

Llactapata -

Not Lost, Just Mislaid

Photos and text by
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“I don’t know where we are,” said Juan, as his co-pilot in the tiny Cessna cockpit desperately tried to find our position on the map. It was not a good moment. We were flying at 19,000 feet in the Andes, and snow-topped peaks were looming out above the clouds. I knew that both Mt. Salcantay and Mt. Veronica, at over 20,000 feet, were close.

In Howard Hawks’s *Only Angels Have Wings*, set in the Andes, ace pilot Cary Grant looks up to see a solid mountain wall suddenly emerge out of the clouds right in front of his nose. I had seen the film many times. “Maybe we should go higher,” I murmured. “You can fly the plane yourself if you want to,” offered Juan. This was not meant sarcastically – he genuinely thought I’d be able to find our target better, as I’d been there once on foot. I declined. Never having flown before, it didn’t seem the moment to learn.

The irony was that we had a highly sophisticated positioning device with us – a thermal imaging camera. Thermal imaging cameras can detect the difference in temperature between stone buildings—which retain heat—and vegetation, which does not. This, we hoped, would be the new technology that enabled us to locate lost Inca ruins beneath the cloud forest



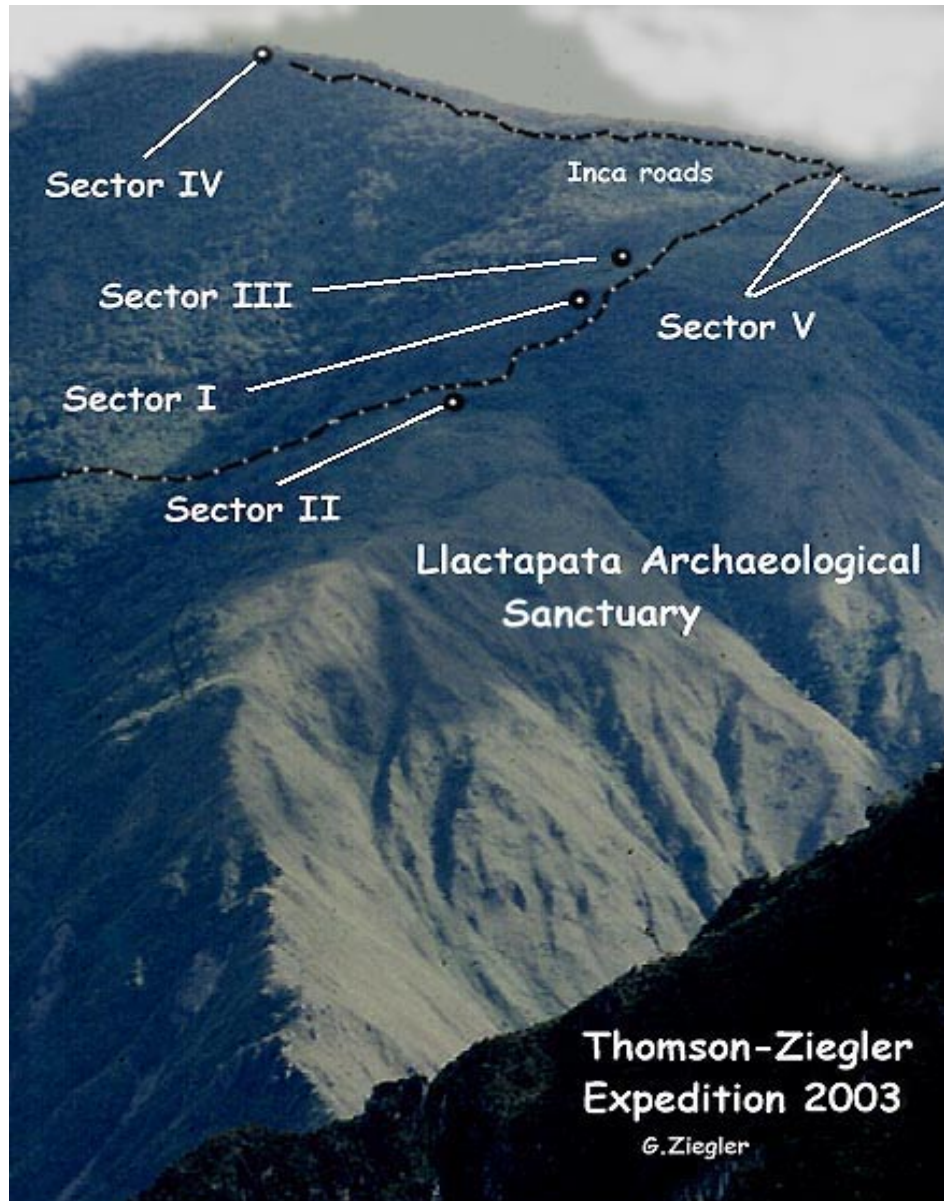
Hugh Thomson (left) and Gary Ziegler, co-leaders of the expedition.

below. Thermal imaging had never been used in this area before, so we hoped to be mining a rich new seam.

But we had not reckoned on the thick cloud cover that sometimes billows into this part of Peru from the Amazon. While the thermal imaging camera could, of course, penetrate

through it, the information was useless without a visual reference.

As we had taken the plane doors off in order to film, the bucketing turbulence inside the lost plane was intense. Then Juan swung the Cessna down through a gap in the clouds and the unmistakable



The different sectors of the Llactapata site as seen from Machu Picchu.

silhouette of Machu Picchu appeared ahead, draped over its saddle below Huayna Picchu. The cloudbanks on either side parted to reveal glimpses of deep valleys covered with the thick vegetation, which characterise this part of the Andes – what Hiram Bingham once called “the magnificent witchery” of the Peruvian jungle.

It was Hiram Bingham who had brought me here in the first place. Bingham was the extraordinary American explorer who had

discovered Machu Picchu and a host of other Inca sites in 1911. Before the expedition began I had travelled to Yale to look through the archive of his personal papers, hoping for some clues about ruins that might still be found in the area.

It had been a wonderful feeling to be able to hold Bingham’s field-journal in my hands, with his excited scrawl when he discovered Machu Picchu: “more ruins – even finer than Choquequirao.”

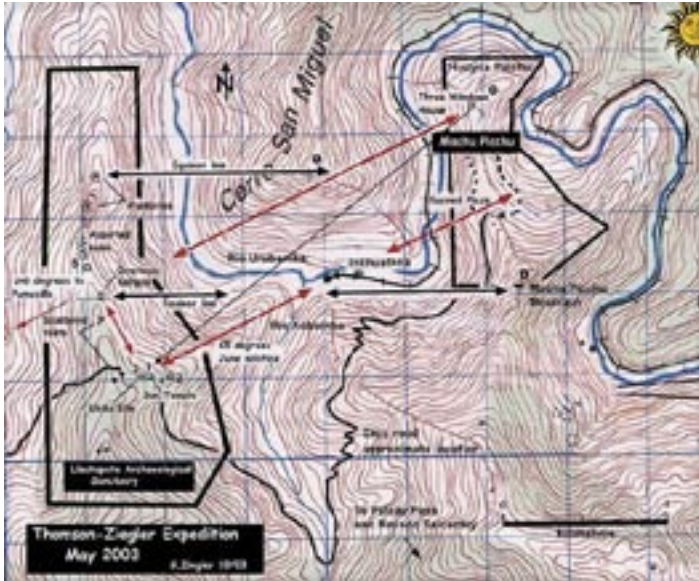
different description and map of what should by all rights have been the same place. Like the Sphinx, it extracted a different answer from every visitor.

The name Llactapata means “high town” in Quechua: another Inca site is similarly named at the bottom of the Cusichaca valley, at the start of the so-called “Inca Trail”, which often causes confusion.

I myself had been there in 1982, but the site I had seen differed in certain key regards from Bingham’s description, as did more recent reports. My suspicion was that we might be dealing with a far larger site than anybody had ever realised, and that previous explorers had each found a part of a much greater whole, rather like the Sufi parable in which three blind men hold the legs, tail and trunk of an elephant but fail to realise that it is the same animal.

The problem was that Bingham had never published proper compass bearings for the place, or anything more than a vague description of how to get there. But now, buried away in the journals, I had found a

I knew that Bingham had visited another Inca site to the west of Machu Picchu, called Llactapata, about which he had published very little. It was a curious site in that each of the very few explorers who had been there seemed to bring back a



Overlook Temple. This building was designed to face Machu Picchu on the distant ridge beyond.



scrawled note written at Llactapata:

“Machu Picchu sacred plaza bears
52° degrees.

Machu Picchu Heights [Mt. Machu
Picchu] 67°.

Huaina Picchu Heights [Mt. Huaynu
Picchu] 45°.”

I felt like Long John Silver given the map to Treasure Island. Bingham had given an exact triangulation point. Armed with this information, I was returning with a full expedition to try to re-locate “Bingham’s Llactapata” and make sense of a mystery that had puzzled me for twenty years.

*One mule was needed
just to carry the vodka.*

Gary Ziegler, my friend and co-leader of the expedition was beside me in the plane, looking at the infrared data that was coming through on the monitor as we circled over the 10,000 ft ridge where Llactapata lay. That morning he had worried me by saying: “Of course I learnt how to do thermal imaging in ‘Nam.” I knew that Gary, a rangy American now in his 60s, had done just about everything in the Tom Sawyer logbook of jobs for active boys - mountain guiding, yacht handling and running a horse ranch, along with being an experienced archaeologist – but somehow I had missed the Vietnam chapter.

We flew over the ridge so many times that the campesinos below later told me they thought we were federales looking for illicit marijuana fields. It was clear that the use of thermal imaging cameras, while theoretically a good one, was still problematic in the Vilcabamba. We would need to go in on foot and clear a way with machetes in the way we were used to.

This was something Gary and I had done often before, but not usually with quite such a caravan. With us, we had seventeen other explorers, eight muleteers, twelve horses and twenty-five mules to carry the supplies. One mule was needed just to carry the vodka.

We had a film-crew and a satellite phone to send results through to our web site, as media interest in the expedition was intense. Two



previously unreported Inca ruins had been found just within the last two years – one of them by us, a lost Inca site called Cota Coca at the bottom of a deep river canyon. It was that discovery which had enabled us to get funding for this more ambitious venture into the Peruvian Vilcabamba, as neither thermal imaging cameras nor large expeditions come cheap.

One might well ask why discoveries were still being made here at all when the rest of the world is so well mapped. It is partly because the Eastern Andes descending towards the Amazon form such a **dense quadrant of twisting river canyons and thick cloud-forest** that it is easy to pass within ten feet of a ruin and miss it. Many explorers have embarrassed themselves by doing just that.

Both for aesthetic and strategic reasons, the Incas chose to build on remote, isolated sites, as even the most casual visitor to Machu Picchu can observe. They also often built settlements in sectors scattered at different levels on a hillside, so that while one sector may have been found, others remain hidden.

As a result, it is one of the last places left



A 150 foot long sunken walkway, which runs through the centre of Llapapata and is aligned on Machu Picchu.



Uncovering ruins at Llactapata

on the planet where “new” ruins can be found, if any ruin can be called new, let alone one that has been found once and then carelessly lost again.

We had a team with us made up of both experience and strength. The veteran British explorer Nick Asheshov had been venturing into the Vilcabamba since 1962 - now sixty-four, partially sighted, and with an *arriero* to guide his horse, he had impressed us all with his fortitude as he rode up into the cloud-forest and brought great knowledge to the councils of war we held each night in the mess tent. I had only met John Leivers the previous year, but was already impressed by his Australian toughness and resilience. To wash his one survival-issue set of clothes, he would simply lie down in a mountain stream and let them dry on his back. Gary and I had asked him to join us when we heard that he was the only man ever to have crossed the Darien Gap three times solo on foot.

We camped close to the ruins I had been to before, in 1982. Checking Bingham’s sketch plan again, it was clear that while these

ruins had some architectural similarities to the ones he had reported, the plans did not match. Nor did the bearings correspond to those I had found in Bingham’s journal. Instead the bearings pointed to the darkest, thickest part of the cloud-forest slopes just above us.

John Leivers volunteered to lead a search party to the spot. His small commando-

*he had failed even in
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style team set off looking as fresh as you can look in the Peruvian Andes and came back with long creepers’ wheels down their backs. Roz Allibone, our young sponsorship organiser, said that she would have “described the undergrowth as impenetrable, if it hadn’t been for the fact

that we were penetrating it”.

Once they’d recovered their breath, John turned to me: “We got to the precise spot of those Bingham coordinates you gave me. There’s nothing there.”

I felt that seventeen explorers, eight muleteers, twelve horses and twenty-five mules were all turning their heads to look at me. I had failed the expedition and brought everyone to the middle of the Peruvian jungle on a wild goose chase.

Cursing Bingham as an incompetent, I spent a bad night. I knew from his private journals that he had been plagued with difficulties on this particular expedition: his muleteers had been mutinous and had finally deserted him. It had been clear already that he had not been fully on the case – the loose sketches, the bad directions – and now he had failed even in the most elementary task, taking compass bearings.

Ironically enough in his classic book, *Lost City of the Incas*, Bingham had commented: “Fortunately I had with me that extremely useful handbook *Hints to Travellers*, published by the Royal Geographical Society. In one

of the chapters I found out what should be done when one is confronted by a prehistoric site – take careful measurements and plenty of photographs and describe as accurately as possible all finds.”

I thought morosely of this as I hacked at the undergrowth the next day. We were clearing some of the ruins I had found on my previous trip, as well as a site the Andeanist scholar Johan Reinhard had described coming across higher up the ridge.

Late in the day, one of the older members of the expedition, Bob Mrocek, who had worked with the Peace Corps in Central America, wandered off to one side and headed into the cloud-forest. We assumed that he was just answering a call of nature, but he seemed to be getting further and further from the path. He could only just hear us when we finally called him: “Bob, are you all right?”

Just one word came back. “Ruins!”

When we caught up with him, he was standing next to a double-jamb doorway covered in brush. At one glance I could tell that this was Inca ceremonial architecture of a high order. And all around were other buildings stretching into the jungle. At the age of 66, Bob Mrocek had just located an Inca ruin.

I asked him how he’d done it. “I just started to follow the light, and it led me here,” said Bob in his soft, southern States drawl. “I figured the Incas would want to build on a flatter area of the hillside.”

For the rest of the day we slashed furiously with the machetes. As one female member of the team commented wryly: “Give a man a machete and you can almost smell the testosterone rising.” Slowly the site began to clear to the point where we could map it.

Gary and I checked it against Bingham’s original map. At first the two didn’t seem to match. Then I spotted a tiny detail I had never noticed before, partly because I had never been looking for it – a tiny nubbin on the entrance to one passageway indicating that it was a double jamb doorway. Suspecting that it might be the one Bob had first come across, we realigned the maps so that the doorways lay on top of one another. It was a perfect fit. We were without question standing in the middle of the Llactapata that Bingham had reported ninety years ago and which had been missing ever since.

Revelation followed revelation. Following a long sunken passageway that ran some

150 yards, we emerged onto a plateau that faced directly onto Machu Picchu. The sight line to the great city was remarkable, directly over the various valleys in between. Nor was it accidental; Dr. Kim Malville,

all around were other buildings stretching into the jungle.

the expert on archaeo-astronomy who accompanied us, calculated that it lay directly in line with sunrise at the June Solstice, and with the rise of the Pleiades constellation, used in the Andes from time immemorial to tell the beginning of certain agricultural seasons. The Incas had built Llactapata as a place from which they could both admire Machu Picchu and use it to take astronomical readings. The layout of the main buildings also corresponded in a quite remarkable way with the layout used at the Coricancha, the main Sun Temple in Cuzco.

There were many similarities in



Hugh Thomson at Llactapata

architectural style between this sector of the site and the one I had previously seen below. As we compared the two, I began to realise why. The Incas often divided their

settlements into matching upper (*banan*) and lower (*burin*) parts, and Llactapata seemed to follow this pattern. Hence the confusion caused when subsequent expeditions like my own had tried to relocate Bingham’s site: because the *burin*, or lower site contains architectural similarities to the *banan*, or upper site, we had been misled into assuming that we had re-found his site when we had in fact found the *burin*, or mirror version of it, some 100 meters below.

Overall, the site turned out to be far, far larger than anyone has ever remotely suspected, with five sectors spread out over the hillside and a two-story temple above. Most importantly, it also aids greatly with the interpretation of Machu Picchu, to which it is so closely aligned and whose function has been hotly debated in recent years. It is the largest Inca settlement in direct sight of Machu Picchu and an Inca road leads from the great city in the direction of Llactapata, across a drawbridge of logs against a cliff.

There has always been an assumption that Machu Picchu was at the “end of the line” on the Inca trail from Cuzco, a final destination for the Inca emperor and his retinue, just as it is for the tourists who go there today. But it immediately seems clear that it was just a stopping point on a much longer trail which would have continued on from Machu Picchu past Llactapata and into the heart of the Vilcabamba.

The Llactapata that Hiram Bingham first reported will now need proper clearing and restoration, threatened as it is by the encroaching cloud forest. It currently lies outside the Machu Picchu Historical Sanctuary and at present receives no protection or conservation, both of which it badly needs. But at least it has been found again.

Hugh Thomson is the author of *The White Rock: An Exploration of the Inca Heartland* (Overlook Press), www.thewhiterock.co.uk

The full report on the site can be seen at <http://www.thomson.clara.net/llactapa.html>

For those who want to participate in further expeditions, see <http://www.gorp.com/adventur/peru.htm>