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Wilke, Sacha

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The Archaeology of Death on the Shore of Lake Nicaragua

Sacha Wilke
University of Calgary

Introduction

Archaeologically speaking Nicaragua is one of the most poorly documented countries in Central America. Most precious information regarding artifacts associated with burials to date is found in cemeteries from looted collections, essentially eliminating any contextual contributions to the archaeological record. Partial excavation provide important information regarding past societies. In this manner those pieces of information will be examined in order to determine social inequalities: the presence, type, and quality of items chosen and grave goods.

The site of El Raya is located at the base of Pasto de Leon, 22 km south of Rivas in the eastern Limon Department of Nicaragua. The site is comprised of a number of similar areas on a low slope above the shore of Lake Nicaragua. The cemetery was comprised mainly of burials, although a few artifacts associated with burials have been recovered from the site. The cemetery was opened in 1993 by Mr. Jaime Valdes, who also offered the remains of some of the most exotic goods associated with the burials. The delimited burial area of Locus 3, Operation 1 likely represents a private burial deposit of a socially linked group.

The cemetery was divided into three distinct areas which were located at the base of the slope, near a stream edge, and on the edge of a depression. These three excavation areas are centered on a lane mark, extending from the stream up the slope to the edge of a depression. Excavations were performed from 2004-2006 by the University of Calgary, N. France, and the Instituto UNESCO.

Archaeological materials from this area were identified and cataloged at the back of this report.

Locus 1

Locus 1 was opened by a small trench that cut through the area to the east. Informed 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 were recorded.

Operation 2 recovered four Sacasa 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 burial urn, and was associated with the cemetary of El Raya 1. As a small pot 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, 6 small spouts and 4 nails.

Locus 2 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 Tanjite. Three of these vessels were excavated to provide a comparative collection to the Locus 3 draw pot (Vessel 3, Vessel 10, and Vessel 17). Within each of the vessels was a single significant artifact identified as an offering. Vessel 3 contained a chert lance point, Vessel 10 contained a fragmented hand grinding stone known as a mano and Vessel 17 contained bone sewing tools. Vessel 10 also was 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 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 trench would have been dug to encompass the extent of the shoe pots along with the human remains. I hypothesize that a secondary deposition occurred at which time vessels were added that crushed those placed in the ground earlier.

Locus 3 Operation 2

No complete Sacasa Striated vessels were found in association with the secondary burial set 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 hand carved with an incised rim. The second offering cluster contained a human scalp; a ceramic feet of a bird offering, a net stinger 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 scapula (similar to a whistle) in the shape of a water bird were also found at this operation.

The most complete sample of Sapa 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 man cemetery that covers an expansive area and was used over a long period (opening the Raya and Sapa period 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 similar 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 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 Nicaraguaan 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


