

Pilgrimage in Central America, large and small:

Esquipulas, Guatemala, and Guancascos in Honduras,

with a brief geography of the Honduran guancasco.

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Contents

On Pilgrimage 1

Esquipulas, Center of the Black Christ 2

Guancasco: Lepaterique – Ojojona 8

Guancasco: Veracruz, Comayagua 14

Appendix: A Brief Geography of the Honduran *Guancasco* 19

Bibliography 23

Pilgrimage in Central America, large and small: Esquipulas in Guatemala and *Guancascos* in Honduras.

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On Pilgrimage. My first notice of pilgrimage was probably during sophomore English at Memphis Central High in 1956. Each member of the class was required to memorize and to recite in Old English the Prologue of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. I suspect many of us can still do some of it:

"WHAN that aprill with its shoures soote, The droghte of Marche hath perced to the roote And bathed every veyne in swich licour, Of which vertu engendred is the flour . . ."

Through the assortment of pilgrims, travelers joined in a common enterprise, we studied the conflicts of religion, economics, and politics in English society. It was travel, but travel with a purpose, not mere tourism.

For comparison, we also learned that the largest pilgrimage is Hinduism's Kumbh Mela, which changes location in India yearly and that the most important pilgrimage site for Muslims is Mecca, in Saudi Arabia. Christians prefer Jerusalem, Rome, and Santiago Compostela in northwest Spain as their major pilgrimage sites. For Buddhism, Gautama Buddha's "Place of Enlightenment" is Bodh Gaya, India. Much closer to home, some Memphians say that Elvis's Graceland is a pilgrimage site, but that notion is up for discussion – Graceland being a secular place, to most people. Does Graceland really have moral or spiritual significance? Perhaps, for some. Also nearby, we have the "Natchez Pilgrimage," for those revering the heritage of Mississippi and the Old South.

My own real life pilgrimages, over half a century past Central High, have been few – in 1962 in India to Agra (Taj Mahal), Banaras/Varanasi (on the sacred Ganges), and Amritsar (Golden Temple), in 1963 to Copacabana, Bolivia, the largest Andean gathering on the shores of Lake Titicaca at 12,500 feet, in 1983 to climb the sacred Mexican volcano Popocatépetl at 17, 833 feet, and, in 2013 to Santiago Compostela, Spain. Many Memphians have hiked *El Camino*. (see end photographs 40-43.) But the treks I have enjoyed the most are little known, in Central America, where I conduct research as a historical-cultural geographer. From my experiences pilgrimage encompasses five primary elements: 1) very slow and contemplative travel to a sacred place, 2) views of supportive landscape elements along the route, 3) some bodily hardship, 4) participation in a communal and often legendary enterprise, and 5) personal renewal. Pilgrimage is sensuous – if you are open to the new, you can see, smell, hear, taste, and feel a lot of new experiences, often with surprises all along the way. One occasion from Guatemala and two from Honduras serve as my examples – at much different scales.

Esquipulas. Santiago Esquipulas, Guatemala, is home of the largest pilgrimage in Central America (Davidson 2014). Very near the shared border node of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, a gigantic Catholic basilica rises from a basically rural environment (figures 1, 2).



Figure 1. The Esquipulas Valley and its basilica.

Figure 2. The basilica of Esquipulas, Guatemala.



Housed within, a life-sized black Christ (3) attracts over one million visitors each year. The pilgrims believe that the dark wooden statuary is miraculous and people paying homage in person will be rewarded with special attention to their problems: a sick child will be cured, a cancer within can be dissolved, their small business or agricultural field will be more productive. **Figures 3**, **4** (by F. Catherwood (1839), in Stephens 1841).



The original black Christ was carved in 1595 and placed in the small parish church in the middle of the village, but in 1764 after miracles were reported, the Guatemalan bishop was inspired to

construct the basilica as a more appropriate shrine for the statue. He built the large structure a kilometer to the south. Since then Esquipulas has been prominent – as shown on old maps and drawings as reported frequently by travelers such as U.S. diplomat/archeologist John Lloyd Stephens in 1839 (4).

The major periods of pilgrimage are around Easter and especially January 15th, "Day of our Lord Esquipulas," but travelers arrive throughout the year. By bus, auto, and foot visitors come to participate in rituals devoted to "El Cristo Negro." They form long lines waiting to enter the basilica (5), pass by (and maybe even touch) the statue, light candles, kneel, and pray before the image. They linger to hear mass and the choir of the Benedictine monks from Louisiana who now administer the site (6).

Figures 5, 6. Entry line and Benedictine mass of Esquipulas basilica.



After initial respects are paid to the black Christ, pilgrims walk the surrounding countryside to inspect caves, streams, trees, and rock formations that have special significance, probably indicating pre-Christian reverence for the area.

Of course, to feed and house the large influx of seasonal population a temporary infrastructure of eateries and street venders explodes and colors the scene (7). Tourist memorabilia is hawked throughout the town (8). The seasonal impact on the local economy is immense.

One unusual aspect of the Esquipulas experience is the consumption of edible clay, which is mined locally and re-formed into small tablets, about one inch square (9). They are sold very cheaply and consumed by pilgrims and families after returning home during pregnancy and for stomach upset. They are known locally as *tierra santa, kipulas, benditos,* or *pan del Señor*. Eartheating, or geophagy, is a worldwide phenomenon that often has practical origins. The clays of Esquipulas have almost the exact chemical composition of Kaopectate. It seems that the ancients knew of the clay's medicinal value.



Figure 7. Temporary street food venders during Esquipulas festivals.

Figures 8, 9. Hats for pilgrims (toquillas) and edible clay tablets.



After a few days at Esquipulas pilgrims begin their trips home. In over 200 hometowns of the pilgrims local churches also display images of a black Christ that are daily reminders of their trip and serve those who cannot make the journey. In Guatemala images of the Esquipulas Christ are

so widespread that it is considered the national religious icon, just as the Virgin of Guadalupe is for Mexico and for Mexicans living abroad.

One of my many trips to Esquipulas since 1968 began in Jocotán, a Chortí Maya town some 26 km to the north. It was August 1994, when I was returning home from a summer in Honduras. As I was passing through Copán I was told that a large family group was walking to Esquipulas to fulfill a promise. The indigenous people who live in the lands surrounding Esquipulas are especially devoted to their "Cristo Negro." From small villages such as Jocotán, frequent pilgrimages are organized by the Chortí who walk through the pine forests and over open, rocky uplands on a well-known path. Although many make the trip in a day, our group of 20 was slower and spent the night with hospitable relatives in Olapa, the half-way point. They provided plenty of fresh hot tortillas and beans, plus some old newspapers on which to make a bed on their floor.





For most of the way the hike is upslope, but easy. We walked along the piedmont of a small mountain. Happy chatter is normal along the route and but prayers and serious discussions occur when the group arrives at small shrines found along the way. I was without camera, but did return up the route to photography an area of blue crosses erected by Maya *shamans* (native priests, *sacerdotes*) from Quetzaltenango, Guatemala (Xela, to Mayans) and Verapaz over 250 miles by road to the west (10, 11). Adjacent is a man-made hole in the soft limestone where

feathers and copal incense had been burned (12). Not exactly a Christian rite. Parents explain landscape features such as the Piedras de los Compadres (13) to their children . . . and so the culture of the pilgrimage is transferred, unifying generation after generation.



Figures 10, 11. Blue crosses of Maya priests from "Xela" and Verapaz.

Figures 12, 13. Cuevita de copal and Piedras de los Compadres.



On the last day when the folks from Jocotán reached the small parish church in the center of Esquipulas, to conclude their trek, many of my fellow travelers dropped to the old cobblestones to finish the last kilometer on their knees. Long before reaching the steps of the basilica pants become torn, skin is exposed, and cuts and scrapes bring blood to knees and paint the way. Suffering is part of the ritual.

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Guancasco: Lepaterique - Ojojona. At a much lesser scale, villagers in western Honduras participate annually in pilgrimages between neighboring settlements. Along with parish priests, the faithful carry their village saint along back wood trails in reciprocal processions to visit a neighboring saint. The ritual is generally thought to be an ancient tradition to confirm landownership between villages. Today, it is quite the social occasion in the elaboration of the major local festival.

Known locally as *guancasco* (also, *El Paisanazgo* (*Ardón 1987*), *compadrazgos* (*Aguilar Paz 1972:160*), and *guanquerías* (Membreño 1982: 95) at least 94 settlements have participated over the years. For the most part, the ancient tradition is practiced in the region of the indigenous Lenca people. They have lost their native language, but some of their traditions and most of their place names remain (Davidson 2016).

The Lepaterique-to-Ojojona *guancasco* begins during mid-January each year in the Lepaterique church, which is about 20 miles west of Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital. At dawn bells ring out to call parishioners to the church to hear the priest's remarks on why they walk (14). During my trip, in 2004, the priest, a young Franciscan from Costa Rica, was new to the village and overseeing his first *guancasco*. His first remarks were that he understood that last year there was too much drinking and that that would not be tolerated this year – "this is a religious event and must be taken seriously." The local lay leader selected yearly from the community, a retired army colonel, stood in the congregation and voiced support for the priest. Other announcements followed, including a list of the stops planned along the way.

Figure 14. Interior of Lepterique church, 6:30 A. M., January 19, 2004.



By seven o'clock, introductory matters concluded, some 200 parishioners formed outside the church and we began our walk to Ojojona, some 18 air miles to the south. Priest and colonel were in the lead, followed by a few flag bearers. Next were five drummers who beat out a slow cadence (15).





Lepaterique's patron saint, Santiago (St. James), was carried in procession within a beautiful wooded casket-like box, supported on the shoulders of eight men. Bearers alternated every 30-45 minutes.

The first stop, some 40 minutes into the hike, was at an isolated farmstead, where a few women offered small paper cups of hot coffee. Drinkers formed an orderly line (16). Another rest came in front of a small cave-like formation that had evidence of ancient markings (17). Another rest,

about noon, was at a large stone cross that marked the boundary between traditional lands of the two communities. Here, in front of a large pile of rocks, the priest prayed for good crops and peaceful relationships between the villages (18).

Figures 16, 17. Rest stops for coffee and at a cave opening.



Figures 18, 19.



Figures 20, 21.



After 19 kms and ten hours of slow walking, often along narrow trails through low pine forests (19), a dusty road (21) and with frequent rests at large crosses (20), the parade reached Surcos de Caña, the crossroads grounds of a rural church and school for overnight. Here we were welcomed by the representatives of Ojojona, with their saint, San Sebastian and fancy patches (22, 23). The flag bearers from each town challenged each other by waving their banners in the road (24, 25) [*juegos de banderas*]. Comments were heard frequently about who did the better job.





Figures 22, 23. Santiago meets San Sebastian at Surcos de Caña; patches of village representatives.



Figures 24, 25. The flag challenge [juegos de banderas].



Afterward, aside the small, rural church (26, 27) and in the plaza adjacent, impromptu camp sites grew up among family groups and friends (28, 29). Single males were asked to sleep inside the school house. I gathered a large pile of pine needles for bedding and warmth. Many pilgrims brought food to prepare on quickly constructed open wood fires (29). Others paid to eat cheaply at small stalls (26) that had been erected to cook and serve a variety of local dishes, including basic tortillas, but also some red beans and rice, fried pork skins, small portions of grilled pork, and an occasional fried egg in hot sauce.

Figures 26, 27. Church at Surcos de Caña, and interior.



Figures 28, 29. Campsite fires near the church, Surcos de Caña.



Figures 30, 31. Drummers at the morning departure, old photograph of much earlier guancasco..



The chilly night passed with a little too much drinking and impromptu singing and only a few of us got a little sleep. The next morning after prayers in the church, while incense filled the church and the drummers (30) beat out their rhythm, much like pictured from years past (31), the group headed out through the sparse pine forests on a dirt road to Ojojona, another ten kms and five hours away. The most prominent landscape feature is a large blue cross about half way (32). Shortly before entering Ojojona town folks lined the walkway applauding the pilgrims (33). The march concluded in the church, with prayers welcoming the visitors (34). The return to Lepaterique was unorganized, on an individual basis.



Figure 32. The Surcos de Caña – Ojojona cross, near Cofradia, photographed on an earlier trip. Geographer Craig Revels (left) and author (sitting).

Figures 33, 34. Cabildo welcome in Ojojona; Church of Ojojona.



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Guancasco: Veracruz, Comayagua, Honduras. The little caserio of Veracruz is a special place for its devotion to the black Christ of Esquipulas. The tiny chapel (35) there holds five representations of the Esquipulas Christ. Also known, incorrectly, to some residents of the Comayagua Valley as Cantoral (which lies a bit to the west), the caserio is of unusual importance given the size of the settlement and its relatively isolated location. Veracruz sits atop the eastern edge of a ridgeline at an elevation of approximately 1,360 meters in the northwestern corner of the Comayagua Valley, some 15 km due west of Comayagua and 11 km northwest from Ajuterique. In 2001, its resident population was 51 (INE 2001).



Figure 35. Chapel of the Black Christ and plaza of Veracruz, Comayagua, January 15, 2004.

Informants at the Ajuterique church in 1995 told me that the statuary in Veracruz was originally located in their church, but today remains "*de los indios de las montañas*." Long ago, when the black Christ of Ajuterique was visiting the small village upslope, they said, the *cristo* became unusually heavy and was unable to be returned down slope. The people in both settlements agreed that "*la figura*" wished to remain in Veracruz. For many years, Veracruz and Ajuterique have shared the *guancasco* tradition. Today, when Santiago in honored in May in Ajuterique, the *cristo negro* of Veracruz makes the journey to Ajuterique to pay his respect.

The festival in Veracruz normally occurs on January 14 and 15. Pilgrims from down slope, especially from the piedmont region of the northwestern corner of the Comayagua Valley, begin their walks early on the morning of the 14th. Two routes are followed. One, which follows the older, more direct, way, from Ajuterique, heads northwest along a trail via Misterio and Corralitos where one must walk – about 15 upslope kms. The other route follows the modern road, a well maintained gravel road as of January, 2004, that passes through to San Antonio Cañas, another *portillo* village. Because Veracruz has no resident priest, the one from Ajuterique presides over the event.

Public transport for the trip to Veracruz is also available in Comayagua from the north side of the main market. A large truck, with standing room only, leaves at 11 A. M. for Portillo de la Mora. The ride is just less than two hours. The road passes through the lush rice fields, irrigated via concrete canals with water from the Río Selguapa. Past the piedmont, through Lo de Reina, an oak hardwood forest dominates, with an occasional liquidambar. Halfway up the slope, pines begin near La Laguna, followed by another band of hardwoods and then finally at about 1,200 m a few more pines. From Portillo, where the truck stops, pilgrims must walk for 90 minutes on a well-maintained gravel road to reach Veracruz (36). All of the settlements in this geographical zone are *portillos*, settlements that are established in the saddles along the ridgelines of the mountain ranges. **Map 3. Veracruz and vicinity**.



Figure 36. Pilgrims on the road to Veracruz.

Figure 37. El Cristo de Veracruz, 2004.



The primary reason for the pilgrimage is to pay respect to "El Señor de Veracruz." This primary image is about 50 cm tall and hangs on the altar encased in glass (37). A close look reveals two other black *Cristos de Esquipulas* on his right arm. A slightly smaller image has been placed on a table to the left of the main altar and, with the Virgen, is prepared for procession (38). **Figure 38. Processional Black Christ of Veracruz, cared for by the mayordomo and amigos.**



The market held in conjunction with the pilgrimage of mid-January attracts a variety of vendor/traders (39). In fact, the range of the merchants -- from Siguatepeque, Comayagua, Marcala, Jesús de Otoro, La Villa San Antonio -- exceeds the distances traversed by the pilgrims.

Figure 39. A few of the merchants, in the plaza, festival of the Black Christ, Veracruz, Comayagua, January 15, 2004.



Because of my carelessness, I missed the last ride out of town and found myself at the mercy of the very hospitable locals. As night fell and they saw me sitting alone at the cross in the plaza, they invited me over to the open fire where tortillas were being prepared. After a full, warm stomach of five or six tortillas, the mayordomo said I could spend the night in the chapel, if I wished. I was joined by a vendor and her small son. The temperature dropped quickly and the cold night became unbearable until the trader offered me part of a plastic tarp that covered her wares. At last, warm as toast, I recall being so thankful for the kindness of strangers.

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While my participation in these events has been undertaken as a student of geography and culture and not religion, I recognize that a pilgrimage experience can be educational and of value for those whose choose to walk.

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Figures 40, 41. Golden Temple, Amritsar, India, August 1962; Procession at Copacabana, Bolivia, August 1963.



Figures 42, 43. At El Paseo de Cortés, Popocatepetl, with LSU students/faculty 1987; at Magdelena, on El Camino 55.5 km from Santiago Compostela, with Sharon, Joe, Dorothy, and Angela, September 2013.





Appendix. A Brief Geography of the Honduran Guancasco

The reciprocal exchange of patron saints between Honduran villages, *el guancasco*, has captured the attention of several scholars. The attached bibliography indicates the range of interest. While the ritual is generally considered to be an ancient tradition of the indigenous Lenca, and most *guancascos* are in western Honduras, a few sites are well outside Lenca lands (see map 4).

Map 4. West and Central Honduras, with locations of guancasco sites. Black lines indicate longest and outlier routes. Numbers are keyed to list of guancascos below.



According to records currently available, 94 places have participated in 66 *guancascos*. Twentyeight events have been exchanges between two churches. Aside from these, eight communities have served as nodes of networks of three to nine other connected churches. The map above shows circled regions of the networks: SB 1 (Atima, has nine connected settlements), Lem 1 (La Campa, with six places), SB 2 (Chinda, with five places), LP 1 (Marcala, with its connected five churches), Com 1 (Ajuterique, with four other connected sites), Cop 1 (Corquín, Copán, and four other churches), Lem 2 (Erandique centro, with three others), Int 1 (Camasca, Concepción, and Colomoncagua exchange saints with each other). All of the networks are within the Lenca zone.

Distances between participant villages are overwhelmingly less than 10 km. (67%) and just over one-fourth are 11-20 kms apart. Only five *guancascos* have trips over 22 kms.

Two so-called *guancascos* are clearly outside Lenca lands: (23) Catacamas – Culmí, Olancho, and (25) Yocón – Yoro, Yoro. The Texiguat – Liure, El Paraiso, event is barely within the Lenca linquistic region, as can be seen by the "Yuscarán" toponym ("pine mountain" in Lenca).

Other less traditional (or typical) saint exchanges occur within town limits, perhaps at once distinct settlements (now barrios), at San Pedro Sula (non-Lenca), Iguala, Corquín, Gracias, and Erandique.

List of guancasco regions and sites in Honduras, as reported in the literature and from author's field notes.

Map	Depto	Place 1	Place 2	Encuentro	Kms	Citation
ID.					Apart	
SB 1	Sta. Barb.	Atima	San Pedrito		4	Ponce 1982
SB 1	Sta. Barb.	Atima	Nueva Victoria		7	Ponce 1982
SB 1	Sta. Barb.	Atima	Valle de la Cruz		4	Ponce 1982
SB 1	Sta. Barb.	Atima	Nueva Jalapa		18	Chapman 1986
SB 1	Sta. Barb.	Macholoa	S. Vicente Centenario		3	my notes
SB 1	Sta. Barb.	San Nicolas	Nueva Jalapa	Las Graditas	2	Ponce 1982
SB 1	Sta. Barb.	S. Vicente Centenario	Santa Lucia (?)		?	my notes
Lem 1	Lempira	La Campa	Belen		12	Ponce 1982
Lem 1	Lempira	La Campa	Colosuca		17	Chapman 1986
Lem 1	Lempira	La Campa	Caiquin		7	Chapman 1986
Lem 1	Lempira	La Campa	Coloete		9	Chapman 1986
Lem 1	Lempira	Coloete	Colosuca		8	Chapman 1986
Lem 1	Lem/Ocot	Colosuca	Gualcho, Ocot.		10	Ponce 1982
SB 2	Sta. Barb.	Chinda	Concep. del Norte		9	Ponce 1982
SB 2	Sta. Barb.	Chinda	Trinidad		4	Ponce 1982
SB 2	Sta. Barb.	Chinda	Ilama		7	Ponce 1982
SB 2	Sta. Barb.	Gualala	Chinda		12	Ponce 1982
SB 2	Sta. Barb.	Gualala	Ilama		5	Ponce 1982
LP 1	La Paz	Marcala	Chinacla	La Cruz	8	Ponce 1982
LP 1	La Paz	Marcala	Santa Elena		17	Chapman 1986
LP 1	La Paz	Marcala	Yarula		12	Chapman 1986
LP 1	La Paz	Marcala	Santa Cruz		4	my notes
LP 1	La Paz	Yarula	Santa Elena		7	my notes
Com 1	Comayagua	Ajuterique	Veracruz (Cantoral)		20	participant
Com 1	Com/L.P.	Ajuterique	Puringla, L. P.		22	my notes
Com 1	Comayagua	Ajuterique	Quelepa		5	Stone 1968
Com 1	La Paz	Santa Maria, L. P.	Puringla, L. P.		9	Ponce 1982
Cop 1	Copan	Corquin	Cucuyagua		10	Chapman 1986
Cop 1	Copan	Corquin	La Union		12	Chapman 1986
Cop 1	Copan/Ocot	Corquin	Sensenti, Ocotepeque		12	Chapman 1986
Cop 1	Copan	Corquin, centro	Corquin, San Pedrito	within	1	Chapman 1986
Lem 2	Lempira	Erandique	Gualmoaca		1	Ponce 1982

Lem 2	Lempira	Erandique, centro	Gualmuaca		1	Chapman 1986
Lem 2	Lempira	Erandique, centro	Erandique		1	Chapman 1986
Lem 2	Lempira	Gualmoaca	El Conal		6	notes 1991
Int 1	Intibuca	Camasca	Colomoncagua		12	my notes
Int 1	Intibuca	Camasca	Concepcion		6	my notes
Int 1	Intibuca	Concepcion	Colomoncagua		11	my notes
1	Comayagua	Taulabe	Jaitique		4	Becerra 2006:8
2	Comayagua	Villa San Antonio	Yarumela		5	Ponce 1982
3	Copan/Lem	Ороа	Pajapas, Lempira		4	my notes
4	Cortes	San Pedro Sula	SPS Centro	within	1	Ponce 1982
		Medina				
5	El Paraiso	Texiguat	Liure		15	Ponce 1982
6	Fran. Mora.	Cofradia	Zepate	La Raja	3	Ponce 1982
7	Fran. Mora.	Comayaguela	Lejamani	garita	60	Ponce 1982
8	Fran. Mora.	Lepaterique	Ojojona	Surcos de Cana	20	participant
9	Fran. Mora.	Talanga	San Juan Flores		16	Ponce 1982
10	Intibuca	Intibuca	Yamaranguila		8	Ponce 1982
11	Intibuca	Yaramanguila	San Fran. Opalaca		30	Becerra 2006:8
12	Intibuca	San Antonio Flores	San Lucas, Lempira		9	my notes
13	Intibuca	San Juan	San Miguelito		9	Ponce 1982
14	La Paz	Guajiquiro	San Nicolas	Recibimiento	12	Ponce 1982
15	La Paz	Tutule	Planes		8	my notes
16	Lempira	Gracias, S. Sebastian	Mejicapa		2	Ponce 1982
17	Lempira	Gualcince	San Andres		12	notes 1991
18	Lempira	Guarita	Tomala		6	Chapman 1986
19	Lempira	Iguala, centro	Iguala, del Calvario	within	1	Chapman 1986
20	Lempira	San Andres	Santa Cruz		13	Chapman 1986
21	Lempira	San Marcos (?)	El Carrizal		?	Chapman 1986
22	Lempira	Santa Cruz de la Sierra		within	0	Ponce 1982
23	Olancho	Catacamas	Culmi	Aguacatal	40	Ponce 1982
24	Sta. Barb.	Petoa	San Marcos		12	Aguilar P. 1972
25	Yoro	Jocon	Yoro		30	Aguilar P. 1972
26	EP/FM	Moroceli, E. P.	Villa San Francisco, FM		12	Aguilar P. 1972
	?	San Antonio	San Rafael (?)		?	my notes
	?	San Jose (?)	Valle Santa Maria (?)		?	my notes

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