

## León Viejo (Nicaragua)

No 613rev

### Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The ruins of León Viejo
<i>Location</i>	Puerto Momotombo, Municipality of La Paz Centro, Department of León
<i>State Party</i>	Republic of Nicaragua
<i>Date</i>	7 October 1994

### Justification by State Party

The site of León Viejo is an historic monument of exceptional importance which is probably unique in Central America. This is largely due to its state of preservation, as few 16th century cities are preserved intact and unaltered by subsequent rebuilding.

Even more interesting is the fact that a large part of the entire settlement has been preserved. Most conservation works on Latin American historic sites has focused on isolated buildings, such as churches and fortresses; there are few opportunities to research and conserve a complete community. There is no site comparable with León Viejo known in Central America. There are abandoned communities in Chiapas, Yucatán, Guatemala, and Belize, but they are marginal rural settlements and do not have the historic importance of León Viejo, which was the first settlement and colonial capital of Nicaragua.

First, León Viejo is an excellent laboratory for experimentation with excavation techniques, and the artefacts discovered provide a rich inventory of materials dating from the first years of contact between the Spanish settlers and the indigenous population in the 16th century. These materials may be used to establish comparative chronological sequences to date other sites in Nicaragua and neighbouring regions. Given the presence of a prehispanic population, the site offers the potential to study the demographic, social, and economic dynamic between the native and Spanish communities. Moreover, burials may supply details about diet and diseases introduced by the Spaniards. Strontium analysis of bone remains provides good results. A programme of research at the site offers great opportunities to train young archaeologists in investigation techniques, with consequent benefits to the development of archaeology in the region. Indeed, León Viejo could be a key site for the development of historical archaeology in Central America, a region where the discipline is still in its infancy.

At a higher level of investigation, it is sufficient to remark that León Viejo played an important role in the history of

Nicaragua as the first colonial capital, and archaeological research offers the potential for new perspectives on the Spanish presence and expansion in the New World. These studies could be complemented by historical investigation in the Archivo General de Centro America in Guatemala and the Archivo General de Indias in Seville (Spain).

On yet another level, León Viejo also presents possibilities for generating public awareness of national and regional history and for promoting tourism through the creation of an archaeological park with conserved buildings, a museum, and other visitor facilities. In this respect, the colonial ruins offer the possibility to develop restoration techniques that might also be applied on other colonial sites in the region. The location beside a scenic lake offers possibilities for tourism development complementary to the historical attractions. The works of research, restoration, and construction and maintenance of tourist facilities would between them represent a substantial source of investment and income in the local economy. **Criteria iii and iv**

### Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the ruins of León Viejo constitute a *site*.

### History and Description

#### History

Although detailed archaeological research has not been carried out on the site of what was to become the capital of the province of Nicaragua, the early Spanish chroniclers record that the region was densely populated before the conquest by Chorotega Indians, a farming society with a moderate hierarchical structure headed by an elected council of elders.

The Spanish town was founded in 1524 by Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, who was sent from Panamá by Pedrarias Dávila to conquer the Pacific zone northwards to Tezoatega (now the village of El Viejo). It developed, like many colonial towns in Latin America, round a central plaza, on the extreme north-east shore of what was to be called the Lake of León. Its role was to dominate the territory already conquered by the Spaniards and expand towards the Gulf of Fonseca and the mining zone of Olancho, as well as to Aguán on the Caribbean.

Hernández de Córdoba did not enjoy his new capital for long, since he was executed on the orders of Pedrarias for treason in 1526. Pedrarias came to León as Governor of Nicaragua in 1528, the year which saw the first convent established, by Francisco de Bobadilla, and also a severe famine, which resulted in the deaths of thousands of the indigenous people. Their numbers were further depleted as a result of their being exported as slaves to Panamá and Perú in large numbers, one of the main activities of León. The end of this momentous year saw the creation of a mint by Royal command, "to process the gold and silver and other metals of this province," thus establishing the second pillar of the economy of the town. Both were productive of violence and demographic catastrophes during its short 86 years of existence.

Despite its role as a provincial capital León was never more than a relatively modest collection of rustic buildings, most of them in the same material as those used by the indigenous people, wood, bamboo, and mud - *mezquinas barracas* (mean huts) in the contemptuous words of the Marquess of Lozoya. Only the church, the convents, and the houses of the governor and a handful of the richer citizens were more elaborate. The fortress that was built at the beginning of the settlement was allowed to fall into ruins within twenty years, indicating the extent of the pacification of the region. The Royal foundry and mint was also a substantial building, but constructed in the indigenous materials, which resulted in successive fires. The material needs of the inhabitants were well catered for, judging by the range of craftsmen working in the town from early on in its history.

León reached its peak of development around 1545, during the governorship of Rodrigo de Contreras. It was still relatively small, its Spanish population not exceeding some two hundred. The murder of Bishop Antonio de Valdivieso in 1550 seemed to mark a turning point in its fortunes: it was widely believed to have put a curse on the town, which suffered from both natural and economic disasters in the years that followed. There was an eruption of the nearby volcano, Momotombo, in 1578, which combined with the raging inflation to drive the richer inhabitants away. By 1603 there were only ten houses remaining, the others having been abandoned and allowed to fall into ruins. The final blow came on 11 January 1610, when a severe earthquake destroyed what was still standing. The decision was taken to move the city to a site six leagues away, near the village of Subtiava, that had already been under consideration for several years. It is recorded that the ruins of the old town were used as a ready source of building materials for the new settlement.

#### *Description*

The original layout of the town is not recorded and has so far not been reconstructed from archaeological data. It was certainly laid out on a regular grid pattern but it is unlikely to have been as large as contemporary towns such as Lima. Excavations carried out since the site was discovered in 1968 have uncovered the remains of a number of buildings, of which the following are the most important.

The Cathedral consists of a central nave, with a main altar at the eastern end reached by steps. Beside the entrance is the base of what is believed to have been a bell-tower. The walls were built in *tapia*, the form of pisé (earth mixed with a compacted material) favoured in the Spanish colonies for its fireproof qualities and the most common material at León Viejo. The Convent of La Merced consists of five rooms enclosed by a *tapia* wall and connected directly with the convent church. The Royal foundry is one of the largest buildings in the town, consisting of eleven rooms. Several private houses have been excavated, some of which can be assigned to a known inhabitant of the town. They are all relatively simple in form and are all built in the omnipresent *tapia*.

#### **Management and Protection**

##### *Legal status*

The enclosed excavated area is protected under the provisions of the Law No 1142 on the Protection of the Cultural Heritage of the Nation.

##### *Management*

The protected area is State property; the area outside, which is known to contain archaeological remains, is private property.

The Nicaraguan Institute of Culture (*Instituto Nicaraguense de Cultura* - INC) is responsible for the management of the site. It works through the Directorate for the Historic Site of the Ruins of León Viejo (*Dirección del Sitio Histórico Ruinas de León Viejo*), created in 1997. A commission involving, in addition to the Institute, the Ministries of the Environment and Natural Resources and of Tourism, the Nicaraguan Institute of Insurance and Re-insurance, and the Municipalities of La Paz Centro and Managua has been established to support the project.

There is a permanent maintenance team of eight people on the site; an architect from the Directorate of Cultural Heritage directs the conservation work. Funds for the maintenance programme come from the budget allocated by the central government to the Nicaraguan Institute of Culture, supplemented by entry fees. The commission has provided funding for the renovation of signs and the construction of a visitor centre, as well as remuneration for students from the neighbouring village of Puerto Momotombo who act as tourist guides.

In 1987 the Organization of American States financed the preparation of a master plan for León Viejo. This sets out the phased activities needed to ensure the conservation of the site.

#### **Conservation and Authenticity**

##### *Conservation history*

The site was buried until 1968, when the ruins of the Church of La Merced were discovered by accident. The Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua in León undertook the excavations and uncovered eighteen buildings. Responsibility for the project passed to the Directorate of Cultural Heritage in 1979. Four of the ruins were reburied by Hurricane Aletta in 1982 (these will not be re-excavated until effective means are available for their protection). The limits of the site were defined following further investigations in 1986 and 1987; the most recent excavations took place in 1999.

Conservation work carried out since the late 1960s has consisted essentially of covering the walls with bricks set in a cement mortar. In the mid 1980s ceramic tiles were used to cap the walls, to protect them from the weather.

These were dismantled in the early 1990s and replaced by a mixture of lime, earth, and cement, which provided adequate waterproofing.

Investigation and analysis were carried out on the constructional materials used on the Cathedral, the Foundry, the Church of La Merced, and the House of Gonzalo Cano in 1984 by Nicasolum (Materials Engineers) SA. Data are now available on the load-bearing capacity, volumetric weight, natural humidity, and absorption capacity of the *tapia* walls, bricks (both original and modern), protective tiles, and mortar.

Since the property was first nominated in 1994 considerable conservation work has been carried out, including complete

survey of the site, further archaeological excavations, and presentation of part of the excavated area. Extensive clearance work was necessitated by the severe impact of Hurricane Mitch on the site in October/November 1998, when it was covered with muddy flood waters to a depth of 1m.

#### *Authenticity*

There is no doubt as to the identification of the site: excavations have provided plenty of evidence that these are the remains of the Spanish colonial town of León. The excavated remains on display are authentic, apart from the additions necessary to make them weatherproof.

#### **Evaluation**

##### *Action by ICOMOS*

ICOMOS consulted its International Committee on Historic Towns and Villages. An expert mission visited the site in February 1995. An ICOMOS expert also visited León Viejo in early 1999 during the course of a mission to evaluate the impact of Hurricane Mitch on cultural properties in Central America. A second expert mission visited the site in February 2000.

##### *Qualities*

This is an archaeological site of considerable importance, representing a failed colonial settlement that is preserved below-ground in its entirety, and so an historical document of great significance.

##### *Comparative analysis*

León is one of the many towns established by the Spanish colonial authorities in the 16th century in Central and South America. It differs from cities such as Lima only in that it was an unsuccessful settlement which was abandoned less than a century after its foundation. As such it is a valuable source of information about life in the early stages of the Spanish colonial period. The claim made in the title of a book published by the Nicaraguan National Commission for UNESCO that it is "the American Pompeii" is something of an exaggeration, since the buildings are very incomplete, having been dismantled to provide building materials for the new settlement.

##### *ICOMOS comments*

On the recommendation of ICOMOS, further consideration of this nomination was deferred by the Bureau at its meeting in June 1995 to enable the State Party to provide clearer information about the delineation of the proposed site and its buffer zone, the management plan and its implementation, and measures for protection against flood threats to the integrity of the archaeological remains.

In 1999 the State Party clarified the situation regarding the boundary of the site and details of the master plan. Measures for the protection of the site against flood damage have been considerably strengthened as a result of Hurricane Mitch.

The report of the ICOMOS expert mission, whilst commending the efforts made by the State Party, and in particular the work following the impact of Hurricane Mitch, expressed concern that there was no effective management plan in operation. The master plan of 1997 referred to above has apparently not yet been implemented. The report also

commented on the fact that the conservation work that was currently being carried out by the permanent team was reactive rather than planned: a systematic maintenance and conservation programme must form part of the management plan, which should also contain provision for training. The State Party should be encouraged to seek assistance from the World Heritage Fund in connection with training.

There was also no formal buffer zone around the nominated area, as required by the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*. This must also be defined and details supplied to the Committee.

The additional information requested by ICOMOS was supplied shortly before the June meeting of the Bureau, which decided to refer consideration of this nomination to its extraordinary session in November 2000, to enable ICOMOS to examine the supplementary documentation fully.

ICOMOS has now done so, and is satisfied that the master plan contains the required maintenance and conservation programmes and is in force. The boundaries of the nominated area and the buffer zone have been clarified and found to be acceptable.

#### **Brief description**

León Viejo is one of the oldest Spanish colonial settlements in the Americas. It did not develop and so its ruins are outstanding testimony to the social and economic structures of the Spanish Empire in the 16th century, and the site has immense archaeological potential.

#### **Recommendation**

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria iii and iv*:

*Criterion iii* The ruined town of León Viejo provides exceptional testimony to the material culture of one of the earliest Spanish colonial settlements.

*Criterion iv* The form and nature of early Spanish settlement in the New World, adapting European architectural and planning concepts to the material potential of another region, are uniquely preserved in the archaeological site of León Viejo.

ICOMOS, September 2000