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 previous information regarding artifacts associated with burials is found in looted collections, essentially eliminating any contextual contributions to the archaeologically recorded burial practices. Providing important information regarding past societies. In this paper these purposes of information will be examined in order to determine social inequality: the presence, type, and quality of objects related to the burials.

The site of El Rivas is located at the Ausa Peninsula of Lake Nicaragua and is dated to the Rupas (AD 300-600) and Sapas (AD 900-1200) periods based on the ceramic sequences at the site. These areas will be examined for this report: Locus 1, Locus 3 Operations 2 and 3. The 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 cut through the area in the south immediately told us that at 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 will be examined.

Operation 2 recovered four Sapas Striated urns, a large globular bottle, human remains, as well as a cache of prestige goods. The cache consisted of four little points, two large ear spools, and a basket case and was associated with the remains of individuals 13 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 crouched and articulated long bones. Associated with these individuals were, 3 small vessels, a tripod vessel and a mace.

Locus 3 Operation 2

No complete Sapas 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 imbedded cap. The second offering cluster was a human sacrifice: a ceramic foot of bird offering, a cat sinister 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 teeth pendant and scutum (similar to a whistle) in the shape of a water bird were also found at this operation.

The most complete sample of Sapas period human remains were recovered from this area. Three burials however were severely deteriorated. All that remained were indistinguishable 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 10 complete vessels, which were placed into the trench cut east of the Trench. Three of the vessels were excavated to provide a comparative collection to the Locus 3 showing those vessels 1, Vessel 8, and Vessel 10. Within each of the vessels was a single significant artifact identifiable as an offering. Vessel 1 contained a single lance point. Vessel 8 contained a fragmented hand grinding stone known as a mottle 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 northeast edge of the feature is an anomaly. Once excavated 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 pot along with the human remains. It is hypothesized 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 Rupas and Sapas 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 burial of Locus 3, Operation 1 likely represents a private burial deposit of a socially linked group. The presence of one significant object within each shoe pot signifies a continuity or status between the burials.

These excavations are critically important for the study of Nicaragua pre-Burials. Unique finds were made at El Rivas 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 Rivas site in order to further our understanding of the prehistory of Nicaragua.

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