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The Archaeology of Death on the Shore of Lake Nicaragua

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Locus 1

Locus 1 was exposed by a small 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 season and all recovered burials were sampled.

Operation 2 recovered four Sacusa Striated urns, a large globular olla, human remains, as well as caches of prestige goods. The cache consisted of four little jars, two large ear spouts and a bird bone and was associated with the cremains of individual 11 as well as a small find 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 mace.

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 10 complete vessels, which were placed into a trench dig out of the Trench. Three of the vessels were excavated to provide a comparative collection to the Locus 3 site pots: Vessel 8, Vessel 15, and Vessel 17. Within each of the vessels was a single significant artifact identifiable as an offering. Vessel 1 contained a chatelance point, Vessel 5 contained a fragmentary bead graining stone known as a mace, and Vessel 17 contained bone weaving tools. Vessel 10 was also excavated as a possible offering vessel, but it contained nothing of significance.

The rockCluster is on the northwest edge of the feature in an ashy. Once exposed the rockCluster 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 these pots along with the human remains. I hypothesize that a secondary deposition occurred at which time vessels were added that covered these placed in the ground earlier.

Locus 3 Operation 2

No complete Sacusa 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 bird covered with an imbricated cup. The second offering cluster contained a human metatarsal, a ceramic foot of a bird offering, a cut stinger 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 scrotum (similar to a whistle) in the shape of a water bird were also found at this operation.

The most complete sample of Sacusa 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.

Conclusions

Locus 3 appears to be a large cemetery that covers an expansive area and was used over a long period (spanning the Bajos and Sapura time periods). The diversity in associated artifacts and concentrations 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 more exotic goods associated with any of the burials. The delineated 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 Nicaraguan prehistory. Unique finds were made at El Rays with little precedence from within the country. Other artifacts such as the copper bell, scrotum, and the cup shaped vessel are previously only known from looted collections, lacking their provenance information.

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

References


