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Introduction

Archaeologically speaking Nicaragua is one of the most poorly documented countries in Central America. Most previously published data is restricted to material from looted collections, essentially eliminating any contextual contributions to the archaeological record. Recent projects provide important information regarding past societies. In this paper, three seasons of fieldwork will be examined in order to determine social inequality: the presence, type, and quality of artifact and stone goods.

The site of El Rayo is located on the eastern Peninsula of Lake Nicaragua and is dated to the Bagaces (AD 500-800) and Sapoa (AD 800-1200) periods based on the ceramic assemblage at the site. These 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 small trench cut through the area to the east. In total, twelve human burials were recovered, including one associated with burial vessels. Suggesting that this area was enculted only a small part of a much larger burial ground. Multiple burials were excavated this season and all recovered burials were documented. Operation 2 recovered three Saca cave urns, a large globular olla, human remains, as well as a cache of prestige goods. The cache contained four little pots, two large ear spouts and a basin olla, and was associated with the presence of indios/13 as well as a small box holding 141 small red ceramic beads. Other human remains were recovered from these units but were not in close association with this cache.

Locus 3 Operation 3

Locus 3 Operation 2

No complete Saca cave urns 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 box covered with an inverted cup. The second offering cluster contained a human scalp, a ceramic face of a bird, offering a cat skull 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.

Locus 3 contains the entire Locus 3 Operation 3 excavations. The excavations occurred in a pit on the shore of the lake. The two offering clusters were found at the same depth with one composed of a miniature box covered with an inverted cup. The second offering cluster contained a human scalp, a ceramic face of a bird, offering a cat skull 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 burials however were severely deteriorated. All that remained were unidentifiable long bones of the arms or legs.

Locus 3 Operation 1

Locus 1 appears to be a man cemetery that covers an expansive area and was used over a long period (opening 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 artifacts associated with Operation 2 at Locus 3 are some of the most exotic goods associated with any of the burials. The delimited burial of Locus 3, Operation 3 likely represent a private burial deposit of a socially linked group.

Conclusions

These excavations are critically important for the study of Nicaraguan prehistoric Unique finds were made at El Rayo with little precedence from within the country. Other artifacts such as the copper bell, scutum, 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 Rayo site in order to further our understanding of the prehistory of Nicaragua.

References