries have been excavated on the coast, we tend to lack complete descriptions, and while there are useful studies of the artifacts found at the cemeteries, it does not always happen that the artifacts are described in relation to the specific tombs with which they were associated. In the worst of cases, knowledge of the sites is little more than anecdotal.

The Regional Development is characterized by the presence of elite cemeteries that were used to define key points of the sacred geography. The most famous of these is found at La Tolita (Valdez 1986, 1987, 1992), but looting of the site has meant that the archaeological register created by scientific investigation is vastly reduced. Sadly, there is no real idea available of the cemetery at Bahía de Caráquez which provided the first pottery artifacts to be described and attributed to the Bahía culture (Huerta 1940). Moving south from Salango, an Early Guangala cemetery associated with an area of non-elite residential occupation at Valdivia has been published (Stothert 1993) with a full description of the graves and their contents. Elaborate Guayaquil phase graves at San Pedro de Guayaquil were published in less detail, but with nonetheless valuable descriptions of the pottery and other artifacts (Parducci and Parducci 1970, 1972, 1975). Other cemeteries are reported (Piana and Marotzke 1997) at Salitre in the lower Guayas Basin, and at Campo Alegre and Punta Brava on Isla Puná, but the accounts of the tombs are brief, and unfortunately the material collected was destroyed in a fire. On a low hill at San Lorenzo del Mate, just west of Guayaquil, a Jambelí cemetery (Ubelaker 1983) has a

published breakdown of the objects associated with each grave, and a very interesting discussion of certain artifacts relating to the consumption of coca (Ledergerber 1992, 1997), though a full analysis is yet to be presented of the structure of the site. At La Libertad, Guangala tombs associated with two house mounds were described as part of the initial definition of this culture (Bushnell 1951). Finally, in South Manabí, an important cemetery at Joá is given brief, tantalizing mention (Holm 1969), but while a collection of artifacts recovered there is stored in the reserve of the MAAC in Guayaquil, neither the site nor the artifacts have ever been described. And the very extensive necropolis at Salaite, only a few kilometers north from Salango, and probably the largest Regional Development period ceremonial site of the central coast, has never been studied at all, though its spectacular offerings are to be found, in part, both in the main displays of Bahía phase artifacts and in the Sala de Oro at the Museum of the Casa de la Cultura in Quito. [3]

The list of coastal Regional Development period cemeteries does not pretend to be exhaustive, but it serves to suggest how valuable it will be to have the Salango data studied and made public. It will show, not least, that such a study is in fact possible. More than that, however, it will open our eyes to the new vision of the world that made itself manifest in the ritual practice of the period.

Meanwhile, although much data on the Late Formative has been presented in the published and archival accounts, many important aspects have of necessity been treated only summarily. For example, we still need detailed analyses of the Engoroy human burials and of the structured artifact offerings other than those of stone figurines; and a complete account of the figurines and related artifacts from all areas at Salango, both inside and outside the core of the ceremonial precinct would add to understanding of the full range of representational possibilities. Likewise, evaluation is needed of the functional aspects of the pottery, along with analysis and interpretation of painted designs on serving (Lunniss 2012b) and cooking wares, comparative study of green stone artifacts; and the large quantity of marine shell artifacts and stone artifacts (both ground and knapped; Mudd 1987) must be worked through.

The analysis so far conducted has thus tended to focus on context, sequence, structure and association, and on the iconography and symbolism of certain of the more elaborate and important cultural artifacts, though some attention has been paid to the faunal components mainly, but not exclusively, associated with diet (Béarez 1996, Béarez 1998, Béarez y Lunniss 2003). There are two main reasons for this.

First, without a proper understanding of context, the significance of the results of any material or technological analysis of artifacts will be limited. There will be no order to the collection of facts

gathered, no means to identify the meaning of difference, no clue as to symbolic association or precise ritual function. Secondly, there has simply been only limited funding available (or none at all) for any type of work. Thus from the outset, it was a conscious decision to focus on the reconstruction of the site and the elaboration of a spatio-temporal framework. Such a framework would then, in an ideal future, support and justify systematic general investigation of associated artifacts, and more technical studies such as petrographic analysis of the pottery, and identification of the sources of obsidian and other imported colored stone.

The case of the anchors and metates just mentioned is an excellent example both of the potential of the material for symbolic analysis and interpretation, and of the need for material study before this can be fully achieved. There still has to be a full assessment both of the formal characteristics of the artifacts and of their geology and sources. No less important would be an analysis of any residues still adhering to the metates in order to help determine the types of foodstuffs being processed. Some of the stones appear to have been used at one time as anchors and at another as metates, and it is necessary to test this preliminary observation and define the order of use. It would be interesting to carry out a comparative study designed to assess the technical advance represented by the stone objects with reference to artifacts of the preceding Late Formative. Another study would look at the similarities and differences found in comparable Manteño structures.

A second, parallel objective has been simply to bring the attention of the academic world, the relevant authorities, and the Ecuadorian public in general, to the existence of the remarkably complex and well preserved data set rescued through excavation, and thus, hopefully, guarantee support for the conservation and study of the site register and material remains. Sites such as Salango do not come to us very frequently, and it is perhaps difficult to appreciate just how different is the quality of information that it provides - or could provide once fully reported.

In addition, Salango is a small site. And although the Ruta del Spondylus passes by only a hundred metres or so away, it is distant from the larger population centers of the coast. Not only that, the area of the pre-Columbian ceremonial center is now entirely buried under a fish meal factory, with no indication as to its existence there. It is then, to all intents and purposes, not only psychologically remote, but physically invisible, and not only invisible, but **made** invisible. A big part of the job has been, in effect, to try to create a positive image of the site that would stand up against the slow process of forgetting that otherwise threatens its existence as an element of Ecuador’s pre-Columbian history.

In addition, however, it has been important to convey something of the value of the site as a source of knowledge concerning not only the material traits of the archaeological cultures

identified there, but also the more abstract spheres of cosmology and ideology (Stothert 2003). One of the more pressing needs is a study of the iconography of the pottery associated with the Bahía II-Early Guangala graves. These vessels are decorated, through various media including iridescent and negative paint, and modeling, with a variety of representational imagery. Some of the representations are complete, others more partial and stylized. Together, they suggest that the underworld house defined by the bases of the wooden posts and trenches of the clay walls was inhabited not only by the human dead carefully placed in their respective tombs, but also by a number of powerful spirit beings. These creatures were, moreover, a new force in the religious environment of the area, and signal a dramatic change in the perception of the hidden forces of the cosmos and their relation with human society.

But to return to the matter of context. Much recent work in the archaeology of Formative Ecuador has seen the use of comparative ethnography in the analysis of ceremonial and religious artifacts and iconography. Such analogy is a very valuable addition to the repertoire of tools available for interpretation, but it can leave the ancient archaeological data overshadowed by the often more brilliantly illustrated models, derived from contemporary or historic societies, which are used to explain them. Further it can easily blind us to the possibilities offered by the archaeological sites themselves for extended and detailed contextual analysis. At Salango, though of course not only at Salango [4] , we find artifacts, many of them previously known only from looted or poorly registered sites, in the precise context of their final use and deposition, associated with other artifacts, with ritual and other action, and with architectural order. It is possible then to make use of these different associations in unraveling the meaning of the offerings and of the other objects found at the site. We can construct an ever-expanding network of references that show how the pottery, figurines, beads and shells are used, individually or in combination, and how different combinations are associated with specific areas of the site and with other combinations of artifacts and features.

Furthermore, we find these ritual contexts set in a chronological sequence of ceremonial occupation of the site. It is thus possible to trace the history of use of artifact types, materials, colors, forms, and associations against the backdrop of a history of changing architectural space and ritual behavior, and so add another dimension to their study (Lunniss 2012a). We end up seeing the material not simply as a set of objects destined for a routinized typological classification, but as the products of human action and interaction through time, action and interaction conducted, moreover, in a particular place that had been constructed specifically for those ritual enactments. And finally, we can put the history of the Salango site in the successively larger contexts of local, regional, and supra-regional politics, religion, and economy.

It would be presumptuous, misguided, and indeed simply wrong to suggest that we can determine the complete meaning of the site and its components. But we can create an image,

or series of images, that tie the site, its features and their contents to the landscape around them. We can use archaeological, ethnohistoric, and ethnographic analogy to help us develop understanding of likely intention behind the actions that left the site as their record. But most important of all, we can use the structure inherent in the archaeological data of a site of long history and deep symbolic meaning, to create a context of sufficient order and complexity that it will act as a counter-balance to, and stand up against, the models brought to the site from outside. In other words, we can hope to develop models of the cosmology and ideology of the societies of the central coast that will reflect local responses to the challenges of human existence, including, of course, local adaptations of more widely shared philosophical and religious traditions.

In sum, the south of Manabí, while mainly recognized for its Manteño Señorío de Çalangome, has an ancient history that reaches much further back in time. Its forests, hills, beaches, headlands and islands were the setting of extraordinary and intricate religious ceremonies that evolved out of a lived understanding and appreciation of those landforms and the creatures that inhabited them. Continued study of the record of the Late Formative and Regional Development period ceremonial center at Salango will bring forward much new material of a substantive nature concerning the history of architecture and ritual on the coast of Ecuador, add greatly to our knowledge of pre-Columbian funerary practice, and of course provide invaluable perspective on Manteño cultural origins. Through the very quality of the data, our concepts concerning the creation, management and use of sacred space in past times will be altered and deepened. In particular, we shall have at our disposal a very significant body of data concerning ancient patterns of thought that developed in a specific setting, both terrestrial and marine; and it will be seen in what ways the local view of human society and of its place in the universe, was embedded in the experience of the land and sea. We shall, in short, be able to know and live in this landscape with greater understanding and sensitivity.

It would be a terrible mistake if the investigation of Salango’s ceremonial center were to end with just what we know now, however valuable that knowledge in itself is. It would be a great, unjustifiable waste, of so much time, money, labor, skill, and passion, if the site record, so painstakingly created over so many years by so many individuals, were simply allowed to rot, and all memory of it to fade. It is an unbearable thought that Salango might be just one more site to add to all the others of which future generations will sigh: “If only they had written and published their final reports! What really happened at Salango? What was its story?” And what a loss for Salango itself! Can we really afford such a loss? And are we really capable of showing such disrespect towards those people whose ancient faith entrusted us with this unique and wonderful legacy?

Notes :

[1] While the Palanda site of the Mayo Chinchipe culture on the eastern slopes of the Cordillera Condor (Valdez 2007a, 2007b, 2011; Valdez *et al.* 2005) is an extremely important, not to say revolutionary, addition to knowledge of Early Formative ceremonialism, it is also valuable for comparative purposes in placing the later coastal tradition represented by Salango in a much wider context. Above all, it shows that while there were certain shared concepts concerning the universe, local expressions of these varied enormously.

[2] Textiles, basketry, wooden artifacts, seeds, leaves and other plant parts, as well as prepared foods and drinks, would undoubtedly also have all been included as offerings at Salango, but have mostly not been preserved. In this context, however, the macro-botanical remains recovered from soil samples, and residues on stone tools may, if ever studied, provide valuable data on food production and processing.

[3] A small number of pottery bowls from Joá and Salaite, however, with designs in iridescent paint, were central elements of the exhibition “Luz, Color y Diseño en la Visión Precolombina ”,
presented at the MAAC in Guayaquil, in late 2012 and early 2013.

[4] Palanda is another excellent case in point.

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