

CHAPTER 6

ARCHAEOLOGY ON MESOAMERICA'S SOUTHERN FRONTIER

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THE southern frontier of Mesoamerica has fluctuated through time but has generally included portions of the Central American countries of El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica (see also Henderson and Hudson in this volume). Tied into this liminal status, the history of archaeological research and the development of archaeological institutions in these countries have varied, sometimes emphasizing 'Mesoamerican-ness' and sometimes highlighting independent development. This essay presents the history of archaeological practice in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica; followed by a brief overview of the culture history of the region with particular emphasis on relations with Mesoamerican cultures.

One similarity shared by El Salvador and Nicaragua is the relative lack of archaeological research, with a greater emphasis on culture historical reconstructions grounded in ethnohistorical and linguistic evidence; Costa Rica is exceptional due to its longer tradition of locally trained archaeologists who, since 1970, have published their research in journals such as *Vínculos* out of the National Museum of Anthropology. When archaeological evidence *has* been applied to recent periods it has often been to supplement and confirm the historical accounts with minimal effort in critical evaluation (again, this criticism is less relevant in the case of Costa Rica). Consequently, investigations have tended to lag behind theoretical paradigms popularized in North American archaeologies. In part this

is reasonable, owing to the existing gaps in fundamental knowledge such as site inventories and regional chronologies. With the recent expansion of archaeological programs in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, and with young nationals entering the field with advanced professional degrees, we anticipate exciting developments in the upcoming decades that will greatly expand the archaeological dialogue to include more compelling social issues pertaining to the past.

ARCHAEOLOGY IN EL SALVADOR

El Salvador covers a relatively small region, about 20,000 square kilometers. Its landscape is diverse, containing active volcanoes, fertile valleys, rich coastal estuaries, and bountiful lakes and rivers. In the nineteenth century, interest in the past was the hobby of wealthy travelers and landowners (Peccorini 1913, 1926; Spinden 1915), and their early descriptions contributed to the creation of the first cultural histories for the region (Amador et al. 2007).

The second phase of investigations in El Salvador featured broad regional studies that were similar to those being conducted in many parts of Mesoamerica and Central America. The new approach incorporated survey, mapping, excavation, and ceramic analysis by professional archaeologists sponsored by renowned academic institutions (Boggs 1943a, 1943b, 1950; León Portilla and Longyear 1944; Lothrop 1926a; Ries 1940; Sol 1929). This phase represents the birth of scientific archaeology and served to establish the importance of ancient sites in the national identity.

The third phase of research began in the 1960s with excavations at large ceremonial centers, such as Tazumal (Sharer 1978), San Andrés (Boggs 1972), Cihuatán (Bruhns 1980; Fowler 1981, 1983, 1984; Kelley 1988), and Quelepa (Andrews 1976). There was also an increase in regional surveys and household archaeology (Casasola García 1974, 1975, 1978; Haberland 1960a, 1960b; Sheets 1976). This phase was grounded in a processualist theoretical perspective. Tazumal and Quelepa became the first sites that were subject to a new method of material analysis that focused on form and function, context, and provenience.

The late 1970s and early 1980s were times of political change in El Salvador, and popular revolution limited archaeological investigation. Nevertheless, important new sites such as Joya de Cerén (Sheets 1976, 1984b, 1989) were discovered, and surveys along the Lempa River and Zapotitan Valley revealed sites with unique cultural affinities (Fowler and Solís Angulo 1977). Most of the ongoing work was directed by Stanley Boggs from the David J. Guzmán National Museum and independent researchers (e.g., Amaroli 1986, 1988; Demarest 1981), and many of these works were published by CONCULTURA in the popular national journal *Tzumpame*.

The most recent phase of archaeological research in El Salvador is perhaps the most exciting, because for the first time the majority of work is being conducted

by Salvadoran archaeologists. These new leaders include Herbert Erquicia, Marlon Escamilla, Roberto Gallardo, Federico Paredes, Claudia Ramírez, Fabricio Valdivieso, and Fabio Esteban Amador. Their combined efforts and expertise have expanded into underwater and nautical archaeology (Escamilla 2008), architectural conservation, cultural identity, rock art, and lithic and ceramic analysis. The past decade has also witnessed the first archaeology and anthropology programs offered at national universities. International congresses have been held at the new Museo Nacional de Antropología, and periodic seminars and workshops are held at the Casa Dueñas, home of the National Historical Academy. The current Department of Archaeology, under the Secretary of Culture, has been strengthened and expanded under the direction of Shione Shibata and his staff, incorporating a group of young archaeologists and students who are the future of the discipline in El Salvador. Finally, archaeological parks at sites such as Cihuatán and Joya de Cerén have been supported by the private organization Fundación Nacional de Arqueología de El Salvador (FUNDAR), which has also sponsored archaeological rescue projects and conservation at some of the principal sites.

Current research involves a combination of regional surveys and university-sponsored projects. For example, the Atlas Arqueológico de Oriente project represents the first archaeological study funded by the National University and is important because it incorporated university students from various departments in all activities related to the research. This represents a change in how research is conducted, and this directly benefits the development of archaeology in the country. The new atlas has produced an updated inventory of previously recorded and newly discovered sites of eastern El Salvador (east of the Lempa River), created a regional ceramic typology (Amador 2010) and established an online, searchable database for site management, research, and protection of national patrimony.

ARCHAEOLOGY IN NICARAGUA

As in other parts of Central America, the first “archaeologists” in Nicaragua were adventurers on other business. Ephraim Squier (1852, 1990 [1853]) collected information on Nicaraguan antiquities while investigating possible routes for a transoceanic canal. Carl Bovallius (1886) was a Swedish naturalist who mapped stone sculptures on the islands of Lake Nicaragua (Figure 6.1). Earl Flint, a medical doctor living in Granada, collected artifacts for the Smithsonian Institution and Harvard University in the late nineteenth century (Whisnant 1994), and was the first to identify human footprints in the volcanic ash at Acahualinca (Flint 1884). All of these scholars pursued the colonial pastime of archaeology with little concern for local scholarship. While their scientific interpretations often bordered on the fantastic, nevertheless they did serve to draw international attention to Central American antiquities.

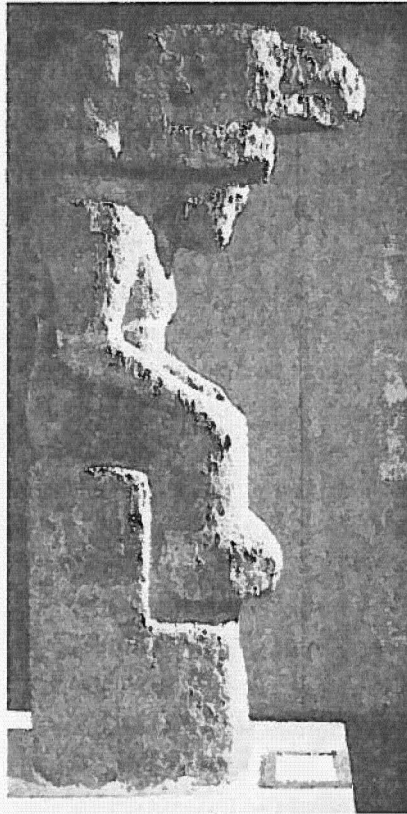


Figure 6.1 Statue from Zapatera Island (Museo Ex-Convento de San Francisco, Granada) (photograph by Geoffrey McCafferty).

Archaeological interest in Nicaragua was sporadic during the twentieth century, in part due to political tensions, natural disasters, and ensuing economic woes, as well as the greater glamour of Mesoamerican and South American cultures. Samuel Lothrop (1926b) published a glossy, two-volume set on the ceramics of Nicaragua and Costa Rica that highlighted the beautiful iconography with symbolic associations with Mesoamerica. Another notable development was a brief project directed by Gordon Willey in the early 1960s in the Rivas region of southwest Nicaragua (Norweb 1964). This later became the substance of Paul Healy's PhD dissertation and subsequent monograph, *The Archaeology of the Rivas Region, Nicaragua* (1980), which remains a cornerstone of Nicaraguan archaeological literature. A German project directed by Wolfgang Haberland (1992) excavated the Los Angeles cemetery on Ometepe Island, recovering evidence for a long cultural sequence.

Nationalist archaeology during this period was largely in the hands of wealthy patrons of the prehispanic past who supported looting to amass large collections of artifacts and to display them in their homes and offices. Occasionally these collections were converted into small museums that were more akin to nineteenth-century "curiosity cabinets," including such things as rocks and minerals, stuffed animals, and historical objects. Archaeology was administered under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture but with minimal budget and staff. The exception was

the National Museum, which housed archaeological collections and produced modest exhibitions under the direction of a professional staff.

A resurgence of scientific archaeology occurred in the 1990s, with several survey projects (Fletcher et al. 1994; Niemel 2003; Roman Lacayo n.d.; Salgado González 1996a) and rescue projects (Espinoza Pérez et al. 1999; Lange 1996). Frederick Lange played an important role in helping to develop Nicaraguan archaeology, including the organization of several symposia that focused on Central American archaeology, in general, and Pacific Nicaragua more specifically (e.g., Lange 1992; Lange et al. 1992). One important component of his work was an extensive compositional analysis of Greater Nicoya ceramics that employed the Smithsonian Institution's neutron activation laboratory (Bishop et al. 1988).

At this time the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua (UNAN) opened a specialized center for archaeological training and research: the Centro Arqueológico de Documentación e Investigación (CADI). This group was formed in collaboration with the University of Barcelona, and under the auspices of conducting several research and survey projects the CADI has trained a new generation of Nicaraguan archaeologists. Out of this program, Jorge Zambrana, Maria Lily Calero, Bosco Moroney, and Oscar Pavón have reached prominence in terms of their field expertise and positions in archaeological administration. Other former students are currently studying in international graduate programs, with the promise of a continued professionalization of the discipline.

The Office of Cultural Patrimony oversees archaeological permits and monitors development projects that would potentially impact cultural resources. In recent years this has included sending teams of Nicaraguan archaeologists (generally graduates of the CADI) to mitigate necessary impacts to important sites. The Office of Cultural Patrimony also sponsors an aggressive program designed to educate local officials on the importance of cultural resources and the legal issues surrounding looting and destruction of sites. This office administers the World Heritage site at León Viejo, an important colonial site that is the current focus of archaeotourism. There is also positive development in terms of regional museums, highlighted by the ex-convent of San Francisco and Mi Museo in Granada.

Beginning in 2000, Geoffrey McCafferty of the University of Calgary has directed several major projects in Pacific Nicaragua, especially at the sites of Santa Isabel, Tepetate, and El Rayo, with the goal of evaluating ethnohistorical accounts of ethnic migrations from central Mexico to Greater Nicoya during the Early Postclassic period (McCafferty 2011). Numerous graduate students have earned advanced degrees based on these projects (Debert 2005; Dennett n.d.; López-Forment 2007; Steinbrenner 2002, 2010), and a variety of specialized studies have been published (Debert and Sheriff 2007; Dennett et al. 2011; McCafferty 2008, 2010; McCafferty and McCafferty 2008, 2009, 2011; McCafferty and Steinbrenner 2005a, 2005b; Wilke et al. 2011).

A second international project is now underway, directed by Alex Geurds of Leiden University, investigating manufacturing areas for monumental sculpture

on the eastern shore of Lake Nicaragua. With a very open attitude toward foreign scholars, Nicaragua offers excellent potential for collaborative projects involving an established cadre of experienced Nicaraguan archaeologists.

ARCHAEOLOGY IN COSTA RICA

In the sixteenth century, most of Costa Rica's territory was inhabited by Chibchan-speaking peoples, with the exception of the Mesoamerican Chorotega-Mangué speakers who occupied the northwest region. Recent linguistic and phylogenetic studies (Barrantes 1993; Barrantes et al. 1990; Constenla 1991) have demonstrated the long-term presence of Chibchan-speaking groups dating back at least to the Archaic period, with the border area between Costa Rica and Panama thought to be the heartland of the Chibchan languages. In addition, ethnohistoric and ethnographic research on Costa Rican indigenous peoples (Bozzoli de Wille 1984; Ibarra 1990) has shed light on cultural aspects such as cosmology and political and social structures. An interdisciplinary approach has renewed interest by archaeologists in questions of continuity and change in the culture history of indigenous people and opened a debate on a proposed Isthmo-Colombian region (Dennett 2008; Fonseca 1992; Fonseca and Cooke 1993; Hoopes and Fonseca 2003), which is seen by some as a culture area extending from northwest Colombia to eastern Honduras. Recent research, therefore, has focused on the culture history of Chibcha and their interaction with related people in Central and South America (Corrales 2000). However, the processes of social and cultural change resulting from the arrival of the Chorotega, as well as aspects of interaction with Mesoamerica, have also attracted some degree of continued attention (Carmack and Salgado González 2006; Ibarra and Salgado 2010).

Until the 1950s archaeological research was carried out mainly by aficionados and scientists other than archaeologists. Anastasio Alfaro (1892), the first director of the National Museum, dug at several cemeteries and, a few years later, Carl V. Hartman (1901, 1907) excavated funerary sites while following stratigraphic principles. The establishment of cultural sequences and their relation either to Mesoamerica or to South America dominated the agenda of archaeologists throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Baudez and Coe 1962; Haberland 1976; Lange 1976; Snarskis 1976), including Costa Rica's first professional archaeologist, Carlos Aguilar (1972, 1976). He was hired by the University of Costa Rica in 1962 and, in 1975, was instrumental in the establishment of an academic program that has trained dozens of Costa Rican archaeologists. At the same time the National Museum initiated a research program developed by the American archaeologists Michael J. Snarskis, Frederick W. Lange, and Robert Drolet—all of whom introduced theory and methods of cultural ecology, the "New Archaeology," and aided

in training the first generation of archaeologists to graduate from the University of Costa Rica.

Over the last decades, questions of research have been driven mainly by tenets of cultural ecology (Drolet 1992; Lange 1984; Murillo 2010; Sheets 2003) and Marxist-based "Latinoamerican social archaeology" (Fonseca 1992), both sharing an interest in social change and the emergence of complexity but differing in the use of evolutionary or historical models, respectively. Recently, postprocessual theories and methods have been applied to study topics related to agency, meaning, and identity (Peytrequín 2008; Reyes 2009). Cristina Aguilar's ongoing M.A. research is the first centered on the reconstruction of gender roles.

In the Caribbean lowlands, current projects include investigation of the site of Las Mercedes by Ricardo Vázquez and Rob Rosenswig and of the site of Nuevo Corinto by Silvia Salgado González Mónica Aguilar, and John W. Hoopes. In addition, Ricardo Alarcón continues work at Guayabo de Turrialba in the Caribbean highlands. Francisco Corrales and Adrián Badilla are working in regional Pacific sites of the Diquís delta. Also important is the ongoing work of Patricia Fernández, of the Museo del Oro, who is utilizing compositional analysis of artifacts and metallurgical techniques to determine raw material sources, production centers, and exchange networks.

Contract archaeology has boomed in Costa Rica since the 1990s due to new legislation, and it employs most archaeologists. Unfortunately, few results are published, though the reports are available through the National Museum digital database known as *Orígenes*.

SHIFTING BOUNDARIES ON THE SOUTHERN FRONTIER

With consideration of these distinctive regional patterns for archaeological development in southern Central America, the evidence for Mesoamerican influence varies through time. What follows is a brief culture historical summary of some of the prominent discoveries connecting this peripheral region to the Mesoamerican heartland. Central America forms the isthmian land bridge by which Paleo-Indian and Archaic-period nomadic peoples migrated to South America, although little rigorous attention has been paid to these periods apart from the occasional discovery of early stone tools, with rare examples of Clovis, Folsom, and Fishtail points (Snarskis 1979). Lake sediments from Costa Rica's northwestern Cordillera (Sheets 1984a) have yielded pollen of maize and other grasses, declining percentages of tree pollen, and abundant charcoal, suggesting forest clearing and cultivation around 3550 BC and the spread of maize from Mesoamerica (Horn 2006), as has also been documented in Panama (Cooke 2005).

OLMEC INFLUENCES AND PRECLASSIC INTERACTIONS 1500 BC-200 AD

The earliest occupation documented in western El Salvador is at the site of El Carmen. Although the pottery shares attributes with that of other sites along the Pacific coast of Mesoamerica, unique modal attributes—Bostan-phase ceramics first identified by Bárbara Arroyo with unique characteristics including white washes and slips as well as tear-shaped tecomates, which are limited to the El Carmen site—attest to a local style (Amador 2009; Arroyo 1991:205–206, 1995). During the Formative period, western El Salvador was clearly in contact with the Olmec, as demonstrated by monumental carvings from the site of Tazumal. Stronger contact between peoples in El Salvador and Pacific Guatemala is indicated by the shared occurrence of “pot belly” sculptures (McInnis Thompson and Valdez 2008). In the later Formative period, sites with monumental architecture and sculpture, dense settlements, organized labor, agriculture, and structured religious/political cults began to appear throughout the Mesoamerican southern frontier (Casasola 1974; Navarrete 1972; Sharer 1978). Usulután-style pottery became a widely popular commodity often found in elite Maya centers in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (Andrews 1976).

There is also evidence for unique regional statuary traditions in western El Salvador (Demarest 1981; Paredes 2008) that are quite different from known traditions of the eastern region (Andrews 1976). These include stylized “jaguar heads” carved in stone, which have a limited distribution from the Rio Paz, bordering Guatemala, the Coast of Ahuachapan, and inland to Coatepeque Lake. Similarly, evidence from other regional studies suggests that there were also significant differences in pottery traditions between western and eastern El Salvador. Given stylistic differences between both statuary and pottery traditions it is possible that these societies, geographically divided by the Lempa River, were also culturally and ethnically differentiated (Amador 2010), with Mesoamerican groups inhabiting the western portion and, as historical documents indicate, Lenca-speaking groups in the eastern portion (Amador et al. 2007).

Usulután-style pottery is also present in Pacific Nicaragua, for example, at sites such as Villa Tiscapa, La Arenera, and Las Delicias in the Managua area. Petrographic analysis indicates that much of the Usulután-style pottery found in the region may be locally made (Lange et al. 2003; Dennett et al. 2011). Abundant obsidian recovered from these sites suggests exchange relations with Guatemala, probably through El Salvador. La Arenera was buried by a volcanic eruption, preserving intact house floors with crushed vessels abandoned in situ (McCafferty 2009; McCafferty and Salgado González 2000). Recent salvage excavation of the Las Delicias cemetery demonstrates the social complexity of a lakeside community dating to approximately 100–300 AD (Moroney Ubeda 2011; Pavón Sánchez 2010). Dispersed villages are common during this period, and although there is some indication of nucleated settlements, no detailed studies of community settlement patterns have been documented.

In Costa Rica, small villages became a common way of life in the Early Formative (Bradley 1994), with sophisticated pottery suggesting introduction from adjacent areas (Hoopes 1994; Snarskis 1984). By 500 BC most regions show an increase in the number and size of settlements, and regional differences are apparent. Greenstone production developed in northern Costa Rica at this time, where lapidaries utilized a wide variety of materials. Discernible differences in the distribution and quality of artifacts indicate that production likely occurred at the household level (Guerrero 1998). David Mora-Marín (2002, 2005) has studied Mesoamerican jades from Costa Rica and argues for a direct and systematic exchange of greenstone between the Maya lowlands and Costa Rica beginning by at least the Late Formative (Figure 6.2). Recent research by Michael J. Snarskis and Juan Vicente Guerrero of the National Museum has uncovered the Lomas Corral cemetery, situated at the Bay of Culebra, which contains an abundance of jade artifacts and Usulután-style pottery that provide additional support for Mora-Marín's arguments about dynamic exchange networks involving Mesoamerican and Chibchan-speaking (and perhaps Lenca-speaking) groups of lower Central America.

MAYA INFLUENCES AND CLASSIC INTERACTIONS (200–800 AD)

The Classic period in western El Salvador can be characterized as an extension of the Maya world, with large sites featuring monumental architecture. The splendor of cultural development, however, was muted by a catastrophic volcanic eruption



Figure 6.2 Costa Rican jade with Olmec stylistic elements but Maya text.
(Photograph courtesy of the Museo del Jade, Costa Rica.)

during the fifth century AD (Dull et al. 2001), which affected the western and central regions (Sheets 1976, 1983). In contrast, eastern El Salvador went relatively unscathed and increased its ties with south-central Honduras and lower Central America (Amador 2010; Andrews 1976). The Middle Classic period does provide a glimpse of economic prosperity throughout El Salvador. Large centers such as Laguneta and Quelepa in eastern El Salvador actively constructed, modified, and enlarged formal architecture, while domestic and luxury goods were being produced, manufactured, and exchanged in long-distance trade networks. The Late and Terminal Classic periods demonstrate the most intense and abrupt cultural changes in the region.

Western El Salvador appears to have been affected by the political and economic collapse of the Maya southern lowlands as indicated by the apparent abandonment of some cities, lack of new constructions, and a focus on external influences that brought foreign ritual paraphernalia, as well as architectural and artistic canons, to the region (Amador 2010; Amaroli 1988; Andrews 1976; Boggs 1943a, 1943b; Longyear 1944; Sharer 1978; Sheets 1989, 1992). The blended culture of the Mesoamerican frontier is apparent at the site of Joya de Cerén, where a thick layer of volcanic ash preserved a small community with wattle-and-daub structures and even crops in the fields, including both maize and manioc (Sheets et al. 2011) (Figure 6.3). Although evidence of foreign intrusion has been documented in eastern El Salvador (Amador 2010; Andrews 1976), there is sufficient supporting evidence to suggest that this region continued to achieve economic and political

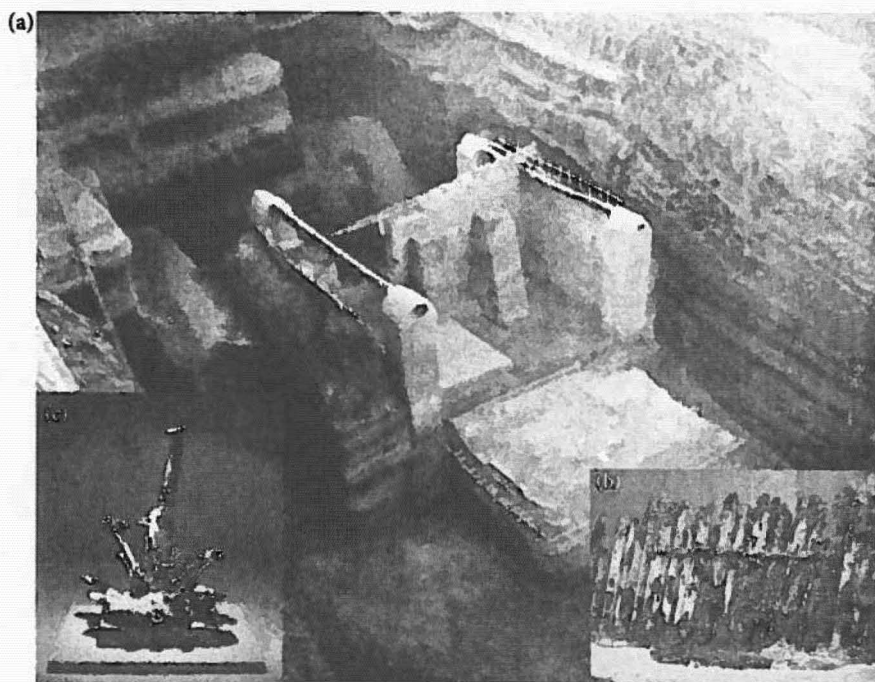


Figure 6.3 (a) Joya de Cerén structure against backdrop of layered volcanic ash; (b) insets of preserved wattle-and-daub architecture; and (c) cast of maize plant (photographs by Geoffrey McCafferty).

success independent of any major changes occurring to the west. In fact, the evidence suggests that at no time were the cultural, ethnic, stylistic, and perhaps linguistic differences more clear-cut than during the Late Classic period.

Relatively little archaeological evidence has been found for the Classic period in Nicaragua. Settlement pattern surveys in the Granada and Rivas regions indicate greater population densities and a more complex settlement hierarchy (Niemeel 2003; Roman Lacayo n.d.; Salgado González 1996a). The site of Ayala, on the outskirts of modern Granada, is the most extensively investigated site, with pottery suggestive of limited contact with Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica (Salgado González 1996b). Recent excavations at the site of El Rayo, on the Asele Peninsula south of Granada, have recovered rich deposits of residential debris associated with a possible terrace wall (McCafferty 2010; McCafferty et al. 2009). While there is some evidence for interaction with Mesoamerican regions, the great majority of the material culture implies independent local origins, probably representative of indigenous Chibchan cultural groups.

The emergence and consolidation of societies with institutionalized social hierarchies during the Classic period have recently become of increased interest to Costa Rican scholars (Hurtado de Mendoza and Troyo Vargas 2008). These societies are identified through the presence of complex architecture, elaborately carved stone sculptures, and fine and/or imported sumptuary goods. Guayabo de Turrialba is perhaps the largest regional center known to date, with architecture consisting of several round, earth-filled mounds with retaining walls of stone cobbles; open spaces, or *plazas*, delimited by stone walls; aqueducts; paved walkways connecting structures; and external causeways that facilitated the integration of other minor sites into Guayabo's political sphere. The largest of these causeways extends about 13 kilometers from the site to the Bonilla Lagoon. Similar sites are found in the Caribbean lowlands, the Central Highlands, and in the Diquís region of Costa Rica. These sociopolitical networks began in the early centuries AD and by the sixteenth century were documented in Spanish ethnohistorical accounts. Ibarra (1990) has amply discussed chiefdoms of the sixteenth century, focusing on how they were engaged—through trade and other mechanisms—in significant interactions among themselves and with other chiefdoms throughout Central America, Colombia, and even many of the Caribbean Islands.

MEXICAN INFLUENCES AND POSTCLASSIC INTERACTION (800–1530 AD)

The most widespread contacts with Mesoamerica occurred during the Postclassic period, as documented in ethnohistorical accounts and through historical linguistics (Fowler 1989; León Portilla 1972) when speakers of Nahuatl and Oto-Manguean

languages were found throughout western El Salvador, Pacific Nicaragua, and the Nicoya region of northwestern Costa Rica. Clarification of this relationship has often been a driving force in archaeological research, but this research has also provided a strong historical foundation for local cultural identity that has limited critical evaluation of the processes of foreign contact.

The eruption of the Loma Caldera around 600 AD once again buried the site of Joya de Cerén and produced far-reaching repercussions throughout El Salvador. When the region was reoccupied in the Early Postclassic period it was by a group with possible central Mexican affiliations relating to the so-called Pipil-Nicarao migrations (Fowler 1989, 1991). This relationship has long been argued to be characterized, and thus supported, by the spread of Mexican Gulf Coast-style stone yokes and *hachas*—equipment worn by players of the Mesoamerican ballgame (Jiménez Moreno 1966). Cihuatán in central El Salvador was built with a “Mexican-inspired” ceremonial center, including a ballcourt and large pyramid (Bruhns 1980; Kelley 1988) (Figure 6.4). Banderas Polychrome pottery features Mixteca-Puebla style iconography, and life-sized ceramic sculptures resemble those from the Gulf Coast (Bruhns and Amaroli 2009). Cihuatán was abandoned about 1100 AD, and little is known of the subsequent culture history of western El Salvador. When Alvarado’s army reached the largest Nahua-Pipil city of Cuzcatlán in 1524, it marked the “beginning of the end” of a rich history of people, traditions, and culture. Recent research in the Izalcos region of western El Salvador by Kathryn Sampeck (2010) further clarifies Nahua-Pipil occupation and cultural traditions at Spanish contact. Insight into the early Colonial period has been recovered from the original, albeit short-lived, Spanish capital of Ciudad Vieja (Fowler 2006).

Eastern El Salvador was not subject to Mexican influence to the same degree as witnessed at Cihuatán; rather, the evidence suggests a continued southward-focused commercial network and, importantly, maintenance of its linguistic and probably ethnic independence despite the surrounding cultural, political, and economic influences (Amador 2010).

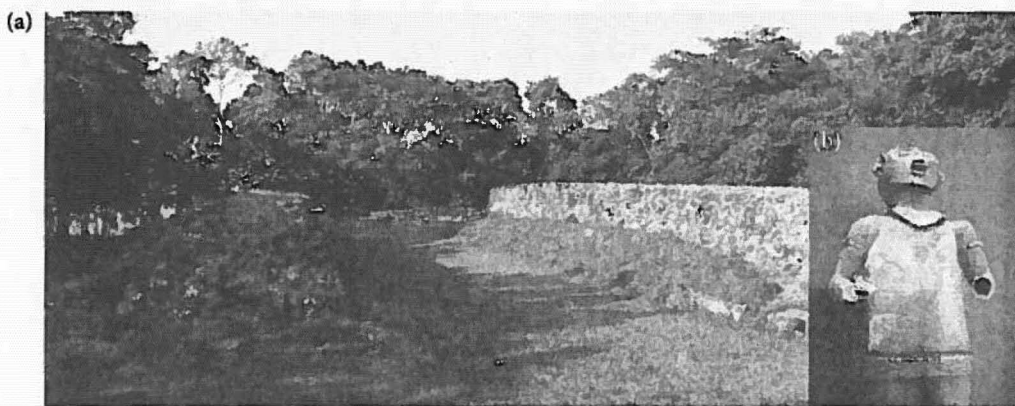


Figure 6.4 (a) Cihuatán ballcourt; (b) inset of life-size ceramic sculpture (photographs by Geoffrey McCafferty).

The same “Mexican” migrations influenced the Greater Nicoya region of Pacific Nicaragua and northwest Costa Rica (Carmack and Salgado González 2006). Beginning about 800 AD dramatic changes in settlement patterns and material culture indicate significant culture change, probably through the arrival of a migrant group. Ethnohistorical sources indicate that Oto-Manguéan and Nahuatl languages were spoken in the region at the time of Spanish contact and that these groups migrated into Greater Nicoya during the Early Postclassic period. Sites such as Santa Isabel and El Rayo, on the shore of Lake Nicaragua, now provide excellent evidence of this transitional period (McCafferty 2008, 2011; McCafferty et al. 2009). Beautiful polychrome pottery bears notable similarities with Mixteca-Puebla polychromes from Cholula and the Gulf Coast, including the use of feathered serpent imagery (McCafferty and Steinbrenner 2005a) (Figure 6.5). Interestingly, however, the material culture from these sites also lacks important traits associated with Mesoamerican identity, including maize, incense burners, and ceremonial architecture.

While the dramatic break in the ceramic tradition at the Classic to Postclassic transition suggests population change, it is not yet clear where the new innovations originated. Investigation of social identities has been conducted by looking at objects of adornment, such as ear plugs and pendants, as well as figurines expressing emic concepts of “the body beautiful” (McCafferty and McCafferty 2009, 2011). The later Postclassic remains even more of a mystery as no sites securely dating between 1250 AD and Spanish contact have been extensively excavated, although Wolfgang Haberland (1963, 1992) did encounter late-period burials on Ometepe Island. The Colonial-period capital of León Viejo has been the site of extensive excavations, and the discovery of the skeleton of the conquistador Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba was instrumental in the site being declared a World Heritage site.

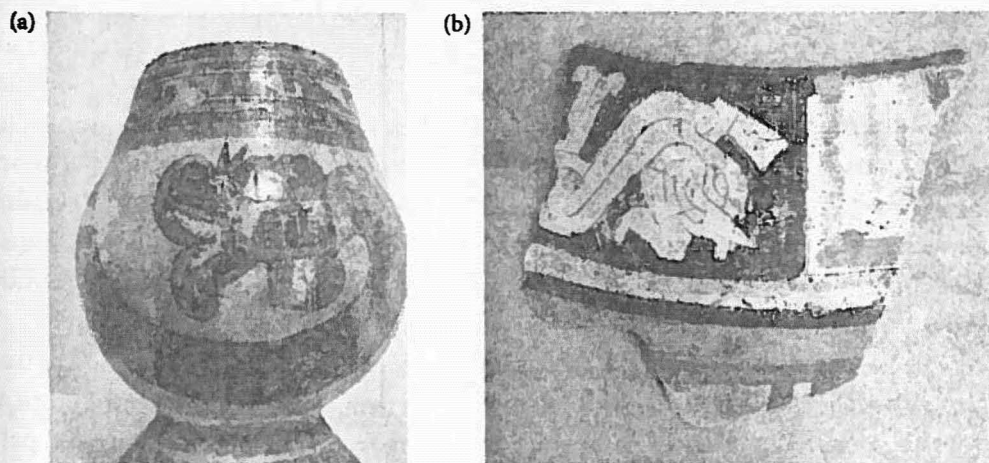


Figure 6.5 Vallejo Polychrome vessels with incised feather serpent iconography (photographs by Geoffrey McCafferty).

Research into the Postclassic period of Costa Rica has generally concentrated on possible Mesoamerican connections, especially in the northwest part of the country that is considered part of the Greater Nicoya subregion. Scholars such as Doris Stone (1982, 1984) and Jane Day (1994) demonstrated similarities between the Nicoya polychromes and the Mixteca-Puebla style from central Mexico. However, extensive research by Frederick Lange (1984) in the coastal sites of Guanacaste led him to conclude that evidence did not support either a significant presence of Mesoamericans or the incorporation of the region as part of Mesoamerica. Recent research, however, has reopened the debate on the significance of Mesoamerican groups in Guanacaste during the Postclassic. Large projects have excavated residential and cemetery areas, often in conjunction with tourism development. For example, at the site of Jícaro, located on the Bay of Culebra, Felipe Solís and Anayency Herrera (2008) have identified several individuals with cranial and dental modification coeval with the Early Postclassic, and they attribute this to the presence of Mesoamericans. However, a contemporary site located only a kilometer to the northwest has little evidence of such practices (Aguilar 2008). In the same region, the site of Papagayo shows architecture typified by circular mounds associated with Chibchan tradition (Baudez et al. 1992). The Guanacaste and Nicoya regions of northwest Costa Rica have seen extensive archaeological research, specifically addressing the question of Mesoamerican influence. It is notable that the results are so ambiguous, in keeping with the region's position on the Mesoamerican frontier.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The use and abuse of Mesoamerican models has been the subject of much discussion and debate (e.g., Coe 1962; Healy 1988; Lange 1993). Recently, John Hoopes and Oscar Fonseca (2003) have advocated greater emphasis on the indigenous Chibchan culture, a linguistic group that occupies territory from Honduras to Colombia, especially along the Atlantic watershed (Barrantes 1993; Barrantes et al. 1990). The choice to variably identify with Mesoamerican cultures has influenced the practice of archaeology in these Central American countries, with western El Salvador placing much more emphasis on "Mesoamerican-ness" in contrast to Nicaragua or Costa Rica, or even eastern El Salvador. The result is a complex cultural mosaic that deserves much more archaeological attention.

El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica have long, if varied, archaeological traditions. While relatively undeveloped in comparison with greater Mesoamerica, they offer enormous research potential, and the open-mindedness of national patrimony offices makes future investigation very accessible. One important development of recent years has been the training of highly qualified local archaeologists.

Unfortunately, economic issues severely limit the scope of research, which is typically restricted to rescue projects in advance of development. This does open the door to collaborative projects with greater research orientation. The past decade has seen significant advances in archaeological involvement, in part due to political stability and economic development. We anticipate continued growth in terms of archaeological research programs, including greater integration of research agendas that cross national borders for more rigorous investigation of Mesoamerica's southern frontier.

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