

THE HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF SAN AGUSTÍN DE CALLO

HISTORY

The hacienda San Agustín de Callo began its life with the arrival of the Inka in central Ecuador in the late 1400s. The Inka, who originated in the Cusco valley of southern Peru, conquered southern Ecuador by the mid 1400s, founding their northern capital where the city of Cuenca now stands. Some of the ruins of this former capital can still be seen along the Calle Larga in Cuenca. The popular tourist destination of Ingapirca, a short distance north of Cuenca, is among the remains of this early conquest.

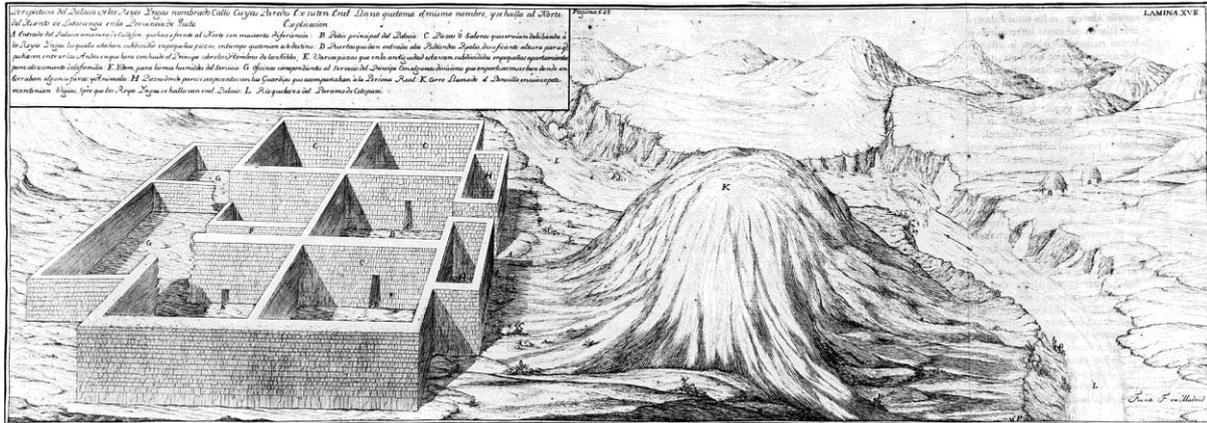
After a few years spent consolidating their southern holdings, the Inka marched north, conquering the Ecuadorian highland regions as far north as Quito. It was during this period, between about 1470 and 1500, that the Inka site of Callo, still visible in the chapel and dining room of the hacienda, was founded. The Inka compound at San Agustín has been called a palace, a tambo or way station along the Inka road, a sanctuary, and even a local administrative center. Though we may never know the whole story, Callo may have served all of these functions at one time or another. Though there is no direct reference to Callo in the earliest documents, the Spanish soldier and historian Pedro Cieza de León, who visited San Agustín in the 1550s, mentions fine buildings and storehouses at Mulahalo, almost certainly a reference to Callo. No Inka remains have been found at the modern village of Mulaló, now about 4 kilometers south of Callo where the village was relocated during the colonial era. Prehispanic Mulaló may have been closer to Callo during Inka times.

Archaeological evidence suggests that Callo was abandoned by mid-1534 when the

Spanish conquistadors under Sebastián de Benalcázar passed through the central highlands, and it was probably still abandoned when Cieza de León saw it. The ruins of Callo may have been included in the lands of Mulaló granted by the Spanish crown in 1548 to Diego de Sandoval, one of the founders of Quito. By 1565, however, the area around Callo belonged to Martín de Mondragón, also a prominent early citizen of Quito.

By the early 1600s, Callo became part of a large hacienda of the Augustinian order in Quito. The Augustinians also had a large hacienda in the Zumbagua area, west of Latacunga, where sheep were raised for wool some of which was made into textiles at workshops located at San Agustín de Callo. The long building immediately north of the main compound at Callo lies on ancient foundations and is one possible site for the textile factory. The Augustinians owned the hacienda for more than two centuries and it is from this that Callo draws its modern name.

The Spanish Captains Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa, members of the French geodesic expedition of the late 1730s and early 1740s, visited the site during their astronomical observations at Cotopaxi and drew the first known map of Callo. A valuable contribution to the history of the site, this map nonetheless bears little resemblance to the hacienda today or to the remains seen in archaeological investigations. While, it is possible that the Augustinians had divided the hacienda into various small rooms with partitions that were later removed, it also may be that the illustration, published in Madrid, may have been made from rough field sketches or even drawn from memory.



San Agustín de Callo was buffeted by devastating eruptions from the nearby Cotopaxi volcano between the early 1740s and the late 1760s. The remains of a mill thought to date to this era were uncovered in the 2000 investigations. Though smaller, it features a similar design to the mill at the Casa de Cultura in Latacunga, 20 kilometers south of Callo. The remains of a segment of stone-lined canal covered by volcanic mud flows and ash just west of the Callo mill echoes the 1757 news that 60 people were killed in the textile factory from the volcanic flows coming down off Cotopaxi that year.



Similar stone-lined canals still encircle the modern hacienda and many may date to the colonial era. In fact, the origins of these canals, which come from streams fed by the glaciers on Cotopaxi, could have been initially laid out during the Inka occupation.

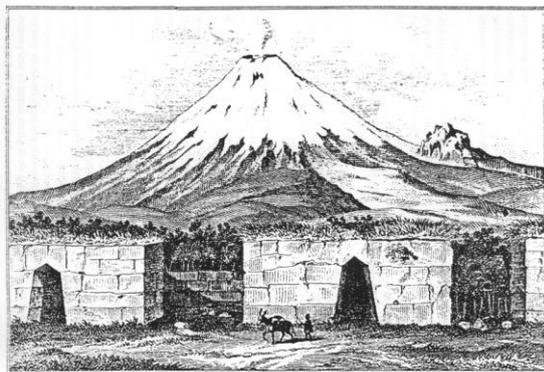
By the time that the famous German scientist Alexander von Humboldt visited San Agustín around 1800, the Augustinians were leasing

the site to private interests. Humboldt wrote a brief description and drew a site plan and sketches of some of the features that are very close to what can be seen today as well as the archaeological evidence. Humboldt was the first to dispel the myth that the Callo hill, a kilometer north of the hacienda, could have been an ancient pyramid. He correctly pointed out that it is a volcanic remnant probably related to the nearby volcano.



A host of travelers and scientists visited the site during the 19th century, contributing descriptions and occasional drawings of the

site that provide important documentation of its history. The descriptions and images vary in detail and accuracy, such as the odd 19th-century drawing by the Italian visitor Villavicencio, which depicts the buildings as much larger than they really are. These differences suggest that the site may have undergone a number of changes in use during this period, but also indicate that some of the travellers may have exaggerated what they saw. This tendency to exaggerate or fantasize can be seen in earlier documents, such as the Juan and Ulloa drawing, and the von Humboldt drawing of Ingapirca from around 1800 that shows palm trees and a Middle Eastern camel, neither of which was ever present at that site.



Volcán Cotopaxi en la gran Cordillera del Ecuador y ruinas de un antiguo templo de los incas.

In the 19th century, the site passed through the hands of several owners. During much of this time the site seems to have fallen into disrepair, and may have been abandoned for brief periods. At one point, a traveler noted that the owner was mining stone from the ruins to build his house in another part of the valley. In the early 1920s, the site was bought by General Leonidas Plaza Gutierrez, twice president of Ecuador and an important military leader in the civil wars of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The hacienda is still owned by the Plaza family.

ARCHAEOLOGY

San Agustín de Callo has long been of interest to archaeologists and historians, and has been

described in numerous sources through the years. While some of this, such as the works of von Humboldt, still serve as valuable scientific references, some of the references present myths and legends that have little basis in fact, such as the early beliefs that the Callo hill may have been an ancient pyramid. Other myths about the site still persist today.

The first scientific excavations at Callo begin in 1995 with the arrival of Dr. David O. Brown, a specialist in Inka culture at the University of Texas at Austin, in the United States. Several phases of excavation and mapping have revealed much about the hacienda's past and helped to dispel some of the myths. Subsequent seasons of excavation by Dr. Brown and his colleagues in 1999, 2000, 2008, and 2009 as well as ongoing reconnaissance and historic investigations in the broader region have helped to better understand the history of Callo and its role within the relatively brief Inka occupation of Ecuador in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Some of the more interesting findings are discussed here.

One of the most persistent myths about San Agustín de Callo is that the hacienda is located on the site of ancient pre-Inka sanctuaries, perhaps initiated by Father Juan de Velasco in his late 18th-century history of Ecuador. Nonetheless, the archaeological investigations at the hacienda have clearly shown that pre-Inka occupations in the immediate site area are nearly non-existent. Stratigraphic evidence from more than 100 square meters of excavation around the hacienda have found only one tiny ceramic fragment and one fragment of stone tool debris from clear pre-Inka contexts, far too little to suggest any significant early use of the area.

In fact, much of the small hill on which the hacienda lies was deposited as a result of a volcanic mud flow less than 2,000 years ago.

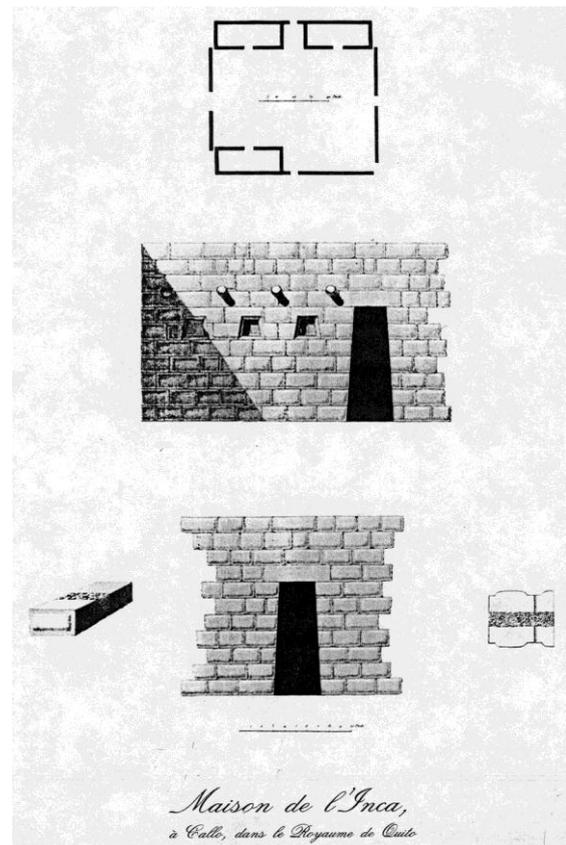
Before that the hill was lower, much narrower and surrounded by swampy terrain. In contrast, a large number of what have been occasionally identified as “prehistoric” ceramic remains have been found in clear colonial contexts, suggesting that these local styles persisted long into the historic era, probably made in the same pottery producing areas as today, such as Pujilí and Saquisilí to the west of Latacunga.

Little is known of the original function of the Inka buildings at San Agustín de Callo but it has been often described in the literature as a royal palace, perhaps because of the fine stonework, among the best examples of its type in all of Ecuador. While the archaeology has provided little direct insight into its early function, comparison with other Inka sites is helpful. First, though the Inka emperor may have stayed at many different sites in his travels, there are few examples of royal palaces known outside of Quito.

A royal palace is described at Tomebamba, now the southern Ecuadorian town of Cuenca, but the actual location of this palace is still debated. Another is described in colonial chronicles at Caranqui, just south of Ibarra in northern Ecuador. A large bath, recently found there and still under study, features beautiful Inka stonework and was likely part of a large and impressive complex, much larger and more elaborate than the existing structures at Callo. Lesser “palaces” may have been located at larger Inka sites such as Latacunga and Quito, but few sites as small as Callo show evidence of palace compounds that are often large and elaborate with fine stone baths and other ritual features.

Callo has also been described as a tambo, a way station along the Inka royal highway, and this description may have some merit. As mentioned before, Cieza de Leon, described well-built halls and storehouses at what is

now San Agustín de Callo rather than the colonial town of Mulaló. The Inka stonework at Callo does resemble some well-preserved tambos along the Inka highway in Peru and it is not impossible that portions of the site indeed served this function. Archaeological observations at the hacienda, however, have shown alignments with the surrounding volcanoes as well as possible astronomical alignments.



The configuration of the compound itself, as first mapped by von Humboldt and verified by the recent archaeological investigations, shows its similarities with the most sacred of all Inka temples, the Korikancha of Cusco, Peru. These observations, and the possibility that the Inka road, which is thought to follow the north-south entry road about a kilometer east of the hacienda, did not actually pass through the San Agustín hacienda area (which it would have were the site a tambo or administrative center), suggest that it could have been primarily a sanctuary, possibly dedicated to the nearby Cotopaxi volcano. At

least this much is in keeping with folk beliefs that San Agustín was a sacred site.

Initial archaeological investigations at the hacienda did not locate clear evidence of Inka compounds beyond the modern main house of the hacienda. More recent investigations have revealed hints of other structures to the north and northeast, as well as an apparent scatter of Inka ceramics beyond the modern configuration. The lack of intact Inka foundations in these areas may suggest that they were not built as well as the main compound and did not survive the series of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions that devastated many nearby villages and towns. The modern remains still reflect Humboldt's earlier drawing of the compound, suggesting that any other Inka buildings may have been removed or reconstructed before 1800.

In addition to the main compound, one deeply buried wall foundation in the open area to the west has been identified as Inka based on its construction. Sealed by a colonial volcanic ash layer, this large, thick wall, probably being built to defend Callo, was never finished. An earlier volcanic ash deposit in and around the foundation are tentatively identified as belonging to the first recorded historic eruption in mid- 1534.

This massive eruption, one of the largest in the few centuries before and after the Inka occupation, was observed by the approaching Spanish soldiers, marching north against the remnants of the Inka empire still present in Ecuador. The eruption, which rained ash for several weeks as far as the coast, and whose explosions were heard for many kilometers, was reportedly taken as a bad omen by the last Inka general Rumiñahui, who had dug in to face the Spanish army west of modern Riobamba, but hastily retreated to Quito after seeing the eruption.

In his retreat, the general ordered Inka sites burned to offer no supplies or shelter to the advancing Spaniards. Burned Inka storehouses at the Hacienda Guachalá near Cayambe, northeast of Quito, echo this order, as does the discovery of many burned Inka ceramic fragments at Callo itself. Thus, while we may never know the original date of construction of the Inka compound at Callo, it now seems that it was abandoned during the Inka retreat before the Spanish in the summer of 1534.



Historians and archaeologists have speculated that the buildings at Callo were continuously occupied from the late 15th century through today, making the buildings among the longest ever occupied in the new world. Recent investigations, however, suggest that this may not be the case.

Historic traveler's tales are quite variable, describing it mostly as occupied, but occasionally as an abandoned ruin. Among the most recent archaeological investigations undertaken in the context of the abandoned defensive wall, suggest that Callo was only minimally occupied, if at all, from the time of

the Spanish conquest in 1534 till the late 1600s. The first mention of the Augustinian hacienda around Callo comes from this era, and a 1691 Spanish real from the site may well date that early reoccupation.



By contrast to some Inka sites in Ecuador, no whole Inka vessels have ever been found, perhaps a result of the intentional destruction of Callo by the retreating Inka armies, or perhaps the result of centuries of colonial occupations. The most important archaeological data at the site have come from the well-preserved architectural remains that have offered archaeologists a view of Inka construction techniques on the far northern frontier of the empire.

These observations suggest that large earthen ramps were used to raise the blocks to the height of the walls, and that blocks were slid into place from the corners that were often set in place. While the wall courses are level across the buildings, apparently little concern was given to the location of joints between blocks, unlike modern masonry. Instead, the Inkas occasionally set smaller blocks slightly down into the lower course to lock blocks in place. And while the wall blocks appear massive, they are a façade, with tightly fitted joints only along the wall face.

Between the wall faces, the interior is filled with stone rubble, clay and ash from an eruption of the Quilotoa volcano around AD 1250. This fine ash was mined out of a large

area around the hacienda by the Inka to use as dry mortar for the construction.

The Inka also apparently excavated out large areas immediately around the hacienda to use the earth for construction ramps to push the large and heavy blocks into place along the walls and also used a partially indurated volcanic mud flow, the most durable stratum in the upper meters of the subsoil, to anchor their three-course foundation. Overall, the Inka showed a very clear understanding of the surrounding hill and its constructive potential, even suggesting that that may have conducted something akin to a modern geotechnical study before attempting to build what can be seen today.



Archaeological and historical studies at San Agustín de Callo, dating back to the drawings made by the French Geodesic Expedition of the 1740s, have contributed to the understanding of the Inka presence in Ecuador. With its well preserved Inka stonework, the site continues to be one of the most important archaeological sites in Ecuador. Preserved, as it is, in the context of a colonial hacienda that itself has a long and distinguished history, the site is truly an icon of Ecuador's past. The efforts to protect and enhance Callo by the Plaza family have preserved it as a monument of national and international importance.

David O. Brown and Dana Anthony, March 2012