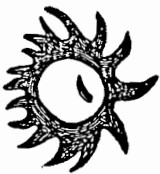


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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO THE GRINGO STIGMA

by Randall H. McGuire



The local people in Trincheras, Mexico assumed the American archaeologists were looking for gold—and probably finding it in spite of their denials. Why would the foreigners spend so much time and money collecting the broken pieces of pottery and stones they claimed to be looking for? McGuire thinks the locals' conviction that archaeologists are treasure hunters stems, not from their ignorance of archaeology, but from their historical experience of foreigners.

Trincheras, Mexico—People here have trouble understanding why archaeologists spend so much time and money collecting potsherds and pieces of stone. Many assume that we are looking for gold. Our protestations commonly fall on deaf ears: everyone knows that if we were recovering great treasures we wouldn't be foolish enough to admit it. I was, therefore, not surprised when a small boy confronted me on the main street of this sleepy village in the northwestern state of Sonora. "Are you from the United States?" he asked. "Yes," I replied. "Are you looking for gold and silver?" I shook my head and began to explain what archaeologists do. Before I could finish he dashed off to join his friends, obviously unconvinced. Trincheras lies in the shadow of Cerro de Trincheras, a hill on which Native Americans built a terraced village about 500 years ago. My Mexican colleague, Maria Elisa Villalpando, and I came with support from the National Geographic Society to map and record the site. For seven weeks we studied the ancient village while the modern townspeople studied us.

THE GRINGO STIGMA

During our first evening in town a shopkeeper told us about a rumored treasure in the hill. According to one account, the first rays of the morning sun fell on a cave filled with gold and silver. No one had yet found the cave because it moved each morning as the rising sun shifted position on the horizon. Another story described a bedrock throne within the hill on which rested a nugget of gold. To many of the townspeople, our presence was an affirmation of these tales. We were here to tear the hill apart, stone by stone, and spirit the gold back to the United States.

The stories were amusing, but the suspicions made us uneasy. During the first week of our project we found numerous rock piles at the site. Thinking they were remnants of railroad construction in the 1940s, we asked a local farmer about them. Two days later, one of the piles had been dug up. After that, we were guarded in our discussions of what we were finding. No doubt our reserve added to people's suspicions. During the second week we gave a talk in the town hall to explain what we were doing. The hundred or so people who came seemed convinced that we were not treasure hunters. They chuckled at the stories of treasure in the hill. But the young boy who confronted me in the street a few days later, like many others, still believed that we had come to take away something of great value. We came to realize that their conviction sprang not from ignorance of archaeology, but from their own experience and history.

Vast placer deposits lie about 12 miles south of Trincheras. These deposits played out a hundred years ago, but a few flakes and an occasional nugget can still be found. Wizened gold diggers from the United States sometimes stop in Trincheras for gas before heading off for these deposits. Treasure hunting here has not always been so benign. In 1857 Henry Crabb, a former Know-Nothing candidate for the U.S. Senate, led a private army of 100 men across the border. Crabb saw another Texas in the making, with himself as Stephen F. Austin. Sonoran troops met this bobtail army with drawn sabers and musket fire. Crabb took refuge in the old mission church at Caborca. After a seven day siege, the Mexicans produced a cannon and threatened to blow the doors off the sanctuary. The Americans surrendered, were tried, found guilty, marched out into the desert, and shot. The

story of Crabb's raid is well-known to the people of Trincheras. The nearest major commercial center is Caborca Heroica, heroic because of Crabb's defeat.

After seven weeks of work we had produced a detailed map of the ancient village, and we knew that the people who had once lived there had been maize farmers and shell jewelry makers. We never found the cave filled with gold and silver, nor the stone throne with the gold nugget. Neither did we convince the people of Trincheras that we were not treasure hunters. That, after all, is what gringos do.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do the local people in areas where you have done fieldwork think you are looking for? Why? How do you know?
2. How do their perceptions affect the project's work and behavior? How do they affect the discipline as a whole?
3. Has your project done anything to inform the locals about your work? What options are available for doing so? What are the obstacles?
4. Were local leaders consulted and asked for input before the project began?
5. What benefits could follow from such consultation? What costs? Are members of your project familiar with the recent history of the area? How might that history affect interactions between project members and local people?