FROM THE ARCHIVES AND COLLECTIONS

AN EXCAVATION IN GUANACASTE PROVINCE, COSTA RICA

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Carl Vilhelm Hartman served five years (1903–1908) as the first Curator of Archaeology and Ethnology at Carnegie Museum. Soon after being employed, Hartman traveled to Costa Rica on a seven-month expedition to excavate archaeological sites and purchase collections. He dug in the Nicoya peninsula of Guanacaste province on the Pacific side and in the Central Highlands. The only research Hartman (1907) published in detail dealt with the burial ground of Las Huacas in Nicoya. His 1907 monograph, though illustrated extensively, contains no field photographs, a point of special interest since the Section of Anthropology possesses 113 images (71 glass plates and 42 “old prints”) documenting Hartman’s 1903 fieldwork, mostly Central Highlands sites. A single photograph (Fig. 1), published here for the first time, illustrates an excavation in the Pacific region.

The photograph provides detailed contextual information about the artifacts. Nine metates are visible, six (\#s 1–6) on the excavation floor in what appear to be pits and three (\#s 7–9) removed to the ground surface. Four metates (\#s 1, 7–9) are broken; five seem intact. The only other artifact (\#10) is a bowl. The absence of artifacts in the profile behind the boy indicates that a layer of sterile (non-artifact bearing) overburden existed above the level containing the metates, a characteristic noted by Hartman (1907:15) for Las Huacas and other burial grounds in the Pacific region.

Rounded (conical) legs, curved platforms, and limited areas (or total absence) of low-relief designs are attributes typical of the rectangular-shaped, tripod metates whose distribution is restricted to the Guanacaste region from 300 BC to AD 500. All Fig. 1 metates have curved platforms and two broken metates on the surface display three conical legs. Hartman’s Las Huacas burial ground map (1907:plate XLVII) shows 16 metates, some with carved designs, positioned singularly and in clusters. Carved designs are not evident on the Fig. 1 metates although their “invisibility” may result simply from the photograph’s poor resolution.

Is this photograph a verifiable image of Hartman’s 1903 Las Huacas excavation? There are reasons to support that attribution. Hartman’s writings state that Las Huacas was the only site he excavated in Guanacaste province in 1903. Fig. 1 attributes that correlate well with his excavation description include the tripod metates, their depth below ground surface, their distributions as individual and clustered artifacts, the apparent presence of pits, the sterile stratum, and the temporal concordance between the span of metate manufacture and use of the cemetery. Yet, there are discrepancies. Placement of metates in Fig. 1 differs from their depiction on his map. No individual metate in the photograph can be correlated, for certain, with a metate in the Las Huacas collection (the photograph’s lack of visible design elements frustrates any match). Absent in the photograph are other kinds of artifacts and the skeletons seen on the map.

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The authors conclude that this image unquestionably depicts an excavation in Guanacaste province but, because of the inconsistencies, it cannot be verified to be Las Huacas. If the image is Las Huacas (a strong possibility), the site sector differs from that shown on Hartman’s map. Whatever site it depicts, Fig. 1 is important historically, as a rare image photographically documenting in situ artifacts from the earliest days of archaeological research in Costa Rica.

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