

Breaking Down Binaries: Gender, Art, and Tools in Ancient Costa Rica

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ABSTRACT

Giant metate-like stone sculptures, found in all regions of Costa Rica, though in various forms, continue to fascinate researchers. Archaeologists contrast these sculptures with other, more utilitarian metates in order to determine their purpose and meaning. They create two groups—metates used by women for grinding subsistence foods and elaborate metates used by men for ritual purposes. This chapter challenges the binaries of tool/art, utilitarian/elaborate, and female/male that essentialize gender and homogenize historical variability. Figurine and burial data demonstrate women's connection to elaborate metates and ritual. In addition, ceramic figurines depict flexibility in gender roles at least within the stratum of ancient Costa Rican society that they depicted. This instance of stereotyped gender attribution and the absence of attention to the possible dynamism of women's lives shows the importance of a feminist approach to archaeology and the need to draw on multiple lines of evidence to answer archaeological questions.

Keywords: figurines, metates, social status, gender, Costa Rica

Varied in form and found in all regions of Costa Rica, giant metate-like stone sculptures have fascinated archaeologists for decades. Elaborate metates have been interpreted as having had functions that include grinding human flesh (Graham 1992), grinding ritual foods (Lange 1971), use in ritual performance to maintain control of productive land (Graham 1992; Lange 1992), and symbolic connotation of fertility (Balser 1955). Researchers contrast these artifacts with utilitarian metates, which are often correlated with women's domestic labor of preparing maize and other foods (Graham 1992). While archaeologists (Balser 1955; Graham 1992; Lange 1971, 1992; Lothrop 1963; Norweb 1961; Sheets et al. 1991; Snarskis 1992) split these artifacts into two groups—metates used for grinding daily subsistence foods and elaborate metates used for ritual purposes—both sets of artifacts retain an association of grinding and agriculture (Graham 1992:171). In pairing utilitarian metates with elaborate metates, researchers assign stereotypically dichotomous gender roles to their uses. For example, Graham (1992) argues that elaborate metates are

a source of male power and that they demonstrate an appropriation of a female-associated tool for higher purposes.

In this study, I challenge the stereotypical gender attribution present in the archaeological literature regarding Costa Rica's elaborate metates in order to show the importance of a feminist approach to archaeology. By reexamining the potential function of these artifacts, we can begin to break down the binary of utilitarian versus ritual that has been mapped so rigidly onto gender roles. In what follows, I present data that challenge the strict separation of women from the elaborate metates. This study uses multiple lines of evidence to address the dynamism of women's lives, which is a central goal of feminist archaeologists. I hope to provide evidence to begin to answer the following questions: Are these sculptures metates? Who used the elaborate metates? What does this say about the construction of gender in ancient Costa Rica? I propose a new interpretation of gender roles in association with the elaborate metates in Costa Rica and suggest the implications of this case study for gender theory more broadly.

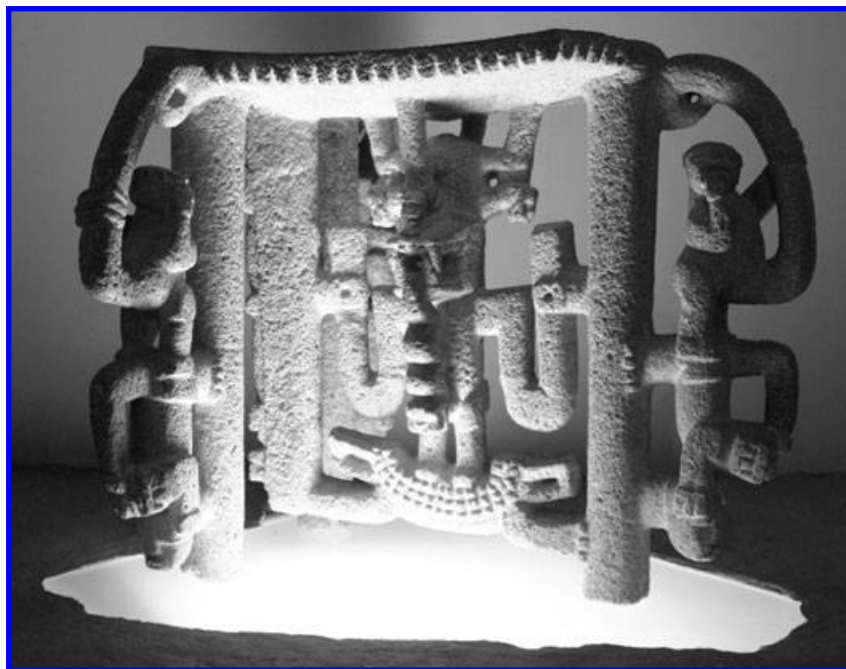


Figure 4.1. Flying-panel metate from the Atlantic Watershed region of Costa Rica. Length 77 centimeters, height 54 centimeters. Colección Museo Nacional de Costa Rica, San José. No. 7150. Photograph by Thomas Preston-Werner.

A Case of Stereotyped Gender Attribution

Archaeologists separate Costa Rica into three regions—the Guanacaste-Nicoya Zone, the Central Highlands/Atlantic Watershed Zone, and the Diquis Zone—recognizing varied environments and differences in manufacturing styles of artifacts, which are most notable after 500 C.E. The Guanacaste-Nicoya Zone is characterized climatically as arid and seasonal and geographically as tropical dry forest. Fertile valleys and cool mountains make up the Central Highlands/Atlantic Watershed Zone. Finally, the Diquis Zone has heavy rainfall, dense tropical forest, and relatively infertile soil as a result of a lack of volcanic activity.

Large and ornate metate-like sculptures have been found throughout present-day Costa Rica. The earliest elaborate metates come from the Guanacaste-Nicoya Zone and the Central Highlands/Atlantic Watershed Zone from sites dated to Period IV (1000 B.C.E.–500 C.E.). These carved, volcanic-stone artifacts vary in shape, size, and decoration (Figure 4.1). They may be flat or curved and with or without a rim. A few from the Central Highlands/Atlantic Watershed Zone have been found with rims of carved human head-like representations. Some metates are rectangular, while others are oval or circular. They have three or four legs. The sculptures feature animals, commonly birds, crocodiles,

jaguars, and monkeys. Tetrapod jaguar metates with rounded plates have been excavated in both the Central Highlands/Atlantic Watershed Zone and the Diquis Zone and date to Period VI (1000–1550 C.E.).

The most famous of all the elaborate metates are the “flying-panel” metates, recovered from the Central Highlands/Atlantic Watershed Zone and dating to Period IV (1000 B.C.E.–500 C.E.). These highly complex and stylized sculptures are carved from a single rock. Anthropomorphic figures, located on the legs and beneath the surface plate, dominate the themes of flying-panel metates. While elaborate metates are not uncommon finds in excavations, only approximately a dozen flying-panel metates have been found (Graham 1992:187).

Archaeologists have showcased the elaborate metates (purportedly signifying power and ritual) as a unique Costa Rican artifact at the expense of studying utilitarian tools (assumed to belong to women): “It seems rather obvious, in fact, that one reason why archaeologists have often devalued the study of mundane *metates* is because of their association with women’s work” (Graham 1992:175). Margaret W. Conkey and Janet D. Spector (1984:15, 17) recognize the positive values researchers have placed on men’s work and roles in society and their consequential dismissal of female roles as natural and plain. Such stereotyped gender attribution is all too common:

As the largest and most complex symbol of power in the early rank societies of the Atlantic watershed, flying-panel *metates* bore an especially heavy ideological function: they claim a relation of equivalence between the domestic labor of women and the political power of men. The work of the chiefly elite is aggression to provide victims for rituals of sacrifice: as ground maize nourishes the household, sacrificed bodies nourish the polity. As in any binary set, however, one term is always privileged. [Graham 1992:188]

In order to assess this inference of social structure from material culture, the original binary assignments must be questioned—specifically those that juxtapose and create a hierarchy between ritual and domestic work, men and women, and artistic sculpture and mundane tools. An inquiry into the potential relationship between women and the elaborate *metates* may speak to the larger role that gender relations played in ancient Costa Rica.

Tools:Art

Archaeologists have coupled elaborate *metates* with mundane *metates*, such that the interpretations of the former are informed greatly by the latter. Have researchers been correct to assume that these artifacts are, in fact, *metates*, that is, grinding stones, and does their classification as such create what might be false comparisons? The stone sculptures have a smooth surface area and appear to be roughly the same shape as grinding stones. Labeling the sculptures as *metates* draws on gendered stereotypes regarding the division of labor and confuses types of work. Archaeologists' application of the label "metate," however, generates bias in the interpretation of use. Karen Olsen Bruhns writes, "The *metate* equals woman hypothesis is so pervasive that it clashes strongly with another common preconception of archaeology, that ritual activity is generally male" (Bruhns 1991:421). Unlike the more popular association of the elaborate sculptures with grinding stones, some researchers have suggested that these artifacts resemble benches or thrones (Graham 1992; Lange 1971; Lothrop 1963; Norweb 1961), a topic to be discussed later in this chapter.

Graham (1992:167) has suggested that the elaborate *metates* represent the union of art and tool—art inspired by tools. In this portrayal art and tools are dichotomized, suggesting that one grows out of the other and creating a hierarchy of wealth and social status that privileges form over function. Graham writes, "In attempting to account for these various aesthetic-ideological complexes, it is crucial that art-tools in Costa Rica not be seen in isolation from their analogues elsewhere, nor from the functions and association of their mundane prototypes, the real tools" (Graham 1992:174). He invokes the work of Charles Peirce to create

a hierarchy in which the indexicality of utilitarian *metates* pales in comparison to the iconic status of elaborate *metates*: "Domestic *metates* are purely indexical signs: they do not represent or resemble anything other than themselves. They are, as it were, mute" (Graham 1992:186, see also 175 n. 11). This thinking discounts linkages, albeit stereotypical, between utilitarian *metates*, the domestic sphere, and reproduction through food preparation, as well as the possibility for other signified meanings assigned to such tools and understood by ancient Costa Ricans. Despite arguing that grinding stones represent nothing, Graham also writes that *metates* connote fertility, the production of tools, food, and a sexual division of labor, "since men used bladed tools in agriculture, war, and sacrifice, and women used *metates* for domestic food preparation" (Graham 1992:175).

As pieces of art, the elaborate *metates* have been interpreted as having been connected to violence. Graham suggests that the rounded figures that outline the *metates*' top surface "clearly stand for the human trophy heads" (Graham 1992:180). Furthermore, "the decapitation of human heads is rhetorically likened to the grinding of maize kernels; the grinding plate itself assumes crocodilian qualities and thus apparently represents the fertile surface of the earth, as crocodiles commonly do in Mesoamerica" (Graham 1992:180). The figures carved into the sides and attached to the *metates*' legs are interpreted to be human corpses being lowered by animals from one state of life to the next. The corpses refer to captives taken during warfare, a form of violence waged to secure landholdings for agricultural purposes. Though Graham's analysis of the sculpted iconography is well grounded in Mesoamerican ethnographic and material sources, he provides no other contextual or material evidence of decapitation, violence, or warfare such as weapons, defensive or boundary-oriented architecture, or mortuary data to support his conjecture.

When researchers map this art-tool paradigm onto gender, they obscure the interrelatedness of function and meaning. Conkey and Spector observe, "Life is both material and symbolic simultaneously" (Conkey and Spector 1984:33). In assuming that elaborate *metates* were art used by men, men are framed as the sole gender capable of creating art. Instead, this art-tool binary might be more appropriately considered to be an art-tool continuum, in which individuals elaborated and personalized their everyday tools and from which other individuals derived the ideas for further specialized decoration of ritual tools.

Other theorists have suggested that tools can receive decoration, even change morphologically, without a shift in user. In other words, decoration does not necessarily determine the transformation of a tool from daily use by a worker to ritual use by a member of the upper class. Technical

innovation or resistance to societal ideology can be ascertained through an examination of artifacts. For example, Ian Hodder (1986:109) writes that contemporary Ilchamus women decorate milk calabashes for the purposes of indexing women's reproductive roles. Instead of elaborate carving being a necessarily male attribute, could it be that ancient Costa Rican women were merely decorating their own metates for personal or political reasons? Archaeologists' practice of splitting metate specimens into two groups, instead of fashioning a more complex analysis using a continuum of elaboration, does not allow for the idea that women might have carved their own decorations into their tools. Were men the only members of the upper class who potentially owned the elaborate metates? Bruhns (1991:421) asks, if these metates had belonged to wealthy individuals, might those individuals not have also been women or only been women?

While the data do seem to point toward the elaborate metates as elite owned, the gender or genders of the owners remain unclear, despite repeated assumptions of male possession. In the 1907 excavation of Las Huacas in the Nicoya region of northwestern Costa Rica, Carl Hartman found carved tripod metates, greenstone axe-gods, and fine stone mace heads. When discussing these art-tools, Graham refers to another well-known Costa Rican archaeologist, Frederick Lange: "Lange had thus made a crucial explanatory advance by identifying a tripartite mortuary complex composed of art-tools, associated with high status and *probably male* burials" (Graham 1992:171; italics mine). It is unclear in this text whether it is Lange or Graham who is stating that the art-tools are of high status and probably male. Graham also makes a similar statement later in his essay: "Little is known yet about the behavioural-functional contexts of axes, celts, and other greenstone artifacts beyond the common assumption that they were worn as ornaments by elite individuals, presumably mostly men, and the evidence that they were finally placed in elite graves" (Graham 1992:194; with citations to Easby 1968; Hartman 1907; Snarskis 1979, 1981a). Such casual examples of stereotyped gender attribution obscure knowable information as well as distract from alternative questions, such as the real use of elaborate metates in ancient Costa Rica.

Domestic:Ritual

Researchers disagree as to the specific use of the elaborate metates, perhaps because of the myriad conditions in which they have been recovered. The locations where archaeologists have found metates as well as the appearance of the artifacts suggest the purpose of the pieces within

ancient Costa Rican culture. The dichotomy that pits common, domestic usage against elite, ritual usage breaks down in the face of data that show the potentially multiple uses of elaborate metates. While not gender-determining, metates have been recovered in domestic contexts, for example, at the site of Severo Ledesma (Snarskis 1984). There, fragments of palm nuts, charcoal, manos, and utilitarian metates were found within household contexts. No maize remains were found, and no hearths were discernable. Underneath the floors, burials were discovered that contained the plate of a flying-panel metate, ocarinas, celts, and rattles. Though no full flying-panel metates have been excavated scientifically, pieces from sites such as Severo Ledesma have been found in mortuary contexts with other ritual objects, as have other styles of elaborate metates from the Atlantic Watershed region (Lange, ed. 1992; Sheets et al. 1991; Snarskis 1992). Occasionally, researchers note an absence of manos with the metates, suggesting either that the manos were located elsewhere for other utilitarian purposes or that the metates were used for purposes other than grinding (Joyce 1916:175).

In part because of rampant looting of archaeological sites in Costa Rica, the original locations of many of the elaborate metates are unknown. The elaborate metates that were documented, however, were found most often in cemeteries (Graham 1992; Hartman 1907). Occasionally, utilitarian metates and pieces of broken elaborate metates have been discovered as stones used in fashioning the walls of tombs (Snarskis 1984, 1992). Carl Hartman's (1907) description of Burial 8 at Las Huacas with an elaborate metate, pestle, and clay figurine of a person sitting on a metate suggests other elite uses. Lynette Norr (1996) suggests metates were used as nutting stones. Indeed, metates have functioned in the past and continue to function in the present as tools used to grind numerous substances. Bruhns (1991) lists the grinding of pharmaceuticals, dyestuffs, cosmetics, pigments, metals, and lime as uses of metates other than domestic grinding of foods. Analyses of organic or inorganic traces from the processing of nuts, maize, manioc, dye, metal, or other objects and correlation of their relative commonality would be informative. Finally, some metates show no wear, perhaps indicating their manufacture for tomb furniture. While these uses do not determine the gender of the user, they point to whether the elaborate metates were used for everyday or elite purposes.

The degree of use wear on the metate plate provides additional clues concerning function. The use wear on elaborate metates varies from copious evidence of grinding on metate plates to metates found in pristine condition, most often located in burials. Payson Sheets et al. (1991) describe decreasing use wear on mundane metates over time in the Arenal site of the Sitio Bolivar cemetery and the light use

wear on elaborate metates compared to their Mesoamerican counterparts. Snarskis (1992) notes worn mundane metates and, interestingly, a small hole worn into the center of an elaborate metate.

The debate over the degree to which maize agriculture had developed in ancient Costa Rica is relevant to the role played by elaborate metates because of the *Mesoamerican* uses of metates in the maize-based diet and the contemporary role of *Mesoamerican* women in maize-grinding. Some archaeologists, such as Michael Snarskis, have been criticized for making grand statements about ancient Costa Rican agricultural practices from scant evidence (Dunn 1978). Yet many researchers have made astute observations about ethnobotanical and lithic remains. Sheets et al. (1991) write that while decorative aspects of metates increased in the Central Highlands region at the Arenal site, the evidence of grinding decreased, suggesting an emphasis on a symbolic role for the metates. Evidence of maize was recovered at the site, but Sheets and his colleagues warn that such few data should not be used to argue grand theories. They write:

Maize was found in deposits of all sedentary phases . . . in carbonized kernel, pollen, or phytolith form. Grinding stones . . . also occurred in all phases following the Archaic (Chenault 1984). From these qualitative indicators one might conclude that much maize was cultivated, processed, and consumed, and even that it was the staple. But maize, because of its hard shell, characteristic phytoliths, and abundant pollen—and the fact that it is more often parched or roasted and thus more frequently carbonized than are other foods—has a higher probability of being preserved and thus easily overemphasized in subsistence reconstructions . . . The heavy use-wear on most SE Mesoamerican metates contrasts with the relatively light use-wear on most specimens from the Arenal area. [Sheets et al. 1991:458–459]

Ultimately, these investigators conclude that subsistence practices were likely broad based and included maize cultivation, perhaps for the production of *chicha*. The broad-based subsistence strategy, they argue, is what allowed humans to survive at the base of a volcano for roughly 3,500 years. Their article demonstrates the need to consider multiple lines of evidence before assuming the existence of certain practices, such as maize agriculture.

Having considered the locations of metates and their various levels of wear, the divide between the two types of metates may not be so clear-cut. Rituals often involve the grinding of various materials to be used for curing or contact with the supernatural (Bruhns 1991:422) and may occur habitually or only during special occasions. The available data provide evidence for linking elaborate metates with elite social figures, but they do not so easily map onto distinctive gender roles as suggested in the current literature.

Female:Male

By setting the two types of metates against one another and mapping gender onto them, archaeologists connect gender to social status and power. Assuming gender hierarchy, Graham writes:

The mundane *metate* as a sign of women's domestic labor was appropriated and transformed by an elite into a sign of a different kind of labor, the production of ideology and ritual . . . As the mundane *metate* provides for the nourishment and reproduction of the household, the ceremonial *metate* provides for the symbolic, ideological nourishment and reproduction of the polity. [Graham 1992:186–187]

Conkey and Spector critique such ahistorical practices of gender attribution, writing, “The sources that archaeologists draw upon to derive their implicit notions about past gender arrangements are rarely made explicit . . . most derive from androcentric ethnographies or from the researchers' own unexamined, culture-bound, assumptions about gender” (Conkey and Spector 1984:15). Graham references Conkey and Spector's (1984) seminal article, stating that they have “rightly criticized the normative ‘androcentric’ mindset that always and everywhere sees an invariable sexual division of labor, especially in terms of sex-linkages of artifacts” (Graham 1992:175). But in his following sentence Graham dismisses their arguments entirely: “However, it does not seem likely that new data or new approaches will materially affect the pervasive association in Middle America of mundane *metates* with the domestic labor of women, nor that of ground stone blades with such predominantly masculine tasks as forest clearing, woodworking, and warfare” (Graham 1992:175). This reasoning exemplifies ethnocentric arguments that rely on preconceived gender roles and the casual, uncritical use of ethnohistoric and ethnographic analogy. Elizabeth Brumfiel asks for more careful gender attribution and for reaching conclusions only when “multiple lines of evidence (skeletal alteration, ethnohistory, burial data, representational art) point consistently in the same direction” (Brumfiel 2006:42).

In order to theorize that particular artifacts were associated with one gender or another, archaeologists must move beyond stereotypes. Burials *can* provide fruitful information when used in conjunction with other lines of evidence. Because of high precipitation levels and soil acidity, bone preservation in Costa Rica is rare, precluding the confident use of osteological examinations to determine the sex of bodies. Occasionally remains are located that can be sexed, such as at La Ceiba in the Tempisque River Valley. Of 104 burials dating from 800 C.E. to 1350 C.E., nine females and eight males were identified. Lange writes, “An additional

twenty-three women and seventeen men were classified on the basis of both osteological and associated material data (grinding stones occurring with women and arrow and spear points with men; these correlations were also observed in the osteologically ‘certain’ sample of seventeen individuals)” (Lange 1992:124). Instead of assuming gender based solely on the material data, researchers at La Ceiba looked to a broader data set, which they used in conjunction with artifacts. The use of multiple lines of evidence to interpret the burial findings shows how archaeologists can assess gender without relying on assumptions.

Engendering Elaborate Metates: A New Interpretation

Brumfiel’s (2006) call for the use of multiple lines of evidence to establish gender attribution prompts a consideration of other ways in which Costa Rican women—or men—might be connected to metates. One possible form of evidence, ceramic figurines, has been found throughout Costa Rica, and I suggest that the figurines provide a new direction for interpretation of the relationship between gender, tools, and art. Most figurines were discovered in the Guanacaste-Nicoya Zone. More than 30 figurines have been uncovered from various northwestern sites over the past century. They date from 1 C.E. to 1100 C.E. The majority of the female figurines were discovered in funerary and domestic contexts in northern Costa Rica, although some have also been located in burials in other locations throughout the country as the result of trading networks among regions (Fernández Esquivel 2006:7).

The pottery styles of the figurines range from the earliest style, Zoned Biochrome, through Early, Middle, and Late Polychromes. Figurines painted in the Zoned Biochrome style of Period IV (1000 B.C.E.–500 C.E.) have engraved or incised lines and red and black paint. Ceramics of this type, more often occurring as vessels rather than figurines, have been found in the Central Highlands/Atlantic Watershed Zone beside elaborate metates and atop graves (Sheets et al. 1991:454). Early Polychrome specimens are boldly decorated ceramics. It is to this period (300–750 C.E. partly based on radiocarbon dates) that many of the effigy metates date (Coe 1962). Middle Polychrome ceramics were heavily traded with Mesoamerica, as this period corresponds with the Late and Terminal Classic periods and the entire Toltec period in Mesoamerica (Coe 1962:177–178). Finally, Late Polychrome ceramics were most often black with extensive appliqué. This is the least common style for figurines, although figurines in this style were produced until the time of Spanish conquest.



Figure 4.2. *Androgynous ceramic figurines. Colección Museo Nacional de Costa Rica, San José. Nos. 9518 and 24076. Photograph by Thomas Preston-Werner.*

The majority of the ceramic figurines are designated female in the archaeological literature. These determinations are based on depictions of breasts, vaginas, and long hair and on the lack of male genitalia. But these identifications are not secure. In some cases, the diagnostic traits (e.g., long hair) are not invariably female, and in other cases, the diagnostic traits are depicted in an ambiguous fashion. For example, the breasts on some figurines could be interpreted as male nipples (Figures 4.2 and 4.3).

Costa Rican figurines differ from ceramic sculptures of women from southern Mesoamerica, which often depict women weaving, grinding maize, caring for children, or fostering animals (Joyce 1993:261). In Mesoamerican figurines, women grinding maize are depicted in a kneeling position, bent over their metates. In contrast, Costa Rican female figures stand upright and alone, occasionally with an infant, sit with their legs spread out, kneel and sit back on their feet, or sit on benches or stools. Compared with figurines from southern Mesoamerica, productive labor is rarely depicted. Many writers, such as Rosemary Joyce, have noted the large numbers of Costa Rican male and female figurines sitting on what appear to be benches; they associate such figurines with high social status (Joyce 1993; see also Graham 1981:118; Snarskis 1981b:191). The benches the figurines sit on show remarkable similarities to some of the more popular elaborate metate styles (Figure 4.4). Some appear to have crocodile heads or birds protruding from each end. Others have cutouts similar to the extensive cutouts in the most elaborate metates.



Figure 4.3. Androgynous ceramic figurine. Colección Museo Nacional de Costa Rica, San José. No. A10LF Art. 1265. Photograph by Thomas Preston-Werner.

While there is little evidence because of extensive looting to support the association of the figures on benches with high status, Burial 8 from Carl Hartman's 1907 excavation of Las Huacas on the Nicoya Peninsula provides some contextual data. Burial 8 consisted of three circular pits about 1.75 meters in length and 1 meter in breadth in which two flexed burials were located at the southern end and one flexed burial occupied the northern end. A utilitarian metate (length 42 centimeters, breadth 27 centimeters, height 10 centimeters) was uncovered alongside the two southern burials. The grinding stone has three cylindrical legs. A second rectangular metate with three cylindrical legs, this one elaborate, was found along the eastern wall. This metate (length 55 centimeters, breadth 37.5 centimeters, height 14 centimeters) has a plain grinding plate on the upper surface, but the underside is covered in intersecting, curvy guilloche designs. The surface of the metate frame contains a bird figure with spread wings and a spread tail. The bird design carries onto one of the metate's legs; the two remaining legs are



Figure 4.4. Ceramic figurine showing individual sitting on a bench and holding a child. From Carl Hartman's 1907 excavation at Las Huacas.

decorated with parallel bands. Finally, a third rectangular metate (length about 60 centimeters, breadth about 45 centimeters, height 20 centimeters), this one also elaborate, was found with the single flexed burial at the northern end. The legs are cylindrical and high, covered in geometrical designs. The upper side of the plate shows an eight-centimeter band of guilloche designs, similar to a nine-centimeter band on the underside that depicts guilloche designs. In addition to the three metates, other artifacts were present in the tomb. Two stone amulets, carved into human shapes, were placed on top of the third, large metate. The first amulet (length 8.1 centimeters, breadth 2.5 centimeters) shows fire damage. It was formed from "green polished bowenite, made in the shape of a small flat ax, the upper part showing the head and breast of a human figure with crossed arms and head-dress sculptured in low relief, the lower part flat, without sculptures. At the neck there is a transverse, cylindrical perforation for suspension" (Hartman 1907:18–19). The second amulet (length 13 centimeters, breadth 3.4 centimeters) is a gray polished stone. The upper half of the long, rectangular figure depicts "a human head and breast, with crossed arms" (Hartman 1907:19). Dividing the top and bottom halves is a transverse, cylindrical perforation at the neck, and the bottom half is plain. A pestle and a ceramic figurine were placed alongside the amulets. The pestle (length 11.5 centimeters, diameter at the base 4.5 centimeters) is made from red clay and has an animal head at its tip. The figurine (length 11 centimeters, height 2.5 centimeters) depicts a person holding a child and sitting atop a metate-like structure. The

large-headed person (height 8 centimeters) wears a flat-topped hat and bears linear, incised ornamentation. The seat (length 11 centimeters, height 2.5 centimeters) has four legs and an animal head at either end. The distribution of the artifacts in the pits of Burial 8 suggests a social hierarchy, because the south end contained two burials and only one utilitarian metate, while the northern end included one burial, an elaborate metate, and the other specialized objects (Hartman 1907).

Hartman's excavation yielded 16 burials in total, which could not be sexed, but many of which contained ceramic figurines as well as carved tripod metates, greenstone axe-gods, and fine stone mace heads. Many of the ceramics have been identified as Early Polychrome, though the records of the figurine from Hartman's Burial 8 are inconclusive (Coe and Baudez 1961). They are interpreted as marking high status (Graham 1992:171). Other large metates found in burials at Las Huacas closely resemble the miniature metate in the Burial 8 figurine. Furthermore, one Early Classic Maya piece of jade from the Guatemalan highlands was recovered in this cemetery, suggesting that ancient Costa Rican people were influenced by or at least in contact with the Maya (Coe 1962:177; see also Hartman 1907:Plate 45).

On the basis of a series of data including mortuary evidence, ceramic figurines, and ethnographic analogy, I want to pursue the linkage between the elaborate metates and elite status. In my argument, however, I resist androcentric notions of work and its social value, as well as the art/tool distinction. I contend, instead, that among ancient Costa Ricans, gender was subservient to class distinctions. Furthermore, the elaborate metates served both as tools (benches or grinding stones, or both, for ritual material) and as signifiers of high social status.

Many archaeologists have argued that the elaborate metates functioned as seats or thrones in connection with ritual and power (Graham 1992; Lange 1971; Lothrop 1963; Norweb 1961). Jane Stevenson Day and Alice Chiles Tillett write, "Ethnographers tell us that in lower Central America, a modern shaman's paraphernalia most often includes a wooden stool, a drum, smoothed stones, whistles or flutes, sucking tubes, and a wooden staff" (Day and Tillett 1996:223). They contend that women played a significant role in ritual activities. Because many of the figurines in the current study appear to be female, ancient Costa Ricans may have shared a similar flexibility of gender roles. While Day and Tillett's evidence comes mainly from ethnographic analogies, their insights stress the historical fluidity of gender roles.

Although many of the figurines can be sexed male or female because of the presence or absence of male genitalia or female breasts, both sexes are similar in stance and



Figure 4.5. Ceramic figurine showing individual wearing a hat. Colección Museo Nacional de Costa Rica, San José. No. 4203. Photograph by Thomas Preston-Werner.

costume. Some are androgynous; the small breasts or nipples could be interpreted as belonging to either females or males. In addition, a figure holding a child is not necessarily a female.

Perhaps the most striking similarity among nearly all of the figurines is the presence of a hat atop the figures' heads (Figure 4.5). The hat is worn by both male and female figures and may have been part of the shaman's costume. The hats are not uniform; some are slightly rounded on top and some of the figurines have openings in the tops of their hats, showing their hollow insides. A large majority of the hats are flat, though some are tall and others are shorter. In addition to hats, most of the figures wear ear spools, and some wear ocarinas around their necks. Though not every figurine displays a hat, figurines bearing hats have been discovered in all three regions of Costa Rica, as far south as the Diquis Valley (Fernández Esquivel 2006:16).

Why are Costa Rican figurines difficult to sex and why, when sex can be determined, are both male and female bodies dressed alike and positioned similarly? Researchers often try to interpret the figurines as texts using their own contemporary gender ideologies, thus creating a potential for misinterpretation on the part of contemporary viewers. They may be unable to see differences in sex because they do not possess the intimate cultural knowledge of gender performance that existed when these figurines were produced. Although little has been written about the Costa Rican ceramic figurines, the texts that do document the figurines often overemphasize figurines that the investigator has interpreted to be female on the basis of genitalia and body positioning while ignoring potential male counterparts. Likewise, the male figurines are often described as engaged in high-status ritual-based activities, while the female figurines (which are in the same positions and wearing the same costumes) are described only as standing or holding items (Joyce 1993). For example, one of the most comprehensive books of Costa Rican art (Snarskis 1981a) contains an annotated catalog of artifacts. Many of the figurines are not sexually ambiguous, because they have clearly defined male or female sexual organs. In the brief artifact descriptions, Snarskis suggests the sexual receptivity of female figurines that are shown kneeling with their legs open, but he does not describe male sexual organs when they are present. The ambiguity of the figurines' genders could also signify intentionality on the part of the makers. Perhaps the makers of these figurines intentionally did not emphasize the genders of the figures. If this were the case, then why might this be so?

If the Costa Rican figurines belonged to members of a social elite, as the Las Huacas Burial 8 suggests, then perhaps gender was obscured intentionally in elite representational media. Joyce (2001) notes both an absence of "overt sexual characteristics" and the existence of commonalities in costume, regardless of gender, in monumental representations among the Classic Maya. She suggests that the lack of emphasis on gender in public art created a "unified noble identity" (Joyce 2001:82). This came at the expense of recognizing the unique contributions provided by men and women. Joyce compares monumental, public art to private, household figurines, which depict Classic Maya women's important productive contributions. She suggests that these figurines demonstrate the means by which women in non-ruling households gained authority and status.

Although the Costa Rican figurines lack the contextual data necessary to distinguish between public and private use, parallels between Costa Rican and Classic Maya representational strategies are clear. On the one hand, for many of the examples, determining sex is difficult. On the other hand, where sex is clear, both men and women are depicted

engaged in similar practices. Elites may have subsumed gender under class for the purposes of constructing and maintaining a social hierarchy and, as with the Classic Maya, this representational practice may have constituted a political strategy of centralization (Joyce 2001:88). The evidence provided by the numerous ceramic figurines suggests that both men and women were members of the elite class who could have utilized the elaborate metates for ritual purposes. To maintain the social hierarchy, elite ancient Costa Ricans in the Guanacaste-Nicoya Zone played down the distinction between men and women; status was of primary consequence.

Despite the androgynous state of many of the figurines, a good number do display female body parts, establishing the inclusion of women in the elite sphere. Regarding the ancient Costa Rican figurines, Patricia Fernández Esquivel writes:

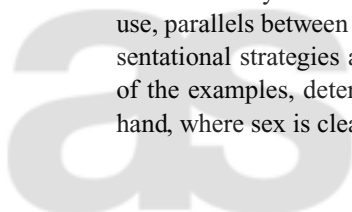
The identification of various degrees of differentiation and social hierarchy that characterized the societies which produced female figures, suggests the possibility that there existed positions of prestige assigned to women that were similar to those held by men, positions that extended to the political and ceremonial realms. This possibility was materially represented by female figures that were produced in ceramic, figures whose posture, attitude, and body decorations all suggest the attributes of power which are associated with these personages. [Fernández Esquivel 2006:18]

Fernández Esquivel (2006:21) further writes that women holding positions as high as chieftess have been documented in the historical writings of the Spanish conquistadors.

It remains to be understood how the ceramic figurines correlated to the lived social realities of ancient Costa Ricans. Whether public or private, elite representational art is just that, a depiction of high-status individuals. Whether gender was as unimportant in the daily lives of ancient Costa Ricans as the figurines suggest is unclear. Regarding the female figurines, Lange notes that controlled contexts are rare and that their mortuary nature is presumed; she also writes, "they are assumed to represent real persons, as each of the known examples is different" (Lange 1992:120–121). If the figurines were representations of real individuals, who had different appearances and body types, then the obscuring of their respective genders seems all the more strategic.

Conclusions

Ultimately, the purpose of this study has been to break down binaries that essentialize and homogenize historical variability. Researchers have applied such binaries to data from ancient Costa Rica suggesting they demonstrate that



women were only associated with domestic labor and utilitarian metates, while men were connected to ritual and elaborate metates. As interpreters of culture, we must be wary not to map our own material and social categories onto other societies, as occurred in the semantic linking of utilitarian and elaborate metates and the gendering of work responsibilities. To interpret the role that these metates played in ancient Costa Rican society, researchers have relied on ethnocentric and androcentric assumptions regarding gender ideology and gender roles instead of seeking out material data to support their arguments. Graham (1992) writes that women's tools inspired men's art. It is quite interesting that another form of art—ceramic figurines—has provided the evidence that begins to complicate these tool/art, utilitarian/elaborate, female/male binaries. Women and men did not necessarily inhabit separate spheres. These figurines demonstrate women's connection to elaborate metates and ritual. They also show the flexibility of gender and, perhaps of more importance, the trivialization of gender roles for ulterior political purposes within at least one ancient society in Costa Rica.

Acknowledgments

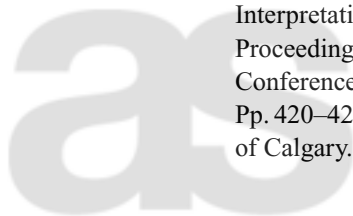
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