Camp Granada, the Next Generation: Recent Excavations at the El Rayo site, Pacific Nicaragua

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University of Calgary / Mi Museo, Granada
Society for American Archaeology 2016, Orlando, FL

It has long been believed that Pacific Nicaragua was colonized by Mesoamerican groups beginning about 800 CE. According to ethnohistorical sources, Oto-manguean and Nahua speakers migrated south from central Mexico, settling in enclaves in the Soconosco region of Mexico, as well as Guatemala, El Salvador, and the Greater Nicoya region of Pacific Nicaragua and northwestern Costa Rica. Since 2000, archaeologists from the University of Calgary have investigated sites along the shore of Lake Cocibolca in search of evidence for Mesoamerican influences and resultant ethnohistorical research.

In 2015, with funding from the Institute for Field Research, we returned to the site of El Rayo on the Asepe peninsula to continue exploration of the Sapoá period settlement (800-1250 CE).

EL RAYO
El Rayo was first identified by Silvia Salgado González during her regional survey of the Granada region. In 2008 road construction exposed burial urns and human skeletal remains, and as a consequence the University of Calgary project began excavations in 2009. Three site loci were initially explored: Locus 1 at the cemetery exposed in the road cut; a Bagaces to Sapoa period residential area at Locus 2; and a second mortuary zone atop a low hill, designated Locus 3. El Rayo is one of the multi-component sites yet identified in Pacific Nicaragua, and because occupation spanned the Bagaces to Sapoa periods it provides an exceptional potential for investigating dynamic changes in material culture and mortuary practice over the transition when the Mesoamerican migrants supposedly arrived.

Bagaces period interments, for example, were primary direct burials, either in extended or flexed positions, yet beginning in the Sapoa period oval ‘shoe pot’ urns were introduced throughout the Pacific Nicoya region. It is also at this transition that a dramatic change in decorated serving wares occurred, including Papagayo, Pataky, and Vallejo polychromes replacing Granada Redware bichromes. Other artifact classes, however, remained unchanged leading to the interpretation of differential changes in domestic practice. Consequently the initial hypothesis of population replacement is not supported, and instead we are discussing cultural pluralism and hybridity.

EL RAYO 2015
The El Rayo Project resumed in 2015. The goal was to continue excavations at Locus 3, a burial locus in which the 2009 field season had encountered an alignment of ‘shoe pot’ urns beside a cluster of stone rubble interpreted as a small shrine. In addition to further exposure of the burial cluster, the 2015 season also excavated at Locus 4, a low mound anticipated to be a residential mound.

DISCUSSION
After three field seasons El Rayo continues to surprise. The Locus 4 structure is one of the largest ever found in Pacific Nicaragua, and its architectural detail is unique. The multiple mortuary contexts suggest that the site served as a necropolis, perhaps centered on the Locus 4 structure which may have served as a ritual space for preparation and/or celebration of the deceased. Investigations will continue in 2016.