CHAPTER 13

GREATER NICOYA AND MESOAMERICA: ANALYSIS OF SELECTED CERAMICS

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INTRODUCTION

More than 40 years ago, Kirchhoff (1943) defined the cultural characteristics, ethnic composition, and geographic limits for the culture area of Mesoamerica, and included aboriginal groups as far south as Costa Rica within the area:

> The southernmost tribes, the Subtiaba, Nicarao and Chorotega-Mangue are so unmistakably Mesoamerican in their culture that there can be no doubt as to their inclusion in this superarea. . . . (Kirchhoff 1952:23)

Kirchhoff's boundaries were drawn on the basis of the distribution of particular cultural traits identified by chroniclers at the time of the Spanish conquest. The limits, consequently, were those of Mesoamerica in the early 16th century.

In 1961, Norweb defined the Greater Nicoya Archaeological Subarea as a part of Mesoamerica, stretching from the Gulf of Fonseca (the tri-nation juncture of El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua), southward to include the Nicaraguan great lakes and the Nicoya Peninsula of Costa Rica (see Chapter 10, Fig. 10.1, this volume). Early archaeological researchers, such as Lothrop (1926), tended to emphasize the cultural connections between local aboriginal groups in this then-undefined subarea and those of Mesoamerica-proper (the Mexico-Guatemala core).

There are two plausible reasons for this initial diffusionary perspective: (1) the 16th century presence of so many Mesoamerican/Mexican traits described (often in considerable detail) by the Spanish attracted the interest of early researchers. Lothrop (1926), in an impressive study of subarea ceramics, argued that many of these documented, Contact Period traits were brought to the Greater Nicoya subarea by displaced Postclassic (post-A.D. 1000) Mexican groups which had migrated overland to Nicaragua and

Costa Rica; and (2) the greater strength of the data base in Mesoamerica, compared to that of Lower Central America, at that time. There was a natural tendency to try to link the more poorly known Greater Nicoya zone with the better studied, and more firmly dated, areas of Mesoamerica.

Two decades after Kirchhoff's definitive statement, M. Coe (1962b:170) agreed with his assessment, noting:

> Both the Nicarao and Chorotegans stressed that they were "not" the ancient inhabitants of the region, having arrived not many centuries past from a homeland in Mexico. As confirmation of their own testimony, it should be noted that they were maize farmers, had elaborate markets, wore padded cotton armor, fought with clubs set with small flint blades, practiced human sacrifice and self-mutilation, and had permanent temples. The Nicarao even had the 260-day calendar, the "volador" ceremony, and a pantheon of Mexican gods. In other words, they were thorough-going Mesoamericans.

Elsewhere Coe (1962b:176) emphasized the point further, stating that "Greater Nicoya was as clearly a part of the Mesoamerican co-tradition as were, let us say, the Guerrero or Huasteca regions of Mexico."

Twenty years ago this characterization of Greater Nicoya was widely accepted and Willey (1966), in a major cultural-historical synthesis of North and Middle American archaeology, drew the southern border of Mesoamerica so as to include both Pacific Nicaragua and Guanacaste Province in Costa Rica. While including Greater Nicoya as a subarea within Mesoamerica, he noted that "Mesoamerican culture shades off and interblends with lower Central American cultures . . . . " (Willey 1966:88) and that the subarea is ". . . much less a part of the Mesoamerican sphere than western Honduras and El Salvador" (ibid:169).

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, additional archaeological research in Greater Nicoya began clarifying the prehistory (Baudez 1967; Lange 1971a, b; Lange and Murray 1972; Lange and Scheidenhelm 1972; Healy 1974). This increased fieldwork revealed greater time depth and cultural complexity for the subarea, and a more detailed understanding of its prehistoric evolution. About the same time, Baudez (1976) reexamined the concept of a southern Mesoamerican frontier. He emphasized, for the first time, the dynamic nature of such a Precolumbian border, preferring to describe a more fluid "frontier zone" which fluctuated diachronically. He questioned earlier descriptions of the southernmost regions as being truly Mesoamerican, except in the ultimate centuries before the Spanish.

MESOAMERICAN INFLUENCE VS. LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

Today many researchers accept that there were pronounced contacts with Mesoamerica during the last cultural phase of the subarea, the Late Polychrome Period (A.D. 1350-1550). However, the question remains quite debatable concerning how far back into prehistory these Mesoamerican connections can be identified. We also are still unclear as to the nature and form of such hypothesized contacts.

Recent discussions of the archaeology of this part of Central America have tended to be polarized and to favor either lesser, or greater, degrees of Mesoamericanization. In dealing with the more northern part of the subarea (Rivas, Nicaragua), Healy (1980) emphasized the Mesoamerican features appearing in the ceramic arts, linguistic affinities, and ethnohistoric accounts of the Nicarao. Snarskis (1981b) has also tended to underscore the importance of early Mesoamerican contacts and influence in Costa Rica. In contrast, Lange (1971b, 1984b) has stressed the importance of local evolution. Indeed, if external influence is to be identified, Lange (1971a) has tended to favor more southerly affiliations than Mesoamerican.

The most recent characterization of the subarea (Lange 1984b:191) has emphasized the importance of "in situ" developments, downplaying external relationships:

> The Greater Nicoya Archaeological Subarea, although exposed for two milennia to external cultural impulses from more developed societies, remained relatively isolated, and strong local traditions persisted. The extent to which these external forces actually influenced local developments has been variously appraised, but this area never underwent substantial development or change as a consequence.

DISCUSSION

Features that have a Mesoamerican "feel" to them, and which researchers have identified as evidence of northern influence, can be divided into two types: (a) general traits represented by the presence of broadly similar artistic motifs, generic-level designs, stylized or realistic representations, and general decorative modes; and (b) specific traits represented by particular religious customs, closely related language identifications, and specific trade items. Both classes of data have been employed, more or less effectively. Some of the specific Mesoamerican cultural features recognized by Europeans at the time of the Spanish conquest have already been noted. For earlier horizons, however, we must rely strictly on the archaeological remains.

Examples of general features which occur in earlier time periods, and which have been used to suggest a north-to-south diffusion,

include the heavy usage of the step fret or "greca" design. This is very common on Mixteca-Puebla polychromes of the Mexican Postclassic Period, and stepped frets appear frequently on the decorated Middle (and Late) Polychrome Period ceramics of Greater Nicoya. Another important element, or theme, in both areas is the jaguar. In Mesoamerica, the spotted feline frequently served as a deity as ancient as the Olmec horizon (Joralemon 1971), while in Greater Nicoya it is represented in varying forms ranging from highly stylized representations to life-like jaguar effigy vessels (e.g., Pataky Polychromes).

There was a marked propensity for carved jade (Plate 32) in both Mesoamerica and Greater Nicoya, until about A.D. 500. Some additional general similarities can be identified in ceramic production techniques, such as multiple brush (comb) painted decoration and color zoning on both Greater Nicoya Zoned Bichrome pottery and the Formative ceramics of Mesoamerica. Others have commented upon the general similarities between early Greater Nicoya orange base polychromes (e.g., Galo Polychrome, Plate 15) and similar wares of the Maya subarea. All of these traits, however, are only suggestive of contacts because they are fairly widely distributed elsewhere and are, therefore, hardly conclusive. Some of the traits are simply too general and have too low a level of specificity to be very useful.

However, more specific features do exist and these suggest a more tantalizing linkage between the two zones. In the Middle and Late Polychrome Periods (A.D. 800-1530), for example, a number of Greater Nicoya decorative wares depict recognizable Mesoamerican deities: Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent; Tlaltecutli, the Mexican earth monster; Ehecatl, the Mexican wind god; and Tlaloc, the rain god, have all been identified.

Furthermore, archaeologists have traced a number of authentic Mesoamerican trade goods found in Greater Nicoya, and "vice versa." These include jades carved with an array of Olmec and Mayan motifs. These were certainly executed by Mesoamerican craftsmen, although they were found in Greater Nicoya contexts. Although many of these are known from private collections in Costa Rica, and therefore are problematic in nature, the recent excavation and reporting of a spectacular Olmec-style jade from central Costa Rica reinforces the likelihood of prehistoric jade trade from Mesoamerica to Greater Nicoya (Snarskis 1979; Parsons 1987). Other exotics, such as the distinctive Ulua marble vases of western Honduras and Mesoamerican-style copper bells, have been identified in limited quantities in both private collections and from excavations.

Despite the significance of the debate over Greater Nicoya and Mesoamerica contact and communication, or lack of it, there have been few attempts to trace material culture from one region to the other, using the sophisticated instrumental analytical means that are now available. Obsidian is a commodity that is mentioned as evidence of north-to-south trade, and can be readily tested using x-ray fluorescence or neutron activation analysis (Taylor 1977). Although it is conceivable that some obsidian recovered from the sites in Greater Nicoya may have been originally extracted from the still poorly known volcanic zones of Nicaragua and Costa Rica, recent trace element analysis suggests that at least some obsidian was traded south from the Guatemalan highlands and other northern sources (Healy 1987).

Jade is another class of archaeological material with considerable potential for detailed analysis. Bishop and colleagues (Lange et al. 1981; Bishop et al. 1984) conducted trace element analysis of Costa Rican jades (Plate 32) in a recent attempt to determine if these were of local origin, or imported (see Chapter 4, this volume). They concluded that a limited number of the Costa Rican jades were foreign and derived from a Mesoamerican source (e.g., the Motagua River Valley, Guatemala).

CERAMIC COMPOSITIONAL ANALYSIS

Given the abundance of the material and the now quite detailed level of typological classification for the subarea (Lange et al. 1984), an even more suitable artifact category for chemical analysis is pottery. From 1980 to 1986, a large-scale compositional analysis of more than 1,200 ceramic samples, drawn from approximately 70 different sites/locales in Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, was conducted by the Department of Chemistry at the Brookhaven National Laboratory and by the Conservation Analytical Laboratory at the Smithsonian Institution (see Chapter 2, this volume). While the major purpose of this study was to examine the degree of ceramic trade and interaction "within" the Greater Nicoya subarea, there was also an interest in trying to determine if there were evidence of external trade relations, especially in Mesoamerica proper.

Some 33 ceramic samples representing possible Mesoamerican–Lower Central American "trade sherds" were submitted for detailed analysis. Some of these tentative trade sherds had been collected from sites in Greater Nicoya and, on the basis of surface decoration features, were identified as potentially having orginated within, or in close proximity to, Mesoamerica-proper. Other sherds had been recovered from archaeological sites in El Salvador and Honduras and were identified as potentially having orginated in Greater Nicoya.

The assumption, with both sets of data, was that by analyzing the chemical make-up of these ceramic specimens it would be feasible to test whether there had been social or economic interaction between Greater Nicoya and Mesoamerican groups. By analyzing samples from different time periods it was expected that some light might be shed on exchange networks at work in different periods. Although the

sample was small and requires cautious interpretation, the preliminary results are of interest and worthy of comment.

1) *Usulutan Ware:* Six sherds with resist decoration were analyzed and were classified typologically by Lange as derived from Usulutan-type vessels (see Chapter 2, this volume). The specimens were all derived from southwest Nicaragua (Ometepe Island; Luisitio and Santa Marta, both north of Managua [Lange, Sheets, and Martinez 1986]). Usulutan pottery is widely recognized as an important horizon marker in southern Mesoamerica from 300B.C. to A.D. 250 (Demarest and Sharer 1982). Manufacture of the distinctive ceramic has been traced to western El Salvador, but the ware appears to have been extremely popular and widely traded during the Mesoamerican Late Preclassic Period. Usulutan ceramics have been found at Maya sites as far north as Uaxactun (Smith 1955:60-61) and Tikal (Culbert 1985:74-75; Clancy et al. 1985:103) in Guatemala. The distribution of Usulutan seemed a suitable test of a Mesoamerica-to-Greater Nicoya trade model for one of the earliest ceramic horizons in this subarea, the Zoned Bichrome Period (Healy 1980:241). The paste compositional analysis, however, indicated that all six of the Nicaraguan-derived Usulutan-like sherds, while similar in surface decoration and technique to the authentic Usulutan Ware, did not cluster with previously anlayzed Usulutan material recovered from El Salvador and Guatemala.

Interestingly, the Greater Nicoya Usulutan-style, resist-decorated pieces did cluster together, and formed a cohesive compositional group, suggesting that they were produced in the same vicinity of the subarea. However, they are not genuine Mesoamerican Usulutan.

The preliminary indications are that technological ideas, even ones as complex as those involved in producing "resist"-decorated pottery, were either being independently developed in Greater Nicoya or, more likely, being diffused from the north by some still poorly understood mechanisms of communication. True Salvadoran Usulutan vessels, on the basis of this first study, do not seem to have been traded to the south.

2) *White-Slipped Polychromes:* These ceramics were originally described by Lothrop (1926) under the rubric "Nicoya Polychrome Ware." The Pataky Polychrome effigy vessel in Plate 17 is an example of what he called Nicoya Polychrome Ware. In recent years researchers have refined their definition of this important type (Plate 1b), renaming it Papagayo Polychrome (Norweb 1961). It is aesthetically striking, a highly distinctive, white-slipped ceramic which was produced in great abundance and variety, in northern Greater Nicoya from A.D. 800 to 1520. The ceramic is famous for its brilliant decoration, masterful designs, and composite silhouette forms. Healy (1980:167-188) identified some nine different varieties from the Rivas region of Nicaragua alone.

For decades Mesoamerican archaeologists have identified various white-slipped polychrome vessels and sherds recovered in Guatemala, Mexico, El Salvador, and Honduras, as being derived from Greater Nicoya. Sites which have produced white-slipped wares that were routinely attributed to Greater Nicoya include, for example, Copan, Los Naranjos, and Las Vegas in Honduras; Tazumal, Chalchuapa, and Quelepa in El Salvador; Zaculeu in Guatemala; and even as far north as Tula in Mexico.

Six white-slipped sherds from the sites of Chalchuapa and Ceren in western El Salvador (see Chapter 2, this volume) were submitted for NAA compositional analysis. The results indicate that despite the superficial similarity with the Greater Nicoya Papagayo type, the northern specimens were all different in paste composition. As with the Usulutan-type specimens, it appears that a decorative technique (in this case, white-slipped vessels with polychrome painted motifs) was being quite widely produced. In general, archaeological identification of white-slipped wares found outside Greater Nicoya as Papagayo Polychrome trade pieces should be very cautiously evaluated. Furthermore, previous identifications, often cited widely in the literature, ought to be subjected to closer scrutiny; the materials from Tula, Mexico, are a case in point (Diehl et al. 1974).

CONCLUSIONS

Two sets of ceramic data, one composed of Zoned Bichrome Period ceramics of Nicaragua, and a second composed of Middle-Late Polychrome Period ceramics from northern Central America, were studied for paste composition. These possible trade pieces were then compared with similarly analyzed specimens with secure proveniences. The laboratory results indicate that, in the first instance, resist-painted Usulutan-style ceramics from Nicaragua were apparently local products, and were not imported from El Salvador. In the second case, the white-slipped, Papagayo-style polychrome ceramics from sites in Honduras and El Salvador were likely northern products and not imported from Greater Nicoya.

These ceramic compositional results are intriguing because, as was noted previously, it is clear that lithics, such as jade and obsidian, were being imported by Greater Nicoya groups from their Mesoamerican neighbors, and that other exotics, such as Ulua marble vases and copper bells, were probably also filtering southward. In the case of pottery, however, the preliminary results reported here suggest that instead of trade, the ceramic techniques (such as resist decoration), modes (white-slipped polychromes), and even specific decorative designs, were diffused between Mesoamerica and Greater Nicoya (and *vice versa*), but pottery vessels may not have actually been transported.

Two other pertinent observations are derived from these ceramic compositional analyses. There is a remarkable degree of cohesiveness in the pastes of the Greater Nicoya Papagayo Polychromes (see Chapter 2, this volume). More than 100 samples from Costa Rica, but especially Nicaragua, clustered together. Curiously, some other white-slipped ceramic types (e.g., Pataky Polychrome, Vallejo Polychrome, Madeira Polychrome, and Casares Polychrome) also fell into this group despite being quite different in surface decoration. The rather striking cohesiveness raises the question of whether a single major production center for Greater Nicoya white-slipped wares once existed in the Middle and Late Polychrome Periods; Pacific Nicaragua seems the likely locale given the unusually large degree of variety there.

Secondly, it is interesting to note the obvious heterogeneity of white-slipped polychromes from El Salvador, Honduras, and Greater Nicoya. Baudez (personal communication, 1987) has insightfully noted that the influence of Greater Nicoya on these Honduran and El Salvadoran groups can be perceived as very strong if one realizes that each of these is a different northern imitation of Greater Nicoya Papagayo Polychrome ceramics. Indeed, one could argue that this kind of detailed copying and mimicry is of greater significance, and more important culturally, than the act of simply receiving imported goods from Greater Nicoya. The same is true, of course, of the Usulutan copies in Nicaragua. The question is why these groups went to such efforts to duplicate, so closely, the wares of their distant neighbors.

Obviously, additional trace-element studies of this type are warranted. The sample of possible trade wares used here is small, and we are very much at an initial data-gathering stage. However, these results do show their utility for providing the objective testing of cultural materials, and the derivation of related hypotheses. The results here emphasize that previous facile declarations of long-distance trade of pottery between Precolumbian peoples of Greater Nicoya and Mesoamerican groups should be reexamined very carefully. Superficial resemblances in form and surface treatment of ceramics obviously can be quite misleading. The similarities may be due to trade, or to copying. If the latter, as appears to have been the case with the samples examined here, we need to explore why such replications were produced (see Chapter 11, this volume).

Although it may not convert the hardcore Mesoamerican diffusionist into a Greater Nicoya isolationist, the compositional results outlined here hint that there was a more complex set of interrelationships at work in this part of Central America 700 years ago, or more, than researchers could have surmised even a decade ago.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Fred Lange (University of Colorado Museum-Boulder) and to Claude Baudez (Musee de L'Homme-Paris) for helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper. Both helped me to maintain a semblance of balance in my perspective on Greater Nicoya archaeology, for which I am grateful.