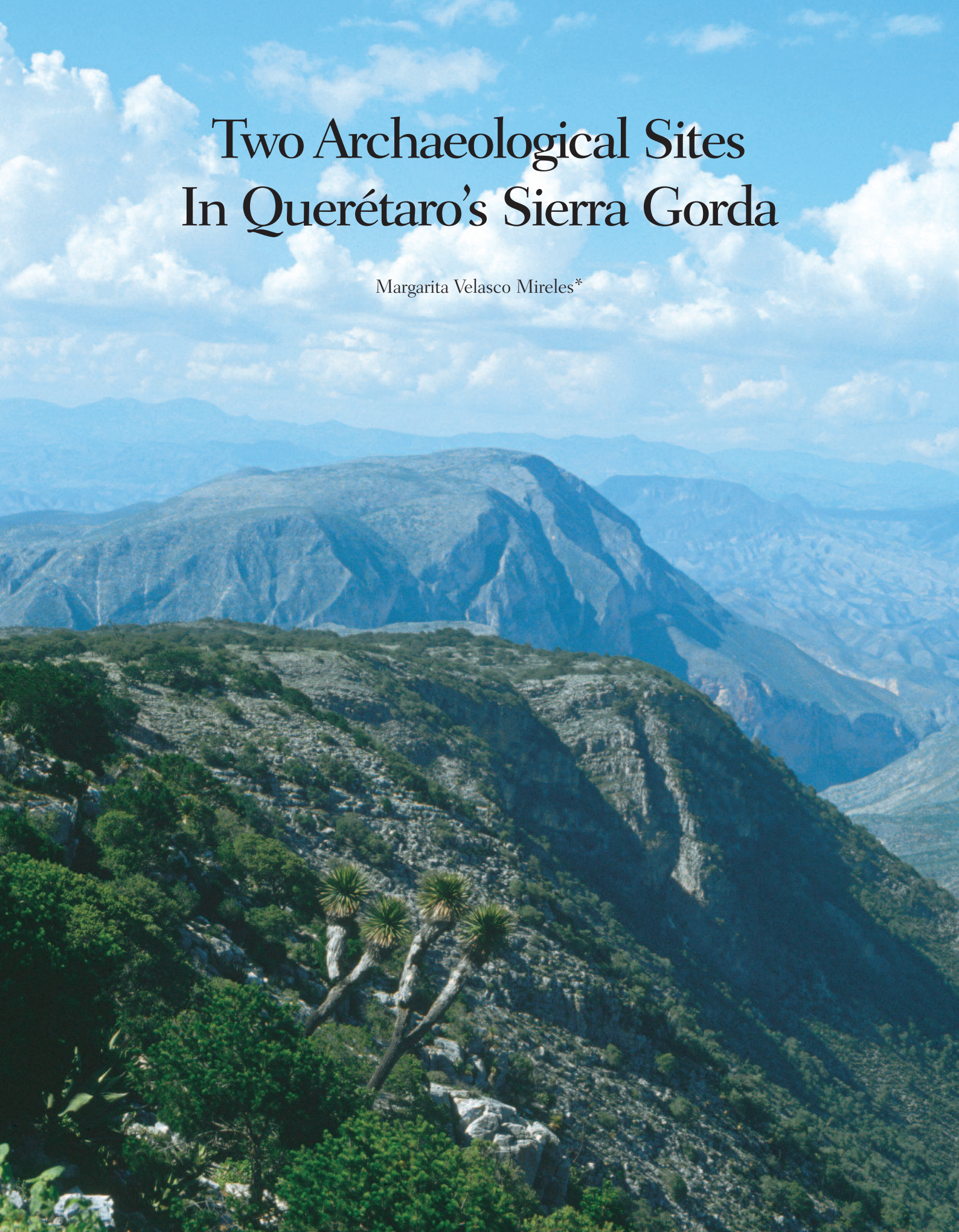


Two Archaeological Sites In Querétaro's Sierra Gorda

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The Sierra Gorda is the part of the Sierra Madre Oriental covering northwestern Hidalgo, northern Querétaro, the eastern part of Guanajuato and south-central San Luis Potosí. Typical of the region are its difficult topography and its contrasting scenery, with dense pine and holm oak forests growing in the humidity that comes from the Gulf of Mexico coast and areas with less rainfall where only thorny thickets and xerophytic vegetation adhered to rocks grow.

Man came to these mountains in early times as nomadic hunter-gatherers to take advantage of the variety of natural resources that the mountains offered for their survival. How-

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ever, around the beginning of our era the first groups to practice agriculture made their appearance as they gradually settled the mountains. These first waves of sedentary farmers seemed to come from the lowlands of the coastal gulf plain and filtered into the Sierra Madre Oriental by different routes.

One of the economic attractions that may have motivated this colonization was the existence of rich mineral deposits, including mercury. Cinnabar, or mercuric sulphide, mercury's only important ore, was valued in ancient Mexico for the same reason that other men at other times and in other places in the world have used it: as a pigment, with magical-religious connotations arising from its beautiful shades of red, associated with blood and life.

From that time on, then, the cultural and economic development of the mountain towns was closely linked to mining. In the 1970s, the



These semi-circular stairways associated with religious and administrative buildings are unique in Mesoamerica.

One example of the high development achieved by the mountain peoples are the cities of Ranas and Toluquilla, located in the southwest Sierra Gorda.



Structure 16, along an east-west axis, was the highest point in Ranas with a view of the whole city and environs.

first major study of pre-Hispanic mining in the Sierra Gorda was carried out, yielding interesting information about progress made in mining engineering during the Late Classical and Early Post-Classical Periods (A.D. 650-1200). The research indicated that the miners in the Soyotal region, in what is today the municipality of Pinal de Amoles, Querétaro, hand dug tunnels more than 80 meters deep that followed the vein of ore; they bored ventilation shafts to evacuate dust and smoke, installing support beams to avert cave-ins and preparing special work areas for collecting, selecting and cleaning the cinnabar. The precious red dust was collected in small receptacles to be stored and later distributed through trade networks far away in Mesoamerica.

Specialists have been able to identify some of the mining processes by looking at the tools and utensils used for the work, like hammers,

puncheons, hatchets, receptacles, shells, small brushes, nets, palm-mats, cording, sandals, torches, etc.

The region's efficient mining and agricultural production resulted in a spectacular flowering of the Sierra Gorda. Important settlements rose up: large cities with a social, political, economic and religious life and many different-sized settlements sprinkled through the mountains.

One example of the high development achieved by the mountain peoples are the cities of Ranas and Toluquilla, located in the southwest Sierra Gorda. Both are strategically placed on high plateaus, with a view of all the surrounding land and restricted access—since each had only one road leading to the city— guarded by sentinels. From this position they controlled the springs that provided their water supply and some of the cultivated land. The long, narrow plateaus where the cities were founded were

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The ball game was the axis around which the main settlements were built.



The ball game courts in mountain settlements were open on both ends and had no markings on the walls.

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adapted for construction by cutting down the forest and changing the natural topography by leveling the ground. When they needed more space, they broadened out the construction by building great retaining walls to create platforms and terraces that would hold up the new structures. For building, they used local materials: earth and rocks for the foundations, clay and flag-stones carefully placed in horizontal rows without stucco covering for the facades and wood for ceilings, posts and doors.

The urban lay-out of Ranas and Toluquilla was similar, both mixing aspects of civil and ceremonial life, putting temples, administrative buildings and dwellings in the same area. The bases of the pyramids on which temples for worshipping their deities were built are noteworthy for their size and the presence of large taluds flanked by protruding cornices, with integrated or superimposed stairways, some of which were semicircular, a typical element of mountain architecture.

In Toluquilla and section II of Ranas, the ball game structures mark the building style, lined up along the central axis of the plateau. The ball game courts have rectangular fields

open on both ends instead of the later I-shaped fields, and they all have a pyramid base at one end. Next to the ball court walls are administrative buildings, dwellings for the elite, circular or semicircular structures and ceremonial platforms, all lining the streets that allowed for foot traffic parallel to the ball courts.

Ranas' three and Toluquilla's four ball game structures not only defined the lay-out of the settlements and others of smaller size, but they also must have marked the social and religious lives of the Sierra towns, given the profound symbolic and ritual significance they had for the peoples of ancient Mexico.

The Sierra Gorda's spectacular cultural development was interrupted in the Early Post-classical period (A.D.900-1200) among other reasons because of climatic changes that caused long droughts that destabilized the economy, forcing the population to abandon their towns, their fields and their mines over a relatively short period. The region then was once again occupied by nomadic hunter-gatherers, who the history books call Pames and Jonaces, peoples related to the Otomí, later grouped under the generic name Chichimecs after the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. **MM**



While searching for cinnabar, pre-Hispanic miners left tools and domestic and ceremonial objects behind in the tunnels.