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El Fuerte de Samaipata in context. Introduction

El Fuerte de Samaipata w szerszym kontekście. Wprowadzenie

Samaipata, a little Machu Picchu and a small Cusco in Bolivia

The name “El Fuerte de Samaipata”, the official title with which this mysterious archaeological and historical site in eastern Bolivia was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List a little more than twenty years ago, is in some sense misleading, as the fortification aspect of the site is not particularly characteristic, at least when considering its prehistoric origin(s). UNESCO’s brief description on its official website mentions the strategic importance of this site for the Inca as it was located on the eastern slopes of the Andes and formed “a bulwark against the incursions of the warlike Chiriguanos of the Chaco region in the 1520s”. However, the reuse of the Inca site for military purposes by the Spaniards during the wars under Viceroy Toledo and later seems to be the reason for its later name of “El Fuerte”. Regardless of its name, the principal reason for the inscription of this site on the World Heritage List is its huge sculptured rock, which is classified as “a unique testimony to pre-Hispanic traditions and beliefs, and has no parallel anywhere in the Americas”.

In the early nineties of the last century, when we were prospecting the area and uncovered the structures in the small valley adjacent to the monumental carved rock known among the local people and in the sparse literature as “El Fuerte de Samaipata”, we soon became aware of the uniqueness of this site¹. It is unique not only in the

Bolivian context of cultural patrimony, but also in a much broader geographical and cultural sense. In our first enthusiasm, we started talking about a little Machu Picchu, and I still think we did not exaggerate.

Firstly, let me recall the archaeological situation in Bolivia at that time. At a superficial level, the only archaeological site known by people not considered as insiders was Tiwanaku (*Tiahuanaco*), the mysterious megalithic site surrounding the famous Gateway of the Sun situated on the Altiplano close to Lake Titicaca. Tiwanaku culture was considered the uniting prehistoric national culture, whose cultural remains were dispersed around most of the national territory except the Chaco and part of the Amazonian regions. Ironically, Carlos Ponce Sanginés, who could be called a national(ist) archaeologist and who dominated Bolivian understanding of their prehistoric origin, already early in the 1970s recognised the importance of Samaipata, as he was promoting it as a national monument. As he told me in 1974, when I had the opportunity to work on a museum collection in La Paz, the site “belonged” to the Mollo culture, a culture defined by their ceramics and architecture and associated with the spectacular ruins of Iskanwaya that dominate the mountain slopes east of Lake Titicaca, and whose remains are distributed along the eastern border of the Andes practically from southern Peru to the Yungas of Cochabamba. As an outcome of this Andean-centric or Tiwanaku-centric view, he filled the local museum of the town of Samaipata with “foreign” pieces of Tiwanaku culture. It must be stated that during

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¹ The Samaipata Archeological Research Project (Proyecto Arqueológico en Samaipata, PIAS) of the University of Bonn included five field campaigns in Samaipata during the years of 1992 to 1996 under the

direction of the author. These were supported by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) and other institutions whose contribution is kindly acknowledged.

our excavations, among the thousands of shards found, curiously we found not a single piece belonging to the classic Tiwanaku culture, or at least none that displayed the characteristic painted decoration of that culture.

Secondly, at that time, the common understanding of the eastern border of the Inca realm was that only a slight part of it reached the Amazonian or Chaco lowlands, and that this had occurred nearer to the end of the Inca Empire. Due to this, nobody would have thought that there was a little Machu Picchu so far to the east. Although early travellers like d'Orbigny in the thirties of the 19th century and Nordenskiöld at the beginning of the 20th century described Samaipata as an Inca gold-washing place or the last Inca fortress to the east against the belligerent Guaraní people, the carved rock itself was considered as pre-Inca style in the scientific literature [1], [2]. On the other hand, Hermann Trimborn underlined the Incan character of Samaipata. However, his detailed description dating from the sixties of the last century was translated into Spanish too late and thus has been scarcely considered by local scholars [3].

Thirdly, the comparison with Machu Picchu was a sort of cry for help: help for financial support for the most urgent measurements – the planimetry of the rock and the whole archaeological complex – and the excavation of the main structures. The results of this excavation could be perhaps summarised in the following short way: although there is clear evidence of pre-Inca cultural manifestations in the form of ceramics, remains of habitations beneath the Inca buildings at the *gran plaza*, and perhaps a considerable amount of the rock carvings, the whole rock has to be viewed in correlation with the adjacent architectural remains and the landscaping and seen as a complete unit.

There are two phases recognisable in the architecture and landscaping of the site. In the first phase, smaller houses were built on the slope to the south of the rock. Then, the whole landscape south of the rock and the valley ground were remodelled and structured with one large platform adjacent to the rock, several terraces, and finally a *gran plaza* of 100 × 100 m (appr.) bordered by medium-sized stone buildings 30–40 m long, and huge stone buildings, *kallanka*, nearly 70 m long (Fig. 1). This is the same kind of structure for “new Cuscos” as described for other Inca sites in the province [4, p. 53]. Samaipata only lacks a sacrifice stone or altar (*ushnu*) in the centre of the plaza² – but what more spectacular *ushnu* could be imagined than the carved rock? It was during this phase in the history of Samaipata that the southern part of the whole rock was cut vertically and provided with lots of niches of human shape, which formed the northern longitudinal walls of the large temple buildings whose foundation walls on the opposite side were documented during the excavations.

Let us now take a short look at the UNESCO description of Machu Picchu: *Embedded within a dramatic landscape at the meeting point between the Peruvian Andes*

and the Amazon Basin, the Historic Sanctuary of Machu Picchu is among the greatest artistic, architectural and land use achievements anywhere and the most significant tangible legacy of the Inca civilization [5]. Concededly, the landscape of Samaipata is not as dramatic as that of Machu Picchu, but the special and surpassing characteristic of it is its position as an Inca town located at the meeting point of three macro-regions: additionally to the Andes and Amazon, the Chaco – a unique and distinctive environment. As generations of botanists, zoologists, and ecologists in general have explained, this special arrangement at the so-called *codo de los Andes* (“Elbow of the Andes”) is famous for its combination of different ecological characteristics. This has been confirmed by the findings of a group of botanists and zoologists whom we invited to the site before clearing it of vegetation [6]. Additionally, in a recent ethnohistoric study, Samaipata has been characterised as a centre of trade routes for stone and metal products from the highlands to the lowlands [7]³. The notion of a macro-regional meeting point is also reflected in the ceramic material that points to regional styles of the mesothermic Andean valleys (Mojocoya, Presto Puno, Yampará, etc.) as well of the Amazonian and Chaco lowland wares (attributed to Arawak and Guaraní-speaking people).

To consider all these elements in terms of a chronological framework, especially as most of the material that has been excavated is undiagnostic and a lot of other material was removed during habitation activities especially during the last horizons, is still a challenge and requires future research. However, stratigraphically, there is a clear pre-Inca cultural manifestation best documented in the *gran plaza* [8, pp. 122–123, Fig. 101]. This is superimposed by a double horizon of Incan settlement, which in almost all habitation contexts is interrupted by the presence of coarse ware ceramics of lowland origin, and above all, the presence of Spanish colonial activity in the form of a typical colonial house (*casa de patio*) dating from the 2nd half of the 16th century and abandoned at the latest during the founding of the town of Samaipata around 1618. Inca culture at Samaipata, as I have argued repeatedly, was certainly present for longer than suggested so far. This has been confirmed by recent research in the neighbouring areas of the south-eastern Bolivian Andes as well as in Chile and Argentina⁴.

³ The same, by the way, could be supposed for Machu Picchu, but until now, it seems that the ethnohistoric interpretation of it being a summer residence, a sort of Castel Gandolfo, for the Inca King Pachacuti distracts from consideration any pre-Inca history as well as other aspects, for example that it may have been a port of trade for Andean and Amazonian people.

⁴ Sonia Alconini, a Bolivian archaeologist teaching in the US, with considerable research experience in the region, also speaks of a double-phase presence of the Inca culture at the fortress of Cuzcotuyo, in the Cordillera de los Chiriguano, south of Samaipata, with the first phase dating from 1400 to 1480 and the second from 1480 to 1536 [9, pp. 137–139]. The almost-hundred early dates for Inca sites in Chile and Argentina published in the last thirty years are currently under debate due to obvious methodological reasons, but at least one conclusion of this situation seems to be reasonable: the historical and mythical dynasty of Inca rulers and the chronological treatment and interpretation of the archaeological context of Inca sites are considered separately [10].

² It is possible that a stone sculpture or altar in front of the *kallanka* similar to that of the other large Bolivian Inca centre of Inkallacta near Cochabamba existed, but it may have been removed later when the area was used as an agricultural field.



Fig. 1. Samaipata, general plan with excavation sectors, 1992–1996.

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The sculptured rock in a broader context

Let us return to the comparison with Machu Picchu, where we also have rock carvings, but not the gigantic ensemble of different elements or the dimensions of the rock present at Samaipata. This has no parallel in the Americas, as indicated in the UNESCO list, and perhaps even no global parallel. Of course, many examples of huge rock carvings can be enumerated, including ones from India, Cambodia, South Africa, the well-known town of Petra (Jordan), another Heritage Site, and the long list of what are generally understood as “rock art” dispersed all over the globe. However, as this point, it is useful to distinguish painting from carving; the former being much more common than the latter. Rock painting is very common and comparatively well studied in the Americas, including Bolivia⁵, but examples of rock sculpture of the dimensions at Samaipata are rare. Malinalco in Central Mexico, with its rock-cut temples and chambers with

wall niches is a spectacular exception. Perhaps the fact that this megalithic mountain sanctuary belonged to the Aztec state could make it a point of comparison with Samaipata, where the Inca state, far away towards the eastern lowlands, manifested the power and strength of its sun cult.

As for a general understanding and comparison, it seems interesting to look at the Iberian Peninsula where, especially in the western part, there are archaeological sites, sometimes called fortresses, but mostly multi-componential habitation sites with rooms, altars, niches, etc. carved in rock. Generally, they are subsumed under the somewhat diffuse Celtiberian culture of the pre-Roman European Iron Age with strong religious and astronomical aspects. Heuristically, in my opinion, comparing the Inca rock-carving complex with these elements of Celtic culture is useful as both cultures were illiterate, and for their interpretation, especially religious interpretation, we need to rely on “foreign” descriptions, i.e., Roman or Spanish narratives. In both cases, because of the absence of pre-colonial “emic” literal documents (not even for the names of the gods or the kings), our understanding is deeply influenced by the (mis)interpretations of the victors of these cultures. Therefore, the tendency in recent Celtic studies is to separate the archaeological material, including the

⁵ The Bolivian Rock Art Research Society (Sociedad de Investigación del Arte Rupestre de Bolivia), who are also engaged in the preservation of rock sites and in whose journal we published our first excavation reports, show great commitment to the study of rock painting in Bolivia.

art, from its analysis in order to create a more emic vision, and in another step compare the results of analysis to historic or historical and mythical sources⁶. This procedure could also be fruitfully applied to Incan studies. Another tendency, used worldwide, is to interpret these rock-sculptured sites in terms of cultural astronomy, for which Samaipata is also an outstanding example.

On a regional, Andean, level, we can find many elements in the Inca realm that are useful for comparison. These are found particularly in the Cusco region and have been determined in recent studies to be of Incan geometric style: rock-cut benches, basins, staircases, channels of different forms, etc. The uniqueness of Samaipata in this aspect is that it has an accumulation of practically all these elements in one place, whereas they appear isolated elsewhere. The multiplicity of niches is well known from the Inca heartland, but in Samaipata we have, for example, a high number of cut seats forming a gallery, which were intended to form a public theatre. In sum, considering the clear superposition of some of the carvings at strategic points at the east and the west end of the rock with classic Inca niched stone walls, there seems to be a clash of two religious systems: one perhaps pan-Andean, more generally oriented to the earth (telluric) and the fixed unmovable rocks, and the other an expression of a standardised, “transportable” state cult. However, certainly, there are elements of more cosmologies that have to be identified by considering especially the other macro-regions – the Chaco and the Amazon.

The need for protection for the sculptured rock

Ironically, in relation to the mentioned reservations about written sources on pre-Hispanic events, we have a chronicle that provides some valuable information about Samaipata in Inca times. Although it dates from the 17th century, the author, a priest named Diego Felipe de Alcaya(ga), got his information as early as from the times of Paullu Inca, one of the half-brothers of the last pre-Hispanic Sapa Inca, and the information was provided by Alcaya’s father, one of the founders of Ancient Santa Cruz de la Sierra (in 1561). Alcaya’s chronicle indicates that Samaipata had been an *asiento real* (king seat) that was destroyed by the lowland Chiriguanos before the Inca recovered it again. This information is reflected in the excavation results. The main purpose of the chronicle is, however, to declare and prove that there is no more gold at Samaipata as it was transported by the last governor to the jungle “where it will be hidden until the end of the world”. As confirmation of this, Alcaya indicates that Father Miguel de Corella, dean of the province of Santa Cruz, went with people to the rock at Samaipata to look for gold, but did not find any⁷. This is just one part

of the long history of vandalism of the site in post-Hispanic times. It starts with the conquistadors, escorted by their indigenous auxiliary troops for several decades after the conquest, who reused the Inca houses as habitations and as building material, as well as damaged the rock and caused other destruction during that time. Anthropogenic damage reduced in the seventies of the last century, when most of the territory that had been declared national patrimony was fenced off, and any tourist visitors trespassing onto the area in the 1990s were impeded or prohibited.

It must be recognised that the person mostly responsible for these and other protective measures was Prof. Omar Claude Callaú, long-time director of the local museum and archaeological centre. He is now retired from his position as departmental archaeologist of Santa Cruz, but lives in Samaipata and is still engaged and interested in any protective initiative and continues to be a source of information for the many experiments that have been conducted in the last fifty years to try to stop the deterioration of the rock. It was also due to his initiative that the Samaipata Archeological Research Project (Proyecto Arqueológico en Samaipata, PIAS) started, which included not only investigation of the planimetry of the rock using the latest technology (a total station) and the excavation of the surrounding archaeological site, but also protective measures in correlation with national (conservation of uncovered building structures) and international (Venice and other charters) norms.

As is well known, the rock in the Samaipata region is principally soft sandstone, which suffers much under the changing weather conditions of this exposed transitional region. Therefore, during our field campaigns that lasted a few months, we were able to observe the dramatic deterioration of some of the structures – for example, several niches on the southern side of the rock fell down. The various initiatives and projects that we proposed during our campaigns and afterwards to preserve the rock were never implemented, even after the inscription of the site on the World Heritage List. A single example might be sufficient in this context. As the environmental conditions are the principle element in the process of erosion, one of our proposals was to install a weather monitoring station near the rock in order to have a solid statistical basis for future measurements of protection. However, this was never done.

Finally, I want to refer again to the example of Machu Picchu, which has known problems of protection that are repeatedly addressed in UNESCO meetings and declarations (although it is not included on the List of World Heritage in Danger). Samaipata also needs these sorts of updates in order to find a way to protect this site. As archaeological resource management in Bolivia has to struggle with the conflicting fields of national, regional, and local pretensions in relation to the cultural patrimony, it is desirable that the World Heritage Centre takes the

⁶ Although there is a bulk of critical literature on the Celtiberian culture, it might be more lucid and pleasant to refer to the mystification of Asterix and the Gauls as described in a short interview with a French archaeologist and conservator [11].

⁷ This treasure hunt that was “legitimated” as extirpation of idolatry must have happened between 1626 and 1628 according to biograph-

ical information [12], which also includes more information about the historical context of Samaipata and a reproduction of Alcaya’s chronicle.

initiative in that field before it is too late. A new plan for the rock is provided by the Polish mission for research on the architecture and rock art of the site and is based on the application of the latest technical instruments as well

as the other outcomes of the project presented in this volume. This plan can be considered an excellent and highly welcomed precondition for the ambitious but necessary initiative of protecting Samaipata.

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Abstract

This article offers an introduction to the El Fuerte de Samaipata site as a unique example of pre-Hispanic cultural heritage in Bolivia, and discusses the importance of current research for the conservation and preservation of the site. The rock carvings and the actual rock on the site have to be viewed in correlation with the adjacent architectural remains and the landscaping and seen as a complete unit. A summary of current knowledge concerning the site is presented, and it shows that the scale of the rock art at Samaipata has no parallel in the Americas, as specified in the description of the site on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The site has been compared to some sites in Bolivia and Peru in terms of the problems facing the protection of heritage monuments. The new approach guided by the Polish mission for research on the architecture and rock art of the site is well justified by the methods and methodology used for its comprehensive documentation.

Key words: cultural heritage, rock art, Samaipata, Tiwanaku, Machu Picchu, Bolivia, Peru

Streszczenie

Artykuł jest tekstem wprowadzającym do przedstawienia stanowiska El Fuerte de Samaipata jako wyjątkowego przykładu dziedzictwa latynoskiego w Boliwii i omawia znaczenie bieżących badań dla zachowania tego miejsca. Zarówno rytu naskalne, jak i samą skałę należy postrzegać łącznie i rozpatrywać w powiązaniu z pobliskimi relikdami architektonicznymi i całym krajobrazem. Zaprezentowano stan obecnej wiedzy na temat tego miejsca i jednocześnie podkreślono, jak podsumowano to we wpisie Samaipata na Listę Światowego Dziedzictwa UNESCO, że skala i waga tych przykładów sztuki naskalnej nie ma swojego odpowiednika w obu Amerykach. W artykule porównano Samaipata z niektórymi przykładami w Boliwii i Peru pod względem problemów związanych z ochroną zabytków. Nowe podejście wykreowane przez polską misję badań nad architekturą i sztuką naskalną Samaipata jest dobrze uzasadnione metodami i metodologią zastosowaną do jego kompleksowej dokumentacji.

Słowa kluczowe: dziedzictwo kulturowe, sztuka naskalna, Samaipata, Tiwanaku, Machu Picchu, Boliwia, Peru



Research team members
analyzing petroglyphs
(photo by J. Kościuk)

Członkowie zespołu badawczego
podczas analizy petroglifów
(fot. J. Kościuk)