
SHELLMOUND INDICATING TRACE OF ANCIENT POPULATION FOUND IN SOUTHERN MEXICO

A large shellmound, or "kitchen midden," which may prove to be the first trace of a pre-pottery, pre-agricultural population, has been discovered in southern Mexico by an archeological expedition of the National Geographic Society and the Smithsonian Institution, in cooperation with the Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia of Mexico.

The shellmound was found in the state of Chiapas, in the area of advanced Indian civilizations of southern Mexico and Central America. It is situated on the Pacific coast, bordering a lagoon surrounded by mangrove swamps.

The huge mass contains clam shells, mixed with earth, charcoal and ash, and various objects of human manufacture, piled in a heap about 350 feet long and 250 feet wide and more than 10 feet high.

A test trench dug in the mound produced a few fragments of weathered, rather crude pottery from the uppermost levels. In the lower portion no pottery was found. Only obsidian knives and pieces of worked and shaped animal bones were uncovered to represent the manufactures of the ancient inhabitants.

The scientific importance of the find lies in the fact that the lower levels appear to represent a culture which existed in southern Mexico before the invention of agriculture and pottery-making—that is prior to the archaic beginnings of the high civilizations of the Maya, the Olmec, and the Zapotecs.

The existence of such an ancient hunting and shell-gathering economy has been speculated on by archaeologists who have worked in Middle America, but this is the first discovery that can be attributed to such a culture. Thus, the shellmound may contain the earliest cultural remains yet found in southern Mexico.

The survey party was led by Dr. Philip Drucker of the Smithsonian Institution. The trip was designed to investigate the archeological resources of the coastal plain of Chiapas, which at one time formed a corridor for the exchange and spread of culture between the populations of Central America and those of southern and central Mexico. Little archeological research had previously been done in the region.

Besides the shellmound, numerous sites were found, some of which relate to early phases in the development of Maya culture, and others to later times, not long before the Spanish conquest of the region.

Dr. Drucker previously had served as an assistant to Dr. Matthew W. Stirling of the Smithsonian Institution on a series of National Geographic Society-Smithsonian expeditions to Veracruz State, across the southern Mexican isthmus from Chiapas.

Those expeditions, conducted for eight seasons, resulted in the acquisition of considerable information about the pre-Columbian people of the region. In 1939 the explorers located a stone bearing in Mayan symbols the earliest recorded date found in the Western Hemisphere—November 4, 291 B. C. Among a large number of sculptures uncovered by the expeditions were colossal stone heads. The two largest, discovered in 1946, stand about 10 feet high and are estimated to weigh more than 20 tons each.