

Bling Things: Ornamentation and Identity in Pacific Nicaragua

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ABSTRACT. *Material culture plays an important role in asserting and reifying social identities. These identities can relate to distinct scales of recognition, from the local to regional, and to different aspects of social practice, such as gender, age, wealth/status, religion, and ethnicity. Using ornamentation from three sites in Pacific Nicaragua, we will contrast the kinds of identities that may have been performed, and the symbols that were used in their representation. Artifact classes considered include ear spools, pendants, and beads, as well as ethnohistorical descriptions of indigenous practice at the time of Spanish conquest.*

The *Proyecto Arqueológico Granada, Nicaragua* (PAGN) had as one of its main goals the exploration of cultural identities during the Postclassic Sapoa and Ometepe periods of Pacific Nicaragua (800–1520 C.E.). Ethnohistoric accounts from the early Colonial period suggest dramatic ethnic changes in the region beginning before the end of the first millennium A.D. (Abel-Vidor 1981; Chapman 1974). Other variables such as gender, age, status and religion make up the tapestry of ancient society, and so were also considered by project investigators.

Ornamentation is one of the aspects of material culture that is most directly related to identity (Joyce 2005; McCafferty and McCafferty 2009). In Pacific Nicaragua ornamentation consists of such items as beads, pendants, and ear spools, made of greenstone, bone, shell, and ceramic. Ethnohistorical sources (Day 1988; Oviedo y Valdes 1976) also record the use of metal, especially gold, *tumbaga* (an alloy of gold and copper), and copper. These have rarely been found in Nicaragua but are better known from Costa Rica and Panama. Other ornamentation on perishable materials included textiles, featherwork, and body stamping. These can be inferred from the polychrome figurines that are common in archaeological contexts.

Building on theoretical discussions by Reischer and Koo (2004) and by Joyce (2005), we have recently discussed concepts of the 'body beautiful' as seen at the site of Santa Isabel (McCafferty and McCafferty 2009). The 'body beautiful' refers to emic concepts of the body, including such aspects as body modification and physical adornment. At Santa Isabel we considered representations as seen on the ceramic figurines as well as a wide variety of objects of adornment in evaluating different aspects of social identity. The linkage between these concepts and individuals are best found in burial contexts where objects can be associated with skeletal remains. Unfortunately poor preservation has limited the ability to make these connections. Instead, this paper will present the kinds of ornamentation that have been recovered while speculating on the kinds of identities that may be represented.

One assumption that archaeologists often make is that objects of greater value should be associated with individuals of greater status. Cultural value is difficult to assign, but following Helms (1993) it may involve objects of rare material or elaborate production. The display of wealth is often associated with 'conspicuous consumption' that has been variably linked with the *nouveau riche* or with lower status groups attempting to enhance their position in emerging economies (Miller 1982).

Body adornment can be subtle or more ostentatious, as in the current use of "bling-bling" by hip hop artists wearing flashy and elaborate jewelry. The term "bling" is intended to evoke the sound of light hitting shiny metal or jewels. "Bling" has spread into mass culture where it refers to the wearing of expensive clothing, stylish glasses, large and flashy wristwatches and bangles, or anything that is ostentatious. In this paper we consider the concept of 'bling' as flashy adornment employed by the inhabitants of ancient Nicaragua.

Archaeology of Pacific Nicaragua

Arriving in the Chorotega town of Xalteva in 1522, the Spanish *conquistador* Gil Gonzalez was presented with many gifts from the *calchuni* or 'chief' Diriangen (Oviedo y Valdes 1976). He was brought large birds similar in size to turkeys, little white flags tied over lances, gold axes, trumpets and flutes but the most amazing gift was six women all covered in plates of gold weighing in at 18,000 pesos (half a million grams). Bling!

Unfortunately, Gil Gonzalez apparently left with all of the gold (*taguiste*), and after 10 years of excavation in Nicaragua the only gold we have found was plating on a modern baseball

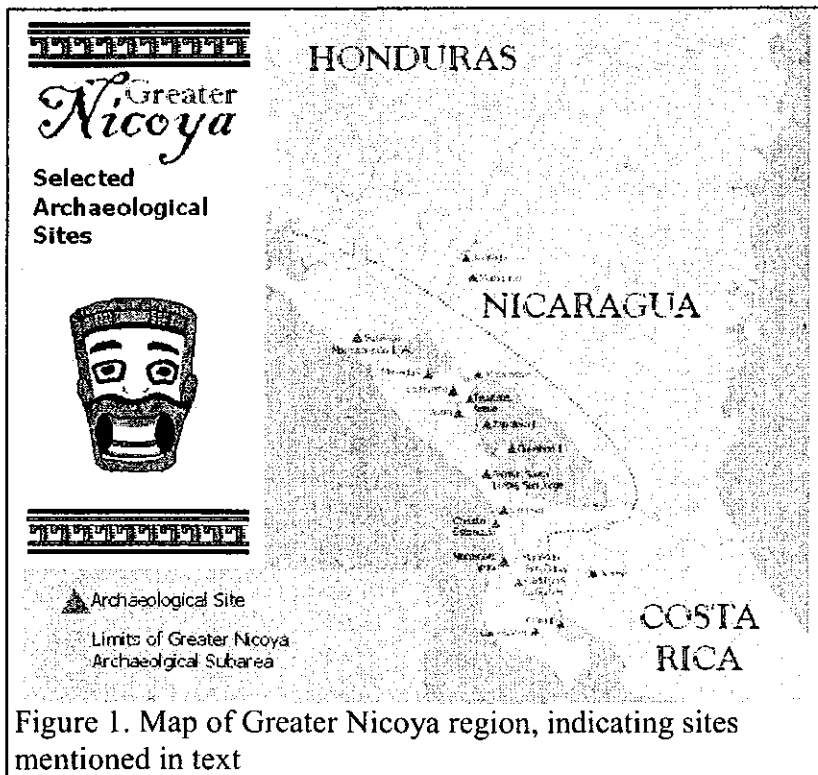


Figure 1. Map of Greater Nicoya region, indicating sites mentioned in text

medallion from a shovel test pit. Setting our sights slightly lower we will look at the examples of Nicaraguan "bling" found at the sites of Tepetate and El Rayo in the Granada region at the northern end of Lake Nicaragua (Figure 1). Tepetate was the site of the contact period regional center of Xalteva, while El Rayo was a fishing village of the same chiefdom. Archaeological contexts from both sites have been dated to the Sapoá period (800–1250 CE), supposedly associated with the Chorotega ethnic group linked linguistically with migrants from southern Mexico. These results are then comparable to data from the contemporary site

of Santa Isabel, located about 75 km south but also on the shore of Lake Nicaragua. No contexts from the Contact period have been identified, so comparisons with the ethnohistorical texts are tenuous.

The Tepetate site is located on the northern edge of the modern city of Granada. It has been known to archaeologists since the late nineteenth century, when it was reported to have stone-slab covered mounds (Salgado 1996); unfortunately it has been known to collectors for at least that much time, and between looting and urban development there is little of the original site remaining. The PAGN project conducted excavations at Tepetate in 2008, focussing on three site loci: one of the last remaining mounds; another structure on the far northern extent of the site; and a cemetery. Poor preservation severely limited the presence of organic materials, even deteriorating much of the painted decoration on pottery. But the excavation of 90 square meters recovered an extensive amount of material culture, including objects of adornment useful for comparative analysis (Wilke and McCafferty 2009).

El Rayo is located on the Asese peninsula into Lake Nicaragua, located about 15 km southeast of the city of Granada. It was first discovered during regional survey by Silvia Salgado (1996), and in 2007 the site was impacted by the construction of a road connecting to a small coastal resort. Excavations at El Rayo concentrated in three loci: Locus 1 was a Sapoá period cemetery overlying a Bagaces period (300–800 CE) site that also included burials; Locus 2 featured a sequence of Bagaces and Sapoá period occupations with extensive domestic deposits; and Locus 3 was another Sapoá period area with burials and offerings, perhaps associated with an altar. Approximately 70 square meters were excavated in total, from which roughly 75,000 artifacts

were recovered. Of these, over 1800 were identified as 'objects', defined as artifacts other than potsherds, lithic debitage, or faunal remains. Roughly 15 percent of the objects were classified as artifacts of adornment (Figure 2). Additional excavations at Locus 2 were conducted in 2010, though at a relatively small scale and with the goal of exposing architectural features.

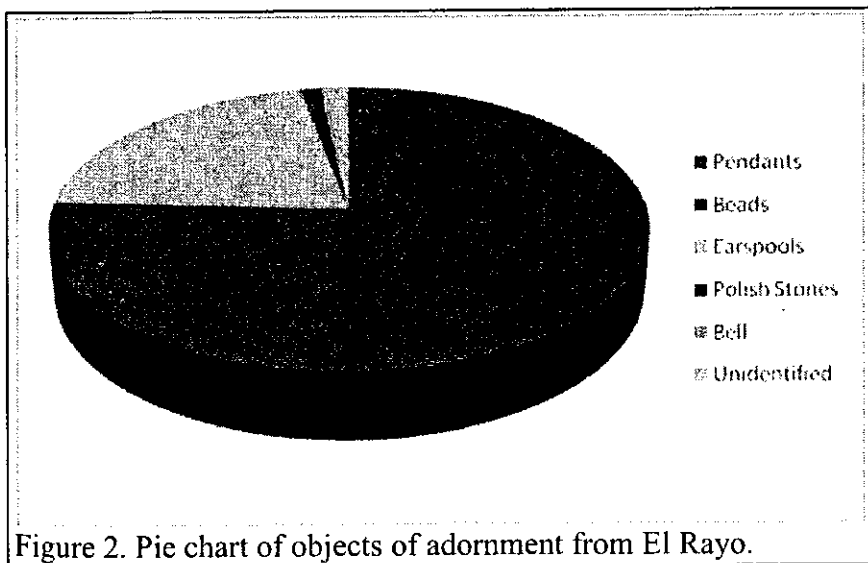


Figure 2. Pie chart of objects of adornment from El Rayo.

Beads were the most numerous of the objects of adornment recovered (n=134). The majority were made of ceramic and seem to have been manufactured at El Rayo, where long tubes were found from which the beads could have been cut. Thirty-four bone beads were found, some with carved designs. Five beads were of jadeite and were significantly larger. Most of the beads were associated with Feature 34 in Locus 1 (Figure 3), where about 80 beads were found in a small bowl associated with three urns and an offering of lance points and two large earspools. These beads were either bone or reddish ceramic.

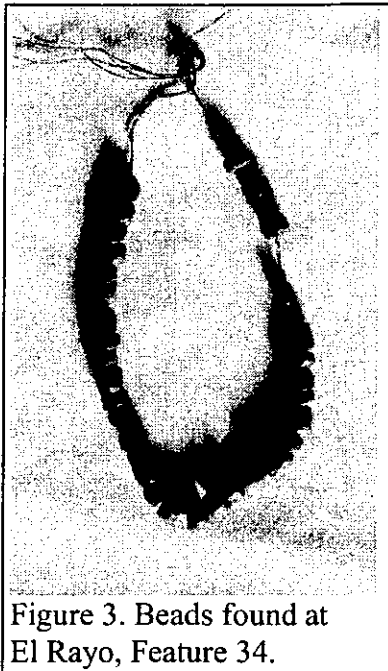


Figure 3. Beads found at El Rayo, Feature 34.

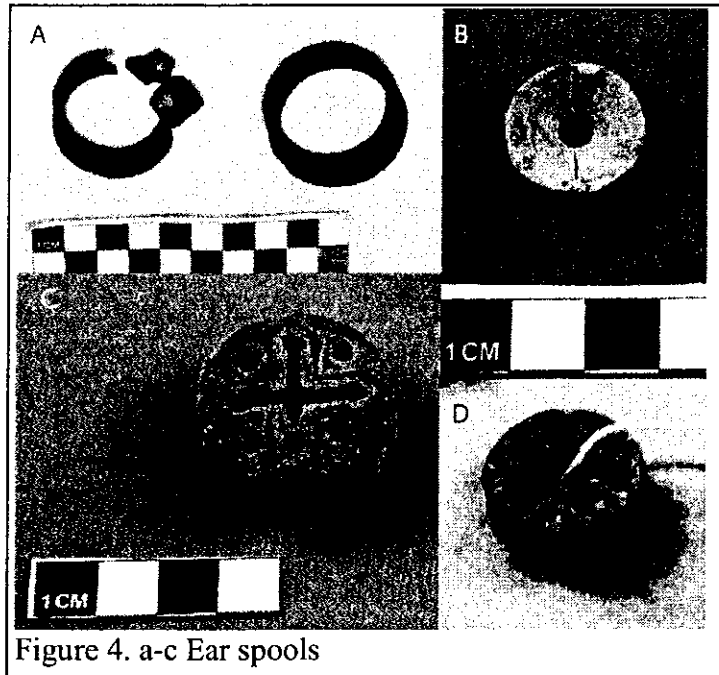


Figure 4. a-c Ear spools



Figure 5. Possible ceramic labret

Ear spools were made of fine clay, polished to a brownish-black color. The most common form consisted of hollow circles with thin, hour-glass shaped walls. They range in size from about one centimetre to five centimetres in diameter, and about one centimetre in width. Size may relate to the age of the individual, or their status. The two large, hollow ear spools found at Locus 1 in Feature 34 are the largest we've ever seen, and probably indicate a very high status (Figure 4a). One other ceramic ear spool was found that varied from the typical style. It was thicker with a smaller centre hole, and featured a possible floral pattern incised on the edge. It was found in association with a burial in Locus 1, which also contained a large clay pendant. Ear spools of shark vertebrae were also discovered (Figure 4b).

Identical hollow ear spool fragments were found on the floor of Mound 1 at Tepetate, and were also present at Santa Isabel. A solid ear spool was found at Tepetate in association with the burial cluster at Locus 3 that resembles a solid ear spool found at Santa Isabel (Figure 4c-d).

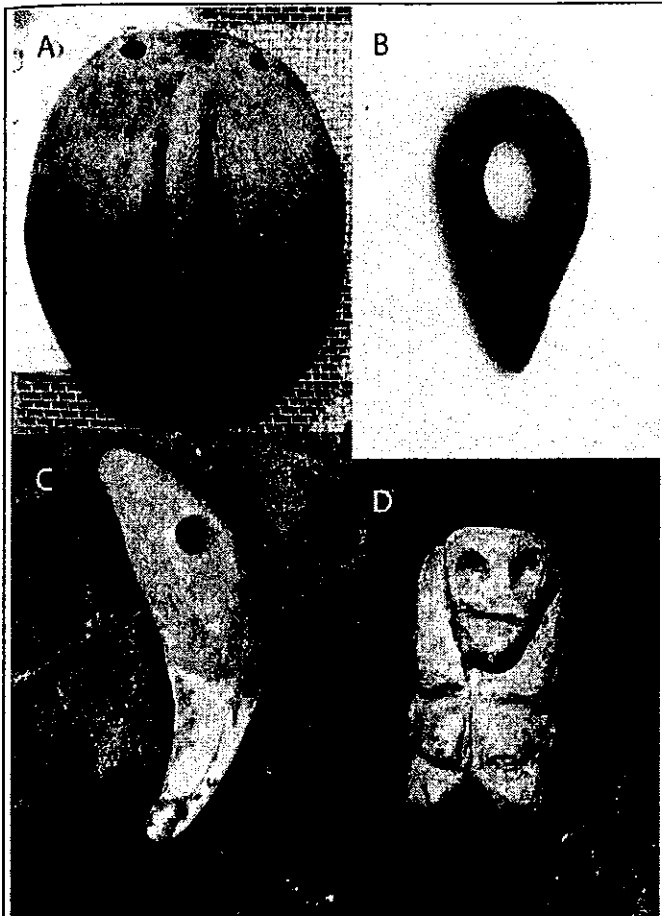


Figure 6 a-d. Pendants.

A hollow ceramic tube found at El Rayo closely resembled the ear spools, with the exception of a broad flange attached to one end (Figure 5). Similar flanges are typical of labrets known from central Mexico (and elsewhere). Labrets were mentioned in ethnohistorical sources about the indigenous Chorotega (Oviedo y Valdes 1976), but thus far this would be a unique archaeological example from the region.

Pendants were made of clay, bone, or animal teeth. One pendant was made of clay, perforated at either end, and was oval with a concave back (Figure 6a). It somewhat resembles others that have been interpreted as cacao pods (McCafferty and McCafferty 2009). Two other ceramic pendants were tear-dropped shape with hollow centers (Figure 6b). Several pendants were made from animal bone, teeth, or claws (Figure 6c-d). The most elaborate pendant was carved from bone and appears to represent a skeletal insect (Figure 6e).

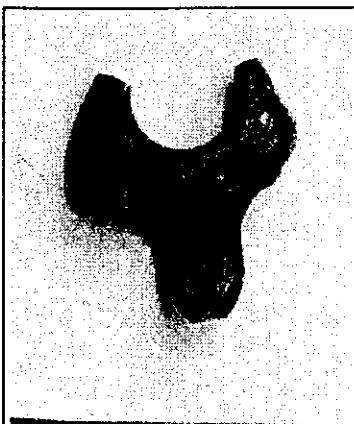


Figure 7. Gar scale adornments.

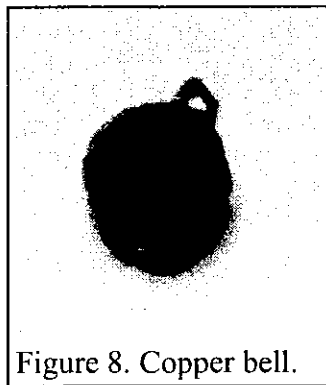


Figure 8. Copper bell.

Gar or *gaspar* (Genus *lepisosteidae*) is a huge edible fish from Lake Nicaragua that is heavily armoured with ganoid scales that are small, shiny and hard. Dozens of these scales and a possible mandible were excavated at Locus 2 in the Sapoá period context. Three of these scales were modified into eccentric shapes, suggesting that they were decorative in nature (Figure 7). They may have been sewn or mounted onto clothing or headdresses, or worn as lip or nose plugs.

A copper bell was encountered in Locus 3 in association with other objects. The objects were scattered around human skeletal remains, although it was not clearly associated with a specific burial (see Wilke, McCafferty and Watson, this volume). The bell is approximately one centimetre in diameter and has a loop at the top for suspension (Figure 8). Similar bells are known from Costa Rica, where they are made of gold. Copper bells are found on the Pacific coast of Oaxaca, Mexico, dating to c. 900–1200 A.D.

Discussion

The excavations at El Rayo have provided us with examples of Nicaraguan “bling” during the Bagaces to Sapoá transition, A.D. 600–1200, and allow us to speculate as to what decorations may have been important to the groups occupying the site. These objects can also be compared to those excavated from other sites in Nicaragua.

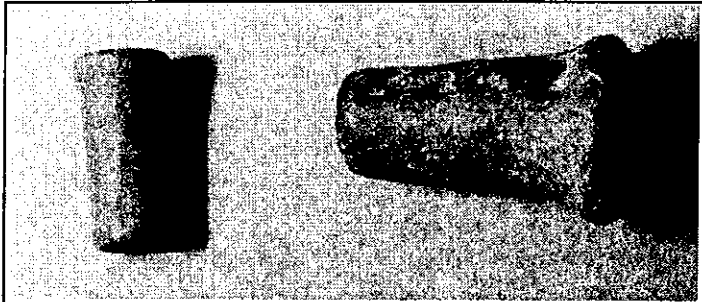


Figure 9. Ceramic tube as possible ear spool or mold for manufacturing ear spools.

Identical ear spools were found in Santa Isabel, located approximately 75 km to the south (McCafferty 2008; McCafferty and McCafferty 2009). Sizes range from about one to three centimetres in diameter; the five centimetre diameter ear spools found at El Rayo Feature 34 are the largest yet found and suggest a distinctive status. The size of the ear spools may also relate to age, with smaller ear spools possibly worn by

youths being initiated into adult roles. Solid ear spools with incised decoration are also known from both Santa Isabel and Tepetate, and may also indicate a status difference. Longer and thicker tubes were also found at Santa Isabel (Figure 9), and were initially interpreted as another category of ear spool; whereas that remains as a possibility, these objects may also have been used as forms for fabricating the smaller, delicate ear spools.

Small ceramic beads were occasionally recovered from Santa Isabel but not in high concentrations or from burial contexts. Clay beads from both Santa Isabel and El Rayo were generally undecorated. Santa Isabel produced one large bead with a Mexican Storm God (Tlaloc) face which was probably worn as a pendant or main bead on a necklace.

Jadeite beads were discovered in small quantities at all three sites. Greenstone debitage suggested that jewellery, including beads, was produced at Santa Isabel (McCafferty 2008). Other green stone objects from Santa Isabel included polished green pendants, weaving battens and spindle whorls. Excavations at Tepetate encountered one green stone bead in a mortuary context. These data suggest that greenstone was relatively rare in the Granada region, at least in comparison with Santa Isabel.

Ceramic pendants in the form of cacao pods have been found at Santa Isabel and on Ometepe Island (Bovallius 1886; McCafferty and McCafferty 2009), although they do not match the one discovered at El Rayo. Perforated re-worked sherds in round, oval, or angular shapes were an abundant artefact class at Santa Isabel where over 400 were found (Figure 10 a-c). Only a few were found at Tepetate, and none were excavated at El Rayo. These objects were obviously made for suspension but their precise function remains subject to speculation and debate (Wilke 2005). Perhaps these were the ‘poor man’s’ version of the gold plaques described by Oviedo? Other ceramic pendants at El Rayo were tear-drop shaped with a center hole. These were not found at Tepetate or Santa Isabel.

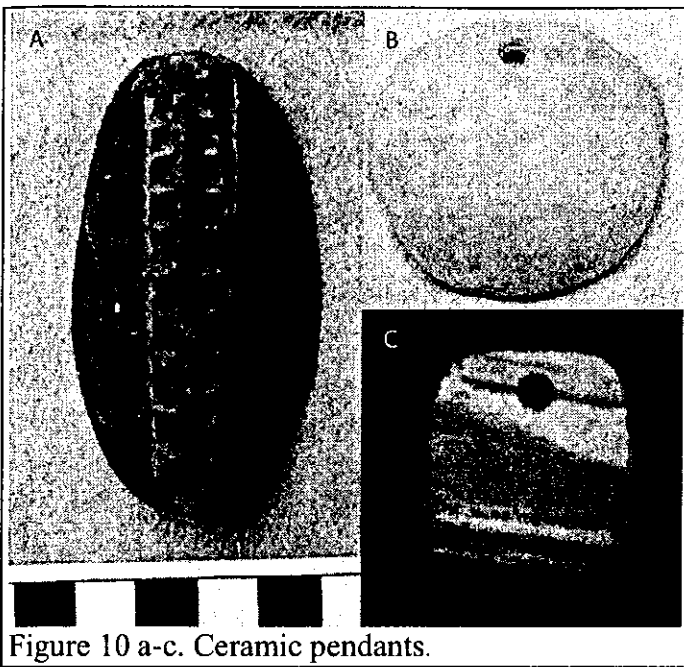


Figure 10 a-c. Ceramic pendants.

El Rayo featured several animal bone, tooth, and claw pendants. This type of ornamentation was also popular at Santa Isabel but in a more elaborate and diverse format. For example, one bone pendant was carved on both ends and featured suspension holes (Figure 11a). Another bone object featured a serrated edge, possibly representing a caiman mandible.

(Figure 11b), and with holes in which semi-precious stones may have been set (small pieces of amber, obsidian, and pearl were found at the site). Human, fish, and animal teeth were also perforated for suspension. A perforated turtle carapace was fashioned as a possible breast plate at Santa Isabel and a fragment of one was also found at El Rayo. A similar perforated breast plate was found at the site of Malacatoya about 40 km from Granada (Espinoza et al. 1999).

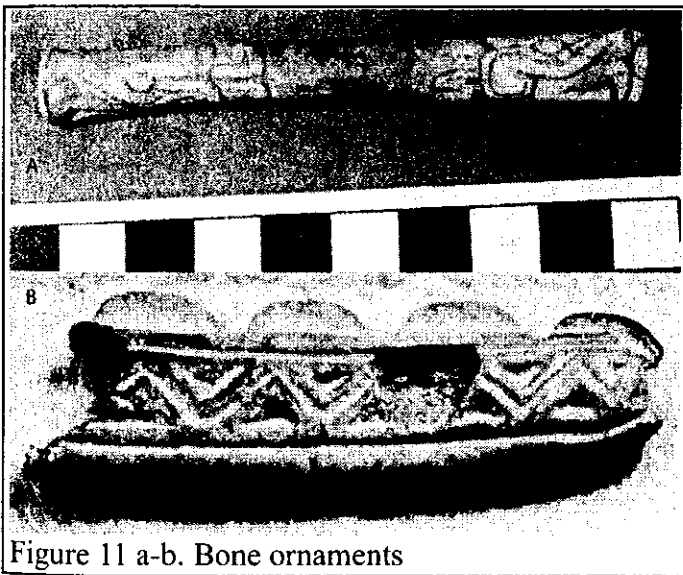


Figure 11 a-b. Bone ornaments

Marine shell was used to manufacture jewellery at Santa Isabel, and numerous examples were found there. However, no marine shell jewellery was recovered at Tepetate or El Rayo. Since the Santa Isabel site included evidence of shell jewellery manufacture it was suggested (McCafferty 2008) that this may have been an artifact class produced for trade or tribute. It is therefore notable that these sites in the Granada region do not seem to have been part of that exchange network.

Roller stamps and stamp seals for body decoration were found only at Santa Isabel (Figure 12 a-b). These objects may have been used for body decoration using “*tile*”, the ash from pine trees. Fernando Oviedo y Valdes (1976) reported that *tile* was used to make temporary and permanent tattoos on an individual’s body. Slaves were frequently tattooed using *tile*. The ancient people from the east side of Lake Nicaragua, the Chontales, made this dye and bartered it at the native markets.

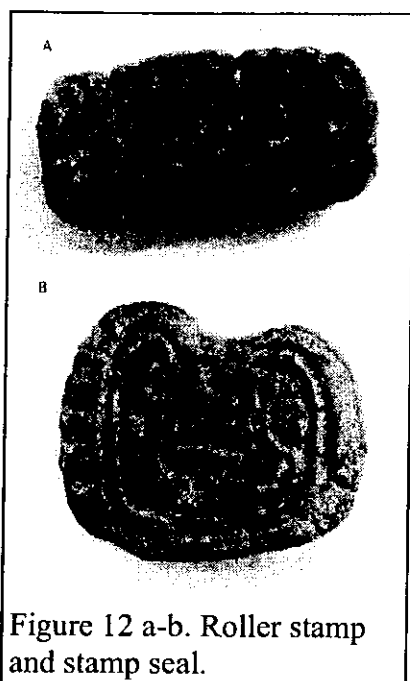


Figure 12 a-b. Roller stamp and stamp seal.

Metal objects are rare from our excavations in Nicaragua. One tiny metal figure, made of native copper, was recovered from Santa Isabel (McCafferty 2008). Three tiny gold beads were excavated at Malacatoya (Espinoza et al. 1999). The small copper bell found at El Rayo is unique from excavated contexts in Nicaragua.

Conclusion

If the ethnohistorical accounts are to be believed, Gil Gonzalez was successful in gathering up nearly all the gold from ancient Nicaragua, but modern archaeologists are not left completely “blingless”. A variety of objects of adornment indicate the expression of different identities, although the analysis is still in the early stages and with more than a little ambiguity. For example, of the 15 percent ornaments at El Rayo the majority were beads, and most of those were from Feature 34, likely from one large necklace? A pervasive question is whether grave goods reflect status of the deceased or mourning ritual of the

survivors? Due to the poor preservation of human skeletal remains, it is nearly impossible to relate objects of adornment with deceased individuals.

Similarities exist in the style of beads and in the hollow earspools of El Rayo, Santa Isabel and Tepetate. But other characteristics are more localized. The re-worked sherd pendants are heavily concentrated at Santa Isabel, suggesting a distinctive symbolic use. Santa Isabel also had much more jewellery made of shell, bone, and greenstone, perhaps because excavations concentrated on the site center, but also relating to the evidence of production.

Burial contexts are generally the best area for recognizing individual identity. Perhaps the ‘richest’ of these was Feature 34 at El Rayo, where three possible burial urns were found associated with other smaller vessels, the concentration of beads, the two large earspools, and a cache of finely made lance points. An isolated cranium was also found near these offerings as a possible ‘trophy head.’

At Feature 32 in Locus 3 a poorly preserved extended burial was associated with a dispersed concentration of complete vessels, the copper bell, a jaguar tooth pendant, and a complete ocarina in the shape of a frigate bird. These represent the greatest concentrations of burial goods, and therefore could indicate higher status individuals. Unfortunately the preservation of skeletal remains is not sufficient to say much about the deceased individual.

It is also interesting that two of the richest graves were found at what would otherwise be considered an isolated fishing village. Because islands in Lake Nicaragua, such as Ometepe and Zapatera, were the sites of large stone sculpture, it has been suggested that they may have served as ritual sites, perhaps including mortuary rituals. Located on the far tip of the Asese peninsula and surrounded by tiny volcanic islands, El Rayo may have had a ceremonial function as well. Locus 3 Operation 3 featured a north/south alignment of twelve Sacasa Striated ‘shoe-pot’ urns,

often associated with burials — but in this case containing offerings. These were aligned in front of a small stone foundation that may have supported an above-ground shrine or altar. Human skeletal remains were also scattered in the area, as were small offering vessels. This context is unique in the annals of Nicaraguan archaeology, and would support the idea that El Rayo also served as a ritual center.

Archaeological research in Nicaragua is undergoing a revival; until recently it was dominated by looters supplying beautiful pottery to the illicit antiquities market. It is frustrating to visit the many regional museums and private collections filled with ‘pieces’ collected from prehispanic cemeteries, now virtually devoid of cultural significance. Ethnohistorical sources describe the complex social organization of indigenous Nicaragua at the moment of Spanish contact, including a multicultural mosaic along the shore of Lake Nicaragua. Through the controlled excavation of sites such as Santa Isabel, Tepetate, and El Rayo we are assembling a rich data base of the material culture of these communities, and discovering intriguing distinctions in artifact classes such as objects of adornment that undoubtedly represent important attributes of social identity. Hopefully as more sites are investigated, especially involving well-preserved mortuary contexts, we will be able to make better and more detailed interpretations of the rich tapestry of indigenous society in Pacific Nicaragua.

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