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## C. CENTRAL AMERICA

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### SOME PROBLEMS RELATING TO THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF SOUTHERN CENTRAL AMERICA

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Southern Central America is here defined as embracing the Republics of Panamá, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and those parts of Honduras which border upon Nicaragua. Within these confines archaeologists of diverse nationalities have sporadically turned their attentions and, with comparatively little effort, have been abundantly rewarded. With due respect to these students, a major portion of their successes can be attributed to the fact that the area is not only a virgin field for investigation, but that within these limits must lie the key to much that would clarify research in the South American, Mayan or Mexican fields.

By far the most pressing need in the area is for well-conducted and organized work, be it on the broad problems of the whole field or upon a specific phase. With the outstanding exception of excavations at Coclé, Panamá, conducted for the Peabody Museum of Harvard by Dr. Lothrop, not even the initial archaeological procedure of a general stock-taking of remains has been made. Modern archaeological methods are as yet untried as is witnessed by the total lack of stratigraphy, with, of course, the exception previously noted. Even grave association is the exception rather than the rule.

The following comments are based upon current literature and information received from Dr. Lothrop. The region has so far produced five major culture areas. Their interrelation and chronological position, however, are as yet obscure. Inadequate typology has had to be the major factor in isolating these areas, the results of which are now briefly outlined.

Proceeding north and west from the Panama Canal as far as eastern Honduras, the culture areas in the order of their occurrence are Coclé, Veraguas, Chiriquí, Highland, and Pacific. Coclé and Veraguas fall exclusively within the Republic of Panamá. Chiriquí overlaps into southern Costa Rica, while the Highland area covers the central and eastern sections of that country. The Pacific area includes northwestern Costa Rica and most of the territory in Nicaragua west of the Continental Divide. From the

central eastern portion of this Pacific area on the slopes of the Cordillera Amerrique I have seen specimens, primarily stone sculptures, that suggest a further refinement and the possibility of a new but probably small culture area.

The quantity of partially documented material from this region collected in the past raises many problems, a selected few of which I shall attempt to point out. They deal mainly with diffusion of traits or specific characteristics that appear to be concentrated in the region and some few that have penetrated into it both from the north and south. No attempt is here made to draw conclusions from such distribution. They are merely used to re-illustrate and emphasize the potentially broader problems of the area, and final answers to such problems must await future intensified research.

Few traces of early horizons have yet appeared from southern Central America. To date Drs. Flint, Linné, Lothrop, and Strong have produced what evidence there exists concerning this question, the most convincing of which is that of a questionable non-ceramic horizon in Panamá. Mr. Junius Bird's estimated age of a possible 5000 years for human remains found in the Straits of Magellan, gives a clue as to antiquity of man in the Isthmian region. Due to the constricted terrain here under consideration it should offer one of the most promising areas in Latin America for the discovery of early horizons. More definite indications will some day be found, but at present the circumstances and details concerning these cultural beginnings must, through necessity, be based largely upon speculation.

Proceeding forward in time we strike the five major areas whose geographical limits have been roughly outlined. There are abundant indications of trade and cultural intercourse between these areas. Lothrop has shown that Coclé thrived chiefly during the 14th and 15th centuries and that, from the evidence gathered at Coclé, the major cultural penetration at that time flowed from the south northward. Pottery and gold of Coclé style and technique occur in the Veraguas and Chiriquí areas. Although Veraguas imported gold objects from Coclé, analyses show that some metals from here are of alloys not found elsewhere. A few specimens of typical Veraguas pottery occur in Coclé graves and one similar in shape is reported from Chiriquí.

The two major works dealing with Chiriquí were, through necessity, based upon meager and largely undocumented reports. Archaeological remains bearing marked similarities to those from Chiriquí are frequently encountered in the Highland region. This is illustrated not only by the stone work but by pottery shapes and designs common to both areas. It is yet to be determined which region influenced the other. Chiriquí and Highland type metates occur in Veraguas and one has been found in the oldest grave at Coclé. Dr. Osgood, in a recent article, states that three wares, formerly associated with Chiriquí, and rare in that area, are but trade pieces

from the Highland region, and strongly urges that distribution of grave types and associated contents be determined. A few pottery specimens from Chiriquí can be linked with Coclé. Holmes suggested that at least phases of Chiriquí might be "remotely pre-Columbian." This seems dubious when one considers the homogeneity of available material and its contact with or influence upon cultures known to have existed at the time of the Conquest. Further, in Chiriquí Lagoon, Columbus saw natives with gold ornaments presumably similar to ones excavated from Chiriquí graves.

The Highland region as we have seen, shares common characteristics in stone and pottery with the Chiriquí. Not such a close relationship existed with the Pacific area. However, Highland polychrome styles assimilated shapes and patterns from the Pacific area. Glass found in conjunction with typical Highland material definitely establishes its contact with the Conquest.

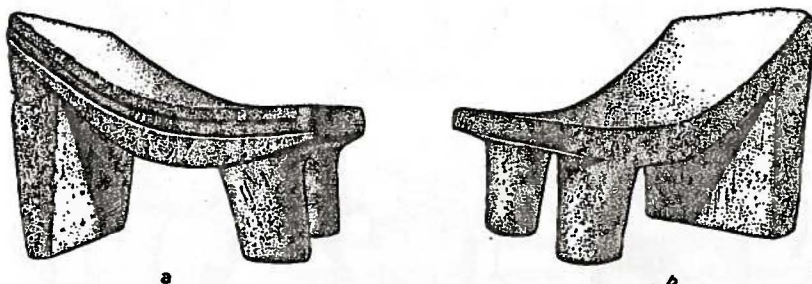


FIG. 1—METATES FROM HONDURAS AND THE ANTILLES

- a. Honduras; exact provenience unknown. Length  $19\frac{1}{2}$  inches.  
 b. Almirante Norte, Puerto Rico. [Specimens in Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, New York.]

The Pacific area also came under European influence as is witnessed by objects of glass, bronze, iron, and steel found in conjunction with local specimens, on the Islands of La Ceiba and Solentiname. The great majority of archaeological remains here have been assigned to the Chorotega, a fact that explains why this area is commonly called by that name. As noted above, the area exerted some influence upon the Highland region and among the very few trade objects between the Chiriquí and Pacific areas are occasional Nicoya jadeites found in Chiriquí territory.

Virtually nothing concerning the archaeology of the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua is known and but few reports have appeared from the north-western section of the country and the adjoining portions of Honduras. These scattered accounts show that at least some of the objects from here bear comparison to the Pacific area material.

A brief sketch has been made of the interrelation between southern Central American cultures. They, however, exerted influence upon areas to the north and south. Actual two-way trade existed between Coclé and

sections of Colombia and Ecuador, while there are historical indications that Isthmian and Colombian metallurgical styles and techniques may have extended to Venezuela, the Guianas, and the Antilles. It is stated that similar pictographs and a few ceramic types are common to the Antilles and the region here under consideration. Through recent microscopic analysis by Dr. Harry Burman, Department of Mineralogy, Harvard University, it has been determined that carved jadeite occurs in Puerto Rico. Figure 1 illustrates two identical but unusual metate forms, one from Honduras, the other from Puerto Rico. The only comparable specimen known to the author comes from the vicinity of Cintla, Tabasco, México, and is now in the Peabody Museum

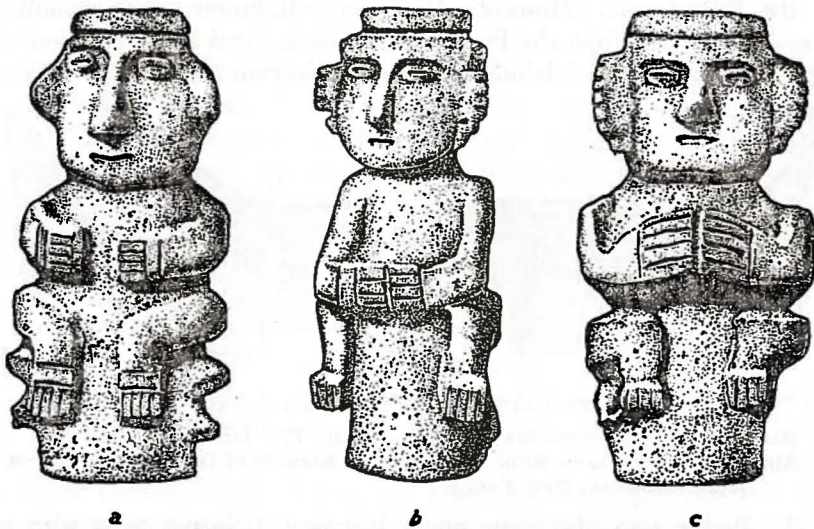


FIG. 2—SCULPTURES FROM NICARAGUA AND THE ANTILLES

- a. Momotombo, Nicaragua. [Property of F. Bunge, Managua.]  
 b. Guanaminthe, Haiti.  
 c. Nicaragua; exact provenience unknown. [Property of R. E. Frizell, Managua.]  
 Height of specimens approximately 12 inches.

of Harvard University. Although it has the same curve to the grinding surface and two round but shorter front legs, the main back support is cone-shaped and centered on the back of the metate. Further, the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, possesses a pumice figure from Guanaminthe, Haiti, (fig. 2, *b*) which finds its only parallel in Nicaragua (fig. 2, *a* and *c*). These Nicaraguan pumice statues vary from one to one and a half feet high and are concentrated on the northwest shores of Lake Managua. So identical in technique and material is the figure from Haiti to those from Nicaragua that one is forced to consider it an object of trade. The question naturally arises as to whether the provenience of the Puerto Rican metate and Haitian pumice figure has been correctly determined.

Upon investigation there seems little reason to doubt the authenticity of provenience. How these pieces found their way from southern Central America to the Antilles is a puzzling question.

Trade objects or modified forms of stone and ceramic specimens concentrated in the Highland and Pacific areas are found in most sections of Honduras, eastern Salvador, and an occasional few in the Guatemala highlands. Strong indicates that cultural impetus in the Bay Islands, Honduras, probably originated from the Highland area. In addition Coclé trade pieces in the form of gold effigy pendants reached as far north as Oaxaca and Chichen Itza, Yucatán. This represents an extremely wide trade dispersal.

It has been advanced that the Chorotega, of the Pacific area, antedated the Mayan Old Empire on its southeastern frontier. Chorotega type statues buried in the foundations of Maya stelae at Copán, plus ceramic trade pieces and designs borrowed from the Maya found in the Pacific area, were used to substantiate this hypothesis. In an article to be published in the near future I tried to demonstrate that the sculptural similarities did not exist. Whether the trade pieces are of Maya workmanship is a debatable question. The designs may be, but emphasis was placed upon the broader concept of subject matter rather than upon its technical handling. Many common expressions strike at the very roots of aboriginal society in Latin America. Their spread with modifications must have occupied the complete time span of Indian development. It seems logical to assume that technical methods and expressions of these concepts are a more reliable time indicator than the concepts themselves. A case in point is the plumed serpent which occurs from the southwestern United States to Perú. It should not be overlooked that if the Chorotega did antedate or coincide with the classical Maya, no author has yet suggested that the latter assimilated much if anything from the Chorotega. It is true that easily recognizable characteristics of the Pacific area material culture are frequently encountered as far north as Mexico, but upon evidence available at present, there seems more reason to suspect that they represent a post-Maya peripheral seepage.

Turning our attention to invasion of material culture and language in southern Central America from the north and south it is fairly obvious that the southern continent played the major role. From eastern South America, Colombia, Ecuador, and Perú, Lothrop has traced cultural features that exerted an influence upon Coclé life. It has been advanced that "the pottery of Chiriquí belongs almost 'in toto' to South America." Further distribution of archaeological types in the Highland area corresponds with that of the Guetar people of southern origin and has been attributed to them. The Pacific area contained four distinct linguistic stocks, namely the Chibcha and Maribio of southern affinities, the Chorotega who were possibly indigenous, and the Nahua, a definite northern linguistic group.

Dr. J. A. Mason mentions that northern penetrations of language reached Panamá in an isolated community, but surely northern linguistic influence upon the region as a whole was superficial.

Lack of northern traits in material culture substantiates linguistic evidence in southern Central America. A cylindrical tripod jar of possible, but dubious, Maya inspiration and an isolated plumbate vessel have been reported in Chiriquí. MacCurdy illustrates an animal head metate from Chiriquí which finds its closest parallel with a group that ranges from the Pacific coast of Guatemala and western Honduras down to the Nicaraguan lakes. Chacmool figures from the Highland and Pacific areas illustrate that Mexican influences in a limited and modified form definitely reached this far south. Their size prohibits them from being objects of trade. As should be expected, the greatest concentration of northern characteristics in the region falls within the Pacific area. Here it is that northern and southern linguistic and material traits penetrated in sufficient quantity to exert marked influence upon and to blend with local or southern characteristics. Therefore, this Pacific area might well prove the most scientifically lucrative zone for intensified research in southern Central America.

We have seen that there are many interrelationships existing between the five major cultures, that their influence occurs sporadically in northern Central America and South America, and in turn they received linguistic and cultural impetus from the north and south. Among the many problems not touched upon are traits common to outside sources that either skipped the Isthmian region entirely or are geographically and culturally limited to sections of the region. The widespread use of jadeite by Middle American peoples to the north stops abruptly with the Chiriquí, and reappears again in northwestern South America. Negative painting is found from México to Perú, and was highly developed by the Chiriquí, yet in the areas adjacent to them it is unknown. These are but two of a long list of similar examples already available in published literature.

Chronological position of the five culture areas has been but vaguely determined. The Highland and Pacific areas definitely extended into the 16th century and Coclé was flourishing during the 14th and 15th centuries. By implication, through cultural contacts and exchanges, Veraguas and Chiriquí should not be far removed from these dates and may even be contemporaneous with them. Few indications exist as to their beginnings and again it must be reiterated that Maya and Mexican students do not believe that the earlier horizons in their fields received much from the five cultures here discussed. There is, however, one exception previously noted. Strong says that cultural impetus in the Bay Islands, Honduras, probably originated from the Highland area, but adds "that no conclusive evidences of great antiquity have been reported."



We have seen that the most crying need is that of future intelligent investigation under modern archaeological methods. Only through such a procedure can a reconstruction be made of the beginnings, developments, borrowings, transmissions, interrelationships, and decline of southern Central America cultures. In conclusion, it should be pointed out that there is no part of the New World so richly represented by huge collections with so little known concerning them.

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