

## Wandering Toponyms in Honduras: The Case of *Sula*

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### Introduction

Those of us who have studied historical cartography, or simply enjoy looking at old maps, have learned that names placed on maps, toponyms, are not always permanent. Place names change over time, and often, even the most prominent names can be transferred in location --sometimes on purpose, but also by cartographic accident (for one example see Edwards 1967). Mistakes in place names can have severe consequences for those who require geographical precision.

Among the errors that persist in Honduran cartography the most notorious is perhaps the so-called "Sula Valley," which surrounds the lower Ulúa River. The original Sula Valley is located on the upper course of the Chamelecón River, near the town of Sula, in the municipality of Macuelizo, Santa Barbara department. It was not until the beginning of the eighteenth century that San Pedro received the name Sula (or its variants: Vsula, Usula, Zula, Urla, Ula, etc.). Apparently, the map of D. C. Hitchcock, prepared for E. G. Squier in 1854, is the primary cause of the Ulúa Valley being renamed by this incorrect name, in English: "Great Plain of Sula" (see map below). Squier's books were widely read and the maps they contained served as the basis for the elaboration of other maps. Three years later, on his 1857 map, William V. Wells printed the "Sula Valley" and the deed was consummated. Thus was established the misguided name that persists until this day.

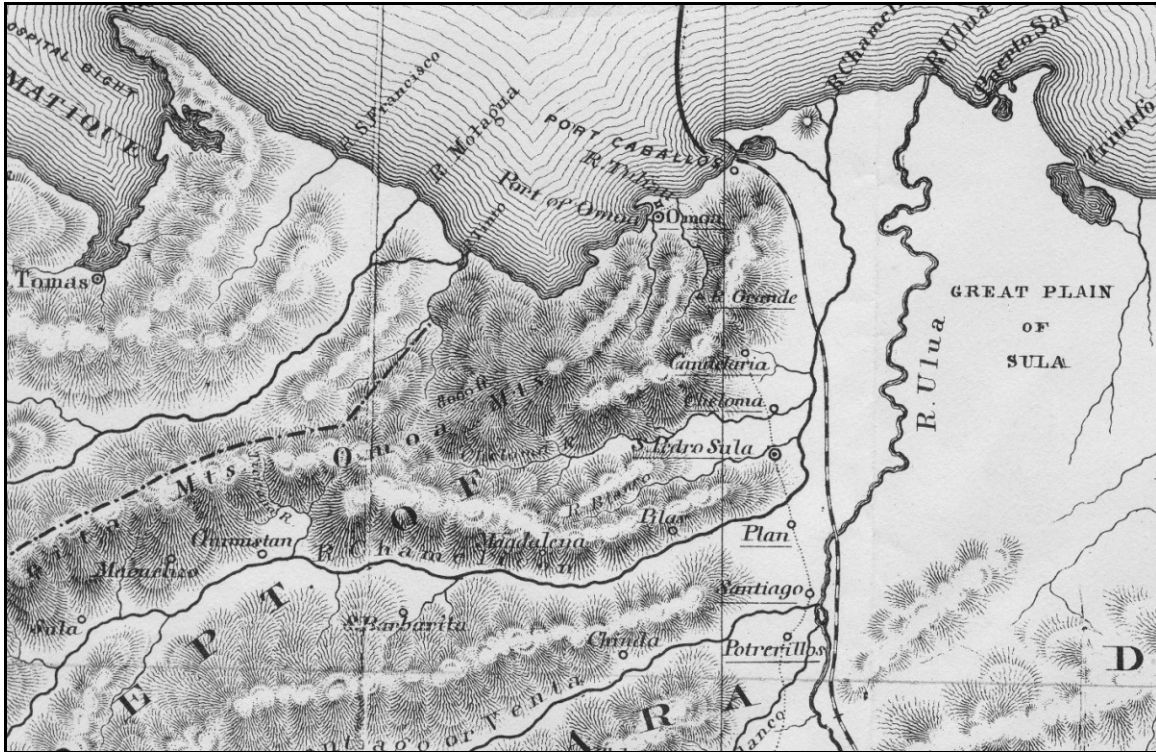
Confusion over these places and their names has been passed on by some of the most prominent historians of the early colonial period. A prime example of such disinformation is that of Chamberlain (1953: 32) who wrote that "Cerezeda [an early conquistador] returned to the Valley of Sula, along the lower Río de Ulúa."

Toponyms such as Sulaco (Yoro), Río Sulaco, Sulalapa (a quebrada east of Naco Valley), and Sulayto, a 1874 land grant near San Jorge, Sensenti (ANH 1901: 294), probably originated with the same root word, but are not related to either Sula Valley location.

Apparently, *Sula* is derived from the Nahuatl word *zollen*, referring in Spanish to the bird, *cordonice*. It seems that the term might also be related to other *u-l-a* words found throughout western Honduras: *Ulúa*, Santa Ana *Ula*, *Sulaco*, *Açula*, *Ingrigula*, *Jurla*, *Yarula*. The geographic unity of virtually all these places is their common attachment to the tributaries and main trunk that make up the Ulúa River basin drainage system. While this unity does not necessarily make the term relate to the river or even to water in any aboriginal language of Honduras, this might be the case. As an early name for an important valley, Sula appeared in several forms according to the keenness of the Spanish ear and contemporary orthography. Between 1525 and 1536, terms referring to

Sula appear in the literature as *Azula*, *Açula*, *Zula*, *Cura*, and *Curx*.

**Map.** Portion of the 1854 Hitchcock/Squier map, showing the town of *Sula* (in the southwest), *S. Pedro Sula* and *Great Plain of Sula* (in the valle of the *R. Ulua*).



As all who have passed along the paved highway between San Pedro Sula and Copán Ruinas know, for much of the route the road follows the elongated valley of Chamelecón River. Local relief, although slight, in two places separates the relatively level topography between La Florida and San Pedro Sula into three easily recognizable valleys. The partitions are obvious while on the site, but they are blurred when observed on maps of great contour intervals (less than 1:25,000 scale). The modern 1:50,000 maps of Honduras include the unnamed Sula Valley as a western section of the Quimistán Valley (IGN 2461-I).

This was not the case on earlier maps. Some maps of the 18th century clearly portray the *Valle de Sula* as independent and to the west of *Valle de Quimistán* and the *Valle de Naco* (1776a Díez Navarro). Another map shows *Valle de Sula* between *Valle de La Venta*, to the west, and *Valle de Quimistán*, on the east (1776b Díez Navarro). Fifty years later, when Central American armies passed through the upper Chamelecón Valley, it was called the "Llanos de Sula" (Guzmán 1832). Modern residents of the area near Macuelizo and Sula use the term "Sula" when locating the modern village and its adjacent flatlands just to the east.

## The Aboriginal Valle de Sula

The aboriginal and post-Conquest valley known as Sula is located approximately 70 kilometers west of modern San Pedro Sula. The Sula Valley was an unusually important aboriginal place and attracted significant attention from the earliest Spanish entradas. Not only was the region valued as a major flat land with dense aboriginal occupation, gold was found nearby, and it was along the well-traveled route between the Ulúa Valley, Copán, and the Motagua depression. Further, the Sula Valley occupied the strategic location of being the highest valley, the headwaters, in the Chamelecón chain before crossing the ridgeline and descending into the Copán Valley on the west. As viewed on the 1/50,000 map (IGN 2461-I), it is obvious that the settlement known as Sula occupied the key eastern site before entering and leaving the mountains between the Copán and Chamelecón drainage basins.

The term *Sula* can be dated from at least 1525 in accounts by Spanish historians. Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1972: 484), who accompanied Cortés in his Honduran adventures and roamed the country for 27 months in 1525-27, wrote that "fuimos a unos pueblos que se decían Giramonga y *Azula*." Capitan Sandoval had been there in the fall of 1526 also. *Azula* (also *Açula*) was reported by Cortés (1526) to be "a major settlement of over 2000 house, with several subject towns."

The town (and valley), although with several different transcriptions, is consistently located in the same place. In a document from 1535 the place appears as *Zula*, "an Indian town in a valley along the Chamelecón" (AGI 1535). One year later, during the July 1536 repartimiento and allocation of indigenous settlements under the jurisdiction of San Pedro, the place was a major reference location, an important valley west of Naco on the upper Chamelecón (Alvarado 1536). No single town was called Sula, but the valley, transcribed as *Zura*, *Cura* and *Curx*, and its surrounding mountains were the locations of 11 assigned settlements. The *Valle Guraynaco* [Çula y Naco] is also mentioned in Montejo's 1539 letter to the King. The governor noted that "when pacified by Chaves a few years ago there were 26 or 28 towns in the *Valle Zura*, but now there are no people ... only a valley and one town with mines and a hacienda"(CDI 24 [1875]: 250-9). Two years later, the toponym appears as *Çula*, a valley (AGI 1541; MCAH IV: 291). By 1548, it was labeled "una provincia," called *Zula* (AGI Pat. leg 58, ramo 4), which reinforces the idea that the place was a large area and not a single settlement. The absence of Sula in the censuses of tribute between 1582 (Contreras G.) and 1767 (AGCA) might imply that it was an abandoned site, or perhaps that by then the region had no tribute-paying residents.

Even after the onslaught and destruction of the Conquest, population rejuvenated in the Sula Valley at least by 1782, when funds were required for the construction of the fort at Omoa. Sula inhabitants, with Quimistán, donated 108 pesos (AGCA 1782). Sula was noted in the church listing of Cadinaños in 1791, and the Anguiano census of 1801. Sula was the smallest town in the district of San Pedro, with 29 households. The count of 1860 indicates families of 74 men present and by time of the national census of 1887 Sula reported 250 residents.

## San Pedro before the Sula suffix

The second largest Honduran city, which lies on the southwestern edge of the Ulúa River Valley, is named San Pedro Sula (Pastor F. 1990). That this prominent settlement has the Sula suffix undoubtedly has played some role in popularizing the relocation of the Sula Valley. However, from a review of the historical documentation of the settlement, it is easily seen that the suffix was a late fixture.

When founded by Pedro Alvarado in 1536, the site was first called "Villa de Señor Sant Pedro de Puerto Caballos" (Alvarado 1536: 535). Three years later, the new governor of the province moved the town "three leagues" south to a healthier spot and renamed it "Villa de San Pedro de Puerto Caballos" (Montejo 1539). Puerto Caballos was the seaport (now Puerto Cortés) just north of San Pedro. Primary records from the remainder of sixteenth century consistently refer to the settlement as San Pedro. The Italian traveler Benzoni (1542: 99) visited "San Pedro, not far from Vulua River." The first Honduran Bishop, Pedraza (1544) wrote of "la villa de San Pedro" that was four leagues from "las minas de Zula." The more general census listings of Honduran settlements in 1582 (Contreras G.), 1590 (Valverde), and 1592 (AGI Cont. 989) all use "San Pedro" as the term and never "San Pedro Sula."

For the 17th century "Sula," to my knowledge, is never used with San Pedro. For only one example, Ordóñez de Solís (1639) refers consistently to "San Pedro" several times in his letter to the king.

Finally, at the beginning of the 18th century the small administrative town just west of the Chamelecón and south of Choloma became associated with the term "Sula." To my knowledge, the first document that notes a place known as "Sn Pedro Sula" is dated 1714. The primary purpose of the manuscript (AGCA 1714) is a discussion of the relocation of the Indian town of Candelaria Masca to the western fringe of the Ulúa Valley. A side note simply mentions that "Sn Pedro Sula" is nearby. "San Pedro de Sula," as new place name also appears in the 1716 letter of don Enrique Logman to the Capitanía General in Guatemala (AGCA 1716; see also RABN 26 (6) 1947, and Bonilla 1955: 319). The Englishman, John Cockburn, who was marooned near Puerto Caballos in 1730 and passed through the small village, knew it as "St. Peter's Solia" (Cockburn 1735: 23). A few years later, the well-informed report of Luis Díez Navarro (1744) consistently refers to the site as "San Pedro Sula."

Near the close of the 19th century "San Pedro Sula" appears consistently in the primary documentation, but the other site, original Sula, does as well. Records from the fortification at Omoa (AGCA 1782), while listing recent donations for the upkeep of the fort, show both "Ciudad y ranchos de S. Pedro Sula" and "Valle de Quimistán y Sula." At this period, San Pedro Sula was not very important in the lower Ulúa region--the small Indian town of Petoa, forty kilometers to the southwest, overshadowed San Pedro Sula and served as the Spanish center for the four small Indian towns that remained in the Ulúa floodplain (AGCA 1784). By the time of the Cadinaños census in 1791, "S P Zula" had re-obtained *curato* status and oversaw church activities in the two small Indian towns of Candelaria[Masca] and Ticamaya (AGI 1791).

## Cartographic Evidence

Old maps show equally well how the *Sula* place name moved eastward across northwestern Honduras. Maps between 1575 and 1723 without exception show "S. Pedro" or "San Pedro" without the suffix (for a few examples see maps: 1575 López de Velasco (later the 1601 Herrera), 1625 Gerritsz, 1642 Tamayo, 1666 Sanson, 1690 Fuentes y Guzmán, 1701 Moll, 1711 Anon.). To my knowledge, the text with the 1723 map of Núñez, the churchman, is the first to mention the toponym "San Pedro Sula."

For the remainder of the 18th century cartographers were ambivalent in naming San Pedro, with and without Sula. Díez Navarro, the most important mapper, on his 1758 map places "Sn Pedro." The 1776b Díez Navarro has "San Pedro," and "Valle de Vlúa." Two years later, on the important 1770 map of del Castillo "Sn Pedro Sula" is found. Governor Ramón Anguiano, as late as 1798, placed "Sn Pedro." On English language maps, however, the cartography lags and "San Pedro" remains for much longer (1774 Kitchin, 1774 Speer). The height of confusion is expressed on the 1839 Whittaker map. *San Pedro* is shown in its appropriate place on the west side of the Chamelecón and S. Pedro Sula is located far up the Chamelecón, but badly misplaced from the "Valley of Naco."

Perhaps the key map that most popularized the Ulúa Valley as "The Sula Valley" is that drawn by D. C. Hitchcock (1854) and published by E. G. Squier, the widely-read North American diplomat who worked in Honduras during the mid-19th century. Large maps included in his books on Honduras display "Great Plain of Sula" over the Ulúa floodplain (see map above). Where Squier learned the place name is not known -- perhaps from the local folk. But Squier was well read on Central American topics and might have seen the report by the Spanish engineer, Porta y Costa (1791), which named a fort 12 leguas up the Río Ulúa "Suluteca"-- a Nahuatl-derived term that translates into Spanish as "Valle Sula." Another probable source was the 1852 map of the Englishman Wyld ("S. Pedro Sula"). Wyld was conducting research on the trans-isthmian route, as was Squier. At any rate, most books by Squier on Central America were soon translated into Spanish and the "Great Plain of Sula" appeared prominently in Spanish as "Valle de Sula." Names of the original village of *Sula* and the town of *San Pedro Sula* also appear on the Squier maps, but at much reduced size in comparison to "The Great Plain of Sula."

The persuasive Squier, with his maps and associated texts about Sula, must be given most credit for popularizing the Ulúa Valley as the Sula Plain. His writings made clear to readers his belief that "The Ulúa . . . flows through a plain of great extent, which was called by the conquerors the plain of Sula" (Squier 1855: 75; 1870: 27). Apparently, this mistake by Squier was the final perpetuation of the error of mislocating Sula. Since the era of Squier, few have questioned the location of the real Sula Valley. The map of Hazzard (1856) continued the tradition.

The *título de tierra* entitled "Valle de Sula" located in the National Archives in Tegucigalpa (ANH-TT Santa Bárbara 456 [1779]) gives further support for the western Sula site and may provide a key to understand why the *Sula* toponym transferred to San Pedro. In the manuscript two well-known modern places are mentioned, *hacienda de Sula* and *Chumbagua*. The latter site was then a part of the "*tierras de Sula*." The document

states additionally that the residents of Sula and Macuelizo who became landowners were required to pay priests in "San Pedro Sula" for the rent of lands. Could this connection between priests in San Pedro Sula and the Sula lands to the west have caused the transfer of the place name? Did priests who administered lands in Sula move to San Pedro and take the name with them? Perhaps during the early 18th century, just before the AGCA 1714 document, and keep the name of their former lands with them? And did Núñez, the clergyman from Guatemala, learn about this first and note it when writing about his map of 1723 ?

In 1733, when the church realigned the borders of the Honduran curatos, the original Sula Valley was placed formally under the jurisdiction of San Pedro, along with the Quimistán Valley, Petoa, and Chinda, a little upstream on the middle Uluá (AGCA 1733).

In Honduras, as is the case elsewhere, place names appearing on maps often change in location through time. Prominent examples of such "wandering toponyms" from Honduras would also include "Taguzgalpa" and its variations (see essay 7 herein). However, the transfer of the place name *Sula* and *Valle de Sula* has the greatest potential for misunderstanding. Since 1980, much archeological interest has focused on the modern Valle de Sula of northwestern Honduras (Henderson 1988, Robinson 1986), and many readers and others unfamiliar with Honduran history might not realize that the modern Valle de Sula in the flood plain of the Uluá River (where the current research is underway) is not the pre-conquest Valle de Sula. The transfer or transposition of the place name is an early 18th century occurrence as can be seen in the documentary and cartographic record. Why the transfer took place is more difficult to understand.