

CERRO DE TRINCHERAS: ITS HISTORY AND PURPOSE

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The problem of the ruined site known as Cerro de Trincheras can be attacked both historically and archeologically. Both methods are necessary to determine the answer to the question, "Is Cerro de Trincheras prehispanic?" Another question presents itself: "What had been the purpose of Cerro de Trincheras?" Of the three possible answers to the second question, that is, military fortifications, agricultural terraces, religious purposes, only archeological research can produce the answer because recondite historical sources are uncertain.

Up to the first decade of the 20th century little use was made of historical sources for the northern part of Mexico. In English, Hubert Howe Bancroft was an exception, but in his discussion of Cerro de Trincheras¹ his sources were only those of travelers and living informants—all unreliably imaginative. The recondite references to Jesuit missionary activities² were already in print in Bancroft's time, but no mention of Spanish sources was made in his footnotes. In this instance I am inclined to Bandelier's view that "He (Bancroft) is very valuable and saves a great deal of trouble, since his quotations, if hunted up, almost generally prove the contrary to his assertions. This is found very often in his 'Native Races.'

¹ H. H. Bancroft, *Native Races*, Vol. IV, *Antiquities*. San Francisco, The History Co., 1886, p. 602.

² The Jesuit Order was the first to enter the northern Mexico area and the letters of these educated friars served as an important source of information to later historians.

If the conditions of aboriginal Mexico had been as he describes them, a conquest like that of Cortés would not have been possible. The descriptions are simply disgusting, and I cannot conceive that I was once blind enough to believe such stuff."³

A contemporary of Bancroft, traveling through northern Mexico, gave vivid descriptions of two Cerros de Trincheras,⁴ the description of the second one approximating Bancroft's in one important point, the walls with alternate entries on opposite sides, but locating the site about sixty miles farther to the north. The first site described was located close to the *cerro* described by Bancroft.

This points up a very important fact, that *cerros de trincheras* are very commonly found throughout western and northern Mexico.⁵ This fact caused an-

³ Adolph F. Bandelier, in a letter to Lewis H. Morgan, dated 17 April, 1879. In *The Bandelier-Morgan Letters 1873-1883*, (*Pioneers in American Anthropology*), Leslie A. White, ed.; Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1940, p. 125.

⁴ Paul Shumacher, "An Ancient Fortification in Sonora, Mexico," *The American Antiquarian and Oriental Journal*, Vol. IV, No. 3, April-July, 1882, p. 227-9.

⁵ Robert H. Lister, *The Present Status of Archaeology of Western Mexico*. Boulder, Colorado, The University of Colorado Press, Series in Anthropology No. 5, May, 1955. "The terracing of hillsides, presumably for agricultural purposes, seems to have been practiced aboriginally in Western Mexico. Also the terracing of hillsides and small natural mounds was undertaken at many of the sites said to represent religious and village centers. The terraces provided level areas for the building of houses and other structures on the sloping hillsides." p. 16.

Carl Lumholz, *Unknown Mexico*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902. "As soon as the plains of Northern Sonora were left behind and the country became hilly and broken, these peculiar structures became conspicuous. At first they appeared more like walls built simply along the slopes of the hills, and not crossing gulches. They seem to be more numerous in the western and central part of the sierra, its spurs

other traveler, Carl Lumholz, to compare the *trincheras* of Cerro de Trincheras with others he had seen which were in use at that time for agricultural terraces.⁶ The dissemination of *trincheras* must be taken into account when considering their antiquity and probable purpose. But we are here concerned with only one such site, the largest of its kind in northern Mexico, and situated in territory occupied by the Pima Alta Indians.

Two other contemporaries of Bancroft—trained observers and not merely travelers—give similar reports on the frequent appearances of Cerros de Trincheras, and are of common opinion that they were fortifications. One, Adolph F. Bandelier, was thoroughly familiar with the sources of Spanish colonial history in Mexico, but his description of the fortifications is based on his personal experiences from living informants without reference to colonial history. The problem of the antiquity of the fortifications is not of concern to him but he greatly enlarges on their function.⁷

and foothills, than in the eastern part of the great range. As regards their southern extent, they are not found further south than the middle part of the state of Chihuahua." p. 22.

⁶ *Ibid.* "These *trincheras* somewhat resemble the small terrace gardens of the Moqui Indians, and have undoubtedly been used for agricultural purposes, just as they are used by the Tarahumares to this day."

⁷ Adolph F. Bandelier, "Final Report of Investigations Among the Indians of Southwestern United States, Carried on Mainly in the Years from 1880 to 1885," Part II, *Papers of the Archaeological Institute of America*, American Series IV. Cambridge University Press, 1892. "I merely allude here to a feature in methods of defense which makes its appearance in the southern portions of the Southwest, especially in Sonora. This is the erection of places of refuge, fortified by primitive parapets, in the neighborhood of villages, or in connection with one or more groups of settlements. These 'Cerros de Trincheras' are purely a military feature which has no bearing upon the question under con-

The second contemporary was J. W. McGee⁸ of the American Bureau of Ethnology. His personal assurances to Lumholz that the Cerro de Trincheras was a fortification apparently almost convinced the latter, who in his later more mature work, *New Trails*

sideration, namely, the causes that determined the native in the selection of his place of abode." p. 19-20.

"Thus I was informed that the Opatas of Sinoquipe and Banámachi had formerly confederated against their southern neighbors of Huépaca and Aconchi; that the Opatas of Oposura made war upon those of Banámachi and Huépaca; and that the people of Opodepe were hostile to those on the Sonora River, etc. (This information was obtained from Opata Indians of Banámachi, Sinoquipe, and Aconchi; how far it can be absolutely relied upon I do not know, yet I see no reason for doubting its truthfulness in the main). One of the consequences of these disturbances was the erection of defensive works, not around but outside of the villages, —places of refuge to which the whole population of several allied settlements could resort in case of danger. The existence of these places, which manifestly were fitted only for temporary occupation, seems to indicate that the warfare which the Indians of that part of Sonora carried on was not the persistent harassing peculiar to northern nomads, but attacks in larger bodies, of the approach of which those who were threatened could be forewarned.

"The 'cerro de Trincheras' or fortified hill of Bato-no-pa is situated a short distance south of the village of Banámachi. . . . The fortifications form something like a spiral, following the sinuosities of the ground. On the western slope there are no fortifications, which implies that danger had been expected only from the south and east. The parapets are so low at present that only by lying down behind them can any protection be secured. . .

"Against an Indian foe the parapets would have been of good service, although their length required quite a number of men to occupy them successfully. The really important part of the stronghold is at its highest point, where the rise and contours induced the builders to construct a double line of bulwarks, with angles and salients, so that the outer parapets could be commanded from the inner." p. 491-92.

⁸ McGee, J. W. *Bureau of American Ethnology XVII Annual Report, 1895-1896, Part I, p. x1.*

*In Mexico*⁹, refers to it as a fortification, but not without reservations. He now views it as probably of religious significance and has given up his idea that it consisted of agricultural terraces. He is certain, though, that it is very ancient.

Therefore, up to the turn of the century much speculation and little certainty existed. Between 1910 and 1930 few contributions to archeology were made. This is probably a reflection of the general unrest and turmoil existent in Mexico during that period. In the last thirty years or so, beginning about 1930, the tempo of archeological investigations has increased steadily, with a slight pause during the years of World War II. When large scale archeological work in various areas in Mexico was producing information relative to the extent and importance of the high cultures of Mexico, some people were taking an interest in their influences elsewhere, especially to the north. This helped to delineate the northern borders of the high cultures, later to be called "Mesoamerica", and to indicate a continuity of culture across the political border which separates the United States of America from Mexico.

The last thirty years have witnessed what might be termed "problem archeology" — investigations directed toward solving specific problems. In 1943, in Mexico City, the Third Round Table met to discuss the north of Mexico and the south of the United States. Present were scholars whose archeological work had earlier defined the cultural areas of western and northern Mexico. Donald Brand, with Carl Sauer, in 1931, had first described the pottery of Cerro de Trincheras and surveyed other sites, some containing

⁹ New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912, p. 140.

similar pottery. They called this purple-on-red ceramic "Trincheras Ware." In 1937, Gordon Eckholm made another archeological survey and mentioned twenty¹⁰ such sites, several of which had already been covered by Sauer and Brand.

In 1939, Eckholm had as yet not arrived at a chronology¹¹. But at the Round Table Brand speculated: "On the basis of studies up to date, one might set up the following archeological provinces in the Southwest (U.S.A.) and in Western and Northern Mexico: Gila, Sonora —the South and western lower portion of the Southwest (comprising Trincheras, Hohokam, Sonora, Mogollon, Chihuahua, etc.) which received the strongest influence of Mexican culture."¹² Robert J. Weitlaner, and J. Alden Mason discussed linguistic connections. Various names for the whole area were introduced, "Arid Northamerica", and "Greater Southwest".

In 1953, George E. Fay made an archeological survey in northern Mexico and near Guaymas investigated two fortified hills. His cryptic remark summing up the results of his investigating is a reflection upon the confusion which has persisted to this day

¹⁰ Noguera says 20 (*Reconocimiento Arqueológico en Sonora*, 1958, p. 7). I found only 10 mentioned in Eckholm's unpublished report in the INAH library.

¹¹ *Recent Archaeological Work in Sonora and Northern Sinaloa*, Congreso Internacional de Americanistas, Actas, Vol. 2, 1939.

"Minor excavations near the town of Santa Cruz show Trincheras purple-on-red pottery to be associated with the red-on-buff wares of Southwestern Arizona and from this material we may be able to arrive at some conclusion in regard to the chronological position of the Trincheras culture, at the present time a moot point." p 69-73.

¹² "Archaeological Relation Between Northern Mexico and the Southwest," in *El Norte de México y El Sur de Estados Unidos*, Tercera Reunión de Mesa Redonda, Mexico, 1943, p. 200.

among supposedly knowledgeable informants. "Town historian of Guaymas [Alfonso Iberria] said that these two fortified sites... were built and used by the 1910 Revolutionists in their battles. But several questions arise: did the 1910 Revolutionists use arrowheads and chipped stone tools, and build the site themselves. Or possibly only reused the Yaqui site, since the rock were available. Only two empty cartridge cases were found on the entire site, which would seem to indicate very little revolutionary activity."¹³

Subsequently, Eduardo Noguera made a rapid survey in Sonora and has given us the most recent picture of Cerro de Trincheras and some new information. The following translation is mine:

The most significant survey was the site called Trincheras, that at the present time is the railroad station which runs from Benjamín Hill to Tijuana, and contains one of the most important of the cerros de Trincheras. We have very old descriptions from Bancroft and other investigators from the past century that give a description a little different from reality. According to them, the Cerro de Trincheras consists of an elevation on whose peak are heaps of stones; but the interesting thing is that the slopes of the hill are circled by 50 or 60 walls of uncut stone, each one of three meters by one or two in thickness, that occur at irregular intervals. In accord with that same description, it appears that each wall has an entrance that is found alternately on opposite sides in a way that an enemy going up would have to circle 25 times around the circumference. In conformity with that description then it would be a question of true trenches or being excavated and empty spaces, where they would be circular, but today nothing remains of this because it never was thus unless the trenches, through the years and from erosion, were filled and the hill acquired the appearance that it presently has. It is a height with its major axis from East to West; on its south face are seen very regular steps, giving the appearance of large stair-

¹³ Unpublished report of Archeological sites in Sonora by Interamerican Institute of Denton, Texas, 1955. In the library of INAH.

ways rather than trenches, which seem from afar to resemble a large stepped hill that in turn suggests, in a very vague way, the platforms that exist in Peru. These large stairways can correspond then to the stone walls of which the authors of the past century speak.

These stairways of the Cerro Trincheras are very characteristic and each one of them is approximately one or two meters in height; these stairs or terraces, better said, are constructed of unworked stone, and no intent has been noted to even the ground to give a smooth aspect. Each one of these terraces is of varying length, thirty to forty meters average, although some are longer. Their altitude depends on the inclination of the hill. For that reason, all the surface from the height to the base is full of a large quantity of small loose stones that cover all the ground. Cerro de Trincheras proper, consists now of two elevations, one larger than the other, but joined together. Unfortunately, the ceramic that is found on the ground is not as abundant as we had supposed. Nevertheless, during our visit we picked up potsherds in various places on the south part of the hill, with the belief that it can be recognized and assigned to the classic culture of this region.

We have seen that there exist two principal types of decorated ceramic purple-on-red, and purple-and-red-on-yellow, that is to say, polychrome.¹⁴

Noguera then goes on to describe in detail the ceramics found on the spot. These details do not interest us here, but where Noguera succeeds most in historical connection is in his investigation of the potsherds found within the adobe of the ruins of a church nearby. "There is no room for doubt that it pertains to the same ceramic type of Trincheras, except that these potsherds, by being found inside the adobes or in protected places, were not so eroded nor so mistreated as that found around the Cerro."¹⁵ Thus, we now move into the history of the region.

¹⁴ *Reconocimiento Arqueológico en Sonora, Mexico*, INAH, 1958, p. 11-12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Sonora had been visited by Fray Marcos, by Melchior Díaz, and by the Coronado party in the period 1539-1541. But these explorers had only passed along its eastern and western borders. The rediscovery and the first interior exploration of this area was the work of Father Kino who arrived in Sonora in 1687 and subsequently established the Jesuit Order almost single-handedly in the Pimería Alta. "Pimería Alta included what is now northern Sonora and southern Arizona. It extended from the Altar River, in Sonora, to the Gila, and from the San Pedro River to the Gulf of California and the Colorado of the West. At that day it was all included in the province of Nueva Vizcaya; later it was attached to Sonora, to which it belonged until the northern portion was cut off by the Gadsden Purchase.

"Kino found Pimería Alta occupied by different divisions of the Pima nation. Chief of these were the Pima proper, living in the valleys of the Gila and the Salt Rivers, especially in the region now occupied by the Pima Reservation. The valleys of the San Pedro and the Santa Cruz were inhabited by the Sobaipuris, now a practically extinct people, except for the strains of their blood still represented in the Pima and the Papago tribes. West of the Sobaipuris, on both sides of the international boundary line, were the Papagos, or the Papabotes as the early Spaniards called them. On the northwestern border of the region, along the lower Gila and the Colorado Rivers, were the different Yuman tribes, such as the Yumas, the Cocomaricopas, the Cocopas, and the Quiquimas. All of these latter spoke the Yuman language, which was, as it is today, quite distinct from that of the Pima.

"When Kino made his first explorations down the

San Pedro and the Santa Cruz Valleys, he found them each supporting ten or a dozen villages of Sobaipuris, the population of the former aggregating some two thousand persons, and of the latter some two thousand five hundred. The Indians of both valleys were then practicing agriculture by irrigation, and raising cotton for clothing, and maize, beans, calabashes, melons, and wheat for food. The Papagos were less advanced than the Pimas and Sobaipuris. . . ”¹⁶

On one of Kino's journeys, in February, 1694, in passing from the Misión de la Concepción at Caborca to the Misión de Magdalena in Buquivaba, he was accompanied by another priest, Marcos Antonio Kapus, S. J., and his armed guard, Capitán Juan Mateo Manje. During this trip they made a fortunate detour along the Río de San Ignacio. Manje was astute enough to have recorded all the stops made through the entire journey, and all the baptisms and conversions performed. This information has served as a basis in determining the population and ethnographic material for later writers, and a means of cross-checking Kino's reports.

From Manje's *Diario of 21 February 1694*: "We departed continuing to the East by way of the bed of the river, passing in view of a round hill where there are a hundred trenches with round stone walls in the form of a shell or spiral up to the crest, that they say, forms at its top a military field where in wars that they have had, if they reached it first they turned on the rest until all the arrows of the attackers were

¹⁶ Herbert Eugene Bolton, *Kino's Historical Memoir of Pimería Alta*, Cleveland, Arthur H. Clarke Co. 2 vols., 1919, p. 49-51.

exhausted and they went down the hill and killed them."¹⁷

Thus, on the date of this diary entry, these three men were the first Europeans to see and record Cerro de Trincheras. Father Kino's writings do not mention it, a fact which is significant in corroborating the omissions in Manje's diary. As elsewhere was done, he does not mention being visited by "indios", or seeing any there, or that Father Kino performed baptisms or conversions on the spot, or that they received food at that spot. It is safe therefore to assume that the area near Cerro de Trincheras was deserted, that it had been built prior to the arrival of the Spaniards in that area, and that the purpose of the trincheras was that of a fortification. This last assumption hinges on our accepting the statement of Manje's unknown informant who may have been an Indian interpreter or guide, as it was Father Kino's custom to take local natives with him for that purpose when feasible.

Bolton's map,¹⁸ as of the year 1711, shows no church having been established by Kino near Cerro de Trincheras. A suggestion for further research to determine when the church was built, where Noguera found Trincheras ware in the adobe, is that the *Historia de la Compañía de Jesús en Nueva España*¹⁹. The

¹⁷ *Lus de Tierra Incognita en la América Septentrional y Diario de las Exploraciones en Sonora*. México, Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1926, p. 220. The translation given here is mine.

¹⁸ Kino's *Memoirs*, vol. 2, p. 233.

¹⁹ Francisco Javier Alegre. Mexico, 1841, 3 vols.

This work is evidently a scholarly attempt at what its title indicates and gives considerable ethnological information. The author draws heavily on Pérez de Ribas, but has a great deal of additional information. No bibliography accompanies it, but letters and reports from missionaries

possibilities are that it was constructed before the Jesuit expulsion in 1767. Or the vast amount of written material on the northwest²⁰ may be consulted in order to determine why a mission was built (and when) near Cerro de Trincheras.

The purpose of this note, is to determine whether Cerro de Trincheras is a prehispanic structure. Evidence convinces me that it is.

One further word on dating of "prehispanic" Mexico. From the arrival of Hernan Cortés in 1519 to the opening of the Pimería Alta in 1687, 166 years had elapsed. Another seven years passed until the first white man saw Cerro de Trincheras. Obviously then, all of Mexico was not conquered in the fall of the Aztec Empire and not all of Mexico passed from prehispanic to colonial at the same time. It would be impossible through the historical sources of the colonial period to ascertain when Cerro de Trincheras was built, but that it antedated the colonial period in Sonora is certain.

are quoted at length in the text, suggesting that the whole is well documented.

²⁰ Ralph L. Beals, *The Comparative Ethnology of Northern Mexico Before 1750*. Berkeley, Calif., University of California Press, 1932.

"The body of material available for study on northern Mexico is enormous. Even yet much of it is known only to the historian, and still more undoubtedly lies undiscovered in various archives. Nevertheless the material available in the form of reprinted documents is so considerable that nearly two years of work have failed to exhaust them, although a representative picture has apparently been secured." p. 94.