

MY FULBRIGHT AWARD HELPED ME TO UNCOVER THE PAST AND DISCOVER MY FUTURE

MARX NAVARRO-CASTILLO

ABSTRACT

The author, passionate about archaeology and the development of his birthplace Chiapas in Mexico, was granted the Fulbright-García Robles scholarship to pursue his graduate studies at SUNY-Albany. This accomplishment allowed him to not only contribute to the field of study of his interest, archaeology, but also to contribute to alleviating the great educational backlog in Chiapas. His academic research has also focused on revitalizing the past of the indigenous populations historically forgotten in Mexico.

Keywords: Mesoamerica • ethnoarchaeology • cultural heritage



The year 2006 was undoubtedly one of the most important years of my life. Even though the process to apply for the Fulbright-García Robles scholarships begins a year in advance it was in 2006 when I was awarded the scholarship that provided the needed funding so I could pursue my master's degree in the United States.

Certainly, the selection process for the universities, where candidates like me end up attending, is rigorously done by the evaluation committee and in the end the best option for me was SUNY-Albany. Some people say that “there is no such thing as coincidence; it is god winking down upon you”. Dr. John Justeson, whom I have admired since I was an undergraduate in Xalapa Veracruz, Mexico was teaching at Albany, and I was very pleased to have been mentored, and much later befriended by him. Likewise, I was fortunate to have begun my studies the same year Dr. Robert Rosenswig began teaching at Albany. He became my advisor and due to his extensive research in the Soconusco, I was able to continue my studies and research near my birthplace in Chiapas. This was a rare possibility because there are so few researchers focused on that region, in spite of its historical importance as the location for some of the very first complex societies in Mesoamerica. It is amusing and at the same time tragic to remember a time where Dr. Rosenswig and I were driving in a van and realized that all the archaeologists actively researching in the Soconusco could easily fit in that car with space to spare. The lack of large pyramids, and the absence of the Maya culture, predominant in Chiapas often results in a dearth of interested researchers, especially Mexicans, to the point that I am the only active Mexican archaeologist working regularly in this region since 2011.

WHEN IN ROME DO AS THE ROMANS DO

SUNY's Anthropology Department is known for faculty work in both Mesoamerica and in other regions of the world. Thanks to my classes on the American Northeast, I had the opportunity to work at the New York State Museum (NYSM), one of the most rewarding work experiences I have ever had. This job not only allowed me to meet many people and travel places all over New York State, but to practice a different kind of archaeological research. A contrasting difference between working in the American Northeast and in Mesoamerica was the type of archaeological excavations. The techniques employed in the museum as a first approach were Shovel Test Pits (STP) and this is not a common excavation practice in Mesoamerica. In fact, I personally had never done one in my life until I worked at the NYSM and by that time I had been doing archaeological work for more than 8 years. For me, learning new techniques was very enriching. The most peculiar anecdote I had was to see the excitement that my fellow specialists in the region got whenever they found a piece of pottery, and I even thought that they were joking with me, since generally, in Mesoamerica we find thousands of pieces of pottery even on the surface, even without the need to excavate. A colleague of mine regularly jokes that Mesoamerican Archaeologists would not know a site unless they could trip on it, whereas they have to do the real work in the Northeast. Untrue, but funny anyway.

While there were contrasts with the work I was involved on my previous experiences in Mesoamerica, some similarities existed as well. Regardless of the cultural differences between Americans and Mexicans, people have very similar ideas about the nature of an archaeologist's work, because in both places, when I encountered the public interested in archaeology, I was asked if I was searching for gold or if any dinosaur bones had already been found, those are typical questions people ask us every time we are working.

Undoubtedly, academics and work more than compensated for many of the hardships I experienced at the beginning of my stay in Albany. I am from a city named Tapachula, Mexico located on the border with Guatemala. The weather is divided into two seasons, hot and very hot, the winter here does not go below 25° Celsius (77° Fahrenheit) whereas in Albany the temperatures in the winter were as low as -30 Celsius (-22 Fahrenheit). There were times when I thought Narnia was a tropical paradise compared to Albany. The weather was not all misery, as it allowed me to enjoy the snow, and to witness Christmas holidays as portrayed in the movies I used to watch when I was a child.

IMPLEMENTING WHAT HAS BEEN LEARNED

My parents were elementary and high school teachers, and they knew that education was especially important in a state like ours, since 14% of the population is illiterate and barely 13% of the population completes a university degree. This academic and economic precariousness motivated me to return

to my home state once I concluded my doctoral studies at SUNY. The tools I learned during my stay as a Master's student thanks to the Fulbright-García Robles Scholarship and my subsequent acceptance into the doctoral program at SUNY-Albany provided me with the necessary skills to develop projects which have been important not only for the Academy but also for mentoring students to enable them to reach their goals as I have achieved mine.

Back in Mexico I had the opportunity to work in the community of Nueva Palestina, an ethnically diverse village formed by Tsotsiles, Tseltales and Choles (groups of indigenous maya people). Conditions are really difficult, internet access is very limited and mobile phone signal is non-existent. It was common to be without power the majority of the days of the week. Despite the logistical difficulties, I was able to carry out an archaeological research project called "Rancho Ojo de Agua in the Periphery of Classic Maya Centers" (RODA). This project allowed us to recognize the cultural practices of both ancient and contemporary inhabitants of the region. This research project had an ethnoarchaeological approach where we observed many religious and cultural practices were shared between the current populations and those who inhabited the place more than 1000 years ago. As agriculturalists, it was evident that they still revere bodies of water for their crops and for life itself. However, this practice had not been documented in this region, and it makes us proud to have been the first researchers that did.

Along with the theoretical and methodological tools learned during my scholarship as a Fulbright grantee at SUNY-Albany, I also benefited from personal relationships. With the support of two of my fellow doctoral students were able to carry out the first systematic underwater archaeological survey in Chiapas's history. With the participation of my colleagues Dr. Justin Lowry and Dr. Jason Paling who contributed to the underwater component of RODA, it was possible to obtain more evidence on the religious practices of the ancient Maya related to water bodies, lakes and lagoons in the region of the Lacanhá River Basin. We knew about this link from research into the Cenotes of the Yucatan Peninsula, since Edward Thompson's incipient work of dredging the Chichen Itza cenote at early twentieth century. The RODA underwater component has undoubtedly yielded many achievements in terms of this gap of knowledge that existed about the Mayas (ancient and modern) that inhabit the Lacanhá River Basin.

Additional to this research work conducted within the Lacandon Jungle, I also have focused my interest in the area known as Soconusco. This study gave me the opportunity to work with two of my mentors, Dr. Robert Rosenswig and Dr. Hector Neff. They have been an important part of my academic formation, as well as my advisor during my undergraduate studies at University of Veracruz, Sara Ladrón de Guevara. Dr. Robert Rosenswig was my advisor and was always supportive during the development of my thesis work. He always provided examples and recommendations to encourage me to move forward. Without him I would not have been able

to finish my dissertation and I thank him his constant support. I met Dr. Hector Neff through the Izapa Regional Reconnaissance project (PRRI) directed by Dr. Rosenswig. Although I was not his student because he works at California State University, his mentoring in the field and his confidence in me to become Co-Director of the Soconusco Coast Archaeological Project (PACS) has been invaluable. Both PACS and PRRI are projects that employ important technological instruments which have been key in the last few years, such as LiDar. Especially in ecological environments such as those of Soconusco, which have dense vegetation where neither satellite images nor aerial photography are useful in the identification of archaeological remains, it is essential to use LiDar for excellent logistical planning. With those images it is possible to identify the existence of archaeological mounds, avoiding the need to physically examine 100 percent of the surface, saving a lot of time.

PACS has also used magnetometer and ground penetrating radar, very useful at the time of excavation, since those pieces of equipment allowed us to identify the anomalies in the subsoil, thereby reducing the uncertainty of excavation. In this way we were successful in identifying a burial dated around 772-955 AD ca, and also areas of ceramic production.

This information gathered has been important for research about the pre-Hispanic craft specialists in the Soconusco mangrove zone. Of particular interest to me has been the Classic period, a time when the ceramic type known as Plumbate was developed, a ceramic type that had a wide dispersion throughout Mesoamerica and beyond its borders, since it has been found as far as the state of Jalisco, and in Costa Rica. Dr. Neff already developed and defined the region where it was produced, yet it was not until the development of this project that the specific areas where the production of such a valued ceramic type occurred were specifically identified.

Furthermore, the study of the ancient ceramic production, PACS has conducted a systematic and diachronic study of ancient populations that settled on the Soconusco coast, from the Middle and Late Holocene to the present time. There have been inhabitants in this region continuously. In spite of being a region that does not have great stone constructions or sculptures as wonderful as in the Mayan area, it has grabbed the attention of public audiences, so much so that in 2019 we appeared on Mexican national television, discussing our project and findings, an important achievement since the work done was well appreciated.

Both projects RODA and PACS have a wide academic impact, as well as being accompanied by students from both Mexico and the United States. It is particularly interesting to tell the story of my students Lucinda and Guadalupe. In spite of all the difficulties they faced, they were able to achieve much through these projects. Lucinda was able to get into a Master's program at the Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, one of the oldest universities in the Americas. In addition, Guadalupe obtained a scholarship from the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) awarded

to indigenous women, and subsequently enrolled in the Master's program of the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología (CIESAS). For me, this was amazing to see such success from a student who had overcome so much.

I'VE GOT A FEELING WE'RE NOT IN ALBANY ANYMORE

Overall, I have contributed to the academic life of my state, and also participated in its social development, as these projects have employed dozens of people who supported us in the logistics of our work. Without them it would have been impossible to do our work. Both of the archaeological projects have reached out to people not only as employment, but as a way to understand their own heritage. People who learn of our work in Soconusco are empowered and proud of their place, their heritage and their culture. We do not give them this, but they find it for themselves in the conclusions about their own ancestors they help to uncover in our shared work. This is important because, within Mexico, these are socially forgotten populations, one mainly because they are indigenous and the other because they are located on the border, where they are far from popular and academic attention. It has been a difficult job due to some of the adverse conditions we have faced, but we continued the important work. Even in spite of the fact that on more than one occasion, coworkers at my former university at Chiapas, told me that I had to realize that I was not in Albany anymore. For moments I felt like I was in that iconic fragment of the Wizard of Oz, where Dorothy says: "Toto, I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore." That mindset, I am aware, has Chiapas mired in low educational quality relative to the rest of the country. However, I have strived to excellence in my work and mentorship because it is what I have learned from my parents, sister and wife and that was strengthened by what I got from my Fulbright at SUNY-Albany.

The purpose of the Fulbright-García Robles scholarship is to strengthen the ties between Mexico and the US. I believe I have accomplished some of that goal, as projects I work on have involved researchers from both countries. I keep constant collegial relationships with archaeologists from all over the world, but especially the US. Above all, it is not only bonds of research, and teaching, but also friendship which will irrevocably change the trajectory of my life and work we all do together.

The purpose of the Fulbright-García Robles scholarship is to strengthen the ties between Mexico and the US. I believe I have accomplished some of that goal, as projects I work on have involved researchers from both countries. I keep constant collegial relationships with archaeologists from all over the world, but especially the US. Above all, it is not only bonds of research, and teaching, but also friendship which will irrevocably change the trajectory of my life and work we all do together.

NOTES

1. To find out more about the author's effort on diffusion archaeological themes, you may access the videos of the program Bitácora Arqueológica (Archaeological Log), which was broadcasted for more than a year in a local radio station in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, Mexico (<https://www.facebook.com/Bit%C3%A1cora-Arqueol%C3%B3gica-228530421152294>).
2. Likewise, via this link you will be able to access the television interview, broadcasted nationally in Mexico (<https://www.facebook.com/marx.n.castillo/videos/10157750435690752>).
3. Navarro-Castillo, Marx, Justin P. Lowry y Jason S.R. Paling. Testing the Waters: Tzeltal Maya Rituals, Reconnaissance, and Survey of Lakes in the Lacanhá Basin, Chiapas, Mexico. *Journal of Maritime Archaeology*, 2020, 15(4):451-474.
4. Navarro-Castillo, Marx y Hector Neff. Estudios en la zona oriental del Soconusco, Chiapas. *Arqueología Mexicana*, 2019, 153:81-85.



Marx Navarro-Castillo having a friendly meeting with the inhabitants of Sibal in Ocosingo, Chiapas, Mexico

BIOGRAPHY

Marx Navarro-Castillo is an archaeologist and obtained his PhD in Anthropology in 2014. He was a Fulbright-García Robles grantee for graduate studies from 2006-2008. In 2015 he was repatriated by CONACYT. Currently he is the Co-Director of the Costa del Soconusco Archaeological Project and Director of the Rancho Ojo de Agua Project. He currently works at Universidad Intercultural de Campeche. He can be contacted at marxnavc@yahoo.com
