

# The Destruction of Part of the Ancient City of Cihuatán

## *Summary through April, 2010*

### Background

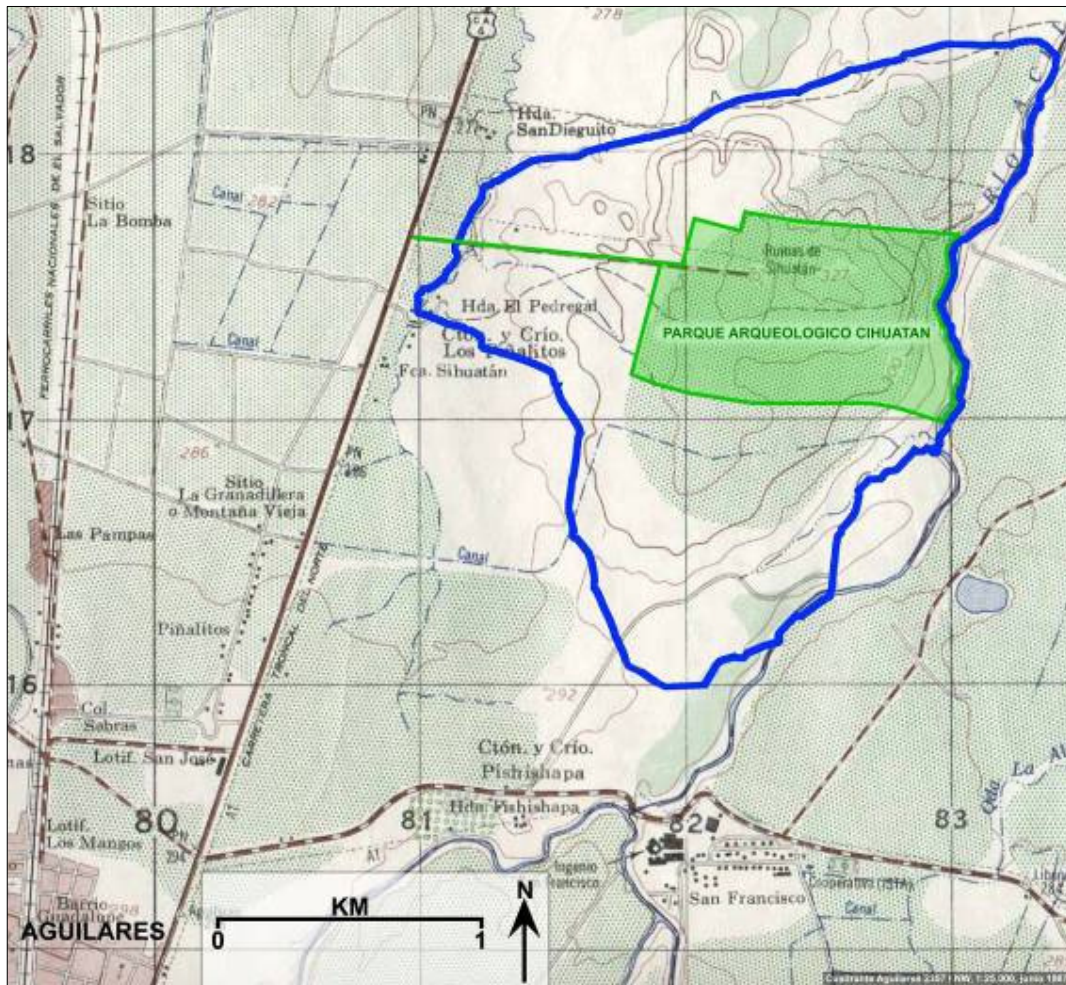
Cihuatán is recognized as the largest archaeological site in El Salvador. It is an ancient city of the Early Postclassic period (AD 900-1200), immediately succeeding the Maya Collapse. In recognition of the importance of this site, in 1977 the Legislative Assembly named Cihuatán a National Monument. The site is located about 35 kilometers (22 miles) north of San Salvador, in the jurisdiction of the municipality of Aguilares.



Air photo of Cihuatán's ceremonial precinct, with the North Ball Court, the main pyramid (Structure P-7), and the wind temple (Structure P-28). The Acropolis, where the royal palace of the ancient city is located, can be seen in the background.

The monumental center of Cihuatán covers over 28 hectares (70 acres), and has two ball courts, the main pyramid, walls, and a number of small temples. The city's center is surrounded by a vast residential area containing vestiges of thousands of houses. The residential zone is apparently divided into several wards, or *barrios*, marked by neighborhood temples. Photographs and more extensive descriptions of Cihuatán are available at [www.fundar.org.sv](http://www.fundar.org.sv) and [www.cihuatán.org](http://www.cihuatán.org)

The first studies at Cihuatán, beginning in 1925, established that it is a very large site, but its real extent remained unknown until 2003, when FUNDAR completed an investigation of its limits (the report is online at [www.fundar.org.sv/referencias/limits.pdf](http://www.fundar.org.sv/referencias/limits.pdf)). FUNDAR is the only local NGO dedicated to archaeological heritage ([www.fundar.org.sv](http://www.fundar.org.sv)). The study revealed that Cihuatán covers approximately three square kilometers (1.1 square miles). The government has acquired one fourth of the site which is now managed as the Cihuatán Archaeological Park. Nonetheless, most of the site is on private land adjacent to the park.



This map shows the limits of the ancient city of Cihuatán (blue line). The Cihuatán Archaeological Park (in green) covers 73 hectares (180 acres), but only protects one fourth of the total site area.

In 2005, the limits of Cihuatán were entered into the geographic information system (GIS) used by the Centro Nacional de Registro (CNR). The CNR is the government agency responsible for maintaining records of title and restrictions for parcels in El Salvador. The GIS information for Cihuatán specifically marked it as an archaeological site. Archaeological sites are protected under several provisions of law, and this protection was reinforced in 2007 with a legal resolution published by CONCULTURA (the government’s cultural organ, now represented by the Secretaría de Cultura). This resolution specified that:

1. Cihuatán was officially designated as a “bien cultural” (a cultural property), which clearly accords the site the fullest protection under the cultural heritage law (Ley Especial de Protección al Patrimonio Cultural de El Salvador).
2. Protection measures were established for the entire extension of Cihuatán (as determined in the cited study of 2003), including the private parcels. For example, it prohibited the removal of stone, any excavation, any construction, and any other modification without the approval of the government’s cultural wing.

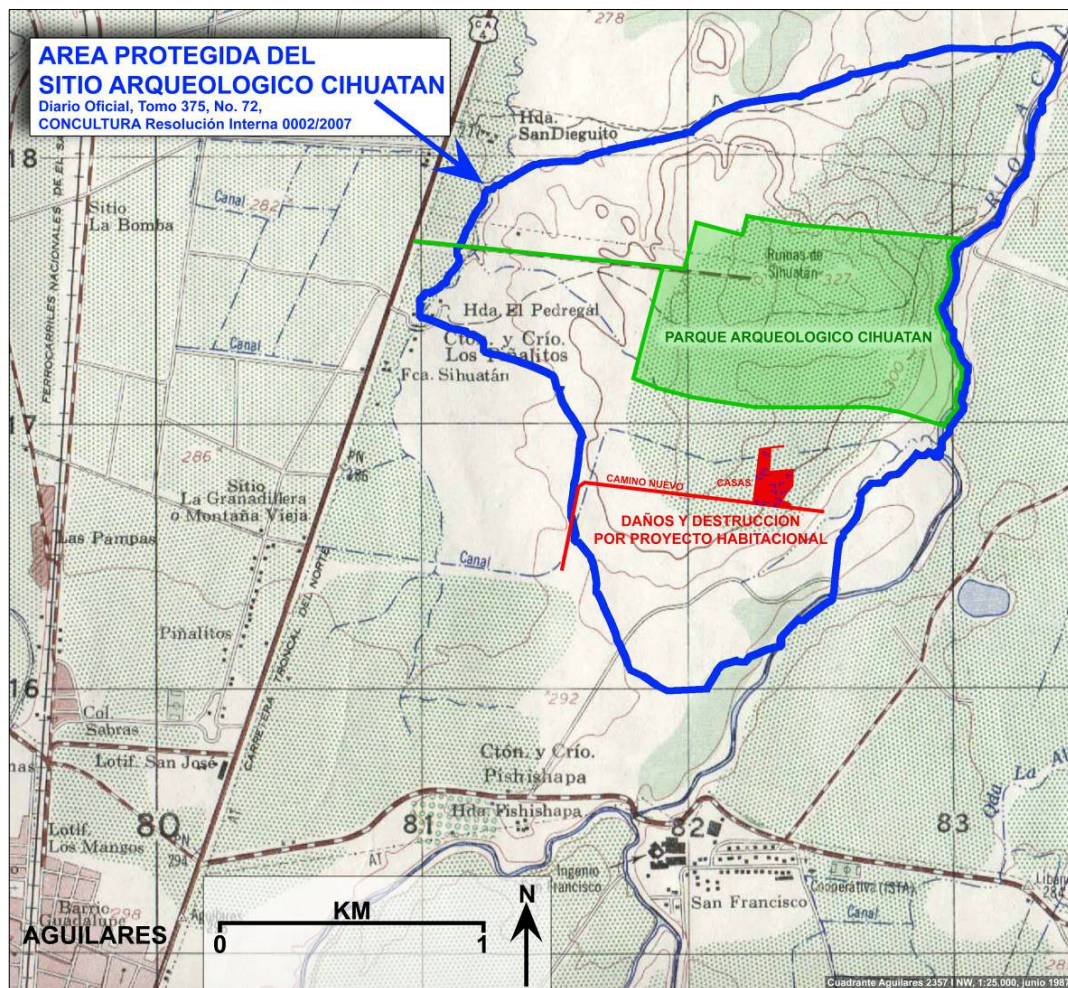
The 2007 resolution is online at: [www.fundar.org.sv/referencias/resolucioncihuatan.pdf](http://www.fundar.org.sv/referencias/resolucioncihuatan.pdf)

With these legal instruments in effect, Cihuatán was apparently safeguarded under the maximum protection afforded by law.

### January, 2010: A Housing Project Within the Ancient City of Cihuatán Destroys Part of the Archaeological Site.

According to available information, around January, 2010, bulldozer work began to cut and level land for a housing project on a parcel of land located completely within the ancient city of Cihuatán, just 170 meters (560 feet) south of the park boundary. This caused the destruction of about 3.5 hectares (8.6 acres) of the archaeological site.

Most of the destruction was caused by grading for an access road and for the construction of housing. It should be mentioned that Cihuatán is a site characterized by its shallow depth, which in its residential zone often varies between only 20 to 40 centimeters (8 to 16 inches).



The housing project (“Casas”) and its access road (“Camino nuevo”) are marked in red.

The bulldozers graded a wide access road (10 meters, 33 feet), with a length of 1.3 kilometers (0.8 miles), destroying an area of about 1.3 hectares (3.2 acres) of the archaeological site. The road leads to the area which was extensively graded for the housing project, destroying about 2.2 hectares (5.4 acres) more of the site.



The new access road. This road and its branches extend for over 1,300 meters (0.8 miles), with a width of 10 meters (33 feet). The bulldozers graded down to the culturally sterile reddish subsoil, destroying archaeological deposits including structures, along its route.



The housing project. In this area the bulldozers cut to depths greater than 3 meters (10 feet).



The bulldozers and other construction work destroyed several prehispanic structures which were recorded during the archaeological reconnaissance conducted by FUNDAR and reported in 2003.

These structures are here marked in blue within the area affected by the housing project (shown in red). The labels correspond to their descriptions contained in the 2003 report. In addition to these superficial structures, there can be no doubt that several others which were not visible during the reconnaissance were also damaged or destroyed, along with other kinds of archaeological features.

A sign placed in front of the housing project identified several local and national government agencies as participants.



According to this sign, the project consisted of the construction of “38 temporary houses” for people affected by a destructive storm (“Ida”) which struck this area in 2009. Despite this, an additional 12 permanent houses were being built, apparently unrelated to this project for the storm victims. Workers informed us that a total of about 300 permanent houses were to be built on this piece of land.

FUNDAR became aware of this destruction on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010, and on the following day delivered the first of several reports about this cultural disaster to the Secretaría de Cultura. These reports are online at [www.fundar.org.sv/cihuadestr.htm](http://www.fundar.org.sv/cihuadestr.htm)

FUNDAR participated in the administration of Cihuatán over several years. Beginning with a virtually abandoned site, in 2007 we inaugurated the Cihuatán Archaeological Park with basic services for visitors including signage, a parking area, site museum, archaeological trail, bathrooms, and a snack bar. In September, 2009, FUNDAR notified the Secretaría de Cultura that we were ending our participation in the administration of Cihuatán and other parks upon the expiration of our contract in December, 2009. This decision was made in order to dedicate our efforts to the principal goals for which FUNDAR had been established: the investigation and dissemination of the archaeological heritage of El Salvador. Accordingly, by November, 2009, personnel of the Secretaría de Cultura had effectively assumed the administration of Cihuatán.

FUNDAR continues with an archaeological project at Cihuatán, and on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010, we began a season of analysis of materials stored there. It was on that date when residents informed us about the new housing project and the damage it had caused. We immediately suspended our first day of analysis in order to inspect the destruction and to prepare maps and text for the report we delivered the following day to the Secretaría de Cultura. We were also informed that personnel from the Secretaría’s Department of Archaeology had visited the housing project on several occasions during the bulldozer work, and obviously we would like to know more about its participation.

Two weeks later, after having presented three reports and seeing that the construction work continued, on March 17, 2010, FUNDAR decided to disseminate the news to the archaeological community via email. By the afternoon, the destruction of Cihuatán began to be reported in the media (see [www.fundar.org.sv/cihuadestr.htm#articulos](http://www.fundar.org.sv/cihuadestr.htm#articulos);

these articles include interviews with officials involved with the destruction in Cihuatán).

Construction work was finally suspended a few days after FUNDAR's email. Pending, however, are decisions regarding the future of the parcel where several prehispanic structures were destroyed (and where many more yet remain). It is also of critical importance to study why the protection measures for Cihuatán utterly failed. If one of El Salvador's largest ancient cities cannot be protected, then what hope is there for any other cultural site?

Anthropologist Jorge Colorado has created a Facebook page as a forum to discuss the cultural atrocity committed at Cihuatán: **NO A LA DESTRUCCION DEL SITIO ARQUEOLOGICO CIHUATAN.**