

# **Sitio Conte, Panama expedition records**

1108

**Finding aid prepared by A. Pezzati, D. Haller, S. Bazán, and K. Wiley.**

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Last updated on March 02, 2017.

University of Pennsylvania, Penn Museum Archives

7/2009

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## Table of Contents

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Summary Information.....	3
Biography/History.....	4
Scope and Contents.....	5
Administrative Information.....	6
Related Materials .....	6
Controlled Access Headings.....	7
Bibliography of published works relating to Sitio Conte, Panama excavations conducted by Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania.....	8
Partial Index to Subjects and Correspondence.....	9
Collection Inventory.....	11
Correspondence.....	11
Administrative Records.....	11
Field Notes.....	12
Reports and Interpretive Materials.....	13

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## Summary Information

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<b>Repository</b>	University of Pennsylvania: Penn Museum Archives
<b>Creator</b>	Mason, John Alden, 1885-1967
<b>Title</b>	Sitio Conte, Panama expedition records
<b>Call number</b>	1108
<b>Date [bulk]</b>	1939-1942
<b>Date [inclusive]</b>	1929-1970
<b>Extent</b>	1.5 linear feet
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Abstract</b>	<p>At the turn of the century, the Río Grande de Coclé changed course, revealing the site of a pre-Columbian cemetery when pottery and gold ornaments were washed out of the river banks. In 1940 the University of Pennsylvania Museum began to excavate Sitio Conte, which belonged to a private landowner, located in the province of Coclé. A very small portion of the pre-Columbian cemetery, estimated to cover four or five acres in its entirety, was selected for excavation. The expedition yielded 6,600 pounds of pottery and stone. The textual records consist of 1.5 linear feet of field notes, diaries, and object cards; correspondence; administrative records concerning contracts, expenses, transportation, and equipment; and unpublished and published reports and articles concerning findings. The arrangement of the records became apparent after some research, for the original order had been lost. Most of the original folder titles, however, have been maintained.</p>

**Cite as:**

[Item name]. Box [Box number]. Sitio Conte, Panama expedition records. Penn Museum Archives.  
 Accessed [Date accessed].

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## Biography/History

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At the turn of the century, the Río Grande de Coclé changed course, revealing the site of a pre-Columbian cemetery when pottery and gold ornaments were washed out of the river banks. Gold ornaments from the site began showing up for sale in Panama City. Thereafter the Peabody Museum of Harvard University excavated the site between 1930 and 1933, securing a number of unique specimens from a previously unknown culture.

As a result of World War II major excavations were not possible in areas such as Egypt and Mesopotamia, freeing up funding for Americanist projects. In 1940 the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology decided to investigate Sitio Conte, which belonged to a private landowner, located approximately ten miles from the Pacific Ocean in the province of Coclé about a hundred miles west of Panama City. A contract to excavate the site was made between the Museum and Señor Miguel Conte, with the full knowledge and permission of the government of Panama.

Dr. J. Alden Mason, Curator of the Museum's American Section, was director of the expedition. Robert H. Merrill was surveyor, engineer, and photographer. John B. Corning, a research associate in the Museum, was assistant director. Corning was trained in anatomy and was in charge of the preservation of specimens. He also made motion pictures. The directors of the former Peabody Expedition, Dr. and Mrs. Samuel K. Lothrop, assisted with arrangements and accompanied the University of Pennsylvania Museum expedition for several weeks. The work was carried out during the short, dry season beginning in January, 1940 through mid-April of that year.

A very small portion of the pre-Columbian cemetery, estimated to cover four or five acres in its entirety, was selected for excavation. The expedition dug a main trench 54 feet in length, 27 feet in width, and 13 feet in depth at its maximum. A second, smaller trench was dug also. About thirty burials and/or caches were encountered, ranging from grave lots with a few vessels to burials of ten feet square containing hundreds of pottery vessels as well as objects of stone, carved bone, gold, and other materials. In the most elaborate burial, No. 11, there were twenty-three individuals, one supplying at least half of the gold objects found as well as the finest in quality. The floor and sides of this grave were virtually lined with pottery. It included one arrangement of twelve individuals laid parallel and close together in six pairs, each pair consisting of upper and lower members. The identifiable skeletons were all males of some social importance as almost all had some gold ornamentation. The one presumed by Mason to be a chief was interred with a wealth of gold.

The expedition yielded 6,600 pounds of pottery and stone. The restoration of the pottery was eventually undertaken by a WPA project in the Museum. Much of the pottery was painted in polychrome. Designs are generally conventionalized animals, but vary from simple geometric to complex pictorial. Over 120 troy ounces of gold were found. Many gold objects are of exquisite workmanship made by casting (cire perdue), hammering, and depletion gilding. Gold objects included large plaques or disks, ear-rods, nose

ornaments, cuffs and anklets, pendants, chisels, bells, and beads. Most impressive are eight large plaques eight to ten inches in diameter with very ornate decoration in high repousse relief. Most of them show saurian-human and avian-human figures. Five were found on the principal individual of burial No. 11. This individual also wore a pendant of heavy gold over four inches in length in the form of a very ornate animal figure, probably a composite creature including features of reptiles, the jaguar, and turtle with a low grade emerald set in its back. Among the most interesting objects found were almost thirty animal and human figurines of carved bone, ivory, or copal resin with features of gold applied as onlays. Little is known about the indigenous inhabitants of the large village that must have been located nearby this cemetery. Such a village cannot be identified from sixteenth-century Spanish accounts, which were written centuries after the fact. The form and decoration of the pottery are very different from the Chiriquí and Veraguas cultures of western Panama. The Coclé culture bears practically no resemblance to the cultures of the Aztecs and Mayas, and little to those of Peru. The period of burial at Sitio Conte was from ca. A.D. 450 to A.D. 900. Burial No. 11 is dated to A.D. 700-900.

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## Scope and Contents

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The textual records consist of 1.5 linear feet of field notes, diaries, and object cards; correspondence; administrative records concerning contracts, expenses, transportation, and equipment; and unpublished and published reports and articles concerning findings. This material has been divided into four series: Correspondence, Administrative Records, Field Notes, and Reports and Interpretive Materials. The arrangement of the records became apparent after some research, for the original order had been lost. Most of the original folder titles, however, have been maintained.

The correspondence consists mainly of letters from Mason to contacts and officials in Panama detailing the planning of the expedition and to University of Pennsylvania Museum Director Horace H. F. Jayne reporting on progress from the field. There is also documentation relating to a proposed second expedition to Panama for the following year (1941), and to the settlement of the contract with the Conte family. The Administrative Records include copies of contracts, and much logistical and financial information. The Field Notes include two field diaries (kept by Mason and Merrill), cataloguing notes, and object cards. Though Mason's diary represents a journal of the expedition, Merrill's contains the scientific notes and detailed measurements for all the excavations. It also includes many photographs, plans, and sections. The Reports series includes published and unpublished articles and papers by Mason on the results of the excavations, exhibit brochures, and notes on the motion picture taken in the field. Original news clippings found in this series were removed to Special Collections— Newsclippings and filed by date. Copies of these clippings have been placed in the Reference Collection under Expeditions— Sitio Conte, and Exhibits— "Panama Expedition." Duplicate copies of the exhibit catalogue for the 1940 "Panama Expedition" have been placed in Special Collections— Publications— Exhibit Catalogues and in the Reference Collection. For preservation purposes all highly-acidic carbon copies of correspondence were photocopied onto acid-free paper and the originals discarded.

Visual collections consist of more than 300 black-and-white safety film negatives made in the field; thirty-seven minutes of 16mm color and black/white motion picture film from the original field footage (as well as an edited copy on videotape); and twelve site plans in ink and pencil on paper. Many

black-and-white prints are found in Robert H. Merrill's diary, which also includes an explanation of the cataloguing system for the field negatives (p. 11). Over thirty 4x5 glass lantern slides were produced for projection in stereopticon lectures. Additional object photography produced by the Museum's photography studio includes color transparencies, black-and-white negatives, and copy prints. The negatives, color transparencies, and motion picture film footage can be accessed through the computer database and card catalogue in the Photographic Archives. The site plans, photographic prints, and glass lantern slides are listed in this finding aid. In addition included in this guide is a list of Museum exhibitions in which artifacts from Sitio Conte were displayed (Appendix I).

Related collections are found in Administrative Records— American Section— J. Alden Mason (see folder “Section Reports”); Administrative Records— Exhibits Department, and Special Collections— Exhibits Photographs (see under the various exhibits as listed in Appendix I); and the J. Alden Mason Biography and Portrait files. The Peabody Museum at Harvard University houses the records from S. K. Lothrop’s excavations, including his visit to Sitio Conte with Mason in 1940 (Appendix III).

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## Administrative Information

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University of Pennsylvania, Penn Museum Archives

7/2009

Finding aid prepared by A. Pezzati, D. Haller, S. Bazán, and K. Wiley.

### Sponsor

The creation of this guide was made possible through the generosity of the Mellon Foundation.

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## Related Materials

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### Related Archival Materials note

A film, produced by Tom Nesmith, about this expedition is available among the archives' film collections. A digitized access copy is online through the generous support of the Internet Archive.

[http://www.archive.org/details/upenn-f16-4011\\_1940\\_University\\_Museums\\_Panama\\_Expedition](http://www.archive.org/details/upenn-f16-4011_1940_University_Museums_Panama_Expedition)

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## Controlled Access Headings

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### CORPORATE NAME(S)

- Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.
- University of Pennsylvania. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

### FORM/GENRE(S)

- Correspondence
- Field notes
- Photographs

### GEOGRAPHIC NAME(S)

- Conte Site (Panama)

### PERSONAL NAME(S)

- Kidder, Alfred Vincent, 1885-1963
- Madeira, Percy C., Jr., 1889-1967
- Mason, John Alden, 1885-1967
- Satterthwaite, Linton, 1897-1978

### SUBJECT(S)

- Archaeological expeditions
- Excavations (Archaeology)

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## Bibliography of published works relating to Sitio Conte, Panama

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## excavations conducted by Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania

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- Carles R., Julio A. "Muestra del legado indígena exponen en Nueva York." *El Panamá América* (October 17 1995).
- Hearne, Pamela, and Robert J. Sharer, eds. *River of Gold: Precolumbian Treasures from Sitio Conte*. Philadelphia: The University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania. 1992.
- Helms, Mary W. *Ancient Panama: Chiefs in Search of Power*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 1979.
- Helms, Mary W. *Creations of the Rainbow Serpent: An Analysis of Polychrome Ceramic Designs from Ancient Panama*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. 1995.
- Ladd, John "A Stratigraphic Trench at Sitio Conte, Panama." *American Antiquity* 22(3): 265-271. 1957.
- Lange, Frederick W., and Doris Z. Stone, eds. *The Archaeology of Lower Central America*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. 1984.
- Lothrop, E. B., and Samuel Kirkland Lothrop "Treasures Which the Spanish Conquistadores Missed." *The Illustrated London News*: pp. 475-477, 479 (March 31). 1934.
- Lothrop, Samuel Kirkland "Archaeological Investigation in the Province of Coclé, Panama." *American Journal of Archaeology* 38(2): 207-211. 1934.
- Lothrop, Samuel Kirkland *Coclé: An Archaeological Study of Central Panama, Part 1*. *Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology*, vol. 7. Cambridge: Harvard University. 1937.
- Lothrop, Samuel Kirkland *Coclé: An Archaeological Study of Central Panama, Part 2*. *Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology*, vol. 8. Cambridge: Harvard University. 1942.
- Mason, J. Alden "The Archaeological Expedition of The University Museum to Panama, 1940." *Tredyffrin-Easttown History Club Quarterly* 3(3): Part 1. 1940a.
- Mason, J. Alden "The Archaeological Expedition of The University Museum to Panama, 1940." *Tredyffrin-Easttown History Club Quarterly* 3(4): Part 2. 1940b.
- Mason, J. Alden "Ivory and Resin Figurines from Coclé." *The University Museum Bulletin* 8(4): 13-21. 1940c.
- Mason, J. Alden "Trace of a Vanquished Race." *Philadelphia Inquirer*: p.4 (July 7). 1940d.
- Mason, J. Alden "Gold from the Grave." *Scientific American* 165(5): 261-263. 1941.
- Mason, J. Alden. "New Excavations at the Sitio Conte, Coclé, Panama." In *Proceedings of the Eighth American Scientific Congress, Washington, DC, May 10-18, 1940* vol. 2: 103-107. Washington, DC: Department of State. 1942.
- Mason, J. Alden. "The Lesser Archaeological Cultures of Mexico and Central America." *The University Museum Bulletin* 10(1-2): 49-56. 1943.
- Merrill, Robert Hall. "Photo-Surveying Assists Archeologists Uncovering Ancient Art Objects in a 600-Year-Old Cemetery at Coclé, Panama." *Civil Engineering* 11(4): 233-235 (April). 1941.
- Meyer, Laure. "Les trésors précolombiens de Sitio Conte." *Archéologia* 319: 62-66 (January). 1996.
- Reif, Rita. "Mythic Shields of Blinding Light." *The New York Times*: p. H41 (December 24). 1995.
- Roosevelt, Anna Curtenius "The Goldsmith: The Coclé Style of Ancient Panama." In *The Ancestors: Native Artisans of the Americas*. Eds. A. C. Roosevelt and J. G. E. Smith. New York: Museum of the American Indian. 1979.
- Ruwel, Mary Elizabeth, and others *A Guide to The University Museum Archives*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum. 1984.



Satterthwaite, Linton "J. Alden Mason, 1885-1967." Expedition, The Bulletin of The University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania 10(2): 2-3. 1968.

Sharer, Robert J., and Pamela Hearne "Panama's River of Gold." Archaeology 41: 54-57. 1988.

Shaw-Eagle, Joanna "Walters' 'River of Gold' Show Bedazzles." The Washington Times: p. C16 (March 9). 1994.

Stirling, Matthew W. "The Importance of Sitio Conte." American Anthropologist 51: 514-517. 1949.

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## Partial Index to Subjects and Correspondence

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(Other subjects are described in the Expedition Summary, Scope and Contents Note, Series Descriptions, and Container Listing)

### CORPORATE NAME(S)

- Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution
  - Box 1, Proposed Expedition to Veraguas
  - Box 1, Miscellaneous Correspondence
- Standard Fruit and Steamship Company
  - Box 1, Transportation
- United Fruit Company
  - Box 1, Transportation

### NAME(S)

- Conte, Miguel Antonio
  - Box 1, Expedition
  - Box 1, Division of Objects, Settlement of Contract
  - Box 1, Contracts
  - Box 1, Field Finances
  - Box 3, Gold Lists
- Conte, Wenceslao
  - Box 1, Division of Objects, Settlement of Contract
- Jenks, John Story
  - Box 1, Proposed Expedition to Veraguas
- Kidder, Alfred II
  - Box 1, "Exchange Gift," Panama Museum
- Madeira, Percy C., Jr.
  - Box 1, Proposed Expedition to Veraguas
- Mendez, Alejandro (Director, Museo Nacional de Panama)
  - Box 1, Proposed Expedition to Veraguas

- Box 1, "Exchange Gift," Panama Museum
- Rainey, Froelich G.
  - Box 1, "Exchange Gift," Panama Museum
- Roberts, Frank H. H., Jr. (Bureau of American Ethnology)
  - Box 1, Proposed Expedition to Veraguas
- Satterthwaite, Linton
  - Box 1, Expedition
  - Box 1, Division of Objects, Settlement of Contract
  - Box 1, "Exchange Gift," Panama Museum
- Schaeffer, George S. (Chase National Bank, Panama)
  - Box 1, Preparation for Expedition
  - Box 1, Contracts
- Scott, Donald (Director, Peabody Museum, Harvard University)
  - Box 1, Preparation for Expedition

**SUBJECT(S)**

- Grace Line
  - Box 1, Transportation
- Gratacos, Juan (Veraguas, Panama)
  - Box 1, Proposed Expedition to Veraguas
- Peabody Museum, Harvard University
  - Box 1, Preparation for Expedition
  - Box 1, "Exchange Gift," Panama Museum
  - Box 1, Contracts

## Collection Inventory

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### CORRESPONDENCE.

#### Series Description

Letters from Mason to contacts and officials in Panama and Samuel K. Lothrop of the Peabody Museum detailing the planning of the expedition, and to Museum Director Horace H. F. Jayne reporting on progress from the field. Also included is documentation relating to a proposed second expedition to Panama for the following year (1941), and to the settlement of the contract with the Conte family.

	Box
Preparation for the Expedition 1939-1940.	1
Expedition 1940.	1
Proposed Expedition to Veraguas 1940.	1
Division of Objects, Settlement of Contract 1953-1970.	1
"Exchange Gift," Panama Museum 1956-1957.	1
Miscellaneous Correspondence 1948-1956.	1

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### ADMINISTRATIVE RECORDS.

#### Series Description

Copies of contracts in English and Spanish (including copy of Peabody Museum contract); correspondence and information regarding, and lists of, equipment and supplies used in the field;

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planning of transportation of expedition personnel to and from the site, and shipment of artifacts; receipts and financial statements.

	Box
Contracts.	1
Equipment 1939-1940.	1
Transportation 1939-1940.	1
Field Finances 1940.	1
Overall Expenses 1940.	1

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## **FIELD NOTES.**

### **Series Description**

Field diary of J. Alden Mason, comprising a journal of the expedition and including notes by John Corning; and field diary of Robert H. Merrill, containing the scientific notes and detailed measurements for the excavations, many photographs, plans, and sections. Merrill's diary contains a table of contents. This series also includes a field object catalogue and object cards, and post-expedition notes on the excavations and the artifacts, especially the gold objects.

	Box
J. Alden Mason Diary 1940 [pp. 1-85].	2
J. Alden Mason Diary 1940 [pp. 86-140, and John B. Corning Notes].	2
Robert H. Merrill Field Notes 1940 [pp. 1-49].	2
Robert H. Merrill Field Notes 1940 [pp. 50-102].	2

General Catalogue 1940.	2
Object Cards 1940 [2 folders].	2
Notes on Diary.	3
Cataloguing Notes 1944-1956.	3
Gold Lists.	3

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## **REPORTS AND INTERPRETIVE MATERIALS.**

### **Series Description**

Published articles and drafts of papers and lectures by Mason on the results of the excavations; exhibit brochures; and notes, probably for lecture purposes, on the motion picture film taken in the field. Original news clippings found in this series were removed to Special Collections— Newsclippings.

	Box
Reports 1940.	3
Official Report; Published Materials 1929.	3

## **VISUAL RECORDS, 1940-1996.**

### **Series Description**

Black-and-white film negatives, lantern slides, color transparencies, and 16mm motion picture film (including edited videotape copy) housed in the Photographic Archives. Black-and-white photographic prints are found in Robert H. Merrill's diary (and see p. 11 for explanation of field cataloguing system), and in the standard size print collection. Visual records also include site plans in ink and pencil on paper. See appended lists for standard size prints, lantern slides, and site plans.

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**PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES: STANDARD-SIZE PRINTS.**

1. Field Photos-Camp Shots/ Aerial Shots.
2. Field Photos-Trench 1.
3. Field Photos-Trench 2, Overview.
4. Field Photos-Trench 2, Burials 3, 7, & 8.
5. Field Photos-Trench 2, Burials 11.
6. Field Photos-Trench 2, Burials 12, 13, 14.
7. Field Photos-Trench 2, Burials 17, 18, 23 & 25, 26.
8. Field Photos-On Site Object Shots.
9. Object Photos-Gold Disks.
10. Object Photos-Gold Disks [Color].
11. Object Photos-Gold— Zoomorphic Pendant (Object #40-13-27).
12. Object Photos-Gold Zoomorphic Pendant (Object #40-13-27) [Color].
13. Object Photos-Gold/Copper Sheathings, Pendants, Bells.
14. Object Photos-Gold/Copper Sheathings, Pendants, Bells [Color].
15. Object Photos-Gold/Copper Nose Clips, Ear Rods, Chisels, Bands, Etc.
16. Object Photos-Gold/Copper Nose Clips, Ear Rods, Chisels, Bands, Etc. [Color].
17. Object Photos-Gold/Copper Mounted for Display.

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18. Object Photos-Resin/Ivory Figures with Gold Only.

19. Object Photos-Resin/Ivory Figures with Gold Only [Color].

20. Object Photos-Pottery.

21. Object Photos-Pottery [Color].

22. Object Photos-Stone Celt, Projectile Points [Color].

23. Object Photos-Stone Pendants.

24. Object Photos-Stone Pendants [Color].

25. Object Photos-Stone Peabody Museum, Harvard University Excavation 1930-1933.

#### **OVERSIZE PLANS.**

Map-case

**1. "Sitio Conte, Map of Site" (handwritten on verso).**

M-65-4

**Scope and Contents note**

**2. "Sitio Conte 1940 Map, Scale 1"=20', 13" (handwritten on verso) (encapsulated).**

M-65-4

**Scope and Contents note**

**3. "Field Work Sheet, Sitio Conte Site, Feb. 1940".**

M-65-4

**Scope and Contents note**

**4. [Overview of Trench 2].**

M-65-4

**Scope and Contents note**

**5. [Trench 2 Detail— Burials 11, 14, 15, 18, and 23].**

M-65-4

**Scope and Contents note**

6. [Trench 2 Detail— Burials 12, 14, 15, 16, 18, 22, and 25].

M-65-4

**Scope and Contents note**

7. [Trench 2 Detail— Burial 12] [1 of 2].

M-65-4

**Scope and Contents note**

8. [Trench 2 Detail— Burial 12] [2 of 2].

M-65-4

**Scope and Contents note**

9. [Trench 2 Detail— Burials 13, 19, and 24].

M-65-4

**Scope and Contents note**

10. [Trench 2 Detail— Burial 11] (encapsulated).

M-65-4

**Scope and Contents note**

11. [Trench 2 Detail— Burial 11].

M-65-4

**Scope and Contents note**

12. [Trench 2 Detail— Burials 7, 10, 17, and 23].

M-65-4

**Scope and Contents note**

Movie.

Box

3