

# Before the volcano erupted: the ancient cerén village in central america

[History](#), [Ancient History](#)



The archaeological site of Joya del Ceren, located in the broad Zapotitan Valley in the fertile region of western El Salvador, is a remarkable and important find that has been compared to the ancient ruined cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum in Italy. Like Pompeii, Joya del Ceren was preserved under layers of volcanic ash in the catastrophic Loma Caldera eruption from the nearby Ilopango volcano approximately 600 AD. This eruption forced the sudden abandonment of the site by its inhabitants who were forced to leave their possessions behind.

Dr Payson Sheets of the University of Colorado-Boulder has been leading the excavations of the site, and as this ancient farming village of the Maya is now being revealed, many important insights into the household and community life of the ancient Maya, as well as their economic, social, and religious activities are becoming better understood. In Dr. Sheets' book, *Before the Volcano Erupted: The Ancient Ceren Village in Central America*, an overview of the knowledge gained by recent excavations is provided.

The book opens with a discussion of volcanology, geophysics, and paleobotany. It is clear that the presence of the nearby volcanic hills around the site presented both benefits and hazards to the ancient inhabitants. The volcano provided a source of hard stones for making manos and metates, its ancient eruptions deposited a fertile bed of ash for fruitful agriculture, but it also proved the destruction of their village.

What is so amazing is the fine state of preservation that the volcanic eruption gave to the material culture of the site. The buildings, complete with their thatched roofs (mice included) and painted walls, the beautifully

painted gourds and pottery vessels, whole and filled with foodstuffs, liquid residues, utensils and other personal items, the craft tools, and the clear evidence of craft production are all on hand, looking untouched despite their fourteen centuries of age. Consider this remarkable statement:

“ The numerous seasonally sensitive plants preserved at the site indicate the eruption probably occurred in August. Further, the positions and conditions of artifacts indicate the eruption probably occurred in the early evening, after dinner was served but before the dishes were washed, likely between 6: 00 and 7: 00 P. M. ” (Sheets) For all the fury and destruction that volcanoes can cause, such an outcome is nevertheless a joy to historians and archaeologists, and should be to anyone curious about the lives of prehistoric peoples.

The focus of the explorations at Joya del Ceren is centered on “ Household Archaeology,” with the household being defined as “ the domestic coresidential social and adaptive unit intermediate between the individual and the neighborhood. ” (Sheets) Part II of the book describes the four households excavated prior to publication, with eleven building having been completely excavated, and seven others partially excavated. Professor Sheets summarizes the work to date as follows:

Four buildings of Household 1 have been excavated, including a domicile (for sleeping, eating, and various daytime activities), a storehouse, a kitchen, and a ramada-style building that occasionally was used for chipped stone tool maintenance, among other functions (Structures 1, 6, 11, and 5, respectively). Two buildings of Household 2 have been excavated, the

domicile and the storehouse (Structures 2 and 7). The kitchen has yet to be excavated, and we do not know if Structure 18 is a part of this household.

Only a part of the kitchen of Household 3 is known (Structure 16). The storehouse of Household 4 has been excavated, and it is a storehouse and much more (Structure 4). The maguey (*Agave americana*) garden south of the building produced fiber for about a dozen households; the leaves were depulped to liberate the fibers using Structure 4's northeast corner pole. " (Sheets) The results of these excavations revealed a good deal about household and village life of the people of the Maya frontier circa 600 AD.

We have an expanded view of what they ate (maize, beans, chiles, squash, manioc, maguey, cacao and guayaba among others), the wealth they possessed (over 70 vessels in household 1 alone), and their source of livelihood (both subsistence farming and craft specialization). Indeed it is possible to speculate that each household produced a certain type of finished craft for export trade within or beyond the village.

Sheets describes how " each household overproduced at least one craft or commodity and used that for exchange within the community and to obtain long-distance traded items that generally were produced by specialists, such as obsidian tools, hematite pigments, and jade axes. " (Sheets) It is shown how household 1 produced groundstone items such as manos and metates, and a tool called a donut stone. Household 2 likely served as a painted gourd factory, as evidenced by the presence of cinnabar paints and the use-wear on chipped stone tools found at the site.

In addition to the household structures, some other community buildings have been identified. These include Structure 9, a large sweat bath that could accommodate a dozen people, structure 10, considered to be a religious festival building of some kind, as evidenced by the presence of some sacred artifacts, such as a deer skull headdress, and an obsidian blade with traces of human blood. There is also a large community center or civic complex, perhaps used for local government functions or religious purposes or both. The religious buildings were painted white and are the only white buildings found at the site.

Some of the agricultural fields have been examined, and the results are very interesting. For example, the rows for maize were ridged, and some areas show where portions of the crop have already been harvested and the ground replanted with the second crop for the year. Many species of plants are identified by plaster casting, including "maize, beans, chiles, squash, manioc, maguey, various trees such as cacao and guayaba, and a number of palm and deciduous trees." (Sheets) The manioc field is known as the first evidence of the cultivation of this crop in the Americas.

In a recent CU-Boulder news release article, Sheets said "we have long wondered what else the prehistoric Mayan people were growing and eating besides corn and beans, so finding this field was a jackpot of sorts for us. Manioc's extraordinary productivity may help explain how the Classic Maya at huge sites like Tikal in Guatemala and Copan in Honduras supported such dense populations." The work at Joya del Ceren is far from over. The book

explains how the archaeologists are using ground penetrating radar equipment to locate numerous other buildings for future excavations.

As time goes on, the riches of Joya del Ceren will continue to emerge from the ashes. Before the Volcano Erupted: The Ancient Ceren Village in Central America is a rather typical archaeological report, fairly dry for reading, but full of fascinating information if you take the time to pick through it. What is important is what the Archaeology of the site can teach us of the ancient people that lived there. The site must be an outstanding place to visit, for to see such well-preserved artifacts would surely spark the imagination.

I would surely recommend the book to anyone interested in the Maya, in archaeology and history in general, or to anybody that is curious about the way that ordinary people from the past may have lived their lives. Works Cited Sheets, Payson. "CU-Boulder Archaeology Team Discovers First Ancient Manioc Fields In Americas." CU-Boulder News. August 20, 2007. <http://www.colorado.edu/news/releases/2007/305.html> Sheets, Payson (ed.) Before the Volcano Erupted: The Ancient Ceren Village in Central America. Boulder, Colorado. 2002