



# EMAIL X AND THE QUITO AIRPORT ARCHAEOLOGY CONTROVERSY

## A CAUTIONARY TALE FOR SCHOLARS IN THE AGE OF RAPID INFORMATION FLOW

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In March of 2006, many archaeologists and preservationists around the world received a flurry of troubling emails. If the recipient were diligent and burrowed beneath layers of forwarding comments, she or he would eventually encounter what we will call here “Email X,” which claimed that “Quito’s new airport is beginning to take shape over hundreds of tombs, structures and villages. It is being plowed under, the whole lost civilization.” The basis for this charge was that the writer knew a man who “used to dig out in the new airport site and he has shown me pictures of his digs and findings. They would be worthy of any modern museum. How can we protest the government and stop the construction?” Email X went on to say that free trade talks were going on, and so “we, as Americans, have been warned to stay low profile [sic].”

Like iron filings to magnets, these emails found their way to certain computers, in particular those at which sat people associated with international archaeological preservation and research organizations, including the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the ICOMOS International Committee for Archaeological Heritage Management (ICAHM), the World Archaeological Congress, and the Smithsonian Institution. Because I am Chair of US/ICAHM and a Vice-President for ICAHM, a good number of them reached me. I forwarded one and saved all of them. Then I began to wonder if by the simple act of forwarding I had lent credence to a charge that might well be unfounded.

In looking over the emails more carefully, I saw, eventually, that all were written or forwarded in response to claims of archaeological malfeasance made in Email X. When forwarding Email X, many did so by adding their own cynically humorous comments or expressions of concern. “The usual train wreck,” said one. Several asked something along the lines of, “can’t we do something to stop this?” As emails accreted, it became easier for subsequent readers, many of whom were familiar with instances of insensitivity by gov-

ernments and businesses toward cultural resources, to conclude that this was simply one more. None of the comments, however, offered independent corroboration of the charge. An anomaly was an email by an archaeologist writing from Australia who had worked in Quito for many years. This archaeologist said, “I take offense at [X’s] communiqué disparaging the Ecuadorian government and archaeologists and the fact that it’s being spread around all over the world.” There were also rebuttals to the charges contained in Email X by various preservation professionals in Ecuador, including members of ICOMOS Ecuador, and a member of the Quito municipal council. The councilman outlined the need for the airport and said that archaeological investigations had been done to prevent damage to resources and to document those found. Emails defending the Ecuadorian preservation effort, however, were outnumbered by those that insinuated misconduct.

Perhaps even more, the perception of misconduct had taken on a life of its own. Anthropologist and journalist Roger Lewin suggested that systems as varied as rivers and cultures are dynamical, in that perturbations of flow, be the flow of water or information, produces currents that further influence flow. Just as a fallen tree produces an eddy in a river, so Email X generated a whirlpool of misinformation in the string of messages that followed behind it. The vortex became more powerful as it moved from computer to computer. A particularly regrettable outcome of this perturbation took form several weeks into the controversy: An email was written to the government of Ecuador by a number of archaeologists associated with a well-established and highly regarded research organization, which expressed dismay about the destruction of important archaeological resources, and doubt about the ability of the archaeologists working on the Quito airport site to deal with the materials that were being unearthed. As the basis for their alarm they cited Email X, which they said had been written by *Dr. X*.

In the interest of finding a constructive way to deal with the frequent reports of damage to archaeological resources that circulate by means of the Internet, I began an exchange of emails with X. By means of this exchange, I found that he was neither a Ph.D. nor an archaeologist. Further, he could not provide me with the name of an archaeologist with first-hand knowledge of the situation who shared his concerns. He was unwilling to provide me with the source of his information, because, he said, he feared reprisals. Why, then, did his allegations stir such concern on the part of the archaeological community? In part this might be attributed to an unfortunate coincidence: X and an established archaeologist have the same name.

In March of this year, I decided to utilize a family vacation to visit the Quito airport site. Arrangements were made with the assistance of Gustavo Araoz, the Executive-Director of US/ICOMOS, in coordination with ICOMOS Ecuador. By these means, I met with Gonzalo Ortiz Crespo, a member of the municipal council of Quito, and an advocate for both the cultural patrimony of Ecuador and the new airport. Planning and oversight of the airport development has been delegated by the central government to the city of Quito, in no small part through his efforts. The airport, he said, was needed for well-documented safety reasons, and to place Ecuador, a country in which 67 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, in a more favorable economic position among the nations of the world. The airport project had been initiated 30 years ago. The existing airport, built 50 years ago in a plot of land of only 105 hectares, is at a very high altitude and surrounded by several neighborhoods, a combination of factors that had produced many fatalities. The new airport will be at a lower elevation and located in a plot of land of 1,500 hectares.

On the day that we met at his office, he took me on a tour of several nearby preservation projects in Quito that he had championed. Among them was the Metropolitan Cultural Center, hosting the Municipal Library, which contains an important collection of the scientific and cultural documents from the Colonial period. These run the gamut from maps to scores for Baroque music. The task of organizing this material and making it available for use by researchers has been an enormous one. Several other buildings in the historic core of Quito have been restored recently, including La Compañía de Jesús, one of the largest and most beautiful Baroque churches in South America.

The following day, Mr. Ortiz brought us to the airport site. The archaeologist in charge of the archaeological investigations there, Dr. María Aguilera, and her field coordinator, Stefan Bohorquez, provided us with a briefing of what had been done so far and plans for future research. The location for this briefing was in the laboratory set up on-site for the archaeological investigation, and it proceeded while two laboratory staff



worked on computers to enter data into an artifact catalogue and create maps utilizing a GIS program. She stressed that all of work had been inspected periodically by the Instituto Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural (INPC), the highest national authority on archeological and cultural sites. Further, no construction had taken place at the airport without the prior permission of Dr. Aguilera and the INPC. The archaeological research had been initiated as part of the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the project, and had initially been conducted with funds set aside for this. Because of the complexity and importance of the findings at the site, however, the municipal corporation responsible for the project, CORPAQ, had taken over support of the research.

Archaeological survey of the area was begun in 2002. All of the areas where construction activities will occur were examined by means of 40 cm by 40 cm shovel test pits excavated to subsoil at intervals of 20 to 40 meters in the areas that were considered most likely to contain archaeological sites. Color aerial photographs had been examined as one strategy used to identify these areas. Areas that were deemed likely to contain archaeological resources fell into three discreet sectors, which together make up only 1.7 percent of the 1,500 hectares that lie within the airport project area.

No subsurface examination of Sector 1 was done because no construction will take place in this area. In Sector 2, Dr. Aguilera's team found a necropolis with 80 deep shaft tombs. In Sector 3, about 120 burials were found, of which 80 percent were shaft tombs. The deepest shaft tomb was 12 meters in depth. Some shaft tombs were in pairs, and others were in groups of three. All tombs had ceramic vessels; almost all had at least one complete ceramic vessel, some had several, and one had 17. All have been excavated. The tombs date to between A.D. 570—700.

Excavated areas were taken down in 10 cm arbitrarily levels. This was necessary because the soil appeared homogenous: sandy with volcanic ash. Over 850 features were found during excavation, but no ceramic workshops, habitations, or even fire hearths. About 800 intact artifacts were found. These included complete ceramic vessels and several flutes and other musical instruments. The musical instruments were found in just some of the tombs, and might indicate that the people buried in the tombs were musicians. A good deal of faunal material was recovered, for the most part deer and camelid. In addition, approximately 35,000 potsherds were found, of which 4,000 to 5,000 are diagnostic. No masonry structures have been found and no living areas. Everything found is pre-Incan, and seems to be associated with the time period in which the tombs were constructed. Mr. Ortiz stressed the fact that the whole area of the new airport has been under agricultural exploitation since the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century until 30 years ago under the hacienda system.

All crew members and monitors that have been involved with the archaeological research are paid. A crew of 45 has been maintained, and they have been working seven days a week with no holidays. If crew members have no applicable previous training, they are put through an orientation and training period. They are overseen by professional archaeologists. No students have been used. About \$700,000 has been spent on the archaeological research and monitoring so far.

Following the briefing, we visited the areas where shovel test pitting had taken place. Material evidence that subsurface archaeological excavations had been conducted in these areas included at least 15 two-meter square test pits that had been excavated in areas with concentrations of artifacts. As these pits were generally no deeper than two meters, they had been left open. The excavated shaft tombs had been refilled.

Work at the airport site and subsequent analysis is expected to continue for the next three years. In the year just ahead, monitoring will be done on a continual basis. Occasional isolated but important finds are being made. On the day that I visited the site, an isolated, decapitated skull was found on a bed of obsidian flakes. This was the first such feature found, I was told.

The archaeological team is proposing that specialized analyses be done of a wide range of recovered materials, including food remains and yeast at the bottom of ceramic vessels found in graves, as well as faunal material, soils, carbon samples, and DNA samples. Also, an analysis of spatial relationships among burials, artifacts, and features will be conducted.

A draft report on the fieldwork phase of the archaeological research has been prepared, which I have been informed contains over 2,000 pages. Recently, an executive summary was prepared in English. This can be obtained by request made to

the archaeological project director, Dr. Maria Aguilera ([mapintag@andinanet.net](mailto:mapintag@andinanet.net)).

In light of questions that have been raised concerning the professional qualifications of those directing the research at the new Quito airport site, I asked for and received the CVs of both the project director and the field coordinator. Both appear to meet the professional standards that would apply, for example, in the United States.

In summary, my observations and the materials that have been provided to me indicate that a great effort has been made by the proponents of the airport project in Ecuador and the project archaeologists there to conduct the appropriate research in accord with very high professional standards. To those who would like to evaluate their work personally, they offer a standing invitation for professional archaeologists to visit the site as I did. They would also welcome assistance, especially in the analysis of food remains in the ceramics found in the burials, and of human osteological remains.

The criticism of those in Ecuador associated with the airport project on the grounds that they insensitively and willfully destroyed an important portion of their country's heritage is clearly ungrounded. This incident seems especially unfortunate in that it was directed in large part toward people in the Ecuadorian government and in the Quito City Hall with the vision and courage to make an investment in the country's cultural resources, historic and prehistoric. These resources are not only of great scientific historical importance, but, as quickly becomes apparent to visitors, many are also beautiful and intriguing. Finally, from a strategic tourism point of view, the renovation of the historic resources of the country and the interpretation of the prehistoric ones that will be done at a museum to be constructed at the airport site makes wonderful economic sense, in that it should induce many people who fly through Quito on their way to the Galapagos Islands or the Amazon jungle to stay and enjoy these cultural resources.

Beyond the consequences of this incident to cultural preservation efforts in Ecuador, it also suggests to me that archaeologists and other scholars might well give thought to the modes of discourse appropriate to the Internet. Email has provided the archaeological and preservation communities with a way to quickly consult and collaborate about research and preservation projects and issues, and to rally support for endangered resources in time to take constructive action. Indeed, the speed of the medium is perhaps its greatest appeal. This being so, email messages are typically composed and sent quickly. Because the initial recipients are often well-known to the sender, the tone is often informal. Messages sent by email are not formulated with the care that is typical when matters of consequence are presented in overtly public forums, such as meetings, conferences, journals, or other juried publications.

Yet the potential audience for any email is covert, as it can be much larger than that which might be accommodated in any conference hall. Further, those emails that most perturb the orderly flow of information are those most likely to be propagated through the medium, often with off-the-cuff remarks that can tacitly support the disruptive comment. At the very least, this should alert us to the need to be very careful in what we say and how we say it. That is, when email deals with matters of real consequence to research or preservation, it should adhere to same rules of verifiability, authority, and logic that are expected in scholarly work.

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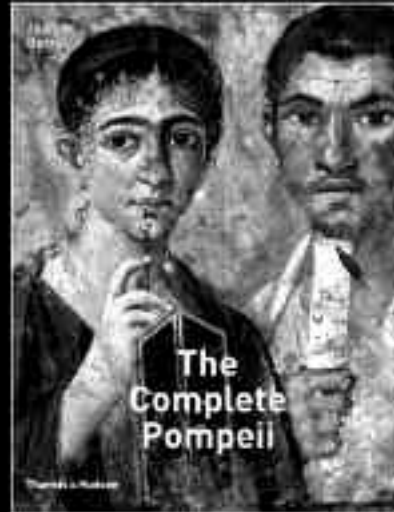
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