

The Archaeology of Death on the Shore of Lake Nicaragua

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ABSTRACT. *Multiple mortuary patterns were observed at the site of El Rayo (N-GR-39) dating to the Sapoa period (A.D. 800–1200) at three loci excavated during the 2009 field season. The site is located on a peninsula on Lake Nicaragua by the colonial city of Granada. The focus of this paper will examine three styles of secondary burials seen at El Rayo including a concentration of 12 urns, a mass burial area and burials without urns. Implications of the observed variation of secondary burial styles will be discussed.*

Archaeologically speaking, Nicaragua is one of the most poorly documented countries in Central America. In this paper we will examine the burial practices at the site of El Rayo (N-GR-39) to identify materials found in the various burials present and discern differences between deposits. This information will provide a basis for comparison for future discussions of the mortuary patterns seen throughout Nicaragua. Since mortuary patterns are among the best information available on past ideological practices, they also provide a unique perspective on cultural identities.

The pre-Columbian history of Pacific Nicaragua is difficult to interpret for a few reasons: few academic archaeological projects have been conducted in the country; conflicting information exists between ethnohistorical sources such as Oviedo (1959; cf. Squier 1990) and archaeological evidence (McCafferty 2008); and few scholars have published their work limiting the data available to other scholars and the public in general. In 2000, Geoffrey McCafferty (2008) initiated a project at Santa Isabel, Nicaragua with a primary goal of evaluating the ethnohistorically described connection between Mesoamerica and Nicaragua. This project now includes the largest collection of archaeologically excavated material from Pacific Nicaragua and has provided information regarding site formation processes, community organization, subsistence practices, and mortuary practices. This project has also challenged the chronology by obtaining numerous radiocarbon dates from stratified residential contexts (McCafferty and Steinbrenner 2005).

Much of the information regarding artifacts associated with burials relates to looted collections, essentially eliminating any contextual contributions to the archaeological record. A notable exception is the major cemetery of Los Angeles on Ometepe Island which uncovered 54 primary burials in individual graves excavated in a 75 square meter area and date to 1000–1200 A.D. (Haberland 1992:92). Burial goods were rare at this site, but included weaving tools, personal adornments, a celt, and 20 ceramic vessels, including 14 small ollas and two miniature shoe pots,

associated with 17 of the burials (Haberland 1992:96). Also encountered were large shoe-shaped vessels used in secondary burials, where the individual was either defleshed or allowed to decompose then placed into the vessel. Often the shoe-pot was then covered by an inverted bowl (Haberland 1992:96). Primary and secondary burials were also found at Santa Isabel, with urn burials being used for children under the age of nine (Chilcote and McCafferty 2005). Extended primary burials of both adults and children from Santa Isabel featured offerings of greenstone chunks, bone tools, a miniature vessel, and turtle carapace, while the urn burials lacked such offerings (Chilcote and McCafferty 2005). Other urn burials have been reported at Malacatoya (Espinoza et al. 1999), a cemetery in the modern city of Managua, and University of Calgary excavations at excavations conducted in 2008 at Tepetate (McCafferty et al. 2009).

Burial practices provide important information regarding past societies. In this paper two avenues of information will be examined: first the presence, type and quality of elite objects and value goods and second the position of the burials on the landscape. By considering these aspects of burial practices we can examine social inequalities based on these differences.

The site of El Rayo is located on the Asepe Peninsula of Lake Nicaragua and has been dated to the Bagaces (A.D. 300–800) and Sapoa (A.D. 800–1200) periods based on the ceramic assemblage and several C14 dates (McCafferty et al. 2009). Excavations took place during July and August of 2009 at three loci as part of a three year project of the University of Calgary, with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Secondary burials were seen in major concentrations at two areas of the site. In addition, two primary burials were recovered from the domestic area of the site. These concentrations contained human remains as well as artifacts previously associated with mortuary practices. The most important of these include the Sacasa Striated shoe pots (an elongated asymmetrical vessel shaped like a shoe), which contain human remains as part of a secondary burial. Sacasa Striated vessels are seen in a limited area generally concentrated within Pacific Nicaragua. This burial pattern appears to be an innovation beginning at the transition between Bagaces and Sapoa time periods and continues until the Spanish contact. Area 1 appears to be a mass burial area, with a minimum of four clusters of shoe pots. Each cluster contained multiple shoe pot urns as well as other offering vessels and a variety of other luxury artifacts including beads, chert lance-points or knife blades, and miniature vessels. Area 2 found two nearly complete primary burials within the Bagaces component of the domestic occupation. Area 3a contained multiple deposits of non-articulated human remains. These remains are not associated with Sacasa Striated vessels, as seen at Area 1 and or Area 3b. Instead we see smaller vessels associated with the remains as well as clustered offerings of prestige goods. Area 3b is the most clearly defined feature excavated at the site as it was dug into the *talpetate*, a type of hard sedimentary rock with a high ash content. The feature contained 18 complete vessels, of which 12 were Sacasa Striated shoe pots. Three of the shoe pots were excavated to provide a sample for comparison with the shoe pots excavated at Area 1.

Area 1

Area 1 was identified based on the presence of human remains and artifacts eroding from a road-cut leading to the lake edge. Informants told us that when the road was constructed numerous

complete ceramic vessels and other artifacts were found. This suggests that the excavated area represents only a small part of a much larger burial ground. Within the road cut partial Sacasa Striated vessels were visible, sometimes containing human teeth and other skeletal remains.

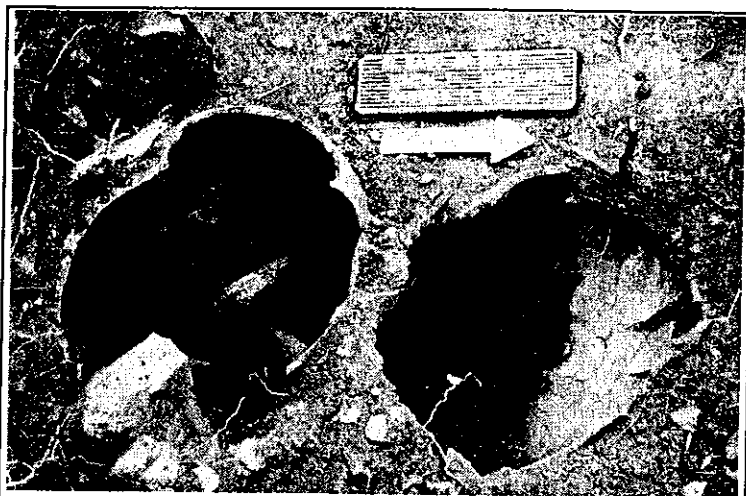


Figure 1. Area 1 Cluster 1, El Rayo. Large volcanic rock located within the rim of a small vessel within a fragmented Sacasa Striated shoe pot. Photo by author.

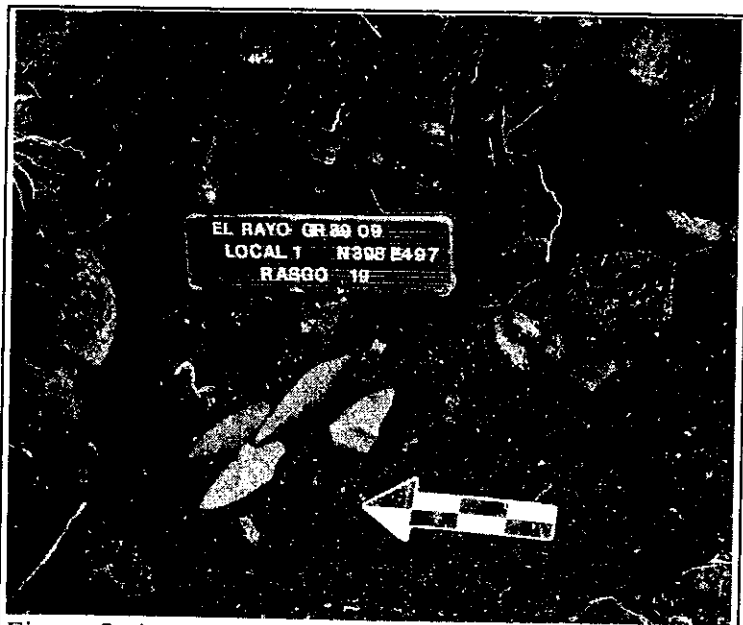


Figure 2. Area 1 Cluster 2, El Rayo. Cache of luxury goods associated with human remains. Photo by author.

A surprising trend from the urns at Area 1 was seen in the contents of the vessels. Expecting to find human remains, personal adornments and offerings, we were surprised to find few human remains and almost no adornments within the vessels. The most common artifacts found were smaller vessels which were placed within the shoe pot at the time of deposition. The Sacasa Striated vessels often appeared to be lined with broken pottery and contained large volcanic rocks, numbering anywhere from twenty to fifty within a vessel. While the shoe pots contained few luxury goods or human remains, both were recovered from the areas surrounding the shoe pots. Generally lithic and faunal materials were lacking from Area 1, especially when compared to the domestic area excavated at Area 2, while ceramics were abundant in all areas.

The first cluster to be discussed consisted of three shoe pots (one being a miniature), one of which contained a bowl (Figure 1), and a small olla with a face on it. The position of the vessels, with the large shoe pots touching and the miniature located between them, suggests that there was a connection between the burials. A small broken bowl was found upside down over the mouth of

the miniature. Bowls have previously been found placed inverted over the mouth of shoe pot vessels presumably as a means of sealing the vessel and its contents (Chilcote and McCafferty 2005, McCafferty 2008). A fragmented bowl was also found covering the mouth of one of the large shoe pots, which kept the vessel partially empty of dirt. This find shows that the shoe pot vessels were not completely filled with earth prior to being deposited. Also associated with these

shoe pots was a unique ear spool and a concave oval ceramic pendant with a raised line across the widest point.

The second cluster contained four Sacasa Striated urns, a large globular olla, human remains, and a cache of prestige goods. The cache consisted of four finely-worked lithic points or knife blades, two large ear spools, and a basalt core (Figure 2). Associated with this cache was a human cranium as well as one-hundred and forty-one ceramic beads. The beads were found in three levels below a small bowl on its side; likely the original receptacle of these prestige goods. Other human remains were recovered from these units but were not in close association with this cache. Thirty-five complete ceramic net sinkers were found with this cluster. This is an unusually high concentration when compared to the rest of the area and suggests that a fishing net may have been included in the burial offerings.



Figure 3. Area 1 Cluster 3, El Rayo. Multiple shoe pot vessels recovered in an "onion-style" deposit. Photo by Author.

The third cluster uncovered eight to ten Sacasa Striated vessels, including an "onion-style" grouping, in which urns are located directly on top of one another. This type of burial concentration was also seen at the Tepetate cemetery. The nature of the onion-style deposit makes it difficult to clearly distinguish one complete vessel from another (Figure 3). Inside the onion-style vessel was a smaller complete hemispherical bowl. This "onion style" grouping was separated from another shoe pot by two large rocks. This shoe pot contained a

small monochrome vessel in multiple pieces. Outside this pot was a complete hunchback figurine (Figure 4) often referred to as a shaman figurine.

The fourth cluster was an incredibly complex deposit spanning three units and reaching depths of 150 centimeters without reaching sterile soil. This deposit included multiple Sacasa Striated shoe pots along with a variety of other offering vessels. Prestige goods such as pendants, earspools, and complete lithic tools were recovered from around the vessels as well as elaborate support fragments, appliqué, figurine fragments and bone tools. Human remains were rare, and when found, were generally in very poor condition.



Figure 4. Area 1 Cluster 3, El Rayo. Upside down Hunchback figurine in situ. Photo by author.



Figure 5. Area 1 Bottom of Cluster 4, El Rayo. Multiple sets of human remains, mano located on top of a long bone. Photo by author.

Excavations ended at this location with multiple crania and the articulated long bones of at least two individuals. Artifacts associated with these individuals included a spindle whorl, three small vessels, and a mano, used with a metate (Figure 5). These deep remains date to the late Bagaces period based on the ceramics found at this level.

A caveat must be given regarding the compacted clusters of finds recorded here. The nature of our excavation strategy has resulted in the appearance of these four clusters of burials, however, based on the information received about the construction of the road it is safe to infer that the areas left unexcavated would also contain burials in similar concentrations, strongly suggesting this locus is a mass cemetery, clearly used, continuously or intermittently, for hundreds of years.

Area 2

Area 2 consists of what appears to be primarily domestic context, characterized by complete vessels, abundant faunal remains consistent with day-to-day subsistence, and traces of stone architecture (most likely wall foundations). Remains of at least three individuals were found at Area 2; one complete skeleton was found in roughly a fetal position, while another complete skeleton was found in a supine posture (Figure 6). The third individual was represented only by a relatively robust and extremely well preserved mandible, with most teeth in place. Considering the rest of the skeleton was absent, it is probably fair to assume that the lone mandible was either an example of jewelry (though no holes were drilled), or curated by descendants as a means of ancestor veneration. Both complete skeletons were found in deep

strata, in association with late-Bagaces-period ceramics, while the lone mandible was found roughly 20 centimetres higher, in a transitional Bagaces-Sapoa layer.



Figure 6. Area 2, El Rayo. Primary burial of elderly female. Photo by author.

Though we do have examples of primary burials from Sapoa contexts at El Rayo and elsewhere, the vast majority of the human remains observed from this period at El Rayo were in at least a secondary (if not tertiary) context. Also noteworthy about the two complete interments at Area 2 is that they are the only burials with a clear-cut ceramic association, putting them solidly in the Bagaces period.

Area 3

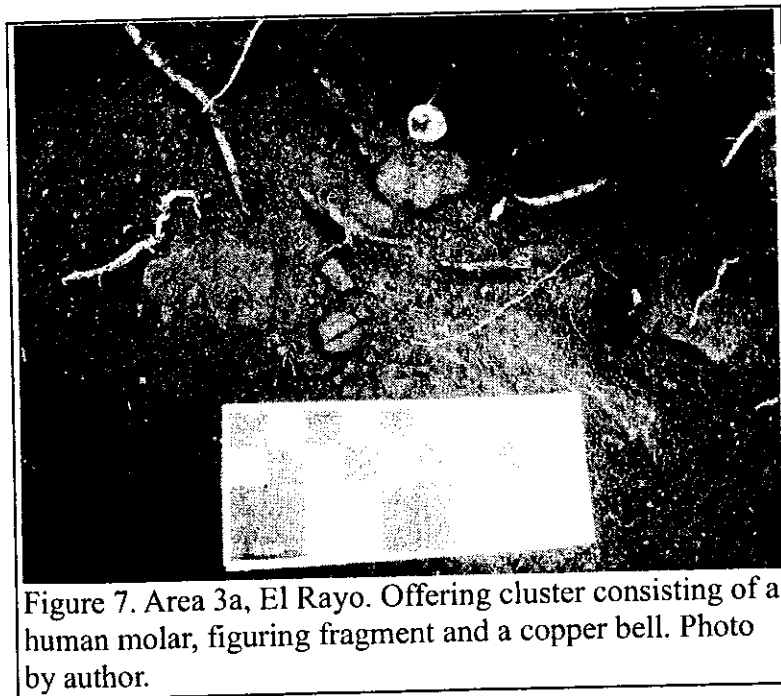


Figure 7. Area 3a, El Rayo. Offering cluster consisting of a human molar, figuring fragment and a copper bell. Photo by author.

Area 3a has a pattern substantially different from Area 1 in that no complete Sacasa Striated vessels were found in association with the secondary burials. Complete vessels were found in the uppermost and lowest levels of the excavation pit. A significant offering was found with three components. The first consisted of a miniature bowl covered with an inverted cup. The second included a human molar, a ceramic foot of a bird figurine, and most importantly, a copper bell (Figure 7). The third component was a complete bowl. This copper bell is the first one to be found in Nicaragua in an archaeological context. Bells are more commonly

seen on the Atlantic Coast as a possible trade item from Oaxaca, Mexico where they are seen as early as A.D. 800. A nearly complete vessel was removed from this area above these offerings, but it was severely fragmented.

One of the most exciting finds of the summer came from this operation. An ocarina (a musical instrument similar to a whistle or flute) was found in association with a jaguar tooth pendant, both of which were located directly above scattered human long bones. This ocarina is in the



Figure 8. Area 3b, El Rayo. Ten excavation units uncovering 18 complete vessels and fragmented human remains. Photo by author.

shape of a water bird, identified specifically as a frigate bird (Patricia Fernandez, personal communication 2009).

The most structured burial deposit from El Rayo was also recovered from Area 3. It consisted of 18 complete vessels which were placed into a trench dug out of the *Talpetate* and occurred in mainly a north-south orientation (Figure 8). Human remains were found to the west and east of the line of vessels, as well as on either side of the southernmost vessel.

Three of the vessels were excavated to provide a comparative collection to the Area 1 shoe pots. Within each of the vessels was a single significant artifact identifiable as an offering. Vessel 1 contained a chert lance point or knife blade similar in style to the ones found at Area 1. Vessel 8 contained a large fragment of a short, tripod basalt grinding stone. The last vessel excavated was Vessel 17 and it contained bone weaving tools.

At least two periods of deposition occurred to bring this feature to its completion. In the first depositional event the trench would have

been dug to encompass the extent of the shoe pots along with the human remains. A second deposition occurred at which time Vessel 8 was added, because Vessel 8 straddles Vessels 7 and 10, both of which are severely fractured. Vessel 15 may have also been added at this time, due to the unique proximity to human remains, which appear approximately half way down the outside of the vessel and appears to have been disturbed with the addition of the shoe pot. Vessel 15 is also the only vessel with its toe facing north; all other shoe pots face south.

Discussion

Major differences need to be noted in the general artifact assemblage between the secondary burial areas and the domestic area seen at El Rayo. While the domestic area assemblage recovered thousands of lithic and faunal remains, almost none were seen at the secondary burial areas. This suggests these areas were specifically reserved for burial use and occurred apart from the domestic space. While the types of ceramic artifacts were similar throughout all loci at El Rayo, burial Areas 1 and 3 contain more atypical ceramics than the domestic Area 2 (Carrie Dennett, personal communication 2009).

Both secondary burial areas occurred in close proximity to the lakeshore with Area 1 located within 100 metres of the shore and Area 3 on a hilltop that overlooks the water. While it is undoubted that these places were not chosen at random, currently we are not confident in hypothesizing possible reasons for their location. The locations of other organized cemeteries such as Los Angeles, Malacatoya, and La Chureca (currently being excavated in Managua, Nicaragua) are also located within sight of lake shores, suggesting that the water held some importance.

The burials at Area 1 appear to be part of a mass cemetery used by various people within the society based on the differences in the types of offerings seen at the different clusters as well as the quality of the goods present. Cluster 1 seems simple with its two miniature vessels when compared to the dozen vessels recovered from Cluster 4. The offering of lithic tools, ear spools, and beads at Cluster 2 overshadows the hunchback figurine found at Cluster 3. The difference between offerings of multiple vessels and one hundred and forty one beads also needs to be considered important. The differences in the types of artifacts recovered with the burials suggest differential access to luxury goods. This can be interpreted as representing a range within a stratified society.

The proximity of the shoe pots in Cluster 1 implies a connection between the offerings. This connection was likely familial but could have also been social or religious in nature. Unfortunately no clues to this relationship were uncovered in the excavation; however, the variety seen between the clusters suggests a more significant connection here. In Clusters 3 and 4 we see the reusing of the exact same place for deposit of offerings and burials. The once complete vessels were shattered as additions were made to the deposit, making the disturbance of these previous offerings unimportant. This could reflect the use of the area by different groups of people who were unconcerned with what others had left before them, but more likely, these were the same people who were using this exact place because it held significance to them. This connection to the land is similar to what is being suggested for the Area 2 primary burials.

The presence of deep deposits in Cluster 4 suggests that this area was an important cemetery stretching across both the Bagaces and Sapoá time periods, reflecting some continuity through the changes that are seen elsewhere in the archaeological record at this time. While the same area was being used over a long period of time notable differences were seen in the burial goods and style of burials suggesting this location was used by a large group of people who held a variety of positions within the society.

While this paper has focused on the secondary burials seen at El Rayo, the two primary burials show differential treatment of the individual. The pattern of burials at Area 2 is consistent with the observed patterns from Mesoamerican cultures at varying degrees of social complexity. The presence of ancestors "underfoot" in a domestic context may have served to legitimize land claims, or simply deepen the connection of a family to their place in the world. In contrast to the cemetery contexts seen as the other two Areas, the isolated individual interments suggest a personal connection to the deceased, rather than a more anonymous community connection to the ancestors in general.

The lack of shoe pots at Area 3a suggests an alternative ritual practice for the secondary burial of individuals. The presence of more exotic offerings (the copper bell and the cup-shaped vessel) along with an alternative deposition of human remains may suggest the elevated standing of these individuals over those using shoe pot burials at El Rayo.

The shallow deposit of shoe pots found at Area 3b is by far the most organized and structured deposit found at El Rayo, likely due to its synchronic deposition. We are suggesting this area represents a "private" burial of socially linked equals, due to the contemporaneous nature of the deposit and the equality seen among the excavated shoe pots. This area lacks the extensive difference in goods seen at Area 1, and instead, shows continuity in the quality and quantity of items recovered. Three small bowls were recovered near the center of this grouping and if the vessels were being used as the primary offering, they may represent a collective contribution. Scattered human remains were found on either side of the line of shoe pots forming some symmetry within the deposit.

Conclusion

The three loci excavated at El Rayo (N-GR-39), Nicaragua in 2009 were identified as two burial areas and one domestic occupation area. In this paper we have focused on the secondary burial areas which show three distinct burial practices. Area 1 appears to be a mass cemetery that covers an expansive area and was used over a long period of time (spanning the Bagaces and Sapoa time periods). Area 3 is comprised of smaller burial areas with Area 3a lacking Sacasa Striated vessels but with the presence of foreign objects (the copper bell and the cup-shaped vessel). The delimited burials of Area 3b likely represent a private burial deposit of a socially linked group.

The different burial patterns seen at each of the four areas discussed point to significant variation between the two time periods discussed, and also likely, within different elements of society at El Rayo during the Sapoa period. Whether the shift to more public burial practices and richer grave goods indicates increasing social complexity through time remains to be definitively shown, however, obvious trade goods such as jadeite and obsidian do occur in higher quantities in Sapoa contexts. We suggest that the shifting burial patterns reflect a changing face of the demographics of Pacific Nicaragua during the Sapoa period, characterized by increased contact with other groups, both near and far, and likely, at least some degree of population intermixing.

We do not yet have enough information to speculate what the differences in the types of goods associated with the different burials may have reflected in the lives of the people interred. Does the presence of a shaman figurine mean that shoe pot represents a shaman? Do lance points point to a warrior? Does elaborate and foreign pottery indicate a trader? At this point we can only speculate. It is important to note these differences and continue collecting the information that will one day allow us to make those interpretations.

The excavations discussed here are important for the study of Nicaraguan prehistory. Unique finds were made without precedence from other excavations in the country. Other artifacts such as the copper bell, ocarina, and the cup-shaped vessel are previously unpublished and mostly from looted collections. Further study must occur in Nicaragua to clarify, support, or contradict

our interpretations from the El Rayo site in order to further explain the diversity of burial patterns displayed in a single site, over a relatively short time period.

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