

EXCAVATIONS AT THE CASTRILLO CEMETERY

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RESUMEN

Excavaciones en un cementerio cerca de Tilarán, Guanacaste, denominado sitio Castrillo G-724 CT, rindieron material cultural pre-hispánico en un contexto muy alterado. Tres operaciones fueron puestas en las áreas menos perturbadas, pero no se encontró ningún rasgo in situ, debido a numerosos e intensos episodios de saqueo. La laja y la piedra de río utilizadas en la construcción de las tumbas se halló removida junto a fragmentos cerámicos y líticos. A pesar de la desafortunada carencia de hallazgos in situ, la excavación en el área del cementerio rindió datos valiosos sobre cronología y métodos de construcción de las tumbas. Los materiales de construcción —lajas y cantos rodados— con la muestra de cerámica sugiere una ubicación cronológica transicional entre las fases Arenal y Silencio para el cementerio. El estudio del sitio Castrillo demuestra que datos valiosos se pueden obtener en contextos alterados, una situación muy frecuente en los sitios arqueológicos de Costa Rica.

ABSTRACT

Excavations at a cemetery near Tilarán, Guanacaste, designated G-724 CT Castrillo Site, encountered ancient cultural material in a highly disturbed context. Three operations, numbered one through three, were placed in the least disturbed areas but no in situ construction was encountered because of numerous and extensive looting episodes. Laja and river rock utilized in tomb construction was revealed in discarded context with broken ceramics and lithics. While the lack of in situ finds was unfortunate, the cemetery still yielded valuable data on chronology and methods of tomb construction. The mixture of construction materials—laja and river rock—in conjunction with the recovered ceramic sample suggests that this cemetery is transitional between the Arenal and Silencio phases. The Castrillo Site, similar to many archaeological sites in Costa Rica because of its disturbed nature, shows that valuable data can still be obtained in this context.

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Extensive surveys conducted during the summer of 2002 encountered numerous archaeological sites, including the Castrillo Site G-724 CT. Archaeological investigation was initiated in June, 2003 with mapping of the site which included documenting at least six visible looter's pits. While the site appeared to be very disturbed, three places were chosen for operations in what were hoped to be the most intact areas (Fig. 1). These operations were designated one through three and a description of each follows. In summary, all three units encountered only previously disturbed burials; no in situ burials were observed. Evidence recovered from the site included vast amounts of *laja* utilized in tomb construction in conjunction with river stone and ceramic and lithic artifacts. Analysis of a ceramic sample yields a chronological timeline that spans from the Arenal to the Silencio phases, suggesting that the cemetery is transitional between these time periods (see Guerrero, this volume). The combination of *laja* and river rock also further reinforces a transitional period as the former material is a common construction element in the Silencio phase and the latter material is prevalent during Arenal times (Bradley, 1994).

OPERATION 1

Operation 1, measuring 2 x 2 m, was placed adjacent to a looter's pit. This area was chose because it was believed that the backdirt from the looter's pit was placed in the area covered by Operation 1, thereby preserving the area and lessening the likelihood of disturbance. This operation was excavated using shovels and picks until an in situ cultural layer was discovered. Unfortunately, this entire operation was previously disturbed by looting activity and designated Lot 1. Cultural material consisting of broken ceramics and lithics were recovered from Lot 1 and were mixed with river stones and *laja*. All of the recovered ceramics were broken and belonged to numerous identifiable ceramic types from the Arenal and Silencio Phases as discussed in detail by Guerrero (this volume). Rare concentrations of sherds belonging to a similar vessel were recovered 70 cm below the surface. Additionally, chipped stone artifacts including percussion flakes and cores were recovered and are detailed by Sheets (this volume).

The arrangement of the river rock and *laja* was random throughout the operation. The single notable exception occurred at a depth of 1.83 m below modern ground surface. A linear arrangement of at least three river stones was clearly visible in the east wall of the excavation operation. It is probable that they are located in their position of original construction of the cemetery. In contrast, the presence of scattered *laja* suggests it is unlikely they were utilized in initial construction of the cemetery mound.

Below this depth, a 1 x 1 m area was further excavated in the northwestern corner of the operation in order to encounter culturally sterile Aguacate (Unit 65). The stratigraphy was dark and uniform until 2.74 m below ground surface where Unit 55 was uncovered with scattered ceramic sherds. Culturally sterile Aguacate was at a depth of 2.99 m below surface.

The loose nature of the soil in conjunction with the random nature of both the majority of the river rock and the *laja* indicates that this operation was located on a highly disturbed area. This suggestion is further supported by the scattered and broken state of the artifacts that were recovered. It is most probable that this operation was located over an abandoned looter's pit that was subsequently filled in by more recent looting activity.

OPERATION 2

Operation 2, measuring 2 x 2 m, was located in the northeast section of the cemetery. It was placed between two visible looter's pits, one to the north and the other to

the east. As with Operation 1, it was hoped that the looter's backdirt had covered this area and Operation 2 remained undisturbed. Excavation began by removing the overburden, designated Lot 1. This lot yielded hundreds of ceramic sherds and fire-cracked rock, possibly indicating a previously disturbed area. A large cedar tree was growing in the northeast corner of the unit and also contributed to disturbing the area. However, large flat-lying laja stones and broken ceramics (designated Lot 4) were located in this area 1.6m below site datum (Fig. 2). As these may serve as indicators for a tomb, extension 1 was placed to discern a possible feature. Several rounded river rocks were also uncovered in a possible aligned in the southeast corner of Operation 2. Extension 2 was placed to also investigate the probability of a feature.

EXTENSION 1

Extension 1 extends north of Operation 2 by 1 m and west by 0.5 m. Large flat-lying laja were uncovered in this extension in conjunction with ceramics and a cycle was initiated that consisted of photographing and mapping the laja and then removing the stones to reveal another layer of rock. This cycle was completed three times with both layers of laja and river rock being encountered as well as ceramics and minimal lithics. As excavation progressed, disturbed Unit 55 was discovered as were more rock lying beneath the tree. The increasingly randomized nature of the rock in conjunction with disturbed Unit 55 and the lack of intact artifacts suggested that both looting and bioturbation had previously disturbed the operation. The project did not have permission from the landowner or the Costa Rican government to remove the tree and further investigate this possibility. The extension was backfilled.

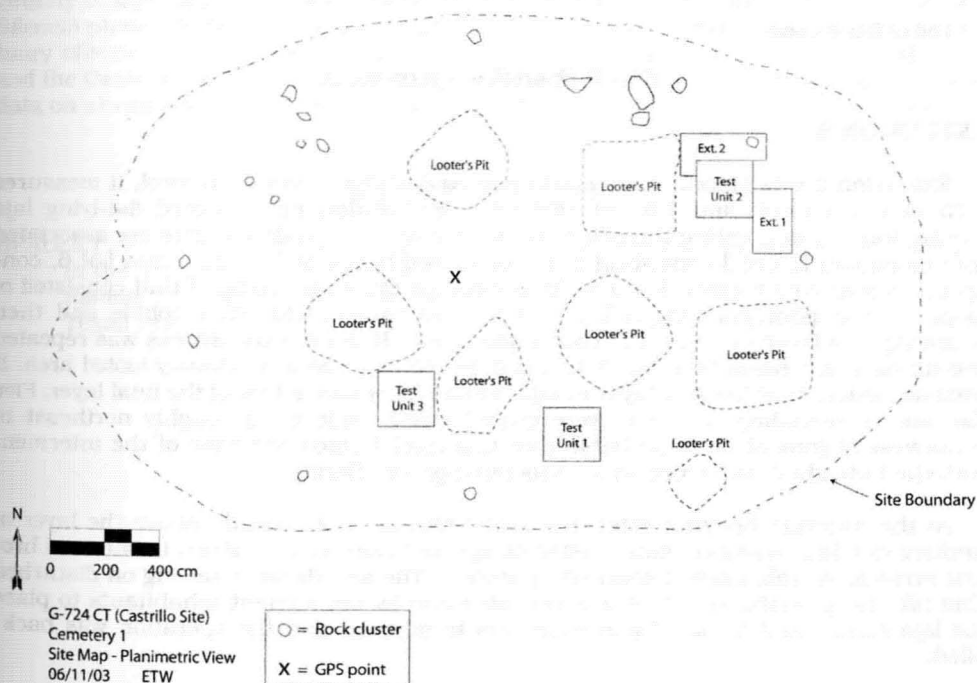


Fig. 1 Castrillo site map.

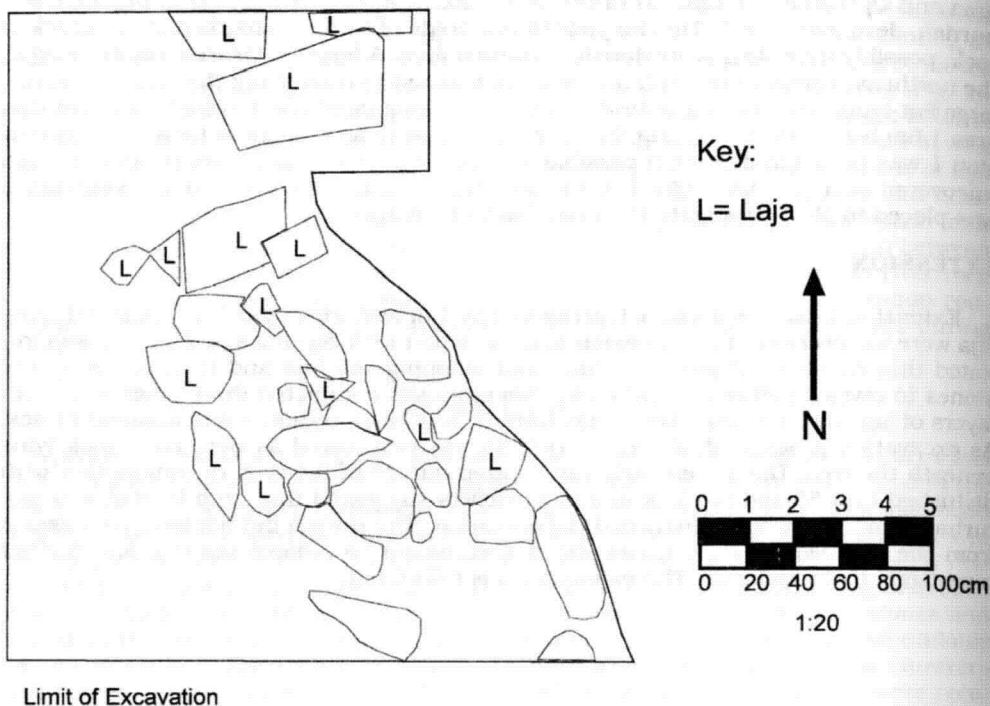


Fig. 2 Operation 2 plan view.

EXTENSION 2

Extension 2 was placed to the south and east of Operation 2. In total, it measures 1.75 m north-south and 1.50 m east-west. Excavation encountered flat-lying laja stones, initially suggesting the presence of an interment. Only two lots are associated with extension 2, Lot 3 consisting of the disturbed layers of the grave and Lot 6, consisting of a broken ceramic feature. An excavation cycle was initiated that consisted of mapping and photographing a layer of laja intermixed with river cobble and then removing this layer to reveal the rock underneath. In total, this process was repeated five times in extension two before it was determined to be a previously looted area. It became evident that the only layer of laja remaining *in-situ* is that of the final layer. Five flat stones, including two laja, were placed side-by-side on a roughly northeast to southwest alignment. It is probable that this level formed the base of the interment with the individual laid above with associated grave offerings.

At the juncture between extension 2 and Operation 2, slightly above the layer of undisturbed laja, was a ceramic cluster designated Feature 1. Feature 1 contained broken ceramic vessels likely discarded by looters. The sherds were resting on disturbed Unit 55, the probable unit that was intruded into by the ancient inhabitants to place the laja stones and burial. Excavation was terminated and the operation was back-filled.

OPERATION 3

Operation 3, a 2 x 2 m unit, was located to the southeast of the western most looter's pit. As with Operations 1 and 2, this area was expected to be the locale of looter's backdirt with the hope of intact cemetery beneath. The unit was excavated to a depth of two meters below datum and only encountered soil and stone in a disturbed context with minimal broken ceramics and lithics. Similar in nature to Operation 1, the amount of laja and flat stones in Operation 3 suggests this excavation uncovered the discarded gravestones and associated artifacts from a looted grave. Excavation was terminated at sterile intact Unit 55 approximately one and a half meters below ground surface.

CONCLUSIONS

Three operations were placed in the least disturbed areas of the heavily looted Castrillo site in order to recover evidence of in situ burials to definitively determine the function and chronology of the site. While no tombs were discovered, excavation was successful in recovering an adequate sample of ceramic artifacts. These ceramics include the types of Carillo, Mojica Impressed, Congo Punctated, and Dos Hermanos Beige which provide evidence that the cemetery was in use from the Late Arenal (approximately AD 500) through the early Silencio phases (approximately AD 800) (see Guerrero, this volume, for further discussion).

Excavations also suggest that tomb construction in antiquity consisted of both flat laja stones, a shaped "mojon" (elongated stone) grave marker, and nearby river cobbles. Known later tomb construction, as evidenced by G-150 the Silencio Cemetery, consists entirely of laja (Bradley, 1994). The abundant ceramics dating both to the Arenal and Silencio phases further suggests a temporal association and presents evidence of mortuary offerings. Looted archaeological sites are commonly encountered in Costa Rica and the Castrillo site is no exception. However, excavations at this site yielded valuable data on chronology and method of tomb construction despite previous disturbance.

LITERATURE CITED

- BRADLEY, J. 1994. The Silencio site: An Early to Middle Polychrome period cemetery in the Arenal region. In Sheets, P. & B. McKee (eds.) *Archaeology, Volcanism, and Remote Sensing in the Arenal Region, Costa Rica*, pp. 106-121. University of Texas Press, Austin.