

## ETHNOHISTORICAL APPROACHES TO THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF GREATER NICOYA

Suzanne Abel-Vidor

At the moment of first contact with the Spaniards, the Nicoya Peninsula, adjacent Guanacaste province, and the Pacific region of Nicaragua, between the lakes and the coastal range, together formed a unit—Greater Nicoya (Norweb 1964; M. Coe 1962a)—with a geographical and cultural integrity quite distinct from the balance of Costa Rica to the east of the Gulf of Nicoya. Nicoya and Guanacaste were incorporated into the new Spanish colony called Nicaragua.

The Gulf of Nicoya was first sighted in 1519 by two lieutenants of Gaspar de Espinosa, who sailed the ships of Vasco Nuñez de Balboa northwest up the unexplored Central American coast; but they did not enter the gulf. It was not until 1522 that an expedition from Panama, commanded by Gil González Dávila, explored the coast by ship and by land from western Panama to the Nicaraguan lakes. González's route took him through northwestern Costa Rica from the eastern shore of the gulf, across Guanacaste, and to Lake Nicaragua.

Two accounts of this expedition—one written by González in 1524, from Santo Domingo and addressed to King Charles V, and the other, dated 1522, written by the official accountant of the expedition, Andrés de Cereceda—provide complementary narratives of the explorations. Cereceda's (in L. Fernández 1976, I: 33ff.) is a terse listing of settlements and *caciques* encountered, the distances traveled between them, the number of Indians baptized in each location, and the spoils gathered at each place. González's (in L. Fernández 1976, I: 36ff.) report to the king notes the striking difference in size, number, and character of the Nicaraguan Indian communities in comparison with those contacted south of the lakes region in the Nicoya Peninsula. The latter were, in turn, distinguished from those found south and east of the peninsula, which were few, scattered, poor, and small. The population and material wealth observed on the Nicaraguan leg of this expedition are much greater than those described either for the Costa Rican part of Greater Nicoya or for the region to the south along the coast into western Panama.

Several sources in print summarize the ethnographic data recorded by 16th-

OVERLEAF:  
Plate 43. Pedestal jar,  
Guanacaste–Nicoya zone, ceramic  
(cat. no. 96).

Plate 44. Pedestal bowl, Guanacaste–  
Nicoya zone, ceramic (cat. no. 112).

and 17th-century European observers of the natural world and the Indian societies and cultures of Greater Nicoya. These are Lothrop (1926), Chapman (1960), Stone (1966c), and Ferrero (1977a). The 16th-century sources from which these modern authors have culled their information are mostly chroniclers, who wrote narratives of the exploration and characteristics of the New World and its peoples. Some were eyewitnesses to the events they described, but the scope of many chronicles is so broad as to demand heavy reliance on secondary or tertiary sources.

By far the most important chronicler for Lower Central America is Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés ("Oviedo"), whose *Historia General de las Indias, Islas y Tierra Firme del Mar Oceano* (1945; first 19 books originally published in 1535) supplies the bulk of the ethnographic information conventionally cited by more recent authors. Oviedo first went to the Panamanian colony in 1514 as *veedor* (inspector of mines). In 1527, he arrived in Nicaragua, where he observed in fine detail the flora, fauna, and some of the indigenous culture and society, while also participating in and recording the involvement of the Spanish in the area. In late July of 1529, he set out on foot for the Gulf of Nicoya, spending ten or twelve days in the company of the cacique of Nicoya before returning by sea to Panama.

Other important 16th-century chroniclers include Pascual de Andagoya, Girolamo Benzoni, Peter Martyr de Anglería, Fray Antonio de Ciudad Real, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, Fray Toribio de Motolinía de Benevente, and Juan López de Velasco. Juan de Torquemada, O.F.M., and Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas wrote around the turn of the 17th century, and the English priest Thomas Gage traveled and worked as a missionary in Mexico and Central America from 1625 to 1637. The numerous legal documents, reports, and letters generated by the European conquerors constitute another source.

There is no doubt that Greater Nicoya was characterized by a plural society. The Nicoya-Guanacaste portion of the territory apparently supported a much smaller population than did the Nicaraguan lakes region in the 1520s, but it nonetheless formed part of the same interaction sphere (Caldwell 1964; Smith and Heath-Smith, in press). Pacific Nicaragua and adjacent Nicoya shared certain archaeologically identifiable cultural elements, but were also characterized by a diversity of languages and ethnic identities. Oviedo (1976: 36, 186) lists seven languages for the Nicaraguan colony: Chondales, Nicaragua, Chorotega, Oroçi, Orotiña, Guetares, and Maribios, although he later states that "The Indians of Nicoya and of Oroçi are of the language of the Chorotegas." Ciudad Real (1873), writing about a visit to Nicaragua in 1586, lists Mangué, Marivio, and "corrupt Mexican" as the languages of the province. This use of "Mexican" is a complicating factor; while a Nahua-related language was in broad use throughout much of Central America north of Panama at the time of the Conquest, the inference that all speakers of Nahua shared a common culture or a common ethnic identity denies the recognized status of that tongue as a *lingua franca*.

González's narrative (in Colección Somoza 1954, I: 90) goes further into the apparent Mesoamerican character of the Nicoyan and Nicaraguan cultures. He says that he "walked CCXXIII leagues, in which I discovered great towns and things until I encountered the language of Yucatan."<sup>1</sup> Later on in the letter, he repeats that "all the things of the Yucatan have we encountered, from the houses to clothing to armaments," and, again, that Nicaragua "is another Yucatan

in its riches and in the language and in other matters of the Indians' dress and dealings" (*ibid.*: 101, 104; author's translation).

While it is clear that González's identification of Nicaragua with Yucatan was in a strict sense erroneous, it is equally clear that his interpretation was based, at least in part, on his observations of cultural elements and linguistic affiliation linking Nicaragua with cultures to the north, and not with those he knew from Panama. González's equation of the Nicaraguan and Yucatecan cultures has had a significant impact on the application of the concept of the Mesoamerican culture area in Nicaragua and Nicoya. A conspicuous tendency in archaeological research to seek indications of direct contact with, or "influence" from, Post-classic nuclear Mesoamerica or Central Mexico has virtually precluded appreciation of the uniquely innovative character of the archaeological and protohistoric cultures of Greater Nicoya.

Oviedo and other sources confirm that there was enmity among the Nicaraguan groups and some variation in observed religious practices, but that, despite the reported bellicosity of the Nicaraguan peoples, the wealth and settlement size and density to the north were of sufficient magnitude, and its geographical position of sufficient strategic promise, to arouse great expectations for the colonization of Nicaragua. Perceiving that area as a rich, well-populated, and eminently exploitable province, the Spanish chose to colonize it immediately, while interest in a Costa Rican colony languished.

The Pacific coast was considered by the Spaniards to be extremely dangerous to navigation because of its great winds and seas and its lack of protected roadsteads; the overland trip to Nicaragua from Gracias a Dios, Honduras, was long and perilous. The only viable supply route lay from Panama up the west coast of Costa Rica and into the well-protected Gulf of Nicoya. From there the traffic proceeded to the town of Nicoya, the sole official Indian town of Greater Nicoya, located in the western Tempisque River flood plain, which served for many years as the vital transport and supply point between the Gulf of Nicoya and the Nicaraguan settlements.

Among other reasons, a lack of concentration of labor and little readily available material wealth in the form of pearls, gold, or silver precluded the establishment of more than a very few desirable *encomienda* grants in the first years of the colonization of the Nicaraguan colony's southern portion. The *encomienda*, a grant of Indians for the provision of labor and tribute to the Spanish *encomendero*, depended quite directly on the perpetuation of stable, productive Indian society. The *encomendero* became the beneficiary of the existing economic system only if Indians were found in sufficiently organized concentration to make it worth his while (Hennessey 1978).

If the extractable wealth of both the Nicaraguan and Costa Rican Indians was very quickly exhausted, the former at least could be exploited very lucratively as slave labor (Lockhart 1968; MacLeod 1973; Radell 1976; Sherman 1971, 1979). The fact that there was a Precolumbian institution of slavery (González, in Colección Somoza 1953–57, I: 95) made imposition of the Spanish practice less problematic. Oviedo (1976: 361; author's translation) writes of his experience in Nicaragua in the late 1520s:

More ceremonies and rites and customs and noteworthy things still should be recounted that have not been said of this territory and its adjacent districts, and to recount them all would be impossible, as much because the diversity of languages precludes the sort of

special treatment and understanding that one would wish, as because war and conversion of the Indians and the passage of time have consumed and put an end to the lives of the elder Indians and even to those of the young, and because of the avarice of the judges and governors and others who have had such haste to remove the Indians from that land, designating them as slaves, to sell them in Castilla del Oro [Panama] and in other places.

The issue of how large the Nicaraguan population was at the time of first contact with the Europeans, and what proportion of it was exterminated, exported, or otherwise lost, has been vociferously debated since the 16th century. The population was certainly substantial, and the density within the lakes region was very high, if not truly urban. Estimates by writers of the time seem to converge around an approximate figure of half a million, with Oviedo citing 400,000, Motolinía 500,000, and D. Herrera 600,000. The decimation was so precipitous that even contemporary testimony of its massive scale has elicited scepticism in the minds of some later scholars.

By 1548, when a very thorough tribute assessment was made for the Nicaraguan province, only 11,137 tributaries could be found (Radell 1976: 75). Applying to this total the perhaps conservative 3.3 factor for approximation of overall population figures based on tribute figures (Cook and Borah 1960), this would yield a Nicaraguan population of only 36,752, a total that is in striking agreement with the estimate of 30,000 made by a royal official in 1545 (D. Herrera 1875). Herrera further states that the original Indian population was 600,000, indicating a reduction of 95% in less than 25 years. Whether or not one chooses to accept the validity of these figures, the picture of demographic disaster is basically the same.

The historic peoples of Nicaragua were found clustering in the very fertile, well-drained plains between the coastal ranges and the two big lakes of Managua and Nicaragua, with dense populations extending up the Pacific corridor west of the volcanic cordillera to the Gulf of Fonseca. With the conspicuous exceptions of the bays and gulfs of the northern Guanacaste coast and the littoral of the Gulf of Nicoya, where a marine-based subsistence strategy remained viable in the ancient tradition of the prehistoric Nicoyan peoples, much of the rest of the peninsula and of Guanacaste province to the north would have been relatively unsuitable for the maintenance of large, stable human settlements. Oviedo's exhaustive description of agricultural practices in Nicaragua leaves no doubt as to the subsistence base of the plains communities. Two resources critical to a predominantly agricultural population would have been soil fertility and drainage, in addition to the availability of fresh water in the dry season, which lasts from approximately December through May or June. In both respects, the Nicaraguans were far better off than the inhabitants of the Nicoya Peninsula, and this difference is obvious even today (Stevens 1964; Lange 1971a, 1980; Healy 1974).

The historic documents evoke an image that unequivocally sets Costa Rican Nicoya apart from the rest of Pacific Nicaragua as a frontier zone with unmistakable connections with the lakes region, but also with a much lower settlement density and smaller settlement size. Dávila (in Colección Somoza 1954, I: 128 ff. 446), Castañeda (in Peralta 1883: 36 ff.) and Oviedo (1945, 1976) all agree that between the town of Nicoya and the lakes were many leagues of *despoblado*, unpeopled, without water, and empty.

For the lands lying between the caciques of Nicoya and Nicaragua, in what is today the province of Guanacaste, Cereceda's account lists eight caciques, several

hundred baptized Indians, a minor quantity of gold, and the only quantity of pearls recorded during the expedition. González's letter does not even mention the existence of these populations, and we must consider this omission deliberate—he did not judge their presence politically significant or strategic. In many later descriptions of the Nicoya area, this impression of the emptiness of Guanacaste is corroborated; it is consistently portrayed as drought-plagued and barren.

Although the historical sources are remarkably silent on the subject, the middle and lower courses of the Tempisque River and its contiguous flood plain could have provided a complex of environmental conditions conducive to intensive agricultural exploitation. The Tempisque makes a very gradual descent from its source near the slopes of Orosí volcano, close to the present Costa Rican–Nicaraguan border, and forms many meanders and occasional oxbow lakes as it nears its mouth at the heavily sedimented head of the Gulf of Nicoya. This very gentle gradient makes the river subject to serious seasonal flooding, a condition that has important implications for human settlement. The potential destruction of human habitations along its course discourages the construction of substantial permanent housing. On the other hand, the floods deposit rich alluvial soils on the bottomlands, although these soils are subject to rapid leaching from heavy seasonal rains.

The large Nicaraguan populations were by no means totally dependent on the products of agriculture. Hunting, important in the late prehistoric period (Healy 1974; Wyckoff 1978), is documented for the early historic period (Oviedo 1976), and the rich fisheries of the two fresh-water lakes undoubtedly provided diversity in the diet. Moreover, as Wyckoff suggests, there may be a strong positive relationship between the amount of land cleared for cultivation and the abundance of certain game, particularly deer and rabbit, both of which Oviedo describes as abundant and appreciated for their meat.

The Nicoya region may have served in ancient times as a resource zone for the Nicaraguans, supplying products for which it was known in the colonial period: purple shellfish dye, honey, beeswax, cotton cloth and other natural fibers, precious feathers, indigo, cacao, and, in all likelihood, dried fish and shellfish. Salt from the extensive salt flats of the Gulf of Nicoya and the northern Guanacaste coast would have been in great demand in the Nicaraguan communities because their own coast lacked this resource almost entirely. The need for control and administration of commerce could help explain the presence of sites along the middle Tempisque that have yielded numerous elaborate Late Polychrome vessels of probable Nicaraguan manufacture. The ceramics may indicate the existence of an elite at these sites, or may at least imply that peoples along the river were receiving these vessels in payment for supplying the commodities listed above (Day and Abel–Vidor 1980.).

Micro-regional demographic and ecological distinctions between Nicoya and Nicaragua have multiple social, cultural, economic, and political implications. If Pacific Nicaragua was, indeed, better endowed for the intensive practice of agriculture in the Mesoamerican tradition and for Central American horticulture, and if it can be demonstrated archaeologically as well as historically that the Late Polychrome period was characterized by both a shift in settlement pattern favoring nucleation in the lakes region and the partial occupation by peoples speaking a language of the Aztecan subfamily, then there is every reason to believe that this period also witnessed a reorganization and reorientation of society, including a tighter integration into the broad trade-articulated Meso-

american interaction sphere (Smith and Heath-Smith, in press).

The nature of the ties between the communities in Nicoya and those in the lakes region of Nicaragua is still poorly understood. While unscientifically excavated ceramics from the Tempisque Valley and the Bay of Culebra zone are known in some quantity and manifest some close stylistic parallels with ceramics from other Postclassic Mesoamerican complexes, these seem to be more common north of the current political boundaries. The most obvious examples are vessels with incised or painted standardized representations of Mesoamerican supernatural beings and other symbols. Local copies or imitations of these styles, which are quite abundant in collections from the middle Tempisque, strongly suggest that the originals may have been imported into the region (Day and Abel-Vidor 1980). Actual trade wares of more northerly Mesoamerican manufacture are more numerous in Middle Polychrome times than in the late period.

While we know from the Fifth Letter of Cortés (1971) and from López de Gómara (1954) that merchants in the Gulf Coast Mexican province of Xicalango painted a map for Cortés of all the roads and major geographic features between there and Nicaragua, in itself powerful evidence for the existence of pan-Mesoamerican trade routes in the 16th century, the absence of imperishable trade wares argues for one of two characterizations of that trade. Either it involved exchange of perishables, or the merchants effected exchange of goods over short distances only, attending periodically scheduled market fairs all over Central America while ranging over longer distances on some regular route. We might conceive of a quasi-autonomous *pochteca*-like class of merchants, who did not operate, in this case, as imperial agents, as they did in the Aztec system, and who would not have been responsible for the simple extraction of goods for the benefit of a single imperial nucleus; their business would have been effected on a more localized scale for the benefit of local elites.

Evidence for Nicaragua's involvement in the Postclassic Mesoamerican interaction sphere does exist in rather compelling form in the ethnohistoric materials; the archaeological manifestations must now be actively sought.

<sup>1</sup>The transcriptions of this letter that I have had access to do not agree on the number of leagues covered by land. While the transcription in Colección Somoza gives 224, that in L. Fernández (1976, I: 36) gives 125 leagues. Hubert Howe Bancroft (1886: 494), on the other hand, citing a manuscript copy of the document, states that 324 leagues were covered by land.