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Tracing Louis H. Ayme's Explorations in Oaxaca, México, 1884-1885



Research Year: 1999

Culture: Zapotec

Chronology: Classic

Location: Oaxaca, México

Site: Santa Maria Coatlan

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Abstract

This report details some aspects of research tracing an early example of the gathering of Pre-Columbian archaeological objects in Oaxaca, México. It focuses on the work of Louis H. Ayme at Santa Maria Coatlan, one of two locations where he excavated in 1884-1885. His records of exploration and collecting in two caves, still important in the life of this Zapotec village, provide an opportunity for studying both the objects that he

recovered and the importance of caves in this part of Oaxaca. Ayme's work helps document a particular case of ritual cave usage in Mesoamerica, a tradition dating from Pre-Columbian times, which sometimes continues into the present. It also provides several opportunities for learning more about Santa Maria's role in this poorly understood area of Oaxaca.

Resumen

En este informe se detallan algunos aspectos de la investigación que rastrea un ejemplo temprano del coleccionismo de objetos arqueológicos precolombinos en Oaxaca, México. Está centrado en el trabajo de Louis H. Ayme en Santa María Coatlan, una de las dos localizaciones en las que excavó en 1884-1885. Los registros que realizó de la exploración y recolección de dos cuevas que aún son importantes en la vida de esta aldea zapoteca, proporcionan la oportunidad de estudiar tanto los objetos que él recuperó como la importancia de las cuevas en esta parte de Oaxaca. El trabajo de Aymes ayuda a documentar un caso particular del uso ritual de cuevas en Mesoamérica, una tradición que data de los tiempos precolombinos, y que algunas veces sigue vigente en el presente. También proporciona algunas oportunidades para ampliar nuestros conocimientos sobre el papel que desempeñó Santa María en esta zona de Oaxaca, insuficientemente comprendida.

Submitted 08/30/2002 by:
Cynthia N. Pinkston
cppinkston@aol.com

Introduction

On January 7, 1885, an adventurous American entered the pueblo of Santa Maria Coatlan, a village accessible only after negotiating 19 miles of a path "...that seemed to have been constructed so as to pass over all the steepest and stoniest places..." before descending into its "...tiny valley with horrid mountains frowning down on every side..."



Figure 1. View of Santa Maria Coatlan from the entrance path. (January 1998)

What motivated Louis H. Ayme, a one time United States Consul in the Yucatán to make this and other arduous journeys to various areas of Oaxaca, some of which, like Santa Maria, are even now relatively unknown? This question is one of many that I have been trying to answer by following Ayme's complicated history in various archives and museum collections, through publications and field reconnaissance, re-inserting his work into the archaeological record of 19th century México.

Ostensibly employed as a Special Ethnographer, Ayme was in fact commissioned by Spencer F. Baird, Secretary of the Smithsonian, to collect objects of both ethnographic and archaeological interest, which were to be sent to the Institution for eventual display at the National Museum in Washington, D.C. More than 1500 archaeological specimens, primarily ceramic, but including metal, stone, shell, and bone examples as well, were shipped by Ayme from Oaxaca; most are still part of the Smithsonian holdings and are the subject of my dissertation. Although the majority of these objects were purchased, some were also surface collected and in two instances, one of which was in Santa Maria Coatlan, artifacts were actually excavated. In these two cases, information about the disposition of the materials and their recovery was carefully recorded by Ayme and provides a much more complete picture of original provenience than is usually retrievable for early collections.

All of the objects assembled by Ayme and the circumstances under which they were gathered, help illuminate aspects of the past that can encourage continuing study and cooperation now and in the future. This is especially so in the case of Santa Maria. Part

of my work has included bringing to the people of Santa Maria information about some of their heritage through the use of photographs, maps, reconnaissance, and interviews, and it has been a most rewarding dimension of my research experience.



Figure 2. Stone objects found in the "Altar Cave" by L.H. Ayme in 1885.

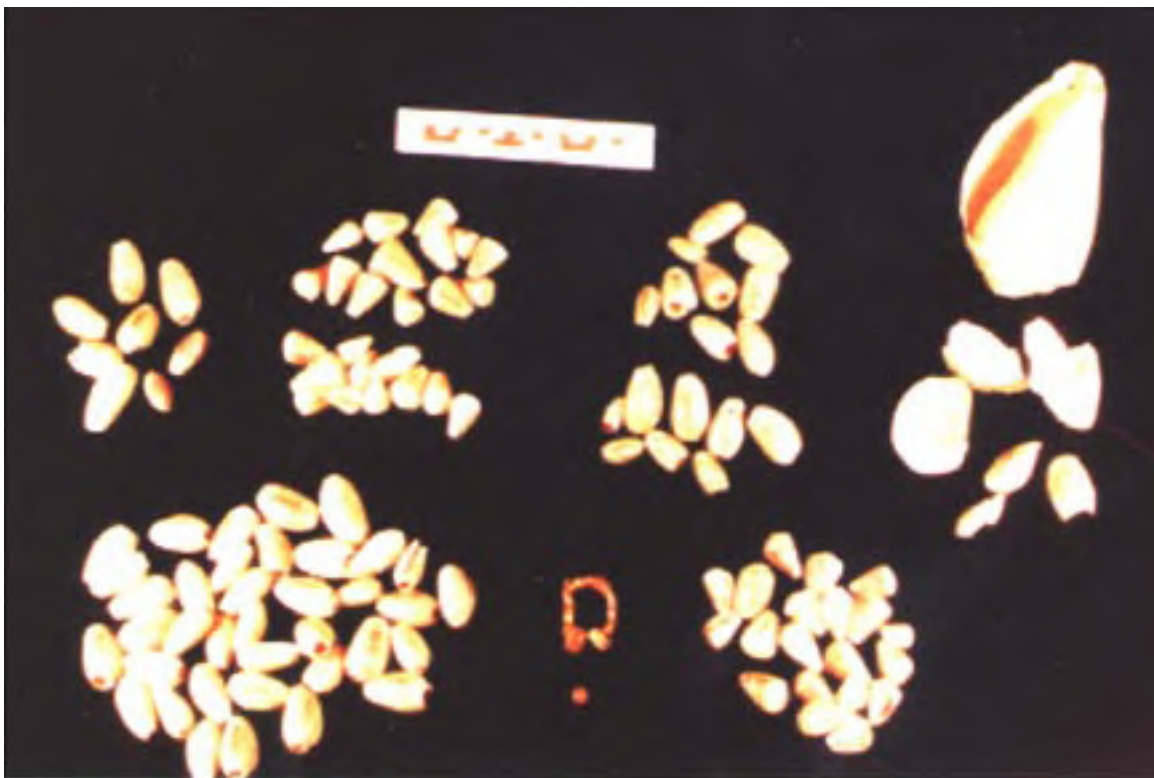


Figure 3. Shell objects found in the "Altar Cave" by L.H. Ayme in 1885.

Although the genesis of this exchange between the past and the present was the long forgotten explorations of Ayme, its prospect is one of a joint, cooperative investigation into the archaeological and ethnographic history of the village. That such a project can even be discussed is due to the kindness and help I have received in Santa Maria, an opportunity only possible because of grant support from the National Geographic Society and the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI). In addition, letters of introduction from the Centro INAH Oaxaca, and advice from colleagues there including Nelly Robles Garcia, Marcus Winter, and Raul Matadamas Diaz, among others, have encouraged me in tracing the outlines of this intriguing path from the past to the present and hopefully forward into future studies related to the prehistory and history of Oaxaca.

Research Goals

One of the greatest problems scholars face in working with early archaeological collections is the question of how should such materials be dealt with in view of the fact that they were often assembled without any regard for, or even knowledge of, the professional standards we expect today? Many of these objects have therefore been ignored because without proper recovery they are now considered as, at the very least, unreliable. This is frequently true since making replicas, or "pious quotations" of

treasured objects, outright fakery, tomb robbing and looting of sites are all much older traditions than those governed by recent codifications of archaeological ethics. Nonetheless, museums around the world house thousands of older collections and in the last several years more attention is being paid to ways in which these materials may be productively studied. A variety of approaches is being employed and includes scientific testing possible because of new technology, integration with more current field research, and the use of a variety of interdisciplinary approaches and interpretations. (Boone, Christensen, Danien, Jeter, Pinkston and Danien, Sellen)

The Ayme collections clearly fall within this problem area noted above, especially since some of the more impressive pieces, such as the Zapotec urns, are exactly the kind of object that has been copied in both the recent and more distant past. For that reason, my research design looks first to Ayme's actual excavations when trying to assess his reliability, next to his surface collecting and finally to those objects which he purchased. He described, mapped and sketched certain aspects of his first excavations at Nazareno Xoxocotlan, near Monte Albán, and his information, which I have reviewed with archaeologists from the Proyecto Especial Monte Albán 1992-1994, seems correct for the time period and location, as does his surface collecting there and at Monte Albán itself.

Ayme's work at Santa Maria Coatlan is perhaps even more interesting than that at Nazareno, although unfortunately his records here were not as complete, consisting of an informative letter and a catalogue of objects, but lacking any map or drawings. However, unlike Nazareno, which has become an Agricultural Research Center, Santa Maria is relatively unchanged and even though the Coatlanes have a long cultural tradition, very little archaeology has been performed in the area. The excavations Ayme conducted here therefore present an opportunity to pursue three separate goals, all of which are interrelated and all of which are examples of some of the opportunities that may be advanced by studying older collections. These goals are:

1. Testing Ayme's reliability. Early collectors often recorded poorly and with considerable dissimulation. Santa Maria is the second venue where it is possible to judge Ayme's accuracy as an excavator and recorder of his discoveries and so if, as at Nazareno, he is being at least fairly factual, it also affects the way his surface collecting and purchasing may be considered. Combining his careful catalogues of the objects he sent to the Smithsonian with an increased respect for his reliability makes the collections more useful for research and study.
2. Researching not only the objects Ayme recovered from Santa Maria but also the ethnographic continuity of cave use in the village. His work here was performed in natural spaces that were and are important to the people of Santa Maria. They still leave offerings at the entrance to one and remember traditions related to others. His records therefore provide an interesting opportunity for study in and of themselves as well as in terms of the continuity of cave use in Oaxaca and further research should be pursued with both aspects in mind.

3. Studying the stone objects, human bones and over 100 worked Pacific Ocean shells that Ayme excavated in what he referred to as the "Altar Cave." The shells certainly came from the Coast and were probably gathered by people active in a Pre-Columbian trade network, beginning at the Pacific, passing through the mountains, and continuing into the Central Valley of Oaxaca where there was a demand for luxury items. Procurement of such an assemblage and their burial more than six feet deep and under a large stone slab was quite possibly related to both ritual cave use and to a quite sophisticated long distance trade tradition and opens questions about Santa Maria's role in such matters. More research could contribute to ongoing studies in other parts of Oaxaca as well as in other areas of Mesoamerica and should be approached by integrating information from such other studies. (Brady, Feinman, Matadamas Diaz, Steele)

Methodology and History of Research

Research methodology for my work on Ayme has been grounded first of all in the evidence provided by the collection materials themselves, by his letters discussing his explorations and by study of the detailed catalogues which accompanied the objects he sent from Oaxaca to Washington, D.C. Understanding these collections, which can be viewed almost as a map of areas of archaeological interest in Oaxaca in the latter years of the 19th century also necessitates research in various, often unpublished archives, some without catalogues and others privately held and unavailable without special permission. Consultation with others working on various types of archaeological, anthropological and ethnographic investigations in Oaxaca are of tremendous importance and field work in the areas where Ayme collected is indispensable. Finally, returning to refine and amplify preliminary research is also critical since new information is constantly being generated. Such work is often only accessible through personal interactions since publication may not occur for appreciable lengths of time.

The history of my work at Santa Maria Coatlan begins with a first visit for purposes of reconnaissance, in preparation for a more extended visit planned as a way to learn more about Ayme's explorations in the caves of this relatively remote village.



Figure 4. Map of the Miahuatlán District, including the Coatlán. From Basilio Rojas, 1958.

At the end of my survey at Nazareno, on January 15, 1998, I went by bus to Miahuatlán, where I was allowed to research in the archives and the next day, accompanied by Professor Angel Barrios Santiago, went by jeep, traversing a still difficult 19 miles to the wayside shrine marking the drop-off point for Santa Maria. At that time the village had very limited electric power, no indoor plumbing, no telephone and no way in or out except by foot—a 35 to 65 minute trek, depending on the direction of one's travel.

Rather discouragingly and in spite of the fact that I had letters of introduction from the authorities at INAH, the municipal officials at first totally disavowed knowledge of any caves at all in Santa Maria, let alone the ones in which Ayme had worked in 1885. It was only after I pointed out a map in the village office showing a "cueva con agua" which I knew was one in which Ayme had worked that I was able to convince the town leaders to lead me to that particular cave. We were taken to the mouth of this Water Cave, a rock shelf dropping steeply down into a dark interior, but we were quite strictly discouraged from entering. It was while I was standing there that I saw kernels of corn deposited in small hollows at the entrance, seeming left as offerings, although none of our escorts made any mention of them. Seeing such traditional offerings, particularly appropriate to the season since caves are associated with rain, which is absolutely necessary for the newly planted maize crop, was the first time I realized that a continuity

of much older traditions might still exist in Santa Maria. That the flow of water from the cave was critical to the village also became apparent because in addition to irrigation it was also used for drinking, bathing, cooking, and cleaning purposes. These two factors, taken in conjunction, led to my request for support so that I could come back and spend a more extended time in Santa Maria.

When I returned to Oaxaca in March of 1999, thanks to FAMSI funding, my first challenge seemed almost insurmountable—finding a host family in Santa Maria since I knew there were no public accommodations in the village. I was fortunate to be steered to the new Ethnobotanical Garden at the Santo Domingo Cultural Center: representatives had recently been collecting plants and trees in Santa Maria. Two gardeners, Señor Enrique Cruz Osorio and his son Ramiro Cruz Jimenez had helped the Garden's work in the village and were employed in Oaxaca caring for the Santa Maria materials. I met them at the International Ethnobiology Conference the Garden was hosting and they agreed to take me back with them when they returned for their weekly visit. As we approached the village after a five hour trip by bus, in the back of a truck loaded with produce, tools, livestock and passengers and while we walked down the steep road to Santa Maria, the Cruzes conferred and informed me that they were taking me to their home to stay since they thought it safer for me—a sentiment with which I gladly concurred.



Figure 5. Inside the "Altar Cave." View up and towards opening. (March 1999)

Coming to Santa Maria a second time, again with INAH introductory letters and now under the protection of a family well thought of in the town was most helpful, as was my ability to stay for a more lengthy period. Although the town government changes every year, my earlier visit was remembered, especially after I presented the village officials with photographs I had taken there the year before, a current topographical map of the area and photographs of the stone tools and shells which Ayme had excavated at Santa Maria in 1885. Fourteen of the men of the village, including the municipal officers, escorted me to both of the caves where Ayme had worked, accompanied me inside, held flashlights and torches while I photographed, and then posed for a group picture after our explorations.



Figure 6. Mouth of the Water Cave. (March 1999)



Figure 7. Inside the Water Cave. (March 1999)



Figure 8. Village men who escorted me to the Caves. (March 1999)

Santa Maria has a very definite hierarchic system with well-defined lines of authority and codes of behavior, including considerable separation of the sexes, at least in the official sphere. Because I was aware of this I asked permission to speak with the women of the village. They have their own semi-formal structure, although not all of them participate in it, but I believed it was important to make myself known to them as I hoped this would help build confidence in regard to my presence in Santa Maria. I also hoped that I might be able to learn something about their customs, for example their use of different plants as food, or for medicinal needs. Permission was granted and the meetings turned out to be particularly interesting. Not only was I an object of much curiosity, but also they asked me to speak to the village officials for them since they had been unsuccessful in getting attention. They wanted some central area set aside as a park/family space for the young children, mothers and elders and felt that activities such as basketball, for the young men for instance, were the only ones receiving support. We made a list of several of their concerns, ranging from the request for "un parque para los niños" to the need for pencils, notebooks, crayons and other school supplies, since some children could not afford these items and therefore often did not attend classes.

Early on Monday morning Señor Cruz and his son returned to Oaxaca City and I spent the rest of my time in the village primarily with the women, especially Dona Maria, Señor Cruz's wife, their three daughters, her daughter-in-law and grandson. I participated in some family activities, weeding in their nearby fields, shelling corn for tortillas, and visiting with Dona Maria who seemed to enjoy having another woman to talk with at the end of the day when we would sit in the adobe kitchen and drink coffee made from beans they grew and roasted themselves. I was also taken, clearly with village permission, to several surrounding areas, the most impressive of which was a magnificent waterfall formed by the stream from the Water Cave remaining after it had traversed the village, been diverted to homes for household use and directed into irrigation canals for many of the village fields.



Figure 9. Waterfall formed by the stream from the Water Cave. (March 1999)

It is difficult indeed to comprehend just how great a flow of water is available to Santa Maria during the rainy season when the Cave totally fills with water (according to my informants) if this is what remains after its journey during the dry season. It was the young women who took me to the waterfall, and I certainly never would have found it on my own: Ayme clearly never saw it for he would surely have mentioned such a natural wonder in his records. It may be that there is some sort of gender linkage associated with these water features, but in any case, it is no wonder that the people of Santa Maria guard them today as they did in the past since the life of the village depends in large measure upon careful water management.

Before leaving the village I spoke with the elementary school teachers (there is no secondary school) regarding educational needs, was able to review the previous year's census which showed a total population of less than 750 men, women and children, photographed the approximately 45 students of varying ages present that day, and upon returning to Oaxaca City, purchased 50 notebooks, 50 pencils and two boxes of crayons to be distributed by the school, sending them to the village with Señor Enrique

and his son, including with the school supplies a letter of thanks for their help addressed to the municipal officials.



Figure 10. Señor Enrique Cruz Osorio and his son Ramiro Cruz Jimenez with notebooks, pencils and other school supplies for Santa Maria Coatlan.

I returned to Oaxaca in July 2000, in part to give a paper at the 4th International Biennial Symposium sponsored by the Welte Institute for Oaxacan Studies and especially because I needed to go back to Santa Maria Coatlan. I found that there had been several changes in the village, including the addition of a telephone. The Cruzes were no longer working at the Ethnobotanical Garden as both had accepted "cargo" positions in the village, Señor Enrique's being particularly important. He was responsible for both the shrine at the top of the hill and the modern church built next to the ruins of the 1660 one, destroyed by the earthquake of 1870. He was also in charge of the yearly festival in honor of the Virgin, a complicated task indeed since this is the time when families return from everywhere, expecting a memorable occasion.

I again gave photographs from the preceding year to the village, along with a binder to hold them and these were warmly received, especially those showing the school children as no one in Santa Maria possessed a camera. As before, I made a contribution to the festival for the Virgin, and included some rolls of film in case anyone of the visiting families might bring a camera with them. I met with the new municipal officials and received, after several hours of lengthy discussion, a letter of thanks for my gifts to the village and an invitation to return with associates to explore and map the caves.

Santa Maria Coatlana: 16 de Julio
2000

Professora Cynthia N. Pinkston
Arqueologia de La Universidad
de Maryland, Estados Unidos

Nosotros, los Autoriados Municipales somos muy felices que usted tene un interese sincero in la Pubela de Santa Maria y los habitantes. Gracias a usted por los cuadranos, lapiz y colores por los niños que usted compra y que Señor Enrique Cruz Osorio y Señor Ramiro Cruz Jimenez porteros a Santa Maria Coatlan en Marzo de 1999. Y gracias por su regalo de \$200 pesos for la Fiesta de La Virgen Maria por esto anno, de 15 Augusto de 2000.

Nosotros hablaremos con usted de la posibilidad que usted regreso de proximo año (2001) con socios profesionas por explorar y fabricar una mapa scientifica de los cuevas de Santa Maria, especialidad la "Cueva con Agua."

Nosotros supportamos mas investigaciones de este proyecto y esperamos trabajar con usted por tenir mas informacion de las cuevas de Santa Maria Coatlan.




Alejandro Martínez Santiago
Argente Suplente

Figure 11. Letter of thanks from the Municipal Officials of Santa Maria with an invitation to return for further work in the caves. (July 2000)

On this return trip my goals also included continuing research, some of which was not possible in the States, doing more work at Cuilapan on Oaxacan ceramics and visiting other areas where Ayme had collected; fortunately I was able to advance some of these projects.



Figure 12. Inside the "Altar Cave." View towards interior and back of cave. (July 2002)

Thanks to considerable advice from colleagues about archives and libraries in Oaxaca, I was able to review materials not available to me before and I began tracing more extensively the history of the different areas where Ayme had collected, using sources including the 1570-1581 *Relaciones Geográficas de la Diócesis de Oaxaca* which describe the Water Cave "...una queva de tanto hueco como una gran caza..." purported to extend for at least 200 leagues. (Paso y Troncoso) This cave was at least partly explored by the 2nd Bishop of Oaxaca, Fray Bernardo de Albuquerque at the end of the 16th century during a pastoral visit to the area. The Bishop's attention was also drawn to the custom the native Zapotecs had of making sacrifices to idols within the cave; these idols were probably modified stalagmites. He seems to have taken

exception to this practice and may have destroyed at least some of these objects of veneration.

It was recorded again by Manuel Martinez Gracida in 1883: he based his commentary on the Relaciones and he may well have been the source of Ayme's information about Santa Maria since they quite probably became acquainted during Ayme's residence in Oaxaca in 1884-1885. That Ayme's work in the Water Cave led to his nearly being walled up alive inside it because of the hostility of the villagers to his trespassing deep into this critical space may not have been recounted to anyone in Oaxaca, and as well, his excavations and collecting in another cave, noted by Gracida as the "Grotto of the Virgin" and as the "Altar Cave" by Ayme, also probably went unmentioned.

There may be a faint echo of these episodes in the 1958 publication *Miahuatlán, un Pueblo de México*, by Basilio Rojas. He draws upon both the Relaciones and Gracida, incorporating as well information about Americans investigating the possibility of washing gold from the river at Santa Maria and trying to discover the actual dimensions and sources of the Cave's seemingly inexhaustible bounty. He concludes his commentary on the caves and grottos of Santa Maria by noting that he knows of no scientific survey or map of these features being either successfully conducted or published, a situation which may still be an accurate reflection of the extent of knowledge of these long noted, yet still poorly understood, natural wonders.

Drawing upon the resources of the Welte Institute also allowed me to learn more about maps in both Oaxaca and México City. I was able to find several documents relating to Santa Maria and Nazareno at various archives in Oaxaca. These are primarily concerned with land disputes but also include two unpublished maps that will help me fill in some of the history of these areas particularly important to my dissertation. And finally, I was able to purchase several books not available in the States that are crucial for my work on the Ayme ceramics.

Now, in 2002, I have returned from another trip to Oaxaca where I gave an invited paper at the 5th Welte Symposium, the subject of which was Ayme's surface collecting at Monte Albán and its relation to his excavations at Nazareno. I was also able to confer with several other scholars whose papers were connected in some ways to my own work. It was on this trip that I was finally able to meet with Dr. Manuel Esparza who was very kind in discussing avenues of approach to the time and society of Oaxaca when Ayme was living there and collecting—he is probably the most knowledgeable scholar of that period. His suggestions about records and research areas will be most useful indeed in trying to understand the reality of Oaxacan attitudes to Pre-Columbian objects, their study and collecting, over 100 years ago.

An especially important aspect of this trip was that I was able to make my fourth visit to Santa Maria Coatlan, this time in the company of two Mexican ethnographers, Paola Garcia Souza and Saul Millan. Their work at Los Huevas de San Mateo del Mar resonates with mine at Santa Maria. This was the first time that I was able to go to the village with colleagues who spoke both Spanish and English, something that was extremely useful for more clearly understanding the unwritten history of the village and

of its two major caves, both of which we visited. I was able to take some new photographs, especially in the "Altar Cave" since it had been emptied of the fodder that had been stored there when I visited in 1999 and 2000. The extent of that cave, which Señor Enrique told us had been used for church services before the building of the 1660 edifice, was impressive and the large stone which seems to be the one that Ayme overturned and dug under, is still *in situ*. That this cave was used long before the advent of the Spaniards seems verified by Ayme's archaeological recoveries there, and we are now investigating the steps necessary to return for more research, which the new municipal officials indicated was still acceptable to them.

Conclusions and Continuing Research

In many important ways, Santa Maria Coatlan would still be clearly recognizable to Louis H. Ayme today, familiar in most of its aspects, although it has changed considerably in just the last four years. Its economy is still based primarily on agriculture; its soil is still extremely fertile; its climate allows a variety of crops—corn, beans, squash, of course but also including coffee, limes, lemons, oranges, peaches, peppers, tomatoes, a variety of herbs and flowers, cotton and even small amounts of cochineal, for which the entire area of the Coatlanes was once rich and famous. As in the past, however, its most notable features remain the impressive caves in which Ayme explored over 100 years ago.

These caves, since they were the focus of Ayme's attention, are clearly still an important part of my research, but I am also searching out more about the history of this area, especially in relation to the lienzo tradition that may reflect knowledge of the Coatlanes. I intend pursuing, along with plans for an interdisciplinary project for mapping the Water and Altar Caves and further ethnographic study, the possibility of promoting conservation work in Santa Maria's archives. There are still some records extant, I have been told, but I have not as yet been able to see them. Since I have some contacts with a project for preserving such records, I hope that I may be able to enlist support, and so help the village protect whatever information of this type they have from their past.

Several different aspects of this past are even today visible in Santa Maria: for instance, still in the municipal building and used as symbols of authority are two staffs of office, objects which Ayme referred to in 1885. Other echoes from earlier times survive as well—the erroneous idea that there is gold in the caves, one which probably dates back to the tribute paid by the peoples of this area first to their caciques, then to the Aztecs and then to the Spanish. The Church bells from the 1700's are still used to call worshippers to services, and small Pre-Columbian objects, usually fragmentary and primarily ceramic, surface when fields are plowed or foundations dug—a few have been shown to me and I have drawn them for their owners.

Yet the modern world is fast advancing on this small village and this is a subject for concern—Santa Maria now has a telephone and a loudspeaker; there has been

considerable building and rebuilding after the earthquake two years ago and more and more fields and homes are siphoning off water from the Cave, sending it through new cement irrigation ditches to expanded fields. A highway to the Pacific Coastal resorts is being built and while it passes high above Santa Maria, it nonetheless opens this community to outside influences in ways never feasible in the past. Some of these developments are good, but others may bring new problems in their wake.

I hope therefore that my research will have positive effects for Santa Maria—that bringing back something of its history may encourage knowledge and pride in their past on the part of the village people, and a determination to preserve that which is special about Santa Maria Coatlan both now and in the future.

Acknowledgements

My interest in Louis H. Ayme and his collections had its beginnings in a joint University of Maryland/Smithsonian Fellowship, "Discovering the Americas" under the direction of Dr. Saul Soskowsky. Grant support from the National Geographic Society and the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI) is gratefully acknowledged.

In the course of my research, I have also been aided by the generosity of staff members of the Smithsonian Institution, including Ronald Bishop, Candace Greene, Johanna Humphrey, Felicia Pickering, David Rosenthal, and Charles Tumosa, among others. Many colleagues have been consistently helpful, with advice on subjects as various as archives and libraries that would be useful, sources of grant support and even including suggestions for places to stay. A few of these knowledgeable people are James Brady, Elin Danién, Norman Hammond, Curtis Hinsley, Thomas Knowles, Arthur Miller, John Peeler, John Pohl, Jeff Quilter, Javier Urcid and Rosanna Woensdregt. Without the counsel of these and others, my work would have been impossible.

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