University of Calgary

PRISM Repository **https://prism.ucalgary.ca**

Conferences Students' Union Undergraduate Research Symposium

2009

The Archaeology of Death on the Shore of Lake Nicaragua

Wilke, Sacha

Wilke, S. "Archaeology of Death on the Shore of Lake Nicaragua". 4th Annual Students' Union Undergraduate Research Symposium, November 18-19, 2009, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB.
http://hdl.handle.net/1880/47649
Downloaded from PRISM Repository, University of Calgary

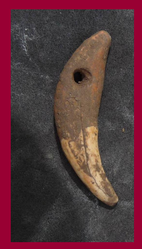
The Archaeology of Death on the Shore of Lake Nicaragua

Sacha Wilke
University of Calgary

Introduction

Archaeologically speaking Nicaragua is one of the most poorly documented countries in Central America. Most previous information regarding artifacts associated with burials is found from looted collections, essentially eliminating any contextual contributions to the archaeological record. Burial practices provide important information regarding past societies. In this poster three avenues of information will be examined in order to determine social inequalities: the presence, type, and quality of elite objects and value goods.

The site of El Rayo is located on the Asese Peninsula of Lake Nicaragua and is dated to the Bagaces (AD 300-800) and Sapoa (AD 800-1200) periods based on the ceramic assemblage at the site. Three areas will be examined for this report: Locus 1, and Operations 2 and 3 at Locus 3. These three excavations contain large areas of human remains as well as artifacts generally associated with human burials.



Locus 1

Locus 1 was exposed by a road that cut through the area to the east. Informants told us that as the area was removed multiple ceramic vessels and burials were recovered. Suggesting that the area excavated is only a small part of a much larger burial ground. Multiple areas were excavated this summer and all recovered burial goods.

Operation 2 recovered four Sacasa Striated urns, a large globular olla, human remains, as well as a cache of prestige goods. The cache consisted of four lithic points, two large ear spools and a basalt core and was associated with the cranium of Individual 11 as well as a small bowl holding 141 small red ceramic beads. Other human remains were recovered from these units but were not in close association with this cache.

An incredibly complex set of units included multiple burial urns along with other vessels. Excavations ended with multiple crania and articulated long bones. Associated with these individuals were, 3 small vessels, a spindle whorl and a mano.

Locus 3 Operation 2

No complete Sacasa Striated vessels were found in association with the secondary burials seen at Operation 2. Complete vessels were found in the uppermost and lowest levels of the pit. Two offering clusters were found at the same depth with one composed of a miniature bowl covered with an inverted cup. The second offering cluster contained a human molar, a ceramic foot of a bird figurine, a net sinker along with a copper bell. This copper bell is the one of only a few to be found in Nicaragua in archaeological context. A jaguar tooth pendant and ocarina (similar to a whistle) in the shape of a water bird were also found at this operation.

The most complete sample of Sapoa period human remains were recovered from this area. These bones however, were severely deteriorated. All that remained were unidentifiable long bones of the arms or legs.

Locus 3 Operation 3

Feature 33 contains the entire Locus 3 Operation 3 excavations. The excavations occurred in mainly a North-South orientation which uncovered 18 complete vessels, which were placed into a trench dug out of the *Talpetate*. Three of the vessels were excavated to provide a comparative collection to the Locus 1 shoe pots: Vessel 1, Vessel 8, and Vessel 17. Within each of the vessels was a single significant artifact identifiable as an offering. Vessel 1 contained a chert lance point, Vessel 8 contained a fragmented basalt grinding stone known as a metate and Vessel 17 contained bone weaving tools. Vessel 10 was also excavated as a possible offering vessel, but it contained nothing of significance.

The rock cluster on the northwest edge of the feature is an oddity. Once exposed the rock cluster appeared to be in a rectangular pattern sectioned into two halves by another line of rocks and may have functioned as an altar. Human remains were found at the base of this feature but were not contained within a shoe pot. Unfortunately, excavations concluded prior to the complete excavation of this area.

I estimate that two periods of deposition occurred to bring the feature to its completion. In the primary deposition the trench would have been dug to encompass the extent of the shoe pots along with the human remains. I hypothesize that a second deposition occurred at which time vessels were added that crushed those placed in the ground earlier.

Conclusions

Locus 1 appears to be a mass cemetery that covers an expansive area and was used over a long period (spanning the Bagaces and Sapoa time periods). The diversity in associated artifacts and concentration of material suggests this was a public cemetery, with the burials suggesting social stratification, with differential access to luxury goods. Locus 3 is comprised of smaller burial areas. The objects associated with Operation 2 at Locus 3 are some of the most exotic goods associated with any of the burials. The delimited burials of Locus 3, Operation 3 likely represent a private burial deposit of a socially linked group. The presence of one significant object within each shoe pot suggests a continuity of status between the burials.

These excavations are critically important for the study of Nicaraguan prehistory. Unique finds were made at El Rayo with little precedence from within the country. Other artifacts such as the copper bell, ocarina, and the cup shaped vessel are previously only known from looted collections, lacking their provenience information.

Further study must occur to contradict, clarify, and support, the findings from the El Rayo site in order to further our understanding of the prehistory of Nicaragua.

References

Chilcote, Celise and Geoffrey McCafferty.
2005.*Tooth and consequences: Mortuary analysis from Santa Isabel, Nicaragua*. Paper presented at the 38th Annual Chacmool Conference, University of Calgary.
Coe, Michael and Claude Baudez.
1961. The Zoned Bichrome Period in Northwestern Costa Rica (American Antiquity, vol.26, pp 505-515).
Dennett, Carrie and Kent Bromley.
2008. *Seats of Power: A "Behind the Scenes" Reassessment of Jaguar Effigy Vessels from Greater Nicoya*. Paper presented at the 41th Annual Chacmool Conference, University of Calgary.
Haberland, Wolfgang.
1992. The Culture History of Ometepe Island: Preliminary sketch (survey and excavations 1962-1963). In *The Archaeology of Pacific Nicaragua*, ed. F. W. Lange, P. D. Sheets, A. Martinez, and S. Abel-Vidor, pp. 63-117. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
Healy, Paul. F.
1980. *Archaeology of the Rivas Region, Nicaragua*. Wilfred Laurier University Press, Waterloo, Ontario.
McCafferty, Geoffrey, G.
2008. Domestic Practices in Post Classic Santa Isabel, Nicaragua. *Latin American Antiquity,* 19(1) 64-82.
McCafferty, Geoffrey, G. and Larry Steinbrenner.
2005. Chronological Implications for Greater Nicoya from the Santa Isabel Project, Nicaragua. *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 16 (1): 131-146.
Oveido y Valdes, Francisco.
1990. *Natural history of the West Indies*. Translated by Sterling A. Stoudemire. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, N.C.
Squier, Ephraim G.
1990. Observations on the Archaeology and Ethnology of Nicaragua. Labyrinthos, Culver City, C.A.
Willey, Gordon, and Albert Norweb.
1959. *Preliminary Report on Archaeological Fieldwork in Nicaragua*. Manuscript on file, Peabody Museum. Harvard University, Cambridge.

Poster Design & Printing by Genigraphics® - 800.790.4001