

Mesoamerican Figurines

Small-Scale Indices of Large-Scale Social Phenomena

EDITED BY

CHRISTINA T. HALPERIN, KATHERINE A. FAUST,
RHONDA TAUBE, AND AURORE GIGUET

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Crafting the Body Beautiful

Performing Social Identity at Santa Isabel, Nicaragua

GEOFFREY G. MCCAFFERTY AND SHARISSE D. MCCAFFERTY

The recent theoretical trend toward agency-based archaeology includes greater interest in the human body as an arena for the expression and negotiation of social identity. As such, it further advances the utility of archaeological evidence as a means for inferring anthropologically relevant information with a diachronic perspective. One application of such an approach has yielded a valuable discussion of aspects of body image from the material culture of the Early Postclassic Sapoa phase site of Santa Isabel, Nicaragua.

In a recent review article, Erica Reisher and Kathryn Koo (2004) discuss the dual roles of the human body as both symbol and agent. A symbolic body serves as a "conduit of social meaning." Following Mary Douglas, a symbolic body is a "text upon which social meanings are inscribed" with a "common symbol set needed to decipher those meanings" (Reisher and Koo 2004: 300). In contrast, the agentic body is an active participant in the construction of the social world, or, more specifically, functions as the agency of the person. Both of these concepts act in unison to communicate externally and internally, to the society at large as well as to reinforce concepts of self.

Tied to these characteristics of the body is the idealized form that Reisher and Koo describe as the "body beautiful," which they identify as the primary site for the construction and performance of gender. While they specifically focus on femininity, the "body beautiful" is by no means the exclusive domain of women; as anthropologists, we should be aware of the multiple gender identities that exist in the present and certainly existed in the past. The various performances of the "body beautiful" may provide important clues that enable us to better understand the social identities present in the past.

An example of this type of analysis has been presented by Marlys Pearson and Paul Mullins (1999) in their article "Domesticating Barbie: An Archaeology of Barbie Material Culture and Domestic Ideology." By taking a diachronic perspective to the original "material girl," Pearson and Mullins interpret changes in body proportion, hairstyle, and costume as these aspects relate to changing social perceptions of the "body beautiful" in late-twentieth-century America, along with the possible roles of material culture in shaping gender ideologies.

In her review of the archaeology of the body, Rosemary Joyce (2005) looks at how archaeologists use material culture from the past, as well as actual skeletal remains, to explore this research direction. Joyce echoes the dual dimensions suggested earlier, of human bodies that were both the scene of display and embodied agency. She identifies several areas in which archaeologists might identify aspects of the "body beautiful": within the skeletal remains of deceased individuals; in elements of dress and adornment; and in representational art such as murals, sculpture, and figurines. Joyce operationalizes these ideas in her analyses of embodiment from Playa de los Muertos, Honduras, particularly in the polychrome ceramic figurines (see also Joyce 1993).

Cultural Context

With these ideas in mind, we have considered the archaeological assemblage recovered between 2000 and 2005 at the site of Santa Isabel, Nicaragua. Santa Isabel is located on the shore of Lake Nicaragua, just north of modern San Jorge in the Rivas district (figure 7.1). Rivas is among the best-known archaeological regions of Nicaragua because of the excavations of Gordon Willey and Albert Norweb in the early 1960s that were analyzed and published by Paul Healy (1980) and through the regional survey of Karen Niemel (2003). Nevertheless, Nicaragua as a whole has experienced limited archaeological investigation, and the Santa Isabel project was the most intensive research project ever conducted in the region. Consequently, little comparative data is presently available for detailed interpretations, apart from museum and private collections of objects lacking secure provenience.

The Santa Isabel project was conceived as a test of ethnohistorical accounts of Mesoamerican ethnicity in the Greater Nicoya region of Pacific Nicaragua and northwestern Costa Rica. According to sixteenth-century accounts (Motolinía 1951; Oviedo y Valdés 1976; Torquemada 1975–83),

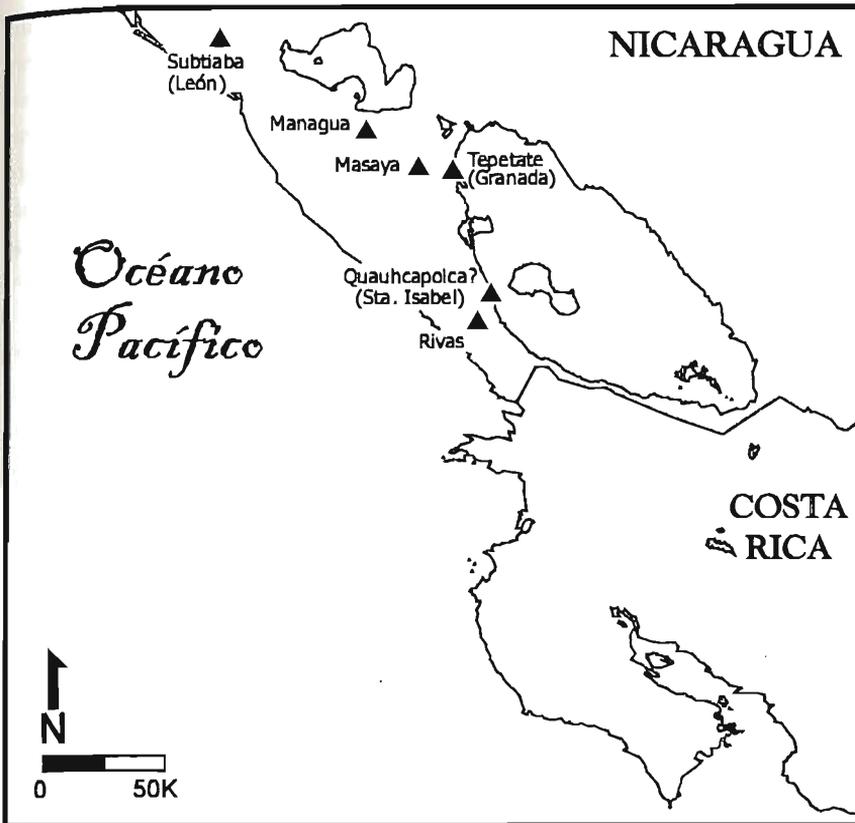


Figure 7.1. Map of Greater Nicoya, indicating location of Santa Isabel site.

migrants from Central Mexico, specifically Cholula, moved first into the Soconusco region of Chiapas and eventually to Central America, beginning in the Early Postclassic period, circa 800 CE. Two major groups were the Oto-Manguean-speaking Chorotega and the Nahuatl-speaking Nicarao, with the Nicarao arriving in the Late Postclassic period (circa 1300 CE). The Nicarao settled in the Isthmus of Rivas, where their capital city was ruled by the cacique Nicaragua in 1522 when Spanish conquistador Gil González Dávila first encountered the group. The Chorotega are generally believed to have occupied the region prior to the arrival of the Nicarao, and a native population, perhaps of Chibchan stock, is believed to have lived in the region prior to the Postclassic migrations (Ibarra Rojas 2001: 46).

Santa Isabel, identified as the largest Postclassic site in the region (Niemei 2003), was initially believed to have been a likely candidate for ancient Quauhcapolca, capital city of the cacique Nicaragua at the time of the

Spanish conquest. Investigators for the Santa Isabel project surveyed and then excavated residential contexts from the final occupation of the site. After recovering a suite of seventeen radiocarbon dates ranging between 800 CE and 1250 CE (calibrated; G. McCafferty 2008; G. McCafferty and Steinbrenner 2005a), we have concluded that Santa Isabel was not the Late Postclassic capital of the Nahua Nicarao and therefore was possibly occupied by the preceding Chorotega culture. It may have been abandoned at the time of the arrival of the Nicarao, but additional investigation will be required to support or refute this premise.

Santa Isabel consists of about forty low residential mounds spread over 270 hectares (Niemel 2003) along the shore of Lake Nicaragua. This is a semitropical environment known for its high agricultural productivity and for the abundance of fish and other animals in the lacustrine environment. Intensive investigations of the domestic practices at Santa Isabel, however, are challenging the ethnohistorically derived assumptions about Chorotega ethnicity (G. McCafferty 2008). For example, manioc was probably preferred over maize as the staple, and no evidence for *comales* or incense burners has been found to support Mesoamerican cultural practices. However, the presence of decorated pottery that features Mixteca-Puebla-style decoration (Day 1994), including representations of the deities Tlaloc and Ehecatl, suggests that social identity may have been contested between native and “Mexican” factors (G. McCafferty and Steinbrenner 2005b). A detailed evaluation of the material culture is ongoing and will be used to characterize the cultural practices of Santa Isabel as a baseline for future comparisons. An interpretation of perceptions of the “body beautiful” has potential to reveal emic concepts of self for comparison with Mesoamerican ideals versus preceding styles from the Greater Nicoyan region.

To date, portions of ten residential mounds have been sampled with systematic shovel testing, and cumulatively, 113 square meters have been excavated at five of the mounds (figure 7.2). The excellent preservation of organic materials and minimal postdepositional disturbance have helped to make Santa Isabel a particularly rich site for the recovery of material remains, including those that can relate to body decoration. This will be discussed in reference to actual skeletal remains, to objects of adornment, and to ceramic figurines and representations on polychrome pottery. Discussion of the archaeological remains is supplemented, when appropriate, with ethnohistorical descriptions of contact-period practices and information from related archaeological collections.

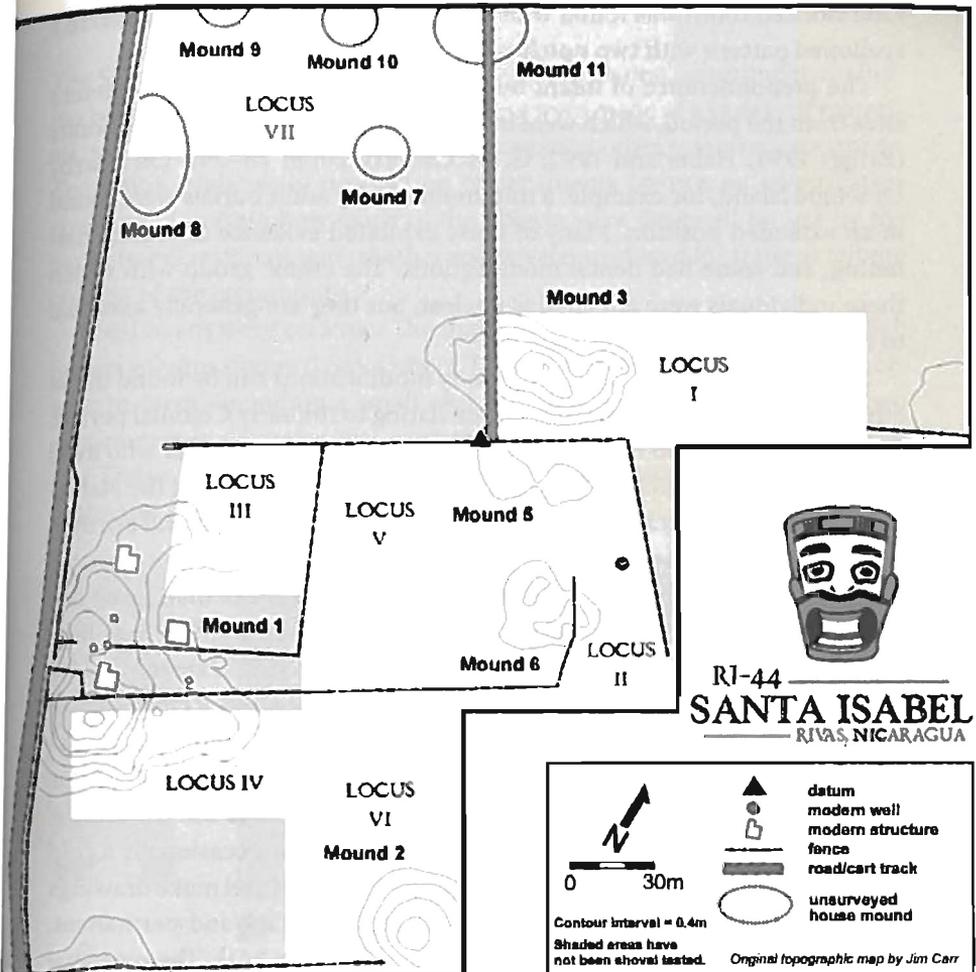


Figure 7.2. Map of central zone of Santa Isabel, indicating mounds and area covered by Santa Isabel project.

Skeletal Remains

Skeletal remains of eleven individuals were recovered from the site (Chilcote and McCafferty 2005). These were primarily the skeletons of infants interred in large Sacasa-type shoe-shaped urns. One adult male and two children were found as primary burials, but the compressed nature of the skeletons (owing to postdepositional factors such as plowing with heavy machinery) prevented investigators from ascertaining possible skeletal modifications.

One isolated tooth was found with evidence of fling into an A2 pattern, a scalloped pattern with two notches in the occlusal surface.

The preponderance of infant burials is in contrast to known cemetery sites from the period, which were more commonly the burial sites of adults (Briggs 1994; Haberland 1992; G. McCafferty 2008: 73–74). On nearby Ometepe Island, for example, a minimum of fifty adult burials were found in an extended position. Many of these exhibited evidence of cranial flattening, and some had dental modifications. The ethnic group with which these individuals were affiliated is unclear, but they are generally assumed to have been Nicarao.

Supporting evidence for specific body modifications can be found in the ethnohistorical sources from the region dating to the early Colonial period. For example, Gonzalo Fernando de Oviedo y Valdés, a chronicler who lived in Nicaragua in the 1530s, reported cranial modification among the Nahua Nicarao: “When our children are young, their heads are tender, and are then molded into the shape which you see in us, by means of two pieces of wood, hollowed in the middle. Our gods instructed our ancestors that, by so doing, we should have a noble air, and the head be better fitted to bear burdens” (Oviedo y Valdés 1851: 2: 345). Regarding hairstyles, Oviedo y Valdés reported that they “frequently shaved the head, leaving only a circle of hair extending along the edge of the forehead, from ear to ear. They all had a custom of cleaving the underpart of the tongue, and of piercing their ears for the introduction of ornaments.” Specifically in reference to the Chorotega, he noted the piercing of the lower lip to place a bone or occasionally a gold plug. And he observed that “both sexes pierce their ears and make drawings on their bodies with stone knives, which are made black and permanent, by a kind of coal called *tile*” (Oviedo y Valdés 1851: 2: 341). The principal cacique had his nostrils pierced after a year of penitence and prayer in the temple.

The sources are frustratingly vague about which groups practiced particular forms of body modifications, instead generalizing that indigenous groups shared some of these practices. Additionally, these descriptions refer to the early 1500s rather than the earlier period reflected in the Santa Isabel interments. Nevertheless, they allow a glimpse of how Europeans perceived the invasive body modifications of the native population at the time of first contact.

Costume and Adornment

The Santa Isabel site featured many objects of personal adornment, including beads, pendants, and ear spools. These were made of a variety of materials, such as ceramic, shell, bone, greenstone, and other semiprecious stones. There was evidence of production of ornaments on-site, so investigators could not ascertain how many of the objects were designed for use by the Santa Isabel residents and whether some were produced for trade or tribute outside of the community.

Most beads were ceramic. The majority were simple perforated reddish brown spheres (figure 7.3a). Others, however, were segmented or zoomorphic in form, including a small ceramic frog. A large bead, roughly two centimeters in diameter, was sculpted with the face of the Mexican storm god Tlaloc, suggesting the presence of a Mesoamerican religious ideology at the site (figure 7.3b).

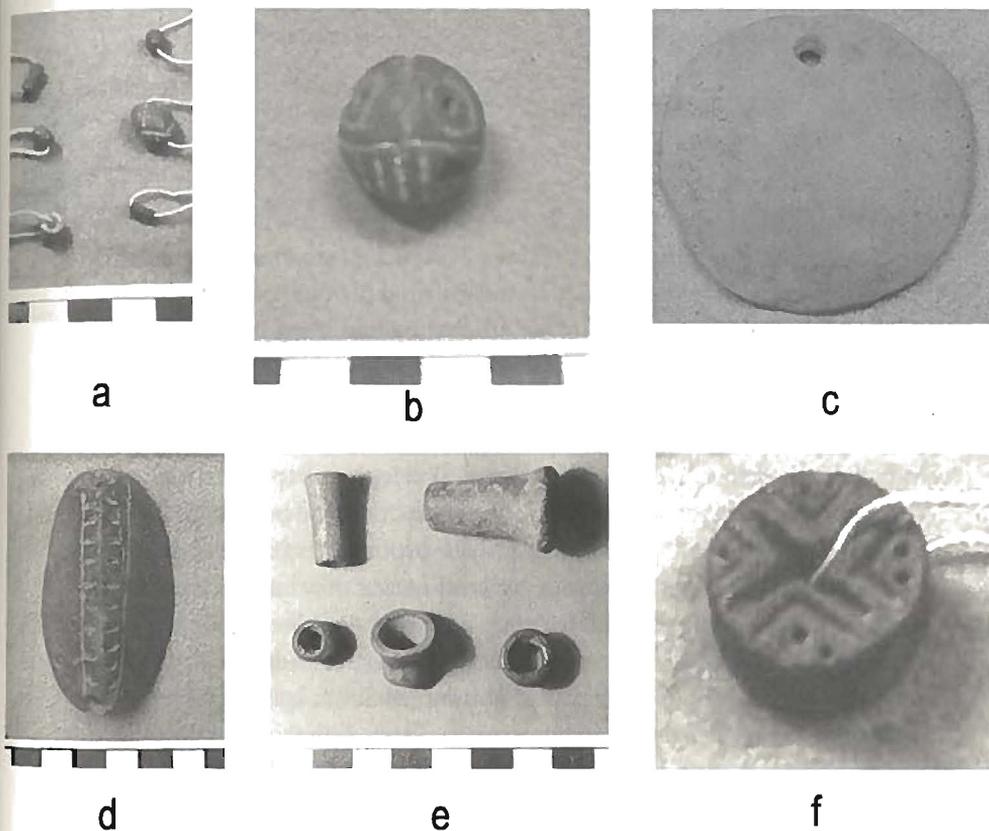


Figure 7.3. Adornment: *a*, ceramic beads; *b*, Tlaloc bead; *c*, reworked sherd pendant; *d*, cacao-pod pendant; *e*, ceramic ear spools; *f*, decorated ear spool.

A very common class of pendant consisted of large sections of reworked potsherds (figure 7.3c). These were ground to an even edge, usually in a rounded or oval form, and with one or two drilled perforations for suspension. Some of the ceramic pendants were made from polychrome sherds, but these were often eroded and no attempt was made to isolate particular patterns for display, so decoration does not seem to have been important in the selection of raw materials. One ceramic pendant was molded into an oval shape, then folded to create a ridge lengthwise down the center (figure 7.3d). The center ridge featured perpendicular scoring, and the pendant was perforated at either end. Whereas our initial impression was that this looked like a football, we now see cacao pod elements. An identical object was illustrated by Carl Bovallius (1886) from Ometepe Island in the late nineteenth century.

Clay was also used to make ear spools in various forms (figure 7.3e). The most common are slightly hourglass-shaped cylinders that are hollow in the center. These come in several sizes, from half a centimeter to about two centimeters in diameter. One reasonable speculation is that these could relate to status distinctions or perhaps age grades. On one pair of solid ear spools, the central field was decorated with incising in a cross pattern (figure 7.3f). Several longer ceramic tubes may have been worn in the ear or lip or may have had some other unidentified function.

Ornaments made of polished greenstone were also found, including beads and pendants (figure 7.4). Since evidence of greenstone production was also found, the extent to which the finished products had been used by the residents of Santa Isabel (or whether they had been involved solely in the manufacture for trade or tribute) remains unclear. The adult male individual buried at Locus 5 had several small chips of prepared but unfinished greenstone associated with his skeleton, including one in his mouth, and a fine chert drill that had possibly served as a lapidary tool (figure 7.4a). A highly polished, rectangular pendant is nearly identical in form to an unfinished preform, indicating possible on-site production (figure 7.4c). And a finished greenstone bead is similar to another that may have been discarded because the drill holes did not meet up in the center. Nevertheless, because several finished pieces of greenstone jewelry were found, it is at least plausible that some were used by the inhabitants of Santa Isabel.

Shell jewelry was also manufactured at Santa Isabel, and again there is the question as to whether it was for local use or exchange. Whereas freshwater shell was fairly abundant at the site as evidence for consumption, marine shell was consistently found with cut marks or as discard after use-

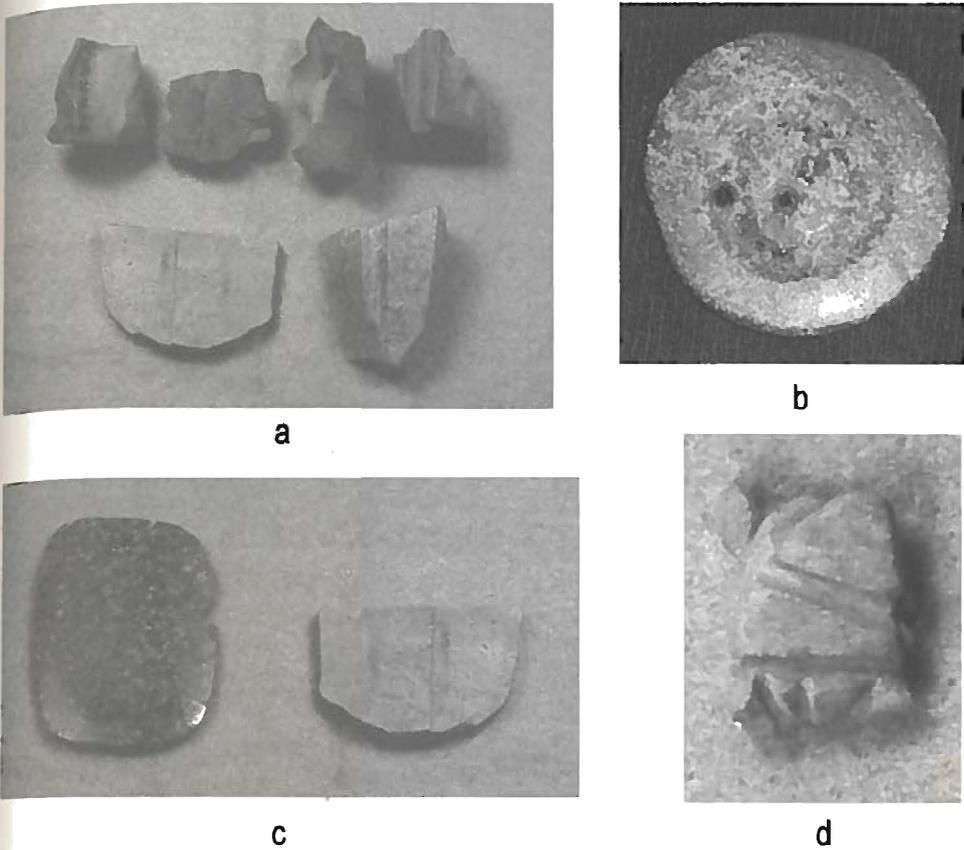


Figure 7.4. Greenstone objects.

ful segments had been removed. *Spondylus*, or thorny oyster, was the most common marine shell used; it was likely obtained from the nearby Pacific coast. Shell jewelry was generally made from simple cut pieces, perforated at one end for suspension (figure 7.5). One large triangular piece features two holes at the top edge (figure 7.5b). A perforated olive shell resembles an ankle tinkler worn by Mesoamerican warriors and dancers (figure 7.5c). More pieces of worked and discarded shell debitage were found than actual finished pieces, so at least some of the shell jewelry is likely to have been produced for foreign consumption.

Some of the most elaborate jewelry in terms of craftsmanship was made of carved bone. Again, there is some evidence of production at the site, and bone weaving tools and fishhooks were also produced on-site. Nevertheless, use-wear on a carved pectoral indicates that it was worn at least briefly

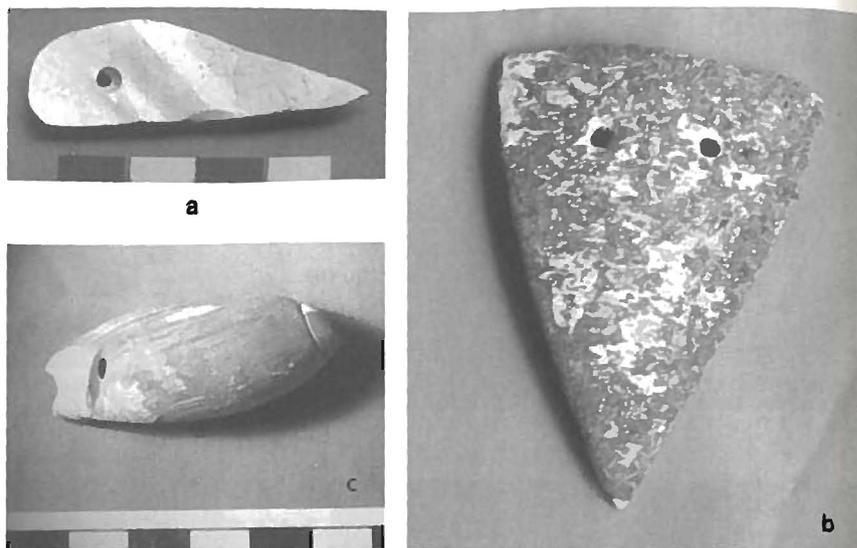


Figure 7.5. Shell objects.

before being discarded or lost at Mound 3. It is a piece of hollow bird bone, with twin perforations on either side of a worn area that may have held a leather or cloth strap (figure 7.6a). On either end of the bone are carved eagle and serpent heads, in a style reminiscent of the Mixteca-Puebla tradition of Central Mexico. A similarly shaped but uncarved bone was found at the same mound, perhaps serving as evidence of an unfinished piece discarded during production.

Another carved bone piece may have been used as jewelry or perhaps as part of a headdress. It likely represents the mandible of a caiman, with rounded teeth above an area decorated with a band of triangles (figure 7.6b). Within the band are two holes that may have been hollows for inset stones. Several "jewels" were found at the site, including raw amber, cut obsidian, and an unidentified round stone that resembles a pearl; these may have served as decorations in such an ornament.

Finally, a turtle carapace features drilled perforations (figure 7.6c), suggesting that it too was used as costume adornment, probably as a pendant or perhaps part of a headdress. A nearly identical piece excavated at the site of Malacatoya, north of Granada (Espinoza et al. 1999: photo 25), was associated with ceramics that suggest contemporaneity with the Santa Isabel occupation.

Additionally, four human teeth were found that had been perforated for suspension, probably on a necklace or bracelet (figure 7.6d–e). These are

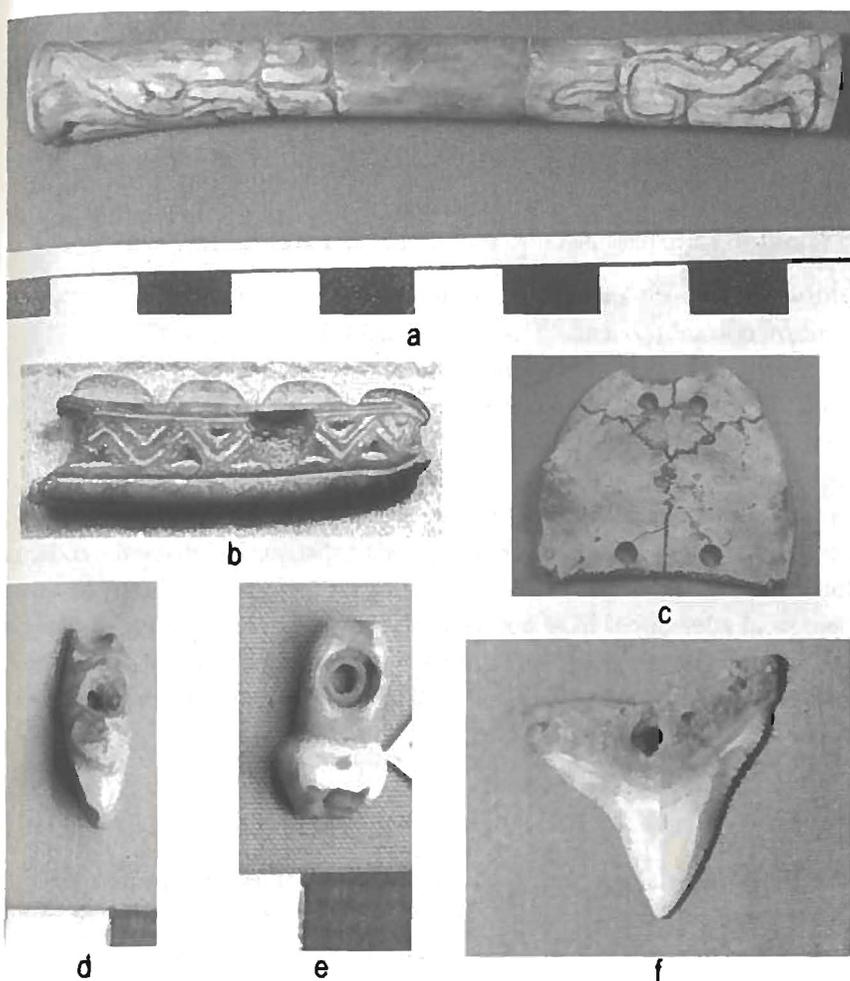


Figure 7.6. Bone and tooth objects.

adult teeth, perforated through the root to hang down from a cord. Among modern indigenous populations, a child's first deciduous tooth is worn suspended on a chain around the neck of his or her mother. Additional perforated tooth pendants include shark and peccary (figure 7.6f).

Because of the tropical climate, no remains of actual textiles were found, though numerous spindle whorls and bone weaving and embroidery tools suggest that textile production was a prominent activity of domestic practice (S. McCafferty and G. McCafferty 2008). Oviedo y Valdés (1851: 2: 346–47) describes local costume from the early sixteenth century:

The men wore a sort of doublet without sleeves, and a belt, which after passing around the body, was carried between the legs, and fastened behind. The women had a *nagua* hanging from the girdle as low as the knees. Those of the better orders had them falling as low as the ankle, and also wore a handkerchief covering their breasts. Both sexes wore sandals made of deer skins, and called *cutares*, which were fastened by a cotton cord, passing between the toes and around the heel.

The warriors wore “quilted jackets and short breeches covering the thighs, made of cotton” (Oviedo y Valdés 1851: 2: 347).

Healy (1980) described some of these objects from previous investigations in the Rivas region. Perhaps because of the less rigorous collection strategies employed by Willey and Norweb in the early 1960s, smaller objects such as beads were not encountered, but Healy described seventeen ear spools and three lip plugs (1980: 271). He also described “perforated potsherd discs” that probably correspond to the reworked sherd pendants found in abundance at Santa Isabel (Healy 1980: 266–68). Although these objects of adornment have not been reported from Malacatoya (Espinoza et al. 1999), investigators there did recover numerous beads of greenstone, and three of *tumbaga* gold (an alloy of gold and copper), from burial contexts.

Figurines

The third material category that can provide an emic perspective on the “body beautiful” is in the actual self-imaging found in the artwork of Santa Isabel. Polychrome figurines are the best artifact class for identifying such self-imaging. No complete figurines were found at Santa Isabel, but many of the 375 fragments were decorated with painted patterns that represent textile clothing and possible body paint or tattooing. Some additional human imagery is found on the painted pottery, particularly as tripod supports.

Polychrome figurines correspond to the Papagayo ceramic type that was introduced as a diagnostic of the Sapoá phase and continued into the subsequent Ometepe phase. Papagayo is characterized by a white slip over which geometric and more-complex designs are painted in black, red, and orange (Bonilla et al. 1990; Healy 1980). The Papagayo figurines are mold-made and are represented either standing or seated with bulbous legs splayed out to the sides (figure 7.7). Arms are usually on the hips with elbows jutting out to create a hollow beneath the armpit, with hands on the lap and elbows



a



b



Figure 7.7. Complete Papagayo figurines showing posture (courtesy of MI Museo, Granada, Nicaragua).

tucked in (if seated), or with arms hanging straight beside the body. Figurines generally have an abnormal head-to-body ratio, with proportionally larger and more detailed faces and headdresses. Most represent females, as identified by small breasts and diagnostic costume elements.

The faces of the Papagayo figurines have low relief features and painted decoration (figure 7.8a–b). Eyes are most commonly tear-drop shaped with an upward slant or rectangular; their shape is outlined in black paint with a solid pupil. Eyebrows are also indicated by black painted lines. The mouth is generally outlined in reddish orange paint that extends to the ear. Teeth are occasionally depicted with possible evidence of dental modification (figure 7.8c–d), but most figurines lack details of the teeth. Ears are often depicted with multiple lobes, as if they had been mutilated through autosacrifice, and often include round ear spools. The chin is not well defined, and the heads tend to run into the body without a neck.

Headbands are depicted as woven textiles most often wrapped around the forehead and crown, obscuring the hair. A plaited twill motif is the most common pattern (figure 7.8e), but less frequently net motifs, bars and crosses, and more-complex patterns (including animals) were used (figure 7.8f–g). The plaited twill pattern consists of groups of parallel lines that meet on either an angle or a perpendicular; similar patterns are used as spindle whorl and vessel decorations, and similar woven patterns are used to represent textiles on the carved stone “metate” thrones common in Greater Nicoya. The same pattern is a symbolic representation of textiles in the Mixteca-Puebla stylistic tradition of Mesoamerica, also designating “culture over nature” and political authority (S. McCafferty and G. McCafferty 2006).

One figurine wears a possible turban or has the hair woven into a turban-like style. Some figurines exhibit specific hairstyles, such as the tonsured style in which the crown is shaven, leaving a tuft at the top where the hair is brought to a peak, with strands hanging past the front of the ear. One example depicts a shaven crown but with a ring of evenly separated hanks of hair, like dreadlocks (figure 7.8h). Another individual’s head has been shaven from forehead to neck, leaving two conical buns, like horns, on either side (figure 7.8i). Two interesting examples depict a textile pattern on the back of the head. One displays the plaited twill motif on the back of the head (figure 7.8j), as if the hair was woven into cornrows or the individual was wearing a textile head-covering with a peak at the top. The second is more elaborate, with vertical and horizontal banding filled with minor patterns.

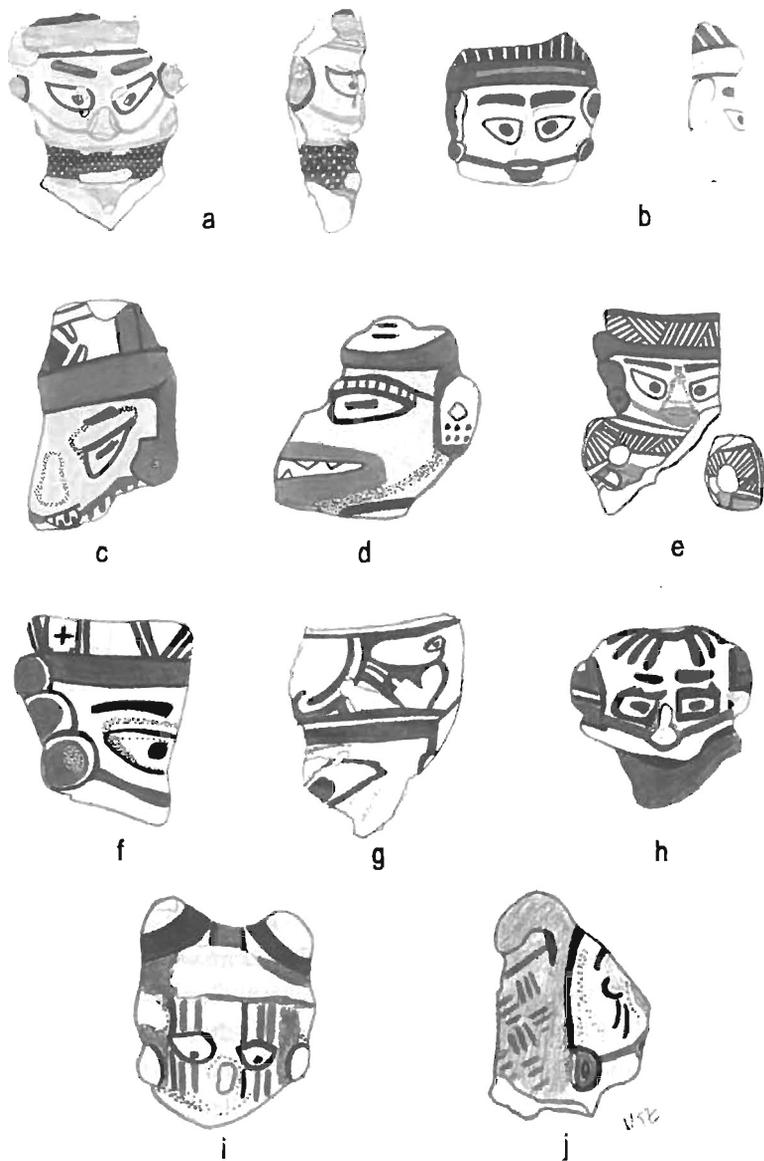


Figure 7.8. Details of figurine heads: *a*, Papagayo head and torso; *b*, Papagayo face with paint; *c*–*d*, dental modification; *e*, figurine with plaited twill headband; *f*–*g*, complex headbands; *h*, tonsure hairstyle; *i*, hair in twin horns; *j*, plaited twill hairstyle.

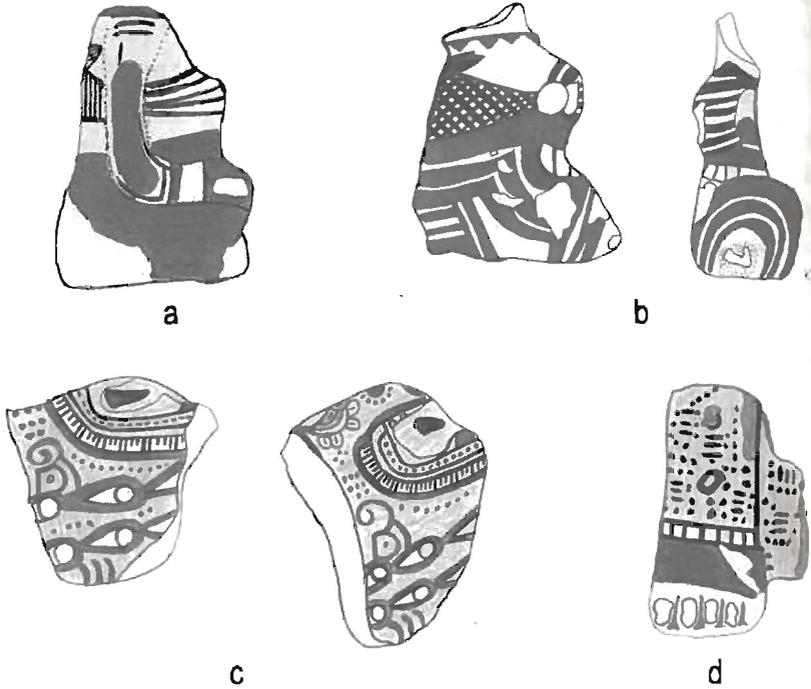


Figure 7.9. Papagayo clothing and body decoration.

Clothing is represented by painted designs, and observers may sometimes have difficulty distinguishing textiles from body decoration, such as paint or tattooing (figure 7.9a–b). Women's upper body garments generally appear to be long loosely woven textiles that bind the breasts, with the ends looped over the shoulders and tucked into the back beneath the arm. Net and plaited twill patterns are most common. Skirts may be banded or solid and occasionally depict a border. Two fragments with more elaborate textile patterns were found: one with multiple motifs that include dots, tear-drops, feathers, and abstract shapes (figure 7.9c). The neck opening exhibits a fringed effect. Another uses horizontal banding filled with triangles. Two figurines depict costuming of possible jaguar skin; one is a full-body tunic, while the other preserves the pattern on a human leg (figure 7.9d).

In addition to the Papagayo polychrome figures, there were monochrome or occasional bichrome figurines. They are a medium to dark gray-brown in color, but the bichromes feature a reddish brown slip over the natural surface and occasional painted highlights. Most of the monochrome bodies are nude with well-defined features, including rounded bellies, full breasts and

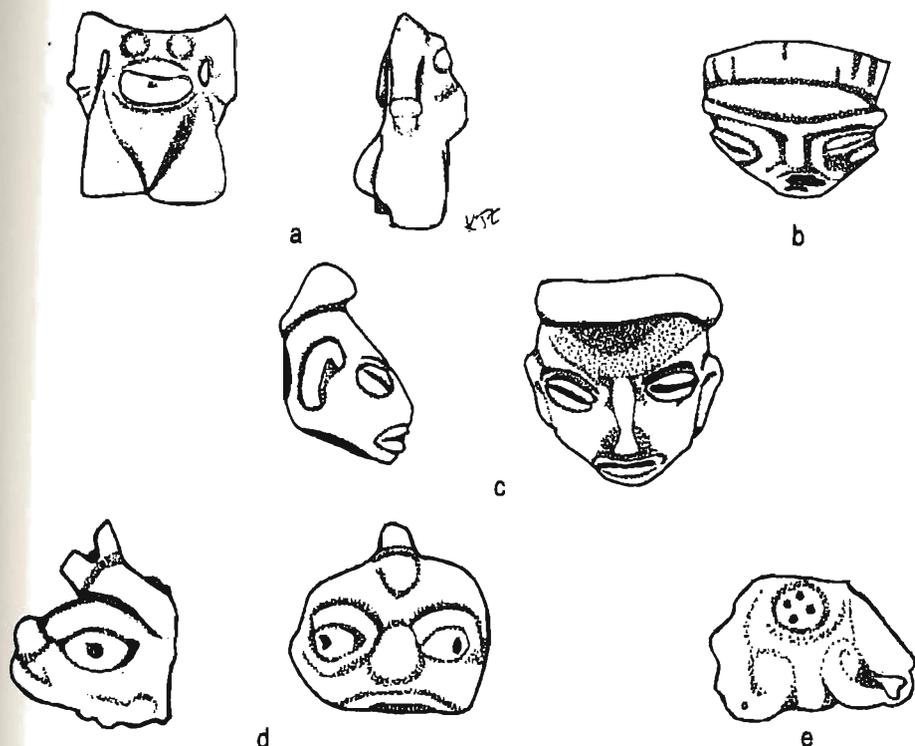


Figure 7.10. Monochrome figurines.

buttocks, and a pronounced pubic mound (figure 7.10). The monochrome heads often represent well-defined facial features, such as coffee-bean eyes that are more diagnostic of the preceding Bagaces phase (300–800 CE), brow ridges and nose, and mouth with teeth. The heads occasionally feature simple head bands of either hair or cloth. One has braided bands, together with an ear spool, while another has a possible diadem protruding from the band. A monochrome torso features a circular pendant with punctates, while another fragment features a similar ornament (though the body portion is ambiguous).

The other major class of anthropomorphic figurine probably represents the Mesoamerican wind god, Ehecatl. This commonly shows up as vessel supports on Papagayo Cervantes, Fonseca, and Mandador varieties and on Pataky polychrome. It is depicted as a human face but with an elongated reddish beak (figure 7.11a), similar to the spoonbill bird beak that is a diagnostic of Ehecatl. A figurine head may also depict Ehecatl in his characteristic conical cap and with an accentuated mouth/beak (figure 7.11b).

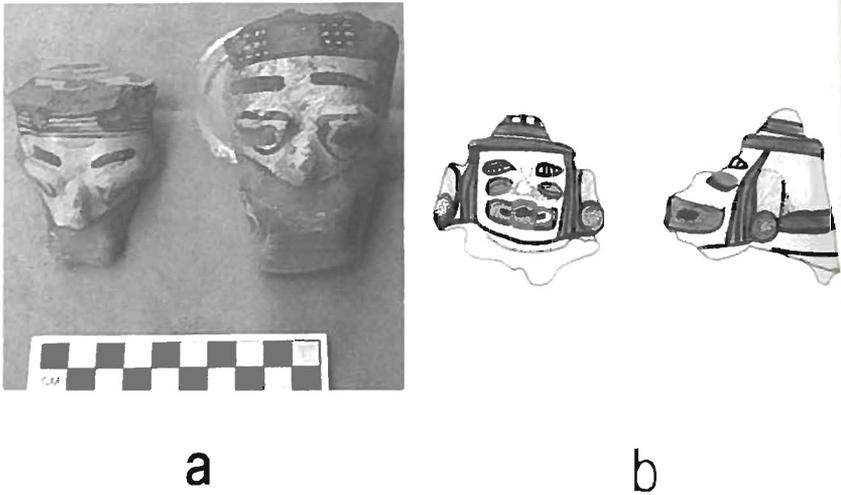


Figure 7.11. Ehecatl figures: *a*, vessel supports; *b*, figurine.

A Papagayo Cervantes variety bowl also depicts a human head with decorative elements, including a prominent feather headdress (figure 7.12a–b). A diagnostic characteristic on Papagayo Mandador variety polychromes is a horizontal human head with a distinctively triangular face and stylized headdress (figure 7.12c–d).

A final anthropomorphic representation is a small metal figurine, probably of native copper, that was found at Mound 3. Although corroded, this figure appears as a standing figure that may have had wings similar to “bird men” found in lower Central America that have been interpreted as shamans.

The most complete discussion of Nicaraguan figurines is again by Healy (1980: 257–66), based on 68 fragments from excavated contexts from the Rivas region. Over half ($n=38$) were hollow, mold-made figurines that he classified as Papagayo polychrome, many assigned to the Mandador variety based on similarities between the bulbous legs and vessel supports. He distinguished between open- and closed-head figurines depending on whether the top of the head has an opening. He also describes the painted facial characteristics and woven pattern as possible clothing.

An extensive treatment of the figurines of the Greater Nicoya region is being prepared by Laura (Brannen) Wingfield for her Ph.D. dissertation in art history at Emory University, based on museum and private collections of complete figurines. Brannen (2006) interprets the many female figurines as possible rulers or shamanesses, reifying identities of living humans in-

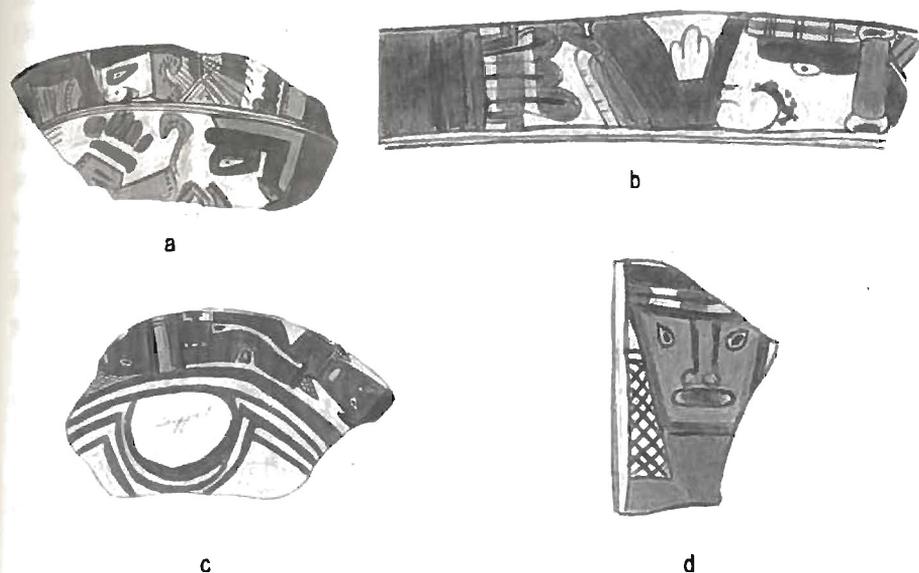


Figure 7.12. Human faces on Papagayo pottery.

tertained with supernatural roles. In contrast, the male figurines are often hunchbacks who may have been ritual assistants.

Conclusion

The Santa Isabel site has produced a rich variety of material culture useful for inferring concepts of the “body beautiful” among its ancient inhabitants. In the case of the modified dentition and the ear spools, as well as the possible tattooing, this beautification was actually inscribed onto the body. In other cases, the adornment was probably draped on the body as if it were a canvas for symbolic communication. To the extent that the messaging was systematic, it likely related to qualities of social identity, including gender, age, status, and ethnicity. Through the regular performance of these identities, selectively chosen to conform to contextual practices, individuals acted as agents within their community or on a more restricted level within their household. The performance even served to reify perceptions of self on the most personal level, allowing for minor variations to reflect the negotiations of identity toward the society at large.

Spatial analysis of material culture patterning is ongoing, but some preliminary observations can be made. The majority of the small, ceramic

beads were found at Mound 6. Some of the more "valuable" objects (such as greenstone pendants, the carved bone pendant, and the copper figurine) were found at Mound 3, which was likely the highest-status residence gauging by labor investment in house construction (G. McCafferty 2008). These data, among others, suggest a degree of social variation across the community. However, figurines were ubiquitous among the excavated mounds, and no distinctions have been found to suggest ethnic differences. The use of both the Papagayo polychrome and the monochrome figurines may relate to different functions for the objects (for example, ritual objects versus children's toys), may indicate the presence of heirlooms from an earlier time period, or may reveal the cultural blending of a multiethnic community.

No strong correlation exists between the material objects of costume and adornment and the figurine decorations. Ear spools are found archaeologically and are commonly represented on the figurines. But pendants, the most common object of adornment archaeologically, are present only in one case from the figurines recovered from Santa Isabel. The pendant on the monochrome figurine is round, like the reworked sherd pendants, but is depicted as decorated with pitting, unlike the sherd pendants. No beads or other pendants are represented on the excavated figurines, though they have been occasionally observed on figurines in museum collections.

Because of the limited database available from Nicaragua at present, the interpretations are limited. We hope that as more sites are excavated and the material culture is reported, Santa Isabel can serve as a model for further comparison toward more robust conclusions. Because one of the research goals of the Nicaragua project is specifically the inference of cultural identities, particularly relating to ethnicity, concepts of the body and aesthetic principles of beauty and identity are key issues that will continue as the scope of investigation is expanded in future research.

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