

SAMABAJ, THE UNDERWATER VILLAGE IN LAKE ATITLÁN AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

By Mark F. Cheney ©2014

Laden with a murky history from two millennia ago, the small village of Samabaj, named after one of its discoverers, Robert Samayoa (Sama + baj from *abaj*, meaning 'stone' in Kiche Mayan), lies under 45 to 90 meters of water near the city of Santiago Atitlán on the south shore of Lake Atitlán in the Guatemala highlands. In 1997 I was privileged to peer down through the clear water of Lake Atitlán from the deck of a small boat bound to Santiago Atitlán and see some of the structures on the bottom of the lake, shrouded with sediment that is mostly ancient volcanic ash. Lake Atitlan is thought by many, including tour guides at this southern Guatemalan lake is the so-called "waters of Mormon," first so named in Mosiah 18:8.

I am not sure now whether I was looking at Samabaj or another underwater site, Chiutinamit, which has been dated to the late pre-classic period (600 B.C. – 250 A.D.), and was discovered by local fishermen. The discovery of Samabaj has been claimed by more than one person, but it seems that some of them merely re-discovered the site. There is a strong likelihood that what is now known as Samabaj was at the time of Christ's crucifixion, one of the cities Onihah, Mocom or Jerusalem, named in 3 Nephi 9:7, where the Lord caused "waters. . . to come up in the stead thereof, to hide their wickedness and abominations from before (His) face." For a further discussion of this see what has been called John L. Sorenson's "magnum opus" entitled "Mormon's Codex" and excerpt therefrom is found at <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/underwater-archaeology-and-the-book-of-mormon-in-sorensens-mormons-codex/>

Over the past decade, a number of different organizations have come to support research at the site; some are large and well known, others are smaller and more obscure. Among the benefactors are: the Ford Foundation Company Awards for the Environment, attempting to preserve the fragile ecology of this beautiful lake during excavation; the Nicole Reinhart Foundation (California), dedicated to improving public access to cultural archaeological treasures; the *Fundacion Albenga para Preservacion del Patrimonio Cultural Subacuatico* (Albenga Foundation for the Preservation of the Underwater Cultural Heritage) based in Argentina, part of "Pro Mare" international organization for oceanic exploration; and the *Instituto Antropología e Historia* or IDAEH (Institute of Anthropology and History), which is the caretaker of archaeological sites, such as Tikal, in Guatemala. All of these are thus far represented mostly by a small museum, the *Museo Lacustre Atitlán* (Lake Museum in Atitlán), housed in the Hotel Posada de Don Rodrigo in nearby Antigua.

The IDAEH Project Archaeologist, Sonia Medrano, and Eric Ponciano, the Director of Cultural Heritage, have pushed for more research to determine the extent and origins of the

ruins. The Revolutionary Armed Forces Officers' Club has been involved in the evaluation phase of the archaeological survey, providing equipment and divers to assist and accompany the archaeologists on the dive sites. The site was first registered in Solola by Samayoa as an official archaeological site in 1999.

The site's exact coordinates are North 14°43'11" and West 91°11'36.06" and a planimetric archaeological survey has established at least three groups of structures on the site. Group I is defined by a basement structure for someone of importance. The walls are laid out with well hewn stones in a clearly geometric or rectangular shape. Group II contains eight different structures, that are mostly well-defined, butx remain to be measured. Perhaps this is a residential area. Group III includes a large edifice about 30 feet by 76 feet, which once had a stairway along the side. In front of the building a smooth basaltic stela stands by a large flat altar. This structure appears to have been the administrative center for the community, which may indicate that it was a 'cacical' society, a chiefdom, or one run by a 'cacique' or chief.

Once an island community surrounded by volcanoes, with a stream running through the center, researchers were particularly desirous to discover what caused the site to originally become submerged. Since the structures are so well preserved and they were not badly overturned by the original upwelling or surge of the rising water, it seems that the water level rose in a very short period of time. Another matter of importance being looked at is how the cultural transition between the Pre-classical social structure and the Classical society in the Maya Highlands. These questions were brought up by diver Roberto Samayoa Asmus along with his fellow discoverer, Archeologist Henry Benitez in the *XIII Simposio de Investigaciones Archaeological Sites in Guatemala, 1999*, the paper entitled '2000 Samabaj and the Underwater Archeology of Lake Atitlan' and more recently at a presentation by Archeologist Sonia Medrano in her presentation 24 September 2009 at the Popul Vuh Museum in the Francisco Marroquin University. Many large pots and other artifacts are now housed in the Archaeological Museum of Lake Atitlan in Panajachel, Guatemala.

The underwater island village of Samabaj is part of the history of this picturesque area of Guatemala, and the first underwater site to be investigated in this country covered with ancient ruins, including the nearby above ground ruins of *Chukumuk* and *Cerro de Oro* (Golden Hill). Lake Atitlan, at least one of the candidates for the most beautiful lake in the world, is set in the midst of volcanoes, the larger ones being Atitlan Toliman and San Pedro. With a geologic setting along the tectonic plates below the Sierra Madre mountain range, the terrain has changed much over the time since the earth was first formed, and more such underwater sites will no doubt be found. It is said that other ruins lie under the waters of another lake in Guatemala, Lake Amatitlan by another volcano, Pacaya, near Guatemala City – perhaps the subject a future article when it is official recognized and exploration is undertaken.

The image below is in the [public domain](#) because it is a screenshot from [NASA's globe software World Wind](#) using a public domain layer, such as Blue Marble, MODIS, Landsat, SRTM, USGS or GLOBE.



LAS PRIMERAS TOMAS DE SAMABAJ

A solicitud de la Fundación Reinhart y el Instituto de Oceanografía Scripps, de California, realizó un reconocimiento del fondo del lago usando sonar. Las dos fotografías oscuras corresponden a estas tomas, donde se observan los diseños de las estructuras desde arriba.

Fragmento de un muro de la estructura.

Jackpot es un conjunto de seis estructuras.

Roca es un conjunto de uso público que se construyó alrededor de una roca natural (mostrada con la línea curva) que tiene 10 metros de largo. La estructura larga corresponde a una fachada de piedras, tiene 20 metros de largo.

Reconstrucción: Gustavo Hérculesa

FUENTE: Roberto Sorayso Armas.

Imágenes: Jorge A. de León Gálvez/Periodo

Illustration from Sonia Medrano's presentation – 2009.



Stela and altar at Group III of Samabaj site.



Una vasija de Samabaj