

Explorations in fuerte del sombrero: insurgent strong hold in the sierra de comanja, Jalisco, Mexico

Introduction

Pedro moreno, architect of Fuerte del Sombrero

After the first stage of the independence movement, which began with the “Grito de Dolores” and ended with the defeat of Miguel Hidalgo at the Bridge of Calderón, other insurgent uprisings took place between 1814 and 1821 in the province of Nueva Galicia, mainly in the Municipality of Guadalajara, along the shores of Lake Chapala and in Los Altos de Jalisco, all of which would constitute an essential impetus for the achievement of independence.¹ Standing out among the uprisings in the Highlands region is the rebellion initiated by Pedro Moreno, a native of Santa Maria de los Lagos (now Lagos de Moreno) who had been born to Spanish parents and owned properties dedicated to agriculture and cattle raising. Moreno was the owner of the haciendas of La Saucedá and Matanzas de Abajo as well as the Coyotes ranch, which had been part of Hacienda de La Daga.² Right from the beginnings of the insurgent uprising, Moreno had put himself in contact with a number of military commanders whom he aided as much as possible. Meanwhile, in the back room of his establishment, he began to hold meetings with his brothers and with friends of liberal tendencies. This turned Moreno into a suspect in the eyes of the Spanish authorities who watched him carefully and threatened him with prison. In late 1813, during a business trip to Apatzingan, Michoacan, Moreno obtained a copy of *The Sentiments of the Nation* written by José María Morelos. Motivated by this book, Moreno decided to organize his own insurgent campaign. He left Lagos and decided to set himself up in his Hacienda de La Saucedá. On April 13, 1814, Easter Wednesday, together with his family, friends and many ranchers in the region, Moreno openly declared he was taking up arms for independence against the royalist forces. His battles against the royalists caused pandemonium in the region between Lagos and Sierra de Comanja in Guanajuato. He won several of these, notably the battles of Las Jaulas and El Ojo de Agua.

With a troop of no more than 300 members, Moreno decided to hide his people in a safe place. After studying the Sierra de Comanja, he decided to use the Cerro del Sombrero, located 25 km from the city of León, as his safe haven, because its ravines made it virtually impregnable.³ It was there that Moreno and his troops, accompanied by their families, barricaded themselves for more than two years. The place was perfect, because with a small garrison, he defended himself against the royalist troops of José Brilanti and against Field Marshals Pascual Liñán and Pedro Celestino Negrete, who attacked that fortress several times with genuine determination to force surrender, but without ever achieving a victory. Around this time, an unforeseen event gave new impetus to the libertarian spirit of New Spain. In April of 1817, the Spaniard Xavier Mina landed at Soto la Marina, Tamaulipas, accompanied by 250 men, including both Americans and Europeans. After several victories over the royalist forces, Mina continued on his way to his next rendezvous: Fuerte del Sombrero, where Pedro Moreno awaited him. Mina arrived at the fort on June 24, 1817, and once the forces of both leaders were united, the fortress became the most important center of insurgent operations throughout the region; together they organized a powerful resistance against the troops of

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Field Marshal Pascual Linan. Field Marshal Liñán was entrusted with leading the campaign against Mina, and it was on July 31, 1817 when he started the siege of Fuerte del Sombrero, concentrating in the surrounding foothills a powerful army of 3000 men who would be repelled by no more than 650 troops gathered in the fortress. The siege lasted 20 intense days, during which the insurgents endured constant attacks by the royalists. Xavier Mina managed to leave twice in search of reinforcements, but was never able to obtain any.⁴

The lack of food and military supplies, but above all water shortages were the main reasons why the brave defenders of Fuerte del Sombrero could no longer resist the continuous attacks of the enemy. Antonio Rivera de la Torre,⁵ in his historical monograph on Mina and Moreno, thus describes the situation of those who remained holed up in the fortress: “The inhabitants of the fort continued, with anguish, to endure the lack of water, which only occasionally fell from the clouds, like a gift from heaven. This was one of the biggest drawbacks of the site, which did not allow them to take advantage of a stream located about 800 meters from the fortification.” The besieged had many reasons to be desperate: their ever smaller numbers, as many of them sought to escape from the fort through the ravines; the many breaches in the walls made by enemy bullets; the shortage of ammunition; hunger, thirst and the unbearable stench of corpses. Moreno was left with no choice but to order the abandonment of the fortress under siege. Thus, finally, on August 19, 1817 the resistance was broken and the decision to escape by night was taken. However, the column was spotted and attacked by the Spanish army, resulting in wholesale butchery in the midst of darkness, where the cries of women and children mingled with the groans of the dying, the roar of cannons and rifles, the shouts of triumph of the victors and the drumming of the rain.⁴ Confusion reigned: while some tried to flee through the ravines, others were forced to return to the fort, including Moreno’s wife, Doña Rita and their children.

Those few who escaped were scattered; only about fifty people survived, including Pedro Moreno, who ended up separated forever from his family. Mina had left El Sombrero two days earlier to seek reinforcements and supplies. The fort was taken by the royalists the morning of August 20. More than 350 insurgents, everyone found there, including the wounded, were shot; the fort was demolished by the very hands of the captives before being shot, until not a stone remained standing.⁴ Mina and Moreno continued to fight until they finally ended up at El Venadito ranch, where the forces of Francisco

Orrantía caught them at dawn on October 27. Moreno, who preferred to die defending himself rather than surrendering, only managed to shout: “Where my life is concerned, I give the orders!” when an accurate shot killed him. Xavier Mina was taken prisoner and executed on November 11, 1817. Of all the insurgents, Moreno was among the few who died fighting, sword in hand.² Today at the summit of Cerro del Sombrero, instead of the demolished fortress, one finds a sober and elegant pink stone obelisk. On it, next to a laurel branch and a broken chain, there is an inscription which reads: “to General Don Pedro Moreno and fellow heroes of the homeland, martyrs for freedom.”

Archaeological project

Among the projects for the celebration of the bicentennial of the Independence of Mexico in the state of Jalisco, was a proposal to rescue the site of Fort Sombrero. Through the Bicentennial Fund and state funds, as well as the participation of the company Dalma, SA de CV, and the Colegio de Michoacan, AC, an archaeological survey for investigating and studying the ruins of the fort was held in the year 2009. The aim was to register and identify the architectural features of the site and to investigate patriotic events which took place there but may have been forgotten with the passage of time. Through whatever remains can be found, the intention is to put together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle in order to discover the story of a place whose destruction left it cut off from the history of Los Altos de Jalisco. We might then ask ourselves a question: What was the fort like in those days? How did they build a fortress in the most difficult and complex part of the Sierra de Comanja? What was daily life like during the occupation of the fort? Several military communications and historical writings of the era speak about the existence of walls, trenches, a hospital, a cemetery and water tanks, along with other buildings, where more than 900 people lived. Much of this probably still persists at the site.

Geographical location and environment

The fort is located in the Sierra de Comanja, at an altitude of 2660 meters above sea level. It is situated within the borders of the states of Guanajuato and Jalisco, but belongs to the municipality of Lagos de Moreno, Jalisco. (Figure 1). The environment found in the area belongs to a sub-humid deciduous forest with mostly oak trees, pines and some laurels, allowing access to wood for buildings and fires. The most common trees on the walls of the cliffs and ravines are burseras, acacias and rock figs. The outstanding features of these hills are their steep slopes especially on the east and west sides, making access from these directions practically impossible and creating a natural fortress. Total protection was obtained by the construction of great walls of adobe and stone at the north and south ends where easier access would have been possible. Del Campo⁶ mentions that the natural defenses were reinforced with stone parapets and mud. The Fuerte del Sombrero, was so called because from a distance the three highest points of these steep mountains take the form of a three-cornered hat, which was widely used at the time (Figure 2). In the Fort there were an estimated 900 people including combatants, salaried workers, women and children, so the infrastructure works of the fort were like those of any rancharía: turrets with gun holes, trenches, gates, bases for cannons, storehouses for gunpowder, arms and food; forges, houses for the officers, huts and sheds for the soldiers and their families, stables, pigsties, cattle pens, cisterns and pools to capture and store water.

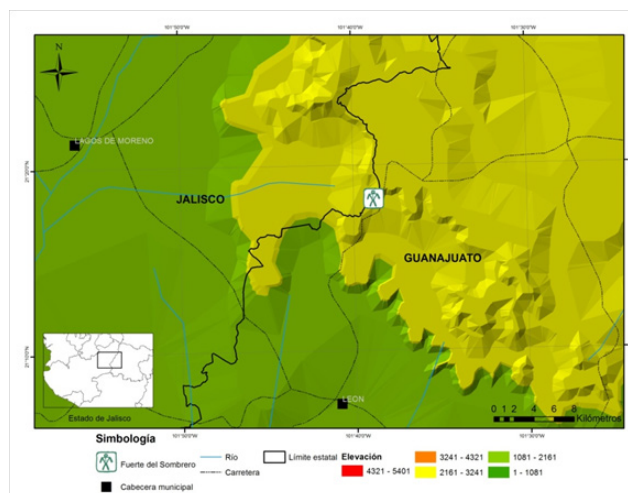


Figure 1 Location of Fuerte Del Sombrero (Drawing:Armando Trujillo).



Figure 2 Overview of Cerro Del Sombrero.

The first maps of the fort

There are at least three maps that were developed by the royalist army to describe Fuerte del Sombrero. These documents are found in the Archive of the Indies in Seville, the Militia Archive in Madrid and the General Archive of the Nation. These maps are mainly schematic, with a perspective that does not clearly delineate the arrangement of the fort's structures. Standing out among these maps is “Cerro del Sombrero” sent to the viceroy by Lieutenant Colonel Pedro Monsalve after his failed attack against the insurgent stronghold (Figure 3).⁷

Description

“View from the South”

1. El Sombrero Peak,
2. Barbosa Peak,
3. Steep escarpment surrounding the fort of the rebel Moreno,
4. Embrasure where a cannon had been located,

5. Parapet made of loose stones, whose extremes join the escarpment,
6. Small trench from the embrasure to the right end of the escarpment,
7. Cobblestone square very close to the parapet,
8. Path leading up to the fort,
9. Barbosa ravine.

7. Trail that goes up to the fort from the Ortiz and Yellow Peaks.
8. Low hills belonging to Ortiz Peak.
9. Very steep cliff.
10. Parapet composed of loose rocks, which follows the escarpment.
11. Santiago Ravine.

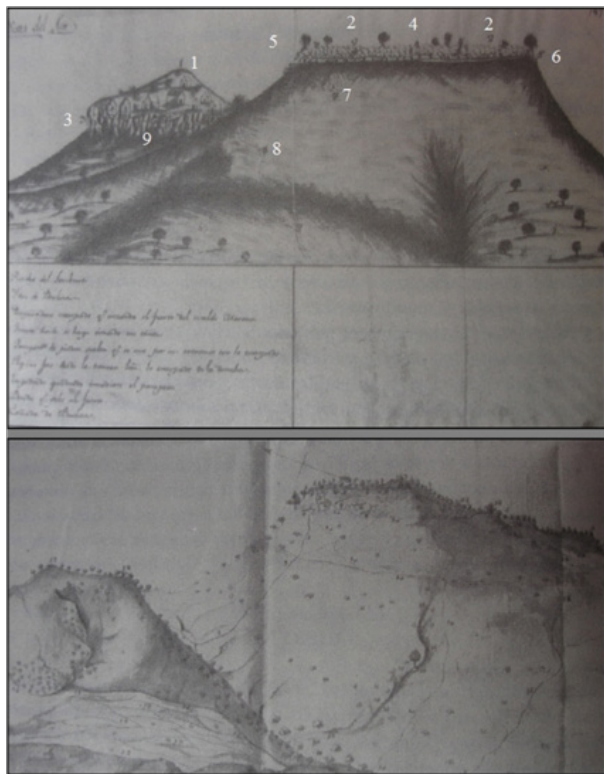


Figure 3 Map of Fuerte del Sombrero (1817).

It is important to mention that point No. 7, which speaks of a cobblestone square outside the fort, may refer to the fort cemetery where most of the people who died during the siege were buried, as well as the survivors who were later shot. There exists another, more exact, map which was created to contain the opponent. It shows the basic installations and follows the upper contour of the hill. This plan of Fuerte del Sombrero, commonly referred to as Comanja, was drawn by Valentin Ampudia in 1817.⁸ The document appears to be the clearest in its spatial arrangement which allows us to corroborate certain field information (Figure 4).

Main legend (as read in the map):

1. Las Tablas Mesa.
2. Cut dividing El Sombrero from Las Tablas Mesa
3. El Sombrero Peak, a high point inside the fort itself which, as well as being detrimental to the besieging troops because of its dominating position, also served as a powder magazine built within the living rock.
4. Barbosa Peak or Mesa.
5. Yellow Peak or Mesa.
6. Ortiz Peak or Mesa.

12. Barbosa Ravine

F. Fuerte del Sombrero

G. Cisterns

E. Enemy living quarters

A. Narrow place through which they communicated

C. Infantry camp of the 1st and 2nd sections of the besieging troops

B. Batteries (of the besieging troops)

Z. Covered road

N. Camp of the auxiliary division of New Galicia

n. Navarra camps to cover the eastern front, and prevent the enemy from getting water from point X.

p. Parapets constructed in order to cover our advances

L1. Zaragoza Grenadier Company and their vanguard

x. Spring with abundant water

Archaeological survey

From the archaeological survey we were able to identify certain features of this fort in a first phase of study. The information obtained in the field shows the existence of several vestiges that have allowed us to record some architectural forms of this fort, even though the texts refer to its total destruction.⁴ For the archaeological survey the total field was divided into perimeters A to E as shown in the general topographic map (Figure 5). In regard to the physical aspects that were easily identified while surveying, studies began with Perimeter E, the closest to the original entrance to the fort.

Perimeter E

In Perimeter E, which corresponds to the fort’s only “natural” entrance, some features were found indicating what the entrance may have been like before the destruction of the fortress.

Trench

This is an open trench in the rocky part of Cerro del Sombrero. It is 8m long by 2m wide and its northern side corresponds to the natural elevation of the hill, while the southern side corresponds to the Mesa de las Tablas. At present it is filled with earth and stones. Apparently it was created with dynamite, since there are drill holes at its east and west ends (Figure 6). In the letter which the Field Marshal sent to Viceroy Juan Ruiz de Apodaca on August 6, 1813, the following story is found: “The Mesa de las Tablas, where I am located, is connected to the fort by a very steep slope which becomes very narrow a few yards from the fort, where it again rises. At its narrowest point it is 15 varas (12.5m) and here the rebels have put an adobe wall of considerable width, whose ends are supported by the steep escarpments typical of the whole area where the fortress is located. On one side of this wall is the door which is protected, apparently by a single portcullis, in the shape of a ladder, but made of stone.”

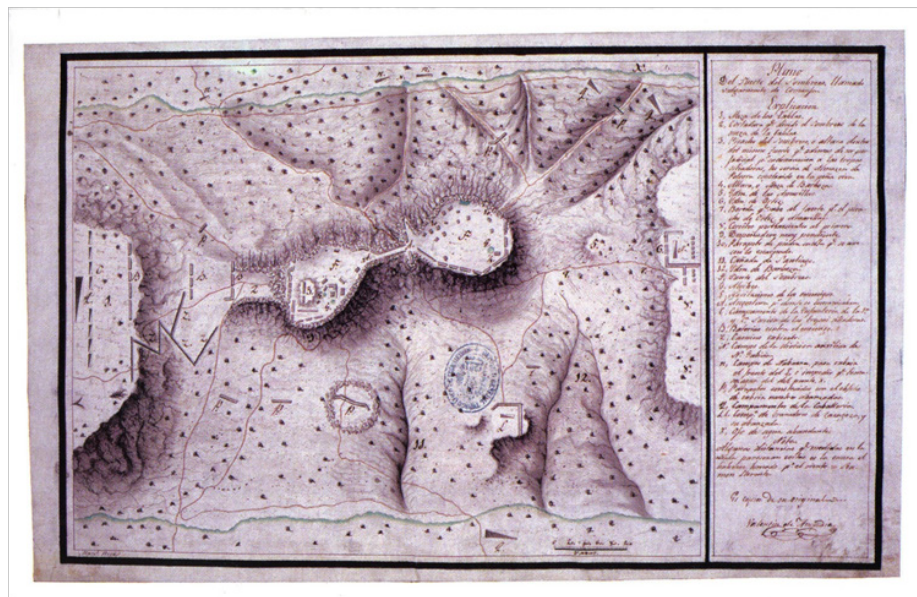


Figure 4 Map of Fuerte del Sombrero, also called Comanja (1817).

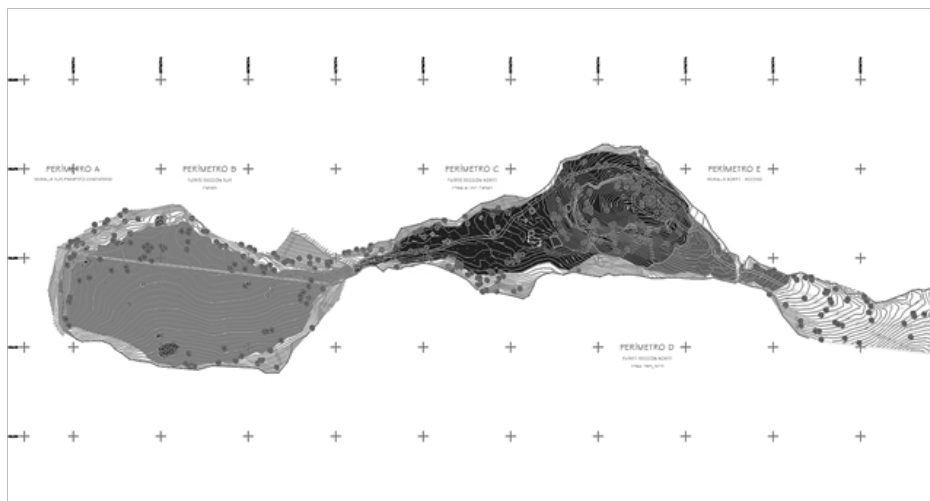


Figure 5 Topographic Map of Fuerte del Sombrero with perimeters indicated.

Lookout point (Punto de Vigía)

This spot was so named for its strategic location above the area where Liñan’s troops were situated. It allowed perfect visual monitoring of Barbosa Ravine and the Mesa de las Tablas. In addition, it is an ideal place to locate artillery. Apodaca comments on it in his report: “The rest of the wall is occupied by two low, square cannon embrasures which have two or three pound cannons. Above them and the door, there is a low wall with rifle holes and in front of these is a trench about three varas high [2.5m] by one [.84m] wide, cut into the stone.” This area was the most fortified part of the fort and the only form of entry to El Sombrero. Its natural characteristics and how they were taken advantage of, represent the key to how the fort’s integrity was assured for such a long time.

Perimeter D

Perimeter D covered the entire elevation of Cerro del Sombrero

including its sides. In this perimeter the following points stood out.

Lookout Point II

This lookout point is similar to the one recorded in the previous perimeter. It is located on the east side and has a marked drop of 1.10 meters possibly carved into the rock to create a free and flat space 6.5 meters long from north to south and 1.60 meters wide from east to west. Liñan said in one of his letters to the viceroy: “On the rocks on each side of the wall there is also a kind of protected platform with an embrasure that has small pieces like three-pounders. Finally at the highest point of this part of the fort, which continues to rise up to about 30 varas [25m], there is another protected platform, resurfaced, in which they previously had the 8 pound cannon and now they have placed a 4 pounder.”¹

¹Part of message which Field Marshal Pascual Liñan sent to Viceroy Juan Ruiz de Apodaca (25).²



Figure 6 Trench at the entrance to fort hat.

Obelisk

Although this obelisk does not go back to the time of the insurgency, it is already part of the history of the site since it is more than 100 years old. The obelisk, which was erected during the centenary celebrations of the independence of Mexico to commemorate Pedro Moreno and his fallen companions, is in very bad condition. Pillaged and destroyed by vandalism, it is currently in urgent need of restoration in many parts (Figure 7). This obelisk inaugurated in the early twentieth century, is now visited every August 22 when a wreath is placed in honor of the insurgent heroes.

Perimeter C

This perimeter covers the area from the southern slope of El Sombrero Peak to just before the narrow place leading to the Mesa de la Serna. For reconnoitering, it was divided into the eastern and western parts and especially the northern area, which is the wide part. This area was of importance because here is found one of the structures from Fuerte del Sombrero which is still preserved, along with other elements.

Cistern

This circular cistern has walls 80 centimeters thick and has an average diameter of 3 meters. It still retains some of the original plaster on the walls and floor which, judging from the color still visible was of a reddish hue. The cistern had a maximum height of 1.50 m, as measured from remains of the original floor. It was built of quarry stone and rhyolite possibly extracted from the hill, and the mortar used was a mixture of sand and baked lime. A hole dug by looters can be seen in the northern part of the cistern and part of the southern wall has been destroyed (Figure 8).



Figure 7 View of the obelisk at Fuerte del Sombrero.



Figure 8 Cistern of stone and mortar.

Pit carved into the rock and channel

On the same side a little farther south, about 40m southeast of the cistern, there is a pit carved directly into the rock. Its shape resembles an asymmetrical hexagon because it has 6 sides of different measurements. Its longest part is 2.33 meters and it measures 1.70 meters at its widest point. Like the trench in Perimeter E, it is filled with rocks of various sizes to facilitate the passage of motorized off-road vehicles.

Habitational area

Less than 10 meters east of the circular cistern, a great concentration of medium-sized rock was found, scattered over a kind of slight slope that virtually covers the entire eastern side of perimeter E. After clearing this area and making a pertinent reconnaissance, we identified alignments, bricks and some traces of mortar similar to that used in the cistern. These alignments are distributed over something like terraces for housing, which stretch from west to east following the southern slopes of the high part of El Sombrero (Figure 9). Altogether, we registered 6 housing terraces featuring the remains of foundations, some more defined than others, with Terraces 2 and 6 presenting the best preservation of wall bases. The walls of Terrace 6 have an average width of less than 50 cm. south of the plain mentioned by Agustín Rivera⁴ were the leaders' houses, the soldiers' huts, warehouses, workshops and the hospital. The complex was protected by the elevation of the Mesa de Tablas: "The main houses were Moreno's and that of the treasurer, Jose Maria Torres. The first had a desk, a bedroom, two separate rooms with a door to the patio, a pantry and a kitchen, while the second had more rooms. When Javier Mina arrived at Sombrero, Moreno gave him his home."⁴

Artificial caves

In the rocks on the northeastern side of Perimeter C, a pair of artificial caves was registered. These were apparently created using dynamite, as seven marks made by drills were found around them. They are separated by a distance of approximately 15m, and between them there is a kind of staircase cut into the rock, giving access to both

(Figure 10). These caves were possibly used for shelter or to store food, because the temperature inside them is always cool, throughout the year. Considering the remains of rooms and features together with descriptions of Rivera,⁴ it is very likely that these belonged to Pedro Moreno and Xavier Mina.



Figure 9 Housing terraces.



Figure 10 Artificial caves.

Perimeter B

This perimeter of exploration ranges from the passageway connecting the two parts of the fort (Cerro del Sombrero and Mesa de Serna) to the middle of Mesa de Serna which was divided into east and west parts, as were most of the perimeters.

Passageway

The passageway linking the hill and the mesa was apparently created by breaking the rocks found here, since some signs of blasting holes were identified as well as cuts in the large rocks nearby. The passageway narrows to only one meter wide and then joins Mesa de Serna. On the west side there is the road leading to the Hacienda de Santiago, which was possibly also used during the insurgency period.

Residential area

Some writings indicate that the southern part of the Mesa de Serna was where the houses of the soldiers were located. We were only able to identify some isolated bricks with no apparent relation to anything else, plus a small concentration of stone and brick in the southern corner of the mesa. No ceramics or other cultural items were found related to this concentration of stone and brick.

Perimeter A

Perimeter A is located south of the Mesa de Serna and as was done previously, it was divided into two sections or sides for its exploration: east and west. The following items were recorded: a well, a boundary marker and a wall.

Wall and rainwater catchment

These are found on the east side next to the paddock which divides the area. This catchment was built using natural rock formations, which form a depression in the ground. On the north side there is a rocky outcrop which has not been modified in any way and on the south side, a small wall of masonry was built to create an enclosed space where rainwater can collect.

Boundary marker

This milestone lies west of the well and is part of the stone fence or pasture. Its shape is very similar to the one registered in Perimeter E, area 1, in the Mesa de las Tablas. Although these boundary markers are not related to the time of the fort, they bear witness to the reuse of stones which may have been part of the houses.

Western rampart

This wall is located on the west side of Mesa de Serna. It is oriented east-west and measures 7 meters in length by 4 in width. It was built with huge rocks along its north and south sides, each of them approximately 1 meter wide. The central part of the wall is filled with rocks of a smaller size. Rocks used in its construction were taken from nearby quarries (Figure 11). Due to its large size, this western rampart can be seen in Ampudia's map of 1817. It is one of the best preserved remains of the fort.



Figure 11 Remains of the western rampart.

Cemetery

This was located on one side of the south wall at the point where the Barbosa Ravine begins to slope. In fact, there are no more trench and it was not found during the surface recce. Curiously, the 1817 map of "Cerro de Sombrero" shows a paved spot next to the north wall. Considering its location, it could possibly indicate this cemetery. Nevertheless, during the reconnaissance along the ravine, no sign of any human remains was seen nor was the paved spot located.

Ceramic material

Most of the pottery found in Fuerte del Sombrero was of the coarse-and-smoothed type. Some pieces were polished to a certain extent, but they were monochrome. We just have a few items decorated in red and black with banded lines and spirals. After the ceramic ware described above, the next type of crockery found in considerable quantities is glazed pottery. We identified several shapes indicating bowls, jars, cups and plates. It is very likely that this had been brought from the cities of Leon or Lagos de Moreno.

Majolica pottery has little presence on the site compared to smooth and glazed ceramic. Fragments with decoration and other monochromes were collected but this may be due to the degree of fragmentation of the piece. The decoration which can be seen in these pots is mainly phytomorphic and geometric, in colors like green, brown, black, yellow and others. When comparing the pots found with ceramic catalogs of the region^{9,10} and the period, a great similarity was found to majolica ware manufactured in the city of Guanajuato. Only one pot was found presenting decoration on a blue glaze using a cream-colored paste. Perhaps this fragment is of majolica pottery from Puebla. As for fine white faience, only two pieces were found in the entire collection. The decoration featured is geometric, in black and green. Its form may correspond to that of a cup (Figure 12) (Figure 13).



Figure 12 Glazed ceramic (XIX century).



Figure 13 Majolica (XIX Century). Guanajuato and Puebla.

Conclusion

Occupation during the nineteenth century is very clear, as mentioned above, thanks to the vestiges remaining in the area. These bear witness to many buildings which appear in maps of the time. In addition, these constructions appear to be simple structures made of masonry. Even though the designs were outside the accepted standards of military architecture and were based more on the ideology of the insurgents, they enabled a strategy which allowed them to overcome every royalist army until the fortress was lost due to lack of survival resources (mainly water). What is very clear is that there are many vestiges of this period. The foundations of dwellings, the trenches, the cistern: all are examples of what can still be seen on the surface. Therefore, it is important to mention that there may be many remains buried and further details may be found when excavation work is performed. Likewise, certain places still remain to be found, such as the cemetery and other constructions which were impossible to verify one hundred percent due to the abundant undergrowth in some parts of the site. Unfortunately, during the twentieth century the area has also been greatly altered. On the one hand its appearance changed due to the creation of the obelisk in the 20's, because the rock was quarried from the very same site. The place was likewise influenced by the construction of fences marking the limits of fields and lots; but perhaps what has most affected it has been the use of the local paths by nearby hotels and haciendas as motocross routes. This resulted in the use of many stones from the fort to pave a new road over the hill as well as the vandalism of the fort and nearby lookout points. It should, therefore, be noted that the rescue of this place should be comprehensive and cooperative, not only in respect to its environment and history but also in reference to the use to which it will be put in the future.^{11,12}

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Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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