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The Archaeology of Death on the Shore of Lake Nicaragua

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Introduction

Archaeologically speaking Nicaragua is one of the least well documented countries in Central America. Most precious information regarding artifacts associated with burials is found from looted collections, essentially eliminating any contextual contributions to the archaeological record. Burial practices provide important information regarding past societies. In this context these pieces 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 Bajío is located on the Azuero Peninsula of Lake Nicaragua and is dated to the Bagaces (AD 300-500) and Sapoa (AD 500-800) periods based on the ceramic chronology 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 burials.

Locus 1

Locus 1 was exposed by a road that cut through the area in the past. Informants 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 in this context and all recovered burials were recovered.

Operation 2 recovered four Sacaña Striated urns, a large globular oila, human remains, as well as a cache of prestige goods. The cache consisted of four little pots, two large ear spindles and a bushle cone and was associated with the ceramics of the period: 11 as well as a small bowl holding 114 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 bone.

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 Tulehehe. Three of the vessels were excavated to provide a comparative collection to the Locus 1 shovels pots: Vessel 1, Vessel 9, and Vessel 17. Within each of the vessels was a single significant artifact identifiable as an offering; Vessel 1 contained a chert lance point, Vessel 9 contained a fragmented bushle grinding stone known as a mortar and Vessel 17 contained bone weaving 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 trough 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 these placed in the ground earlier.

Locus 3 Operation 2

No complete Sacaña 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 Jade covered with an inlaid cap. The second offering cluster contained a human occipital, a ceramic base of a bird figurine, a net sinker 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 scrotum (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 mass cemetery that covers an expansive area and was used over a long period (spanning 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 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 Nicaragua prehistory. Unique finds were made at El Bajío with little precedent 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 Bajío site in order to further our understanding of the prehistory of Nicaragua.

References

[References: Please provide a list of references for the cited works.]