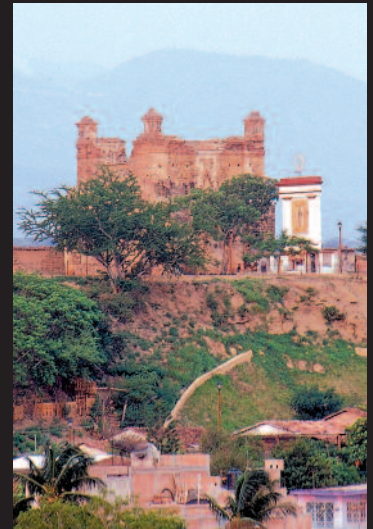


Chiapa de Corzo

A Meeting Place

María del Carmen Valverde Valdés*





Nestled in the sultry Central Chiapas Depression on the banks of the Grande or Grijalva River and just before the entrance to the spectacular Sumidero Canyon is the city of Chiapa de Corzo.

Famous for its magnificent sixteenth-century *Mudéjar* fountain, a few people know it for its colorful *xicalpestles* (lacquered and painted gourds), and even fewer know it for its *parachico* revelers, the main attraction at the fiesta of San Sebastián.¹ Also, few people are aware of the existence of a first-class archaeological site in the city, even though a round-about had to be built on the route of the Panamerican Highway to avoid going directly over one of its pyramid's foundations. Most people only visit Chiapa de Corzo because the boats that go through the Sumidero Canyon leave from there, and they are not aware that its nooks and crannies and environs contain an ancient and sometimes fascinating history.

The town of Chiapa has been inhabited by different groups continuously from the earliest pre-Hispanic times until today. It is one of the few places in Chiapas that has



- ▲ This pre-Hispanic building is on private grounds.
 - ▼ Structure 32 still stands at a crossroad near the entrance to the city.
- Photos: Elsie Montiel



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been both an urban center and a meeting place for different cultures that have been determinant in the history of today's Mexico.

FIRST INHABITANTS

In the Central Depression of Chiapas, vestiges of settlements have been found dating from before the use of ceramics. An enormous amount of archaeological evidence tells us of occupation during the entire pre-Hispanic period. One part of the population was concentrated around urban and religious centers and the rest was distributed in the agricultural areas along the rivers. However, few locations show continual settlement; most had relatively short, intermittent occupation. This, together with the testimonies that indicate that the area was a migratory route and therefore an area of constant cultural exchange and trade, could explain certain political and social instability down through its history, as a consequence of the continual movement and encounters of different cultural groups over a period of more than 3,000 years.

Today, the Chiapa de Corzo archaeological site located to the east of the modern city has been divided in two by the Panamerican Highway. Urban growth has been responsible for the disappearance of many of its mounds, some of which have vanished beneath the modern city's buildings. Like many other settlements, this one began as an agricultural village between 1500 B.C. and 1000 B.C. thanks to the excellent soil on the banks of the Grande or Grijalva River, and evolved into the region's largest political, economic and religious center and the cultural heart of the Central Depression by 700 B.C. By that time, it was already an incipient city, strategically located *vis-à-vis* pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica's main trade routes. For this reason, Chiapa de Corzo was not alien to the influence of other cultural regions like the Olmecs of La Venta (between 800 B.C. and 400 B.C.), or the Mayans of the lowlands during the rise of the great city El Mirador (between 400 B.C. and 100 B.C.). Its maximum development was reached between the Late Pre-Classical and the Early Classical (450 B.C. to A.D. 450), a period in which the Maya area's political institutions were going through a full-blown process of development and change. Its Mixe-Zoque-origin inhabitants would abandon the city during the Middle Classical (from A.D. 550-700), when Teotihuacan's influence had already been felt, and the area surrounding it would be occupied later by another cultural group.

Archaeological studies indicate that there are about 100 structures in the site, among them the foundations of pyramids, housing complexes, platforms and terraces around patios or plazas with complicated designs, as well as what are called palaces, the more complex buildings. These include tombs or burial chambers which, in contrast with simpler burials found in other mounds, contained high-quality offerings of materials like copal, jade, bone, obsidian, amber and sea shells in the form of ornaments like ear plugs, seals, bracelets and lip plugs, as well as various examples of local pottery (most of these objects can be found in the Tuxtla Gutiérrez Regional Museum, since there is no site muse-



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The former Santo Domingo Monastery.



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um). Among the most important finds of the Chiapa de Corzo archaeological site are five fragments of stelas, one of which (number 2) is inscribed with one of the oldest known dates of the “Long Count” found until now, leading to very important research on the origin of writing in Mesoamerica.²

MEETING THE CONQUISTADORS

Although the history of the Zoque people in Chiapas covers a long period, it is relatively unknown. This is not the case of their successors, the Chiapanecs, who occupied the site for a shorter time but were the protagonists of epic moments that became legend in Chiapa de Corzo.

The Chiapa indigenous arrived to the Central Depression in the Post-Classical period, and, subjecting the local inhabitants, conquered the best land in the valleys on the river banks. They established their capital in what is today downtown Chiapa de Corzo. Apparently, they lived in constant conflict with their Zoque, Tzotzil and Tzeltal neighbors, even ferociously resisting Mexica dominance. Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s description of the city gives an idea of its importance and magnificence:

Although the Chiapanecs vigorously resisted conquest, once defeated, they very quickly absorbed the cultural patterns hailing from the old world.

We agreed to make our way through their city of Chiapa, and it could truly be called a city, and well populated, the houses and streets very much in concert, and more than 4,000 souls, without counting the many other subject peoples who inhabited the environs....We entered the city, and as we arrived at the most populated part, where their great temples and places of worship were, they had houses so close together that we could not set up camp.³

Unfortunately no architectural vestige of this proud, bellicose capital remains; we know that its civic, ceremonial center was razed by the colonial power’s religious zeal, and its uninterrupted occupation ended by destroying any other vestige of the ancient city. We also know very little about the cultural



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basis of this people, both because we lack written records and because the Chiapanecs, although they vigorously resisted conquest, once defeated, very quickly absorbed the cultural patterns hailing from the old world, losing their own in the process. In fact, their ancient language has disappeared. What has been preserved of the history of this

warlike group are the testimonies of the chroniclers of the time of the Conquest, who narrate the ferocious battles between Chiapanecs and Spaniards, the Chiapanecs' incredible demonstrations of bravery and the military tactics they used. It is said that during one of these great battles, the Chiapa were cornered by the Spaniards and preferred death to surrender, throwing themselves off the highest cliff of the Sumidero Canyon. The veracity of this episode has never actually been proven, but it is a fact that when the colonial city was founded, it was named Chiapa de los Indios in recognition of the Chiapanecs' unusual valor and military ability. It is also true that the Chiapa Indians and their capital played a fundamental role in the history of the Spanish conquest of what is now Chiapas, from the entry of Luis Marín in 1524 and Mazariegos in 1528 to the different rebellions in the 1530s. Seemingly, it was during these uprisings against Spanish domination that the rebels, who had earlier abandoned the town to withdraw to the Sumidero Canyon, finally met the Spaniards in a battle that was to become legend.

As a result of the last uprising in 1534, many of the rebels were hung in the plaza of Chiapa de los Indios while their leader, Sanguieme, was burned alive "between the two trees in the plaza of this town."⁴ One of those trees, "la Pochota", an enormous *ceiba* or silk cotton tree that witnessed the feats of the resistance, still offers shade to visitors in today's Chiapa de Corzo plaza. Next to it is the magnificent *Mudéjar* colonial fountain, "La Pilona" as it is affectionately called by local residents, included in leading treatises on Hispano-American viceregal art as one of the few monuments of civil architecture that remain to us from the century of the conquest itself.

Religious architecture, a witness to the arduous Dominican efforts to spread the Gospel, can also be seen in Chiapa de Corzo in the solid construction of the former Santo Domingo monastery, adjacent to the plaza. The size of the entire church complex speaks to the importance of Chiapa de los Indios, probably the largest and one of the most important of what was then the province of Chiapa.

The meeting of cultures left the city other attractions. Visitors cannot leave the town without seeing the Lacquer Museum in the former monastery, which offers



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The Lacquer Museum in the former monastery offers a select sample of the most famous local craft, the colorful *xicalpestles* or painted gourds.



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a select sample of the most famous local craft, the colorful *xicalpestles* or painted gourds. The Mexican name for gourd is *jícara*, a word adapted from the Nahuatl word *xicalli*; the objects are actually dried squash shells painted with lacquer, a technique that dates from the pre-Hispanic period. These products were among the most highly sought after in Chiapanec trading. Making them is a long and very complicated process and they are painted with many different, varied motifs, all with a wonderful, joyful color scheme.

In the past, natural pigments ground and mixed with oil for decorating were used, but today, chemical colorings are more common.

The city is bursting with bad imitations of lacquer, but in the oldest neighborhoods pieces are still produced with the legendary lacquer technique, a reflection, just like the town of Chiapa de Corzo itself, of a hybrid, ancient history. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Held in January, this is one of the most famous fiestas in the state of Chiapas. The main attraction is the dance of the *parachicos*, men dressed in colorful outfits, painted masks and big wigs, that revives the legend of Doña María de Angulo, a colonial lady who, thankful that her very sick son was cured in Chiapa de Corzo, became the benefactress of its inhabitants in hard times.

² The "Long Count" is a dating system used by the Mayans during the Classical period (between A.D. 300 and A.D. 900), which not only pinpoints the date by specifying *bactunes*, *tunes*, *uinales* and *kines*, but also incorporates other aspects like the agricultural, the lunar and the ritual calendars.

³ Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *La historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (Mexico City: Porrúa Editores, 1972), pp. 421-423.

⁴ Heinrich Berlin, "El asiento de Chiapa", *Anales de la Sociedad de Geografía e Historia*, vol. 31 (1-4), 1958, p. 19.

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