The Archaeology of Death on the Shore of Lake Nicaragua

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Introduction

Archaeologically, Nicaragua is one of the most poorly documented countries in Central America. Most precious information regarding artifacts associated with burials is found in looted collections, essentially eliminating any contextual contributions to the archaeological record. Burial practices provide important information regarding past societies. In this paper, these instances of information will be examined in order to determine social inequalities: the presence, type, and quality of artifacts and grave goods.

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

Locus 1

Locus 1 was exposed by a small cut through the area to the east. Informants told us that 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 recorded.

Operation 2 recovered four Sacauna Striated urns, a large globular olla, human remains, as well as a cache of prestige goods. The cache consisted of four little jars, two large ear spouts and a bird crouse and was associated with the maximum of individual 11 as well as a small bowl holding 141 small red ceramic beads. Other human remains were recovered from these areas 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 wheel and a stone.

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 dug out of the Tulepete. Three of these vessels were excavated to provide a comparative collection to the Locus 2 show pits: 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 chariot lance point, Vessel 8 contained a fragmented hand grinding stone known as a mastic and Vessel 17 contained bone working 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 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 those placed in the ground earlier.

Locus 3 Operation 2

No complete Sacauna 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 rim. The second offering cluster contained a human male; a ceramic stela of bird figure, 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 large teeth pendant and scapula (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.

Conclusions

Locus 1 appears to be a man cemetery that covers an expansive area and was used over a long period (spanning the Ranas 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 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 Raya with little precedence from within the country. Other artifacts such as the copper bell, scapula, 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 Raya site in order to further our understanding of the prehistory of Nicaragua.

References


