

**Identification**

<u>Nomination</u>	Joya de Ceren archaeological site
<u>Location</u>	Department of La Libertad, Canton Joya de Ceren, Jurisdiction of San Juan Opico
<u>State Party</u>	Republic of El Salvador
<u>Date</u>	12 October 1992

**Justification by State Party**

The Joya de Ceren archaeological site is a pre-Hispanic farming community that was suddenly engulfed by a volcanic eruption around AD 600. The deep layers of volcanic ash have preserved detailed evidence of the daily lives of ordinary Mesoamerican farmers. It is unique by virtue of the remarkable state of preservation of the remains. It therefore qualifies for inclusion on the World Heritage List under criteria iii and iv.

**History and Description**History

Around AD 200, the central and western parts of the territory of the modern Republic of El Salvador were buried beneath thick layers of volcanic ash from the Ilopango volcano. The area was abandoned and the Late Preclassic Maya Period cultural evolution was interrupted for several centuries until the ash layer had weathered into fertile soil.

Resettlement did not begin until around AD 400, and the Joya de Ceren settlement was founded before the end of the 6th century. Since excavations are still in progress, it is not yet clear whether it was a small village or a larger community. Evidence from the structures excavated so far suggests that the inhabitants were farmers.

Not long afterwards, around AD 600, Joya de Ceren was destroyed by the eruption of the Loma caldera, less than 1 km from the settlement. Although the eruption only affected some 5 sq km, it completely buried Joya de Ceren under 5-7 m of volcanic ash.

The site was discovered during the construction of Government grain-storage silos in 1976, when a clay-built structure was exposed by a bulldozer. Excavations were carried out under the direction of Dr Payson D Sheets (University of Colorado) in 1978 and 1980, but were interrupted by civil war. They were resumed in 1989 and been continuing since that time.

## Description

The extent of the buried site is still being investigated. So far 17 clay structures, all with thatched roofs, have been identified and ten have been wholly or partially excavated. They include buildings for both residential and specialist use. The former are grouped into compounds that include structures for sleeping, storage, cooking, and handicrafts. The specialized structures include a sweat-house, a large communal building, and two which may have been used by specialists such as a shaman or a healer.

The volcanic eruption was so sudden that artefacts representative of every aspect of daily life were found still in place around the buildings, whilst perishable materials, including plants, survive either as carbonized material or as casts in the ash deposit. The objects recovered by excavation from the buildings constitute a virtual inventory of their contents at the moment of eruption - ceramic and organic containers, implements in stone, wood, and bone, and a variety of foods, including maize, beans, chilis, and cocoa beans, along with stone, shell, and bone ornaments, pigments, incense burners, and deer-antler head-dresses.

Several cultivated fields and other vegetation have also been uncovered. These include fields containing young and mature maize plants, a kitchen garden with a variety of herbs, and a henequen (agave) garden. Various fruit trees, including guayaba and cacao, have also been found.

## **Management and Protection**

### Legal status

Since it was declared a National Monument in 1989, the site has been in public ownership, through the Dirección del Patrimonio Cultural, Museo Nacional "David J Guzman".

The Constitution of the Republic of El Salvador establishes (Article 144) that "international treaties between El Salvador and other states or international entities constitute laws of the Republic," which applies to El Salvador's ratification of the Convention on the Defence of the Archaeological, Historical and Artistic Patrimony of the American Nations (the San Salvador Convention). A transitional law for preservation of properties that form part of the Salvadoran cultural patrimony has been in force since November 1973, and a new Law on the Cultural Patrimony of El Salvador was approved in April 1993.

### Management

The National Council for Culture and Arts (CONCULTURA), through the Dirección del Patrimonio Cultural, is committed to the long-term protection, conservation, and management of the site. The preliminary management plan was prepared in 1991. After reviewing the environmental context of the site, its archaeology, and the history of its investigation, it goes on to

address two fundamental problems, the conservation of this fragile site and public access. General policies and objectives are prescribed, together with the objectives of the first two phases of implementation. The first phase, of six months' duration, will concentrate on the establishment of standard procedures for conservation, the determination of the total extent of the site, and planning for limited public access, including the creation of a site museum. In the second phase it is intended that the management of Joya de Ceren should be integrated with that of other cultural and natural features in the surrounding Zapotitán valley. For this purpose a new administrative organization is to be established. Two management programmes are put forward, relating to the archaeological resource and public use respectively.

The site is fenced and under 24-hour guard for protection against unauthorized entry by humans and large animals.

At the present time, the excavated area and land to the south and west of it, up to the boundary with the present village of Joya de Ceren (formerly owned by the Ministry of Agriculture) is owned by the Dirección del Patrimonio Cultural. The grain-storage silos whose construction first brought the site to notice are to be removed in the near future.

## **Conservation and Authenticity**

### Conservation history

Site preservation and structural consolidation measures have been applied continuously at Joya de Ceren since 1989. This work has been supported by a number of national ministries and agencies as well as foreign organizations, particularly in the USA (Smithsonian Institution, Yale University, US National Park Service, US National Science Foundation, NASA) and international bodies (UNDP, UNESCO). As a result of considerable experimental work, techniques have been developed for the consolidation of the architectural remains using a material based on the viscous sap of a local plant. Site-wide protection and maintenance activities to mitigate the effect of local climatic factors (humidity, temperature, wind, sun) have involved the erection of stable temporary roofing over excavated areas, design and construction of surface drainage systems, construction of windbreaks, river-channel protection, and reforestation of adjoining areas.

The design and erection of permanent roofing over excavated structures that harmonizes with the environment is seen as a priority task. Further studies are also needed in the fields of analysis of structural materials, the micro-environment, and the archaeological environment. It is intended that such studies shall form the basis for a global conservation strategy for the site.

## Authenticity

The circumstances of the burial of the site ensure the absolute authenticity of the remains. Preliminary conservation interventions and those proposed in the series of reports so far produced are directed towards the preservation of this authenticity.

## **Evaluation**

### Qualities

Joya de Ceren is an archaeological site that is unique to the New World, comparable only with the famous buried sites of Pompeii and Herculanaeum. The wealth of information that it has yielded, and will continue to yield, about the minutiae of everyday life in a Late Preclassic Maya Period Mesoamerican settlement means that it is without parallel in the Western Hemisphere.

### Comparative analysis

Many sites of this period have been excavated in Mesoamerica. However, the circumstances of the burial of Joya de Ceren under a deep layer of volcanic ash and the sudden nature of its engulfment have meant that the archaeological evidence that it has yielded, and will continue to yield, is infinitely richer than that from any other site so far known in the region.

### Additional comments

The property was visited by two ICOMOS experts in April 1993. They stressed the problems of conservation of this fragile archaeological site, and in particular the eventual provision of effective climatic control within the permanent cover buildings.

Whilst the acquisition policy of the Dirección del Patrimonio Cultural will ensure that the totality of the buried site will eventually be included in the area in public ownership, it is arguable whether this will constitute a buffer zone of the type envisaged by the World Heritage Committee. It is desirable therefore that a wider area around the site should be defined as a buffer zone with rigorous control over unsympathetic development.

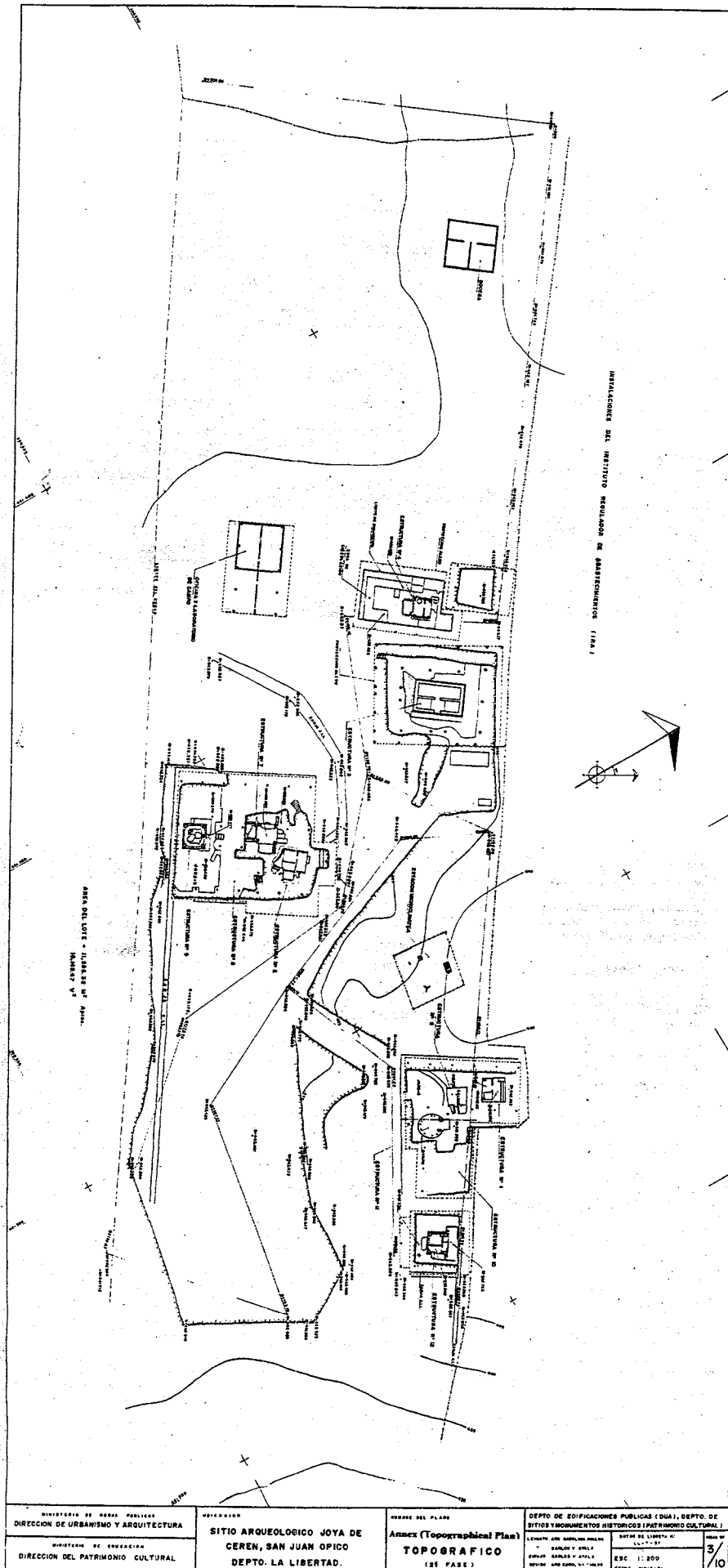
The proximity of the Panamerican Highway to the site may present the Salvadoran authorities with difficulties over controlling tourist access to the site, as well as security problems from clandestine excavations. The attention of the Government should be drawn to the necessity for a properly drafted and rigorously applied policy for public access.

## **Recommendation**

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of criterion iii:

- Criterion iii Joya de Ceren is remarkable by virtue of the completeness of the evidence that it provides of everyday life in a Mesoamerican farming community of the 6th century AD, which is without parallel in this cultural region.

ICOMOS, October 1993



Joya de Ceren : plan du site archéologique /  
 map of the archaeological site