

## A MACROREGIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON CHIEFLY CYCLING IN THE CENTRAL REGION OF PANAMA DURING THE LATE CERAMIC II PERIOD (A.D. 700–1522)

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*The sixteenth century indigenous societies who inhabited the Pacific plains of Panama have occupied an important place in discussions of social hierarchy in the Americas. Beginning with the discovery of the richly stocked tombs at Sitio Conte in the 1930s the origins of social hierarchy and wealth accumulation has been a key theme in the Central Region of Panama. Although the most lavish burial hoards at Sitio Conte contained hundreds of sumptuary goods elaborately decorated with cosmological iconography, no other contemporary cemetery shows evidence for this degree of wealth accumulation. The only other site with mortuary patterning suggestive of high ranking individuals is He 4, where high ranking mound burials were interred following the abandonment of the Sitio Conte cemetery. From a macroregional perspective the increase in access to prestige goods in mound burials at He 4 contemporaneous with, or immediately after, the decline of Sitio Conte is best explained as a result of changes in political organization of the kind often associated with the growth and decline of chiefly polities.*

*Las sociedades indígenas del siglo dieciséis, que habitaban las llanuras del Pacífico de Panamá, han ocupado un lugar importante en los debates sobre la jerarquía social en las Américas. Empezando con el descubrimiento de las tumbas de Sitio Conte en la década de 1930, los orígenes de la jerarquía social y la acumulación de riqueza han sido un tema clave en la región central de Panamá. Los entierros más ricos de Sitio Conte contenían cientos de artefactos de prestigio elaborados con iconografía cosmológica; sin embargo, ningún otro cementerio contemporáneo demostraba evidencia de este nivel de acumulación de riqueza. El único sitio con patrones mortuorios sugestivos de personas de alto rango es el sitio He 4, argumento que ha sustituido a Sitio Conte como una “necrópolis macro regional” pero para enterrar a los individuos menos poderosos. Desde una perspectiva macro regional, el registro funerario de He 4 sugiere el desarrollo de una jerarquía social más modesta que Sitio Conte. Esta diferencia se explica mejor como una consecuencia del cambio de organización política a nivel macro regional. En otras palabras, el aumento en el acceso a artefactos de prestigio en los montículos funerarios en He 4 inmediatamente después de la disminución de Sitio Conte, se explica mejor como resultado de cambios en la organización política asociada con el crecimiento y la disminución de cacicazgos.*

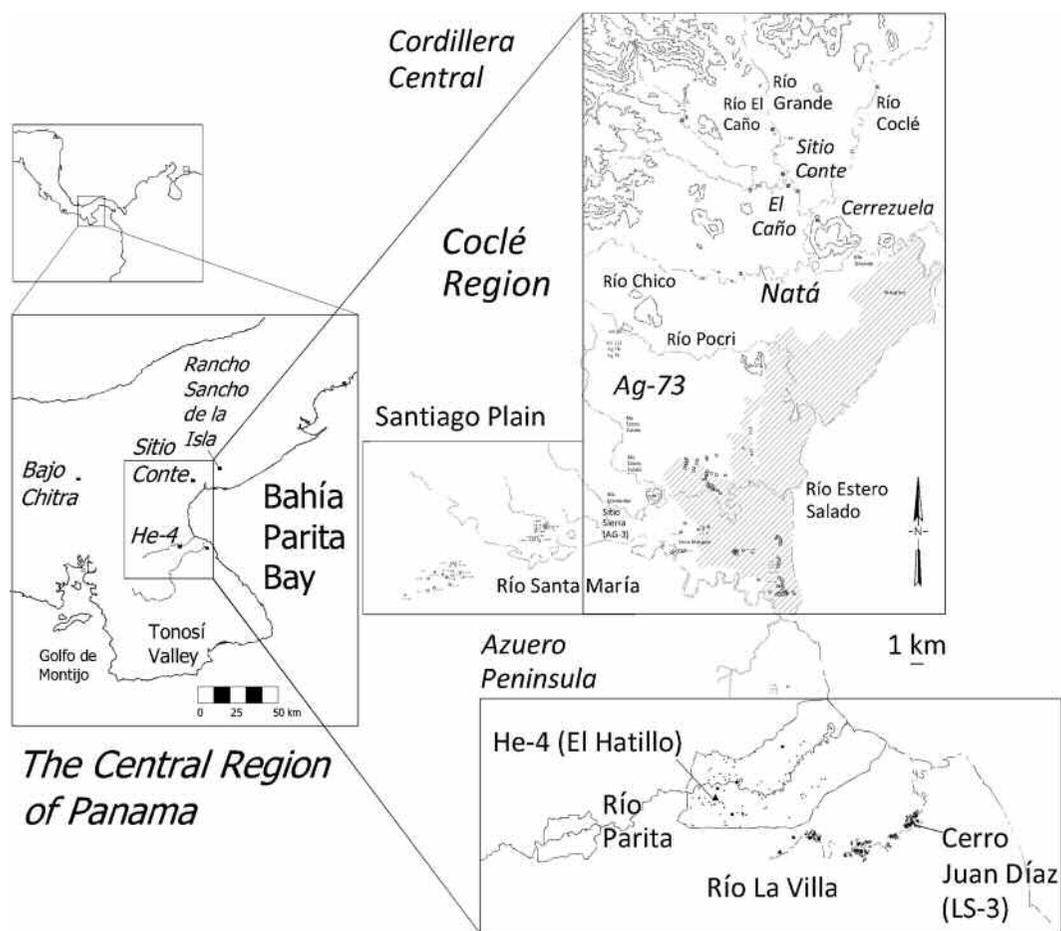
The sixteenth-century indigenous societies who inhabited the plains and foothills of Pacific Panama (Figure 1), described as having clearly marked status distinctions and a penchant for the ostentatious display of personal wealth, have occupied an important place in discussions of cultural evolution (Oberg 1955; Steward and Faron 1959). Spanish accounts describe a competitive chiefly class whose antagonistic relationships resulted in alternating periods of prosperity and defeat (Andagoya 1865, 1994; Espinosa 1994; Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés 1994) that suggest par-

allels with comparative examples of ethnographic or archaeological episodes of chiefly cycling (Anderson 1996a; Flannery 1999; Peterson et al. 2008). With the discovery in the 1930s of the richly stocked tombs at the Sitio Conte cemetery in modern-day Coclé province (Lothrop 1937, 1942; Mason 1941, 1942) attention shifted to the historical development of the societies encountered by the Spanish. Efforts at reconstructing a broader context for this cemetery have emphasized that no other pre-Columbian cemetery in Panama shows evidence for similarly wealthy individuals (Cooke 2004a). More

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*Latin American Antiquity* 23(4), 2012, pp. 449–466  
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**Figure 1.** Map of the Central Region of Panama with inset showing Parita Bay showing archaeological sites mentioned in the text.

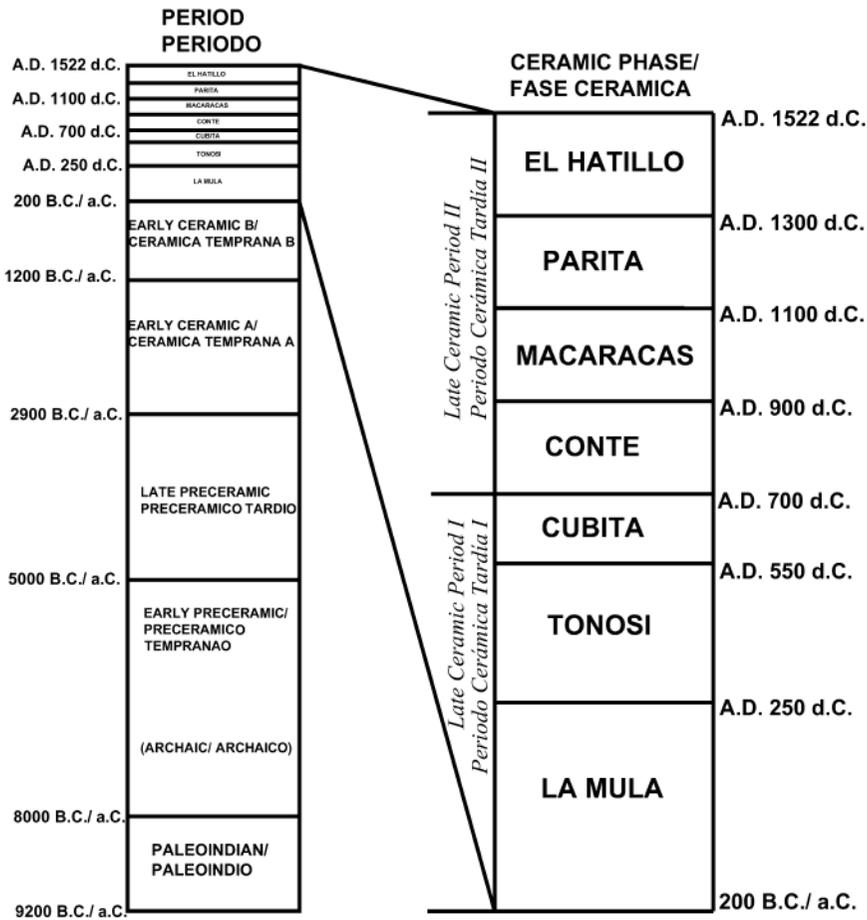
to the point, the kinds of prestige goods found in such great quantities in the richest graves at Sitio Conte have been recovered in relatively small numbers in cemeteries in the Azuero Peninsula (Cooke et al. 1998; Ichon 1980; Ladd 1964). This pattern is particularly evident when the Sitio Conte and He-4 cemeteries are compared. Located approximately 60 km to the southwest in the Río Parita valley, He-4 (El Hatillo, Finca Calderón, or Parita) is the only other site in the Central Region with mortuary patterning that is indicative of at least a small number of high ranking individuals (Cooke et al. 2000). Nonetheless, the most extravagant grave hoards documented for He-4 are much less impressive than those found at Sitio Conte.

This observation has underscored arguments for regional variability in the development of social hierarchy during the Late Ceramic Period II (A.D.

700-1522) (Table 1) and the chronological sequence for the two cemeteries brings this contrast into even sharper relief; the first burial mounds containing wealthy graves at He-4 were constructed in the Macaracas phase (A.D. 900-1100) as high status burials declined at Sitio Conte (Cooke et al. 2000:155). One explanation for the differential consumption of prestige goods is that it was the result of chiefly cycling and endemic sociopolitical instability similar to the sixteenth century.

This article attempts to provide the social and political context necessary to evaluate the evidence for chiefly cycling in the Late Ceramic II Period. To that end, this article adopts a "macroregional" perspective (Flannery 1976:5; Redmond et al. 1999:110) to integrate settlement, household, and mortuary data to compare the Coclé region with the Río Parita valley. Our discussion is limited to

Table 1. Ceramic Chronology for the Central Region of Panama (after Haller 2008:Figure 2.12).



these two cases because they are the most thoroughly documented for the period under consideration. By widening the focus of our analysis from mortuary remains to include other lines of evidence, the macroregional approach lends itself to tracing the growth and decline of chiefdoms in these two regions.

### Chiefly Cycling in the Central Region of Panama

Chiefly cycling refers to the periodic expansion of chiefdoms into larger confederacies to subsume a number of smaller chiefdoms (Flannery and Marcus 2000:2; Wright 1984). These complex or paramount chiefdoms faced organizational challenges including factional competition within and

between lineages, endemic warfare, population growth, and competition over access to resources and symbols of power (Junker 1999:90; Kelly 2008:158; Sahlins 1968:93). As a result, paramount chiefdoms often fragmented into smaller, previously existing chiefdoms, or into new chiefdoms in regions where none had existed before (Junker 1999:88 90; Wright 1984). Typically this fragmentation resulted in a decline in the level of social complexity (Tainter 1988:4 5, 25).

The sixteenth-century indigenous societies of Parita Bay are often cited as prime examples of paramount chiefdoms with a clear social hierarchy and constant rivalry between groups, largely initiated by a competitive chiefly class (Espinosa 1994; Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés 1944). Membership into a high ranking lineage was inherited (Helms

1979:25–27), but status distinctions were also marked through success in warfare, religious roles, and craft specialization (Cooke 1998a; Roosevelt 1979). Higher ranking chiefs and warriors were differentiated from commoners through class endogamy, sumptuary rules, and personal wealth, much of which was accumulated through raiding, territorial expansion, and exchange (Cooke 1979:18; Helms 1979:59–60).

By the sixteenth century at least four powerful chiefs controlled territories that encompassed several river valleys, including coastal and highland zones, and provided access to a diverse range of resources (Cooke 1993a; Helms 1979:40–65). The territory of Escoria in the Río Santa María region was approximately 176 km<sup>2</sup> with an estimated 7,800 people (Cooke, Sánchez Herrera, et al. 2003:8) and Parita's territory is estimated at 381 km<sup>2</sup>, and included both the Parita and La Villa valleys (Isaza Aizpurúa 2007:11–13). Conflict was common for access to hunting and fishing grounds, transportation routes, captive taking, and prestige for certain individuals (Helms 1994:59; Redmond 1994:39). Territorial gains also created fragile hierarchical confederacies and the chiefdom of Natá, for example, is thought to have had as many as 11 subchiefs (Helms 1979:57). Unfortunately, reconstructing these sociopolitical dynamics archaeologically remains underdeveloped.

#### *Archaeological Indicators of Chiefly Cycling*

Archaeologists working in Panama have drawn analogies with the sixteenth century to infer a high degree of instability in pre-Columbian indigenous politics suggestive of chiefly cycling. Samuel Lothrop speculated that the position of the sixteenth-century paramount Natá was a result of his having defeated the last of the chiefs interred at Sitio Conte (Lothrop 1942:253). Olga Linares (1976:15) has argued that groups in Coclé must have experienced episodes of “fission and fusion” resulting from competition over land and other resources during periods of population growth. Similarly, Richard Cooke (1979; Cooke and Ranere 1992b:128) has traced the rise and fall of several centers in Parita Bay and has documented the existence of large regional populations (Cooke, Sánchez Herrera, et al. 2003). The concept of chiefly cycling is certainly implicit in this body of work, and with the benefit of several decades of

archaeological research it is possible to expand on this scholarship to reconstruct sociopolitical changes in more detail.

Identifying chiefly cycling in the archaeological record “requires examination at broad spatial and temporal scales, encompassing regions and generations” (Anderson 1996b:234). The development of regional settlement hierarchies with a large chiefly community differentiated from smaller villages and hamlets is a common indicator of the growth of chiefdoms (Wright 1984). The dissolution of these hierarchies, as well as large-scale demographic shifts, has been used to identify their decline (Scarry 1996). Similarly, buffer zones between rival chiefdoms are often evident from regional settlement patterns (Allen 2008:70; Anderson 1996a:173; Hally 2006:33). Episodes of cycling are also apparent from the abandonment of large communities and the emergence of new ones or lengthy hiatuses at a single center (Anderson 1996a:160; King 2003:60–63; Rosenswig 2007:7–8). The construction of monumental architecture has been taken as evidence of periods of political competition and efforts at status legitimation (Anderson 1996b:247; Blitz 1999; Trubitt 2000:679). The presence of public architecture and quantities of prestige goods at smaller sites has also been a useful measure for the relative importance of secondary and tertiary sites within regions (Blitz and Livingwood 2004:292; Redmond et al. 1999:111). The sudden disappearance of prestige goods from household and mortuary contexts has been used to infer a breakdown of trade networks due to changes in sociopolitical organization (Anderson 1996b:250; Bradley 1991:56–58).

#### **The Evolution of Chiefdoms in Coclé (A.D. 700–1522)**

A variety of factors have been proposed to explain the precocious development of the system of social hierarchy reflected in the extraordinary accumulation of wealth in the Sitio Conte graves, including population pressure, social circumscription, control over fertile alluvial soils, access to highland resources and control over trade networks (Cooke and Ranere 1992a; Linares 1977). The nature of available settlement evidence makes it difficult to evaluate these hypotheses directly, and the relative importance of economic factors to chiefly author-

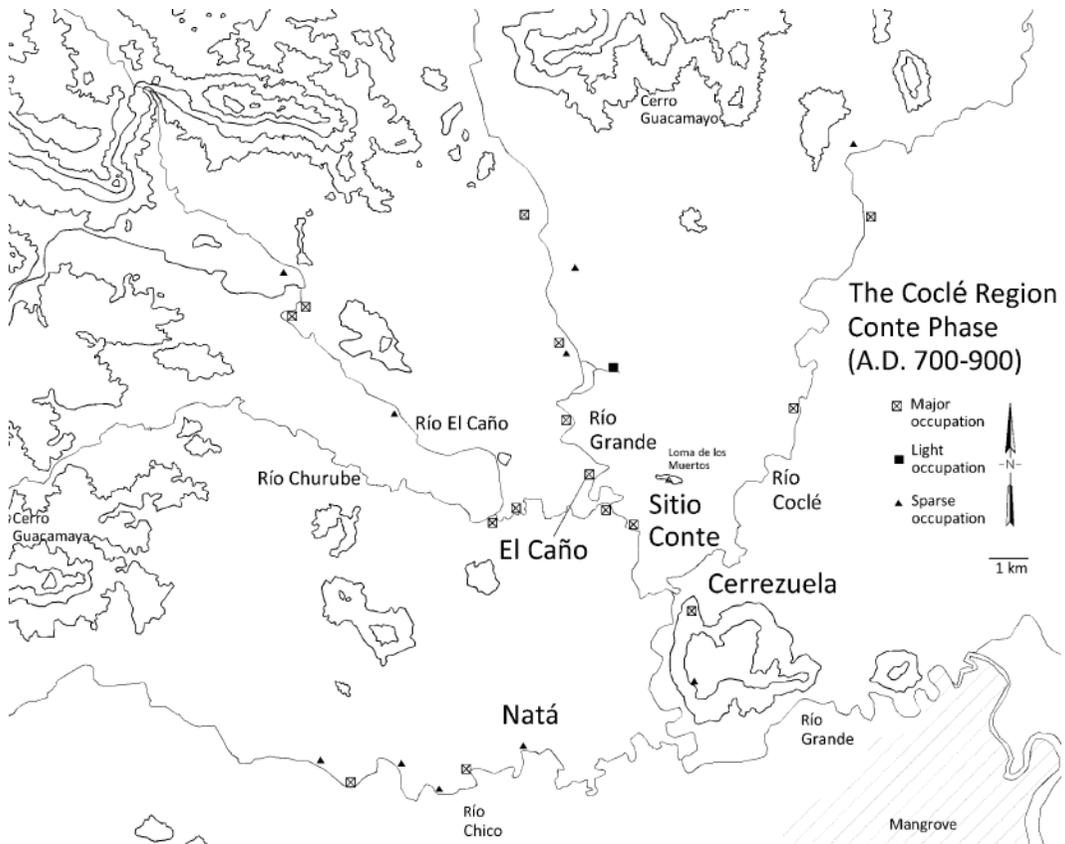


Figure 2. Conte phase (A.D. 700–900) occupation in Coclé (compiled from Cooke 1972:Map 1, Table 12).

ity is not well understood. Nonetheless, the distribution of villages along the major river valleys of Coclé and slopes of the Cordillera Central (Figure 2) and evidence for human impact on the landscape indicates large regional populations (Cooke 1979; Cooke, Sánchez Herrera, et al. 2003). In the absence of an empirically reconstructed settlement hierarchy, there is some evidence that sites were differentiated based on size, ceremonial function, and relative status of the inhabitants.

The hilltop site of Cerrezuela, located less than 2 km from Sitio Conte, is the best candidate for a chiefly center in Coclé. The site was occupied when the first wealthy burials at Sitio Conte were interred during the Conte phase (A.D. 700–900) (Cooke 1972:438). Although no site-size estimates are available, “Cerro Zuela is immense and could support a very large population” (Cooke 1972:437). Test pitting and unsystematic survey has shown that there is abundant residential debris across its summit (Cooke 1972; Lothrop 1942:218–219). It

is also substantially larger than every other residential site known for Coclé for this time. The large stone terraces on the slopes of the hill may have been used as house foundations (Cooke 1972:436–437) or for agricultural purposes (Mayo et al. 2007:98; Morena and Murray 2007:143). There is no data regarding household status differences within the community, but several gold items were recovered and polychrome sherds were found in abundance (Lothrop 1942:219).

The Sitio Conte cemetery provides the strongest evidence for the presence of chiefdoms in Coclé (Cooke 2004a; Creamer and Haas 1985; Fitzgerald 1996). The cemetery itself covered an area of approximately 4 ha with a small residential occupation (Briggs 1989:65; Linares 1977:34). The wealthiest burials, predominantly adult males (Briggs 1989:72), were interred between A.D. 750 and A.D. 950 (Cooke 2005:151). Interments ranged from simple flexed burials to multiple interments of 3–22 individuals, buried in deep tombs with a

principal individual surrounded by the bodies of retainers, captives, or warriors (Lothrop 1937:48).

The mortuary record indicates that wealth accumulation, particularly elaborate costumes, was a defining feature of status in this chiefdom (Drennan et al. 2010; Feinman 2001:158). The graves cluster into a pyramidal social structure consisting of 10 groups, with the most elaborate graves making up Clusters I, II, and III (Briggs 1989:132, table 24; Creamer and Haas 1985:746). Status was reflected in the quantity (in some case thousands of offerings) and diversity of grave goods (Briggs 1989:132, 139). Although certain types of gold items were restricted to the wealthiest burials (Cooke, Isaza Aizpurúa, et al. 2003:121), gold was only one of several markers of status. These also included polished stone bars, worked bone beads and pendants, animal teeth and tusks, ivory, dog teeth, sting ray spines, emeralds, and figurines made from resin (Briggs 1993:158 160; Cooke et al. 2007:583). Most of the luxury items formed costumes, including gold helmets, greaves, nose rings, and “aprons” of worked animal teeth or bone tubes (Cooke and Jiménez 2010:40). These were primarily found in Clusters I, II, and III (Briggs 1989:137). Many graves contained carved spear throwers, sting-ray spines, projectile points, and necklaces of human teeth that suggest a connection between status and success in warfare (Cooke 1993b:185; Redmond 1994:113). Near the bottom of the social pyramid, Cluster VIII included the largest number of graves with the fewest luxury goods and costume elements (Briggs 1989:121). Thus, “both the simple presence or absence and the absolute number of sumptuary and costume mortuary arts indicates higher or lower status among the deceased at Sitio Conte” (Briggs 1989:137).

These patterns provide a synchronic view of mortuary wealth at Sitio Conte, but a relative chronology of the graves shows that poorer graves were not simply deposited before or after wealthy ones (Cooke 1998a:96, 109). In fact, many of the poorest graves were interred adjacent to wealthy graves (Lothrop 1934:207). This patterning is suggestive of the kind of internally ranked lineages argued for other chiefly centers in the Americas (Milner 1998:134; Peebles and Kus 1977). There are also indications that the same kinds of status differences were present across the region. A Conte

phase burial at Rancho Sancho de la Isla, a short distance to the east of Sitio Conte, contained at least three gold chisels and an array of polychrome vessels (Dade 1960:74, 86) that suggest the presence of lesser elites at a secondary center.

The presence of modest monumental architecture at sites in the vicinity of Sitio Conte provides further evidence for a regional ranking of communities. Located less than 2 km to the north, the site of El Caño featured lines of carved basalt columns, cobble pavements, low burial mounds, a large ceremonial structure, and recently discovered Conte phase burials with grave offerings on the same scale as Sitio Conte (Mayo et al. 2010; Mojica et al. 2007; Williams 2012). Although this monumental architecture was modest by the standards of other early chiefdoms (Drennan et al. 2010:70), El Caño was clearly the focal point of ceremonial activity for this chiefdom (Cooke 2004a). The presence of basalt columns at two smaller, but poorly documented, sites and low burial mounds at several others in the vicinity (Lothrop 1942:200 216; Mayo et al. 2007:99; Verrill 1927), suggests that these were more important communities than most villages in Coclé and may have been secondary centers. Taken together, we are left with a picture of a Coclé chiefdom that was characterized by clear differences in ranking, prestige good consumption, and the dominance of three major sites over smaller communities. The proximity of Sitio Conte, El Caño, and Cerrezuela suggests that they formed the social, ceremonial, and political core of this chiefdom (Cooke, Isaza Aizpurúa, et al. 2003:126).

The prosperity of high ranking lineages in Coclé was in decline by the early Macaracas phase and there is evidence that this chiefdom collapsed quite dramatically. High status interments at Sitio Conte cease sometime between A.D. 900 and A.D. 950, although two of the wealthiest graves (Graves 5 and 26) date to the early Macaracas phase (Cooke 1998a:96). The simple caches found after this time contained only modest offerings with few of the prestige goods that marked status so conspicuously during previous centuries (Lothrop 1937).

Accompanying this decline was a widespread reduction in regional population; Cerrezuela was abandoned, as were numerous smaller communities (Cooke 1972:437 438) (Figure 3). Available settlement data shows a pattern of dispersed vil-

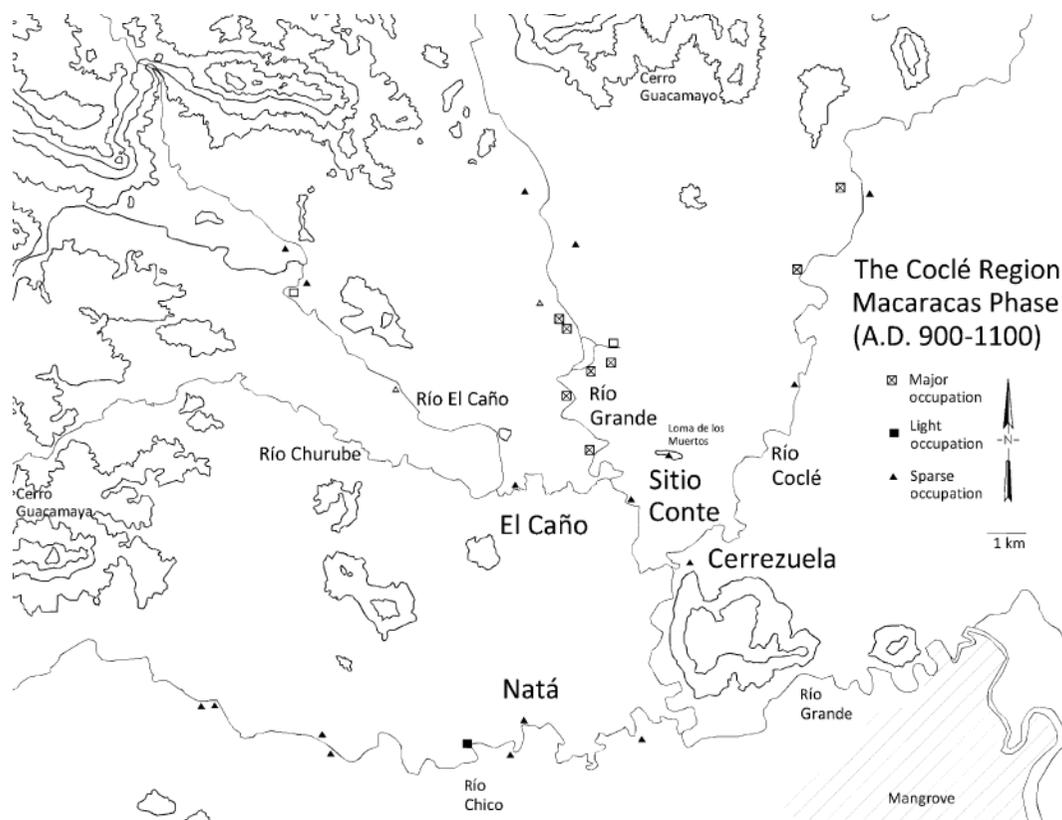


Figure 3. Macaracas phase (A.D. 900–1100) occupation in Coclé (compiled from Cooke 1972:Map 1, Table 12).

lages with only a small residential occupation in the vicinity of Sitio Conte and El Caño (Cooke 1972:389; Ladd 1957).

After several centuries the Coclé region experienced a settlement and demographic reorganization as population levels recovered from the Macaracas phase (Figure 4). By the middle of the Parita phase (A.D. 1100–1300) the densely settled community of Natá had emerged as an important regional center (Breece 1997; Cooke 1972:437–446). The three sites that clustered around Natá reflect a nucleating effect resulting from its rapid growth (Cooke 1972:366). Although the territorial extents of this polity have not been determined, ethnohistoric accounts mention buffer zones of uninhabited areas between Natá and Chirú that may have been as wide as 22 km (Cooke 1979:930). Mound burials from El Caño for this period included both multiple interments and urn burials with modest offerings (Cooke et al. 2000:168–170). The few metal artifacts recovered

were both smaller and of poorer quality than those found at Sitio Conte (Bray 1992:45–46).

### The Rise of the Río Parita Chiefdom (A.D. 700–1522)

At the height of the Coclé chiefdom during the Conte phase, a three-tiered settlement hierarchy in the Río Parita valley indicates the existence of a local chiefdom with the large community of He-4 situated at its apex (Figure 5) (Haller 2008:85–87; Menzies 2009:81–82). Intensive systematic surface survey, test pitting, and horizontal household excavations in 2006 and 2007 have documented household status differences within the community (Locascio 2010; Menzies and Haller 2012). The differential distribution of Conte phase beige paste pottery, assumed to be imported from Coclé (Ladd 1964:129, 214) helps to define a cluster of elite households in the center of the community. This central cluster was differentiated from lower-ranking

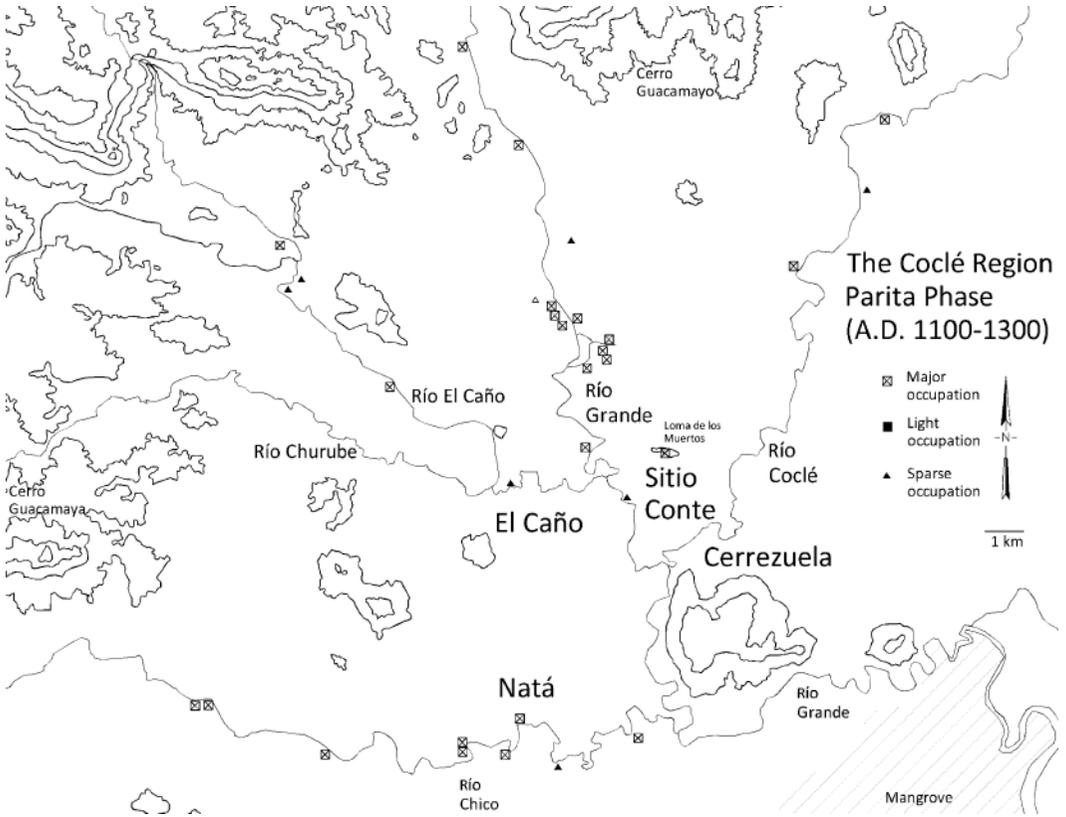


Figure 4. Parita phase (A.D. 1100–1300) occupation in Coclé (compiled from Cooke 1972:Map 1, Table 12).

households based on greater proportions of polychrome ceramics, serving vessels, and rare vessel forms (Locascio 2010:58, 75; Menzies 2009:84).

Finds of Conte phase vessels in mound fill (Ladd 1964:43) and in “deeper graves” (Mitchell and Acker 1961a:22, Plate VIII) indicate that the area

where the mound group is eventually constructed was in use as a ceremonial space at this time (Haller 2008:87–89). Although it is not known if any gold items were found in these graves, they contrast with simpler graves elsewhere in the valley (Ladd 1964; Mitchell and Acker 1961b).

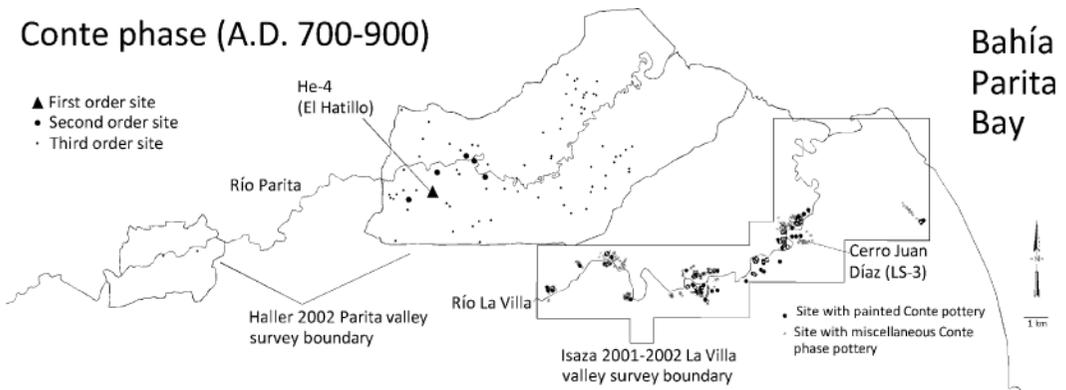
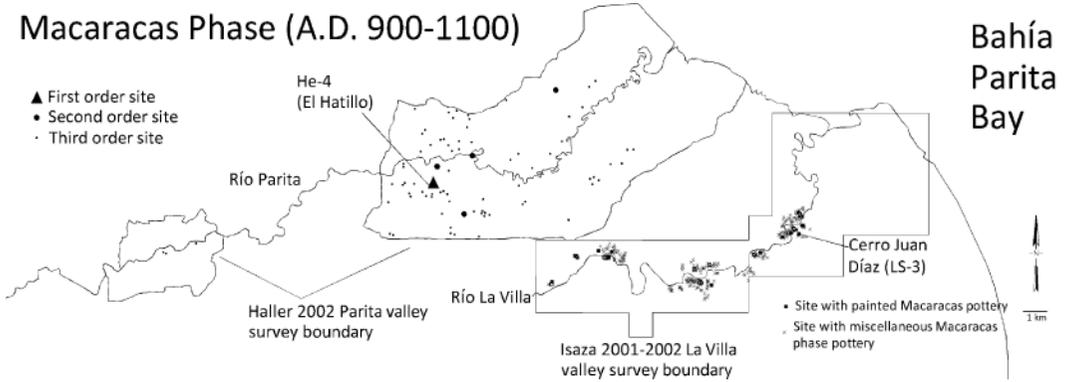


Figure 5. Conte phase (A.D. 700–900) occupation in the Río Parita and La Villa valleys (after Haller 2008:Figure 4.15 and Isaza Aizpurúa 2007:Figure 6.26).

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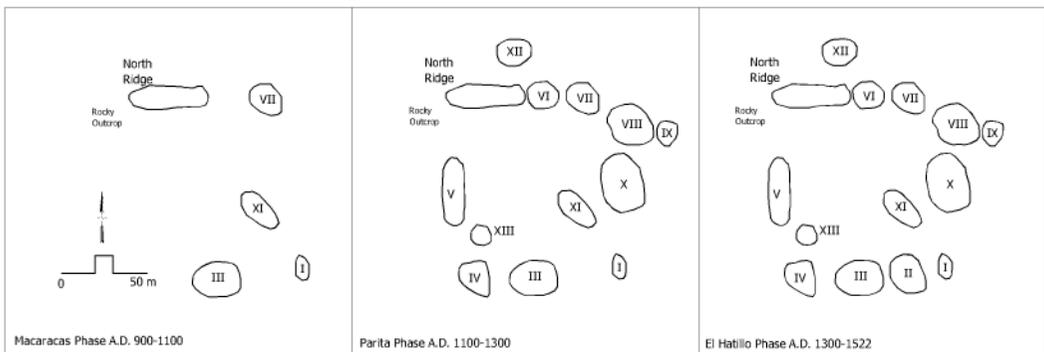


**Figure 6.** Macaracas phase (A.D. 900–1100) occupation in the Río Parita and La Villa valleys (after Haller 2008:Figure 4.18 and Isaza Aizpurúa 2007:Figure 6.38).

Regional settlement data shows that, contemporaneous with the decline of the Coclé chiefdom, the Río Parita valley experienced an increase in regional integration during the Macaracas phase (Figure 6) (Haller 2008:89). He-4 remained at the head of the three-tiered settlement hierarchy (Haller 2008:89) and household status differences were again defined by the clustering of polychrome pedestal plates, serving vessels and spouted polychrome bottles in middens adjacent to the mound complex (Menzies and Haller 2012:12–13).

It is in this social and political context that the first construction phases for Mounds I, VI, VII, X, and the North Ridge were undertaken (Figure 7). Only Mound VI shows evidence for substantial labor investment in the excavation of deep tombs (Bull 1965:33). This effort contrasts with bedrock pits in other mounds that were reused for several

centuries and there is a clear juxtaposition between wealthy and modest burials (Biese 1961:40; Ladd 1964; Mitchell and Acker 1961a:4). Like Sitio Conte, multiple burials with a principal individual found in deep tombs also contained the largest burial hoards. The most elaborate Macaracas phase tombs were discovered in Mound VI and Burial 4 contained at least three adult males, two metal items, over 1,000 worked shell beads, tubular bone pendants, animal teeth, jadeite beads, quartz crystals and other precious stones, as well as more than 200 Red-buff vessels and polychrome pedestal plates (Bull 1965:35–38). Several of the graves with the greatest number of offerings included large numbers of polychrome pedestal plates (Ladd 1964:250), illustrating a connection with the markers of household status documented through survey and test pitting.



**Figure 7.** Sequence of mound construction at He-4 after A.D. 900 (after Ladd 1964:figure 1).

The recovery of a large collection of elaborate metal objects from a deep tomb has always been taken as evidence that He-4 occupied a prominent place for the interment of high ranking individuals (Biese 1967:207; Cooke et al. 2000:171). This collection, recovered by looters from a grave more than 20 feet (6 m) deep is referred to as the "Parita Assemblage" (Biese 1967:207) and based on stylistic characteristics is believed to date to the period from A.D. 900–1500 (Bray 1992:45). Several other deep burials were also discovered by looters. One of these contained upward of 20 individuals, and another had at least six large stone grinding stones and an unknown number of bodies (Dade 1972b). These graves also contained quantities of metal and polychrome ceramic offerings that were never tabulated (Dade 1972a:38, 1972b:154).

During the period of demographic resurgence in Coclé and the growth of Natá, the Río Parita chiefdom and the elite families at He-4 continued to prosper as population levels in the valley increased during the Parita phase (Haller 2008:97–99). Population also grew at He-4, which remained at the head of the settlement hierarchy with five secondary sites clustering nearby (Haller 2008:99). Differences in household status at He-4 were even more conspicuous at this time. Two clusters of elite households have been identified based on the most diverse ceramic inventories, differential access to polychrome serving vessels, worked bone jewelry, and some craft activities involving polished stone celts (Menziés and Haller 2012).

Widening status differences in daily life at He-4 were also reflected in mortuary treatment and deep burials again contained the wealthiest individuals, although none of these are well documented because they were found by looters (e.g., Mitchell and Acker 1961a). Several modest mortuary features excavated in 2006 beneath Parita phase house floors and in midden deposits in residential zones provide a glimpse at mortuary customs for lower-ranking people not interred within the mound complex (Menziés 2009).

The El Hatillo phase (A.D. 1300–1522) was a period of declining prosperity for the Río Parita chiefdom with a significant reduction in population levels and regional integration, although He-4 remained at the head of a three-tiered settlement hierarchy (Haller 2008:105–107). Elite families at

He-4 continued to be differentiated from the rest of the community (Locascio 2010; Menziés 2009).

The continued use of at least five of the mounds again points to the ceremonial importance of this area; Mound II was the only new mound and contained burials that were not as wealthy as during earlier periods (Haller 2008:103). The stratigraphy shows a single construction phase to inter six funerary urns that together contained 17 individuals, including adults and children (Ladd 1964:27, 245). Urn 1 contained the remains of three individuals and 737 perforated human incisors (Ladd 1964:246). Located between these urns were several pieces of carved manatee bone dart throwers associated with large quantities of polychrome bottles and effigy jars and another necklace of perforated human teeth (Ladd 1964:245, Plate I).

## Discussion

The macroregional perspective developed in this article provides the necessary social and historical context to understand the differences in mortuary treatment in the Sitio Conte and He-4 cemeteries that are often cited as an example of regional variability in the Central Region of Panama. The dramatic decline in regional population after A.D. 950, abandonment of residential sites, including the large village of Cerrezuela, and decrease in mortuary wealth at Sitio Conte are all indicative of the breakdown of a paramount chiefdom in Coclé in the early Macaracas phase. The small, dispersed regional populations during the late Macaracas phase and absence of wealthy burials for several hundred years before the emergence of Natá during the Parita phase underscore the severity of this political fragmentation. The macroregional effect of this collapse is seen in the expansion of an existing Conte phase chiefdom in the Río Parita valley. The increase in regional integration, rapid construction of monumental architecture, accumulation of large burial hoards by a few individuals and widening differences in household status at He-4 during the Macaracas phase all indicate the consolidation of local power in the Río Parita valley. The initial observation that mortuary hoards at Sitio Conte were dramatically more elaborate than those found later at He-4 is best explained as a consequence of chiefly cycling in Parita Bay. Nonetheless, the archaeological record shows that elites at

He-4 did not wield the same kind of social influence as their erstwhile competitors.

These findings have implications for understanding regional variability in the appearance and degree of social hierarchy across the Central Region. The lack of any other cemetery with mortuary patterning like Sitio Conte has been taken by some scholars as an indication that the cemetery, disconnected from any political territory, was used to bury high-status individuals from across the Central Region (Cooke et al. 2000:172; Cooke, Isaza Aizpurúa, et al. 2003:126–127). The pyramidal social structure apparent from the graves at Sitio Conte, however, is a clear indicator for a single, internally ranked chiefdom (Creamer and Haas 1985; Drennan 1991; Drennan et al. 2010). The founding of formal cemeteries and construction of ceremonial architecture often reflect elite efforts to provide legitimacy to lineage claims over territory (Earle 1987:364; Renfrew 1973:553), and it is not difficult to imagine that the burial of high status individuals at Sitio Conte and El Caño was intended to make such a statement (Briggs 1993:162–163). The regional hierarchy of sites in Coclé, with a high status cemetery and large residential center at its heart, reinforces this picture of a single local chiefdom (e.g., Redmond et al. 1999:124). In short, we find it more parsimonious to argue that the chiefs buried in Coclé were laid to rest comfortably within their own territory.

The territorial extents of this Coclé chiefdom have never been empirically defined, but this has implications for further understanding the relationship of the Coclé chiefdom with neighboring polities. Unfortunately, much of the settlement data for Coclé and adjacent regions is inadequate to the task of reconstructing chiefly territories, largely because of a lack of site histories detailing phase-by-phase changes in site size, population, and relative status differences. Using a maximum distance of a single day's travel as the potential limits of a territory that could be directly administered (Hally 2006:26; Spencer 1987:375), however, means that the Coclé chiefdom could have exerted influence over nearby areas such as the Santiago Plain and the Río Santa María watershed to the west (Figure 1). The large nucleated community of Ag-73 (approximately 38.5 ha), located just over 20 km from Sitio Conte, may have been a secondary center near the edge of this potential limit or the center of a rival chiefdom

(Cooke and Ranere 1984, 1992b:table 5; Weiland 1984:41, 46). The same exercise shows that the Río Parita valley, located approximately 60 km to the southwest of Sitio Conte, is well outside of the potential sphere of direct control of the Coclé polity because it is considerably more than a single day's travel there and back. This potential limit could be extended if we consider coastal canoe travel because the Spanish describe large ocean-going vessels (Cooke and Sánchez 2001; see also Cooke and Ranere 1992b:117). Although faster than overland travel, it would have been an unreliable means of managing distant territories because of weather, currents, and the effects of seasonal rainfall on river levels (Drennan 1984:106). In short, the distance between the two regions is much larger than comparative ethnographic examples suggest is possible to directly administer given the inherent structural limitations of chiefly politics (Sahlins 1968).

In the absence of direct coercive control by a Coclé paramount over the Río Parita valley during the Conte and early Macaracas phases, a more likely means of interaction would have been exchange. The clearest markers for this are the Conte phase polychrome beige paste vessels found in elite households at He-4. The display of these elaborately decorated serving vessels during communal events would have contributed to the success of He-4 elites by emphasizing external political connections with Coclé (Earle 1987:296; Spencer 1993). It is almost certain that the fame of high ranking Coclé chiefs would have been widely advertised and elites at He-4 would have benefited locally from any kind of association. The cosmological content of the iconography on these vessels would no doubt have strengthened this effect (Cooke 2004b; Flannery and Marcus 1993; Linares 1977).

In contrast, the more conspicuous markers of status, such as costume elements and jewelry, do not appear to have been exchanged in great quantities. The poor documentation for Conte phase burials at He-4 makes it difficult to evaluate this directly, but the small number of such items in mortuary contexts at the nearby cemetery of Cerro Juan Díaz in the La Villa valley illustrates this point. The wealthiest Conte phase grave was of an adult female, buried with 14 gold beads, two polychrome vessels, and an unpainted effigy vessel (Díaz 1999:Table 3.2). When set against the hundreds of sumptuary items in contemporary graves at Sitio

Conte and El Caño, it is reasonable to argue that these objects were difficult to obtain by the inhabitants of the Azuero Peninsula, perhaps because exchanging or gifting these objects was not an important strategy for elites in Coclé (e.g., Anderson 1997:257; Beck 2003:646). These individuals may have been reluctant to exchange the items that formed their regalia; the elaborateness of their costumes would have reflected individual achievements over a lifetime and exchanging these objects would have diluted the obviousness of this (Helms 1994:58; Linares 1976:14).

The conspicuousness of this wealth accumulation would have been enhanced if other chiefs, such as those at He-4, were unable to mobilize sufficient resources to obtain the most desirable items through exchange (Steponaitis 1991). Regional settlement and household evidence for the Río Parita valley has shown that elite control over prime agricultural land, surplus production, or sponsorship of craft production during the Conte phase was quite weak (Haller 2008; Menzies and Haller 2012). If elites in Coclé were intensifying surplus production using the terraces at Cerrezuela, they would have been at an advantage over potential rivals (e.g., Redmond et al. 1999:125; Spencer et al. 1998).

Elites in Coclé also appear to have enjoyed a geographic advantage that allowed them to access gold, animal products (skins, bone, teeth, or feathers), and other materials more easily than inhabitants in other regions (Cooke and Jiménez 2010:43; Cooke, Isaza Aizpurúa, et al. 2003:133). Although gold is found across the isthmus in placer deposits, it is present in much greater densities in the Caribbean watershed and Cordillera Central (Cooke, Isaza Aizpurúa, et al. 2003:135) where there is also a great diversity of animal species (Cooke et al. 2007). These regions are within a day's travel from the coastal plain and would have placed the inhabitants of this region in an advantageous position with respect to natural trade corridors. It is notable that Cerrezuela occupied a strategic location at the "confluence of the three major rivers of Coclé" that made access to both the highlands and coastal trade routes easy (Cooke 1972:437). Perhaps not coincidentally, there was a shift in the preference from shell to gold prestige goods with the appearance of the wealthiest graves at Sitio Conte that also accompanied a reorganization of regional trade networks (Cooke 2011:125; Cooke et al. 1998:165).

This Coclé chiefdom lasted for only a few hundred years and was in decline by the early Macaracas phase (Cooke et al. 2000:155). The factors contributing to this remain unclear. The collapse of this chiefdom appears to have been felt in the Río Parita valley. The increase in regional integration, widening differences in household status at He-4 and appearance of wealthy mound burials indicate the consolidation of local power by elites. These developments coincide with a decline in the size of the community of Cerro Juan Díaz and a broad shift in settlement inland in the neighboring La Villa valley, suggesting an expansion of local power as it was incorporated into the Río Parita chiefdom (Isaza Aizpurúa 2007:376–377). It seems clear that Macaracas phase elites at He-4 carried more influence than did elite families in the same community during the preceding Conte phase.

The effect of systematic looting at He-4 makes it challenging to discuss the degree to which Macaracas phase elites in this community rivaled Conte phase elites in Coclé in terms of wealth accumulation. Widespread looting, however, has not completely obscured evidence that the individuals buried at He-4 were not as wealthy as their predecessors in Coclé. Multiple interments with a principal individual, sometimes on a stone slab, large quantities of costume elements, and goods made from exotic raw materials, such as carved manatee bone, at both cemeteries point to similar principles of ranking (Haller 2008:95, 103; Ladd 1964:150). The smaller and less diverse grave hoards at He-4, however, give the impression of comparative modesty in the size of elite burial hoards. The wealthiest graves in clusters I–III at Sitio Conte contained anywhere from 3,800 to 5,415 costume and sumptuary goods (Briggs 1989:33), whereas the wealthiest documented grave from He-4, Burial 4 from Mound VI, contained approximately 1,400 items (Bull 1965). None of the graves at He-4 contained the thousands of ceramic vessels that formed the "walls" of several grave containers at Sitio Conte (Lothrop 1937:108) indicating much less labor investment in grave preparation.

This comparative modesty in grave hoards at He-4 is also reflected in the quality of costume elements. The predominance of shell jewelry at He-4 suggests that chiefs at He-4 did not have the same access to exotic materials, particularly gold, as those buried at Sitio Conte. For example, the

triangular *Spondylus* (sp.) and *Pinctada mazatlanica* beads found in large quantities in several graves at He-4 (Bull 1965:Plate X, E; Ladd 1964:150) are similar in size and shape to the triangular gold pendants from Sitio Conte (Briggs 1989:figure 13), where shell jewelry was absent (Cooke and Sánchez 2003:20). Similarly, there are relatively few animal teeth from graves at He-4, but worked bone “teeth” that resemble the canines from large predatory mammals are reported from at least two burials (Bull 1965:37, 46). This jewelry may have been produced locally. Mammal bone jewelry was produced in small quantities at Cerro Juan Díaz (Cooke and Jiménez 2010) and worked marine shell has been found in household middens at He-4 (Menzies 2009). An outcrop of thorny oysters has been documented less than a day’s travel from the Parita valley (Cooke 1998b:102) and the production of shell jewelry at nearby Cerro Juan Díaz during preceding centuries suggests that it was known to local groups (Mayo and Cooke 2005).

One explanation for the difference in grave wealth between the two cemeteries is that chiefly power was based on different principles at He-4 than it was earlier in Coclé. There is little evidence for an economic foundation to chiefly authority at this time in the Río Parita valley (Haller 2008); however, the importance of status display is clear. The production of some craft goods, such as important prestige goods, in the central cluster of elite households may have been for higher-ranking members of these households, indicating that competition for these items was intense (Menzies and Haller 2012). The sizable quantities of polychrome pedestal plates in the largest grave hoards and in elite household inventories at He-4 also point to the need for sustained efforts at status legitimation through communal activities and ostentatious display (Locascio 2010). The reuse of several mounds to inter both rich and poor people, sometimes in the same bedrock pits, suggests internally ranked lineages of the sort described for the sixteenth century. These groups would have been a critical source of support. The proximity of elite households to the burial mounds would also have emphasized the legitimacy of higher-ranking members of these lineages (Welch 1996:89). Mortuary rituals accompanying new construction phases would have further reinforced this (Haller 2008:93 95;

Ladd 1964:27) in the wake of a macroregional sociopolitical reorganization.

During this Macaracas phase reorganization elites at He-4 also appear to have monopolized prestige goods, at least locally, and were by no means impoverished relative to other regions of the Azuero Peninsula at this time (e.g., Cooke et al. 2000; Ichon 1980). For example, there is a decline in mortuary wealth at Cerro Juan Díaz contemporaneous with the first elite burials at He-4. Macaracas phase burials were poorer than for previous periods and only a single gold item was recovered from mortuary contexts (Cooke et al. 2000:155). The graves of women and children predominated in ossuaries that were reused over time (Cooke et al. 2000:166 167). If these tombs did contain grave goods these were generally stone tools or utilitarian pottery, with only small quantities of worked shell or animal teeth (Cooke and Jiménez 2010:45).

A few hundred years after the collapse of the Coclé chiefdom, the region saw the consolidation of a new polity based at Natá during a new episode of cycling in the Parita phase. At the same time, continued centralization in the Río Parita valley, continuity in status differences between households, and new mound construction at He-4 shows that this chiefdom remained an influential presence in Parita Bay. Much like the sixteenth century, these two regions must have had some relationship, although this may have at times been genial or antagonistic. There are indications, however, that elites at He-4 were under pressure in the last few centuries before the arrival of the Spanish during the El Hatillo phase. This pressure may have come from both internal and external sources.

The decline in regional population and growth of another village (Site 393) to almost half that of He-4 (Haller 2008:105) could have been a consequence of internal competition, arguably the result of increasing factionalism developing out of the prosperity of elite lineages (Service 1975:175). The appearance of a new feasting zone in an area not occupied since the Conte phase (Locascio 2010:82) and slowdown in mound construction suggest that efforts to legitimize political authority were not as successful as during previous generations.

External pressures may have also contributed to sociopolitical instability. Warfare and raiding was likely endemic across Parita Bay at this time (Isaza Aizpurúa 2007:551 552), possibly a result of pres-

sure from Natá or the large, but poorly documented, site of Bajo Chitra, located in the highlands between He-4 and Natá (Cooke 2011:124). Ethnohistoric accounts describe war captives taken as slaves whose teeth were removed to mark their new status (Helms 1979:14). The necklaces of perforated human teeth in several graves at He-4 may reflect this practice and alludes to conflict between groups (Cooke 2004a:273).

The dearth of detailed survey data for much of Parita Bay obscures the true complexity of sociopolitical interactions at this time, but the growth of the four powerful sixteenth-century chiefdoms, including one based in the Río Parita valley, illustrate the continuity in the sociopolitical dynamics of the region. The El Hatillo phase decline at He-4 could have easily been a temporary setback before the emergence of Parita's powerful chiefdom in the early sixteenth century, in what must have been a particularly rapid and dramatic consolidation of power. The extensive territory that he controlled and his personal wealth could have been amassed during his lifetime (e.g., Cooke and Ranere 1992a:297; Helms 1994:57–58).

### Conclusion

Chiefdoms, like many kinds of political systems, undergo cyclical periods of expansion and contraction often characterized as a process of chiefly cycling. The archaeological record for the Late Ceramic Period in the Central Region of Panama illustrates variable patterns of growth, fragmentation, and reconsolidation of chiefdom polities in both Coclé and the Río Parita valley that indicate some antiquity to this process. Framing differential patterns of prestige good consumption in pre-Columbian cemeteries in a macroregional social, political, and historical context provides insight into differences in the development of social hierarchy in these two important regions of Parita Bay. More specifically, this article has shown that the differences in mortuary patterning at Sitio Conte and He-4 are best explained as a result of the growth of a paramount chiefdom in Coclé during the Conte phase and its subsequent collapse, resulting in the consolidation of at least one smaller and less influential chiefdom during the Macaracas phase.

Unfortunately this reconstruction raises more questions than it answers, the most significant being

why the Coclé chiefdom emerged earlier and with much greater emphasis on wealth accumulation than any other area of the Central Region. The importance of ideology in this process has received considerable attention; we have explored the possibility that this was because of access to highland resources and control of trade routes. Although we have briefly considered the importance of intensification of surplus production, it remains impossible to assess the relative contribution of economic factors to chiefly authority in Coclé. These also include the relative contribution of population pressure, social circumscription, and conflict over resources, factors that have never been evaluated with systematic settlement and household data.

To better understand episodes of cycling in the Central Region, it is imperative to include even more regions, such as Veraguas, the Tonosí valley, and eastern Coclé, to consider how other local sequences fit with the broad patterns outlined here. Reconstructing how different regions developed would provide a clearer picture of both the cycling process and would greatly expand our understanding of the sociopolitical dynamics in Parita Bay sketched in this article. Regional settlement data is critical in this regard but so are household inventories for large nucleated villages and small agricultural hamlets that may illustrate differences in status or craft production. As noted at the beginning of this article, there are a variety of potential factors that might trigger the breakdown of paramount chiefdoms, but at present it is impossible to explore these any further for the two cases discussed here. A better reconstruction of chiefly cycling in the Central Region of Panama than the one offered here could explain not only why chiefdoms rose and fell in some places but also why they did not in others.

*Acknowledgments.* In writing this article the first author was supported by a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSRHC) Postdoctoral Fellowship (No. 756 2010 0298). The archaeological research in the Río Parita Valley was undertaken by the authors with funding from a SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship (No. 0612859); NSF Dissertation Improvement Grants (No. 725 2005 0531 and No. 0139005); a SSHRC Standard Research Grant (No. 93576); the Department of Anthropology, University Center for International Studies and Center for Latin American Studies all at the University of Pittsburgh; and a SSHRC Small Institutions Grant administered by St. Francis Xavier University. The authors thank Carlos Fitzgerald, Linette

Montenegro, Tomás Mendizabal, Jaime Zárate, and Ismael García all from the Patrimonio Histórico de Panamá. The authors also wish to thank Robert D. Drennan and Richard G. Cooke for their support of this research in all its aspects. Dr. John Menzies provided much critical insight. Several anonymous reviewers also provided valuable comments that improved the arguments in this article. Ultimately, the responsibility for the content of this article rests fully with the authors.

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*Submitted: April 18, 2011; Revised: January 8, 2012;  
Accepted: September 27, 2012.*