The Archaeology of Death on the Shore of Lake Nicaragua

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Introduction

Archaeologically speaking, Nicaragua is one of the most poorly documented countries in Central America. Most precious information regarding artifacts associated with human remains from local collections, essentially eliminating any contextual contribution to the archaeological record. Recent projects provide important information regarding past societies. In this paper, three areas of information will be examined in order to determine societal interaction: the presence, type, and quality of items found at site.

The site of El Raya is located on the Burnt Peninsula of Lake Nicaragua and dated to the Bella (40-300 AD) and Sapoa (300-1000 AD) periods based on the ceramic quantities at the site. Two areas will be examined for this report: Locus 1, and Operations 2 through 5 at El Raya. 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 small trench cut through the area to the east. Informants told us that as the area was removed multiple ceramic vessels and human remains were recovered. Suggesting that the area excavated was only a small part of a much larger burial ground.

Multiple areas were excavated this manner and all recovered burials were removed.

Operation 2 recovered four Sacaicas Striated urns, a large globular olla, human remains, as well as a cache of prestige goods. The cache consisted of four little pots, two large ear spindles and a burial urn and was associated with the remains of individuals 13 and 14 as well as a small flaked 14 and 15 small red ceramic beads. Other human remains were recovered from these units but were not in close association with these. 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 maize.

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 Trench. Three of the vessels were excavated to provide a comparative collection to the Locus 1 and 2 pots. Vessel 13, Vessel 8, and Vessel 17. Within each of these vessels was a single significant artifact identifiable as an offering. Vessel 1 contained a chert lance point, Vessel 3 contained a ceramic bundle grinding stone known as a manta, and Vessel 17 contained horse-sounding tools. Vessel 10 was also excavated as a possible offering vessel, but it contained nothing of significance.

The rock cluster on the northeastern edge of the feature is an anomaly. 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 trends would have been dug to encompass the extent of the shoe pot along with the human remains. I hypothesize that a second deposition occurred at which time vessels were added that crushed these placed in the ground earlier.

Locus 3 Operation 2

No complete Sacaicas Striated vessels were found in association with the secondary burials seen in 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 inlaid cup. The second offering cluster contained a human skull and a ceramic feet of a bird figurine, a net sinker along with a copper bell. This copper bell is one of only a few to be found in Nicaragua in archaeological contexts. A jaguar teeth pendant and scutum (similar to a shield) 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 undetectable long bones of the arms or legs.

Conclusions

Locus 1 appears to be a man cemetery that covers an expansive area and was used over a long period (opening the Bella 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 1 are some of the most exotic goods associated with any of the burials. The delimited burials of Locus 3, Operation 1 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 Mesoamerican prehistory. Unique finds were made at El Raya with little precedent from within the country. Other artifacts such as the copper bell, scutum, and the cup shaped vessel are previously only known from local collections, lacking their provenience information.

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

References


