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THE STONE STATUES OF NICARAGUA

By S. K. LOTHROP

ARCHAEOLOGISTS have known for many years that large stone statues are found in the region of the great lakes of Nicaragua. However, as yet no serious study of the problems raised by these figures has been made, and I therefore propose to discuss a few points in connection with them.

In height the statues range from three to twelve feet, and the subject is invariably a human being, usually male, and often shown in conjunction with an animal figure. The types of particular interest are as follows:

- I. A human figure, to the back and shoulders of which clings an animal (fig. 67, d).
- II. A human figure bearing on its head the head of an animal (fig. 67, b).
- III. A human figure shown in conjunction with an animal or an animal head, within the jaws of which appears the human head (fig. 67, c). Sometimes the animal head of this type is partially conventionalized (fig. 67, a).

These three types form a unit series in which certain changes take place. Thus, starting with a complete animal figure carried on the back of the man, we end up with the human head within the animal jaws. This series is obviously connected with a conception common among the ancient Mexicans and Maya, but it is distinguished from the Mexican and Mayan treatment in that the Nicaraguan body is always human, even when the head is enclosed in animal jaws, while the Mexican and Mayan body is characteristically an animal, within the jaws of which appears a human head.

In addition to the above types there are:

- IV. A human figure seated on the top of a tall column.

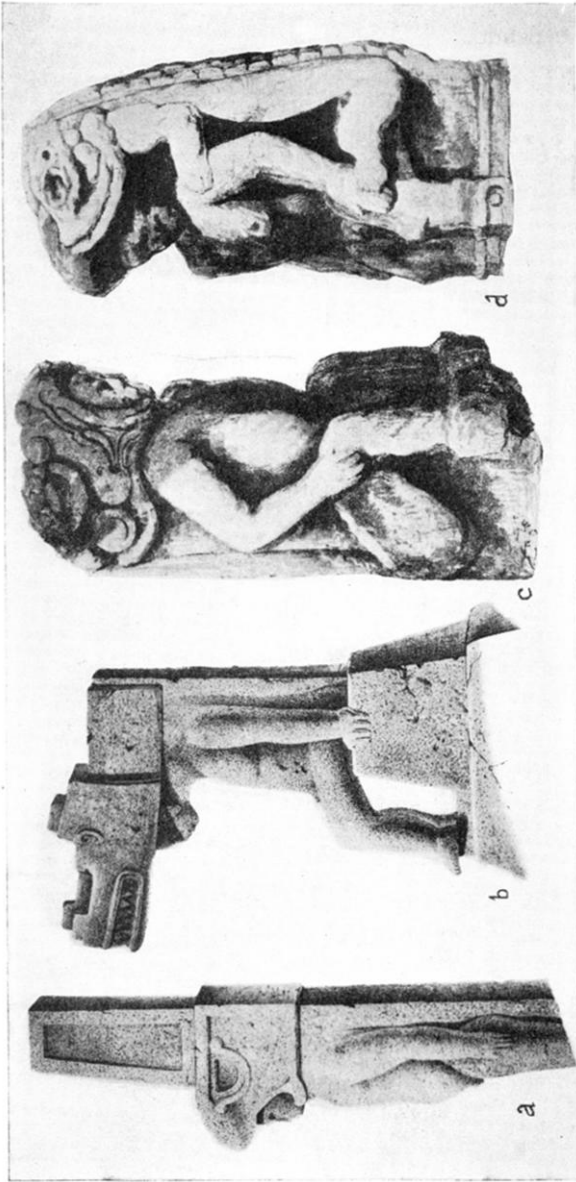


FIG. 67.—Types of Nicaraguan stone statues.

V. A human figure with a large gorget held in the hand or suspended from the neck.

VI. A human figure with the arms folded across the chest.

VII. Stone columns with pictographs.

In distribution these statues come into direct contact with the Maya area. Dr. Gordon discovered in the Uloa Valley a rather crude sculpture (figure 68, a) which is comparable to a figure discovered by Squier on Zapatero Island in Lake Nicaragua (fig. 68, b).

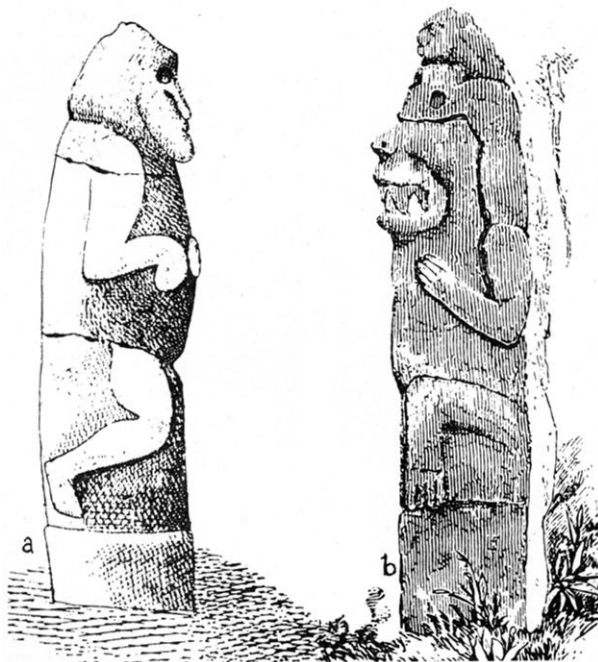


FIG. 68.—A stone statue (a) from the Uloa Valley Honduras, compared with a figure (b) found on Zapatero Island, Nicaragua.

Seler found near Comitan, a town in southwestern Mexico, a statue (fig. 69, a) stylistically very close to one of the Nicaraguan types (fig. 69, b and c). This form, the fourth of our classificatory system, represents a man seated on the top of a tall column. The capital of this column is round while the shaft is usually square.

A third pair of statues of greater significance is seen in figure 70. The standing figure (a) was found on Zapatero Island and is en-

tirely typical of that region. A seated figure (b) was found by the writer at La Florida, a town some sixty miles from the great Maya city of Copan and itself surrounded by ruins of Maya type. The La Florida sculpture bears on its back a small animal figure, which, we have seen, is a Nicaraguan feature and is not characteristic of Mayan art.

While the La Florida figure belongs in the same group with what we have called the Nicaraguan figures, it also is stylistically

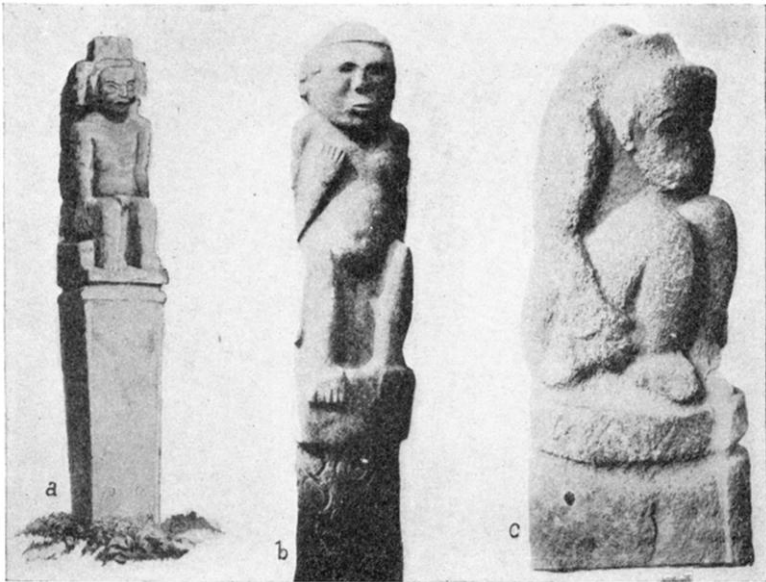


FIG. 69.—A stone statue from southwestern Mexico (a) compared with statues of Nicaraguan type (b, c).

affiliated with a group of crude sculptures found principally in the highlands of Guatemala (fig. 70, c), which are probably a local development of the Nicaraguan type. The method of representing the hands and arms as well as their position on the body indicate stylistic affiliation, and, furthermore, similar subjects, among which should be mentioned crude figures with a plate or disk held on the belly, are represented all the way from Guatemala to Costa Rica. This, perhaps, is the germ of the idea which later developed into the reclining human figure type commonly called the Chac Mool,

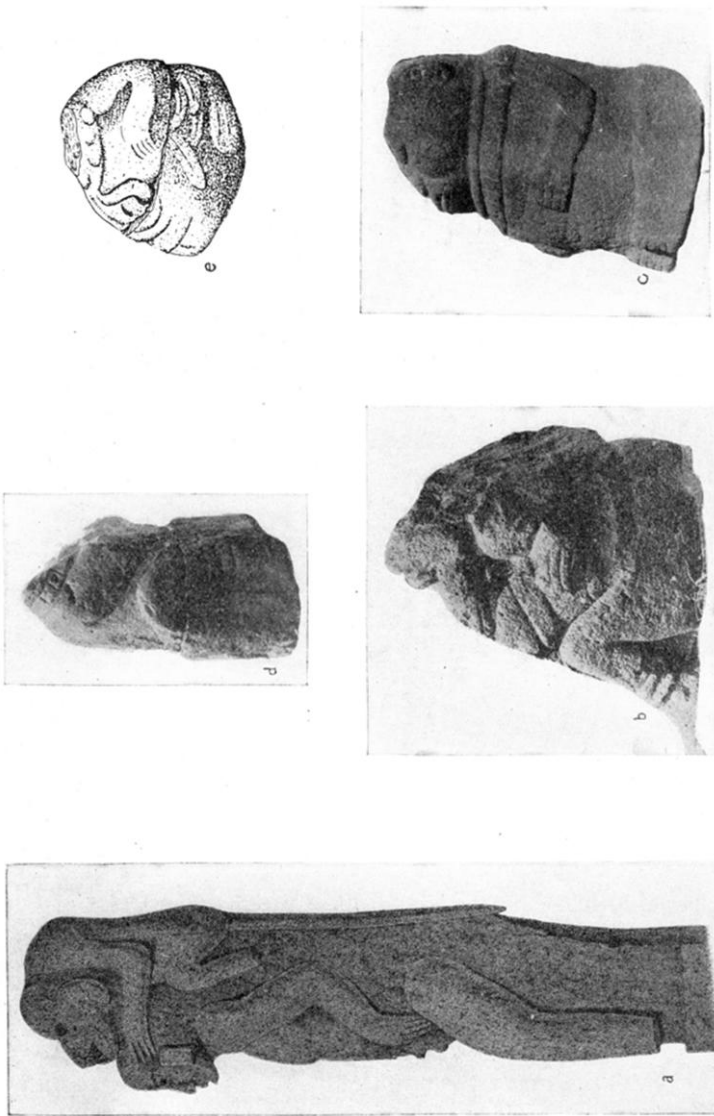


FIG. 70.—Sculptures of Nicaraguan type: (a) Standing figure, Zapatero Island, Nicaragua; (b) Seated figure from La Florida, about sixty miles from Copan, Honduras; (c) Crude sculpture from the highlands of Guatemala; (d, e) Statues of the Guatemalan sub-type from the ruins of Copan.

now proved to have been evolved as early as the Maya Great Period (sixth century A.D.) by its discovery by Prof. M. H. Saville at the ruins of Quirigua.

Two statues of the Guatemalan sub-type (fig. 70, d and e) have been found at the ruins of Copan, where they had been built into the foundations of stelae 5 and 4 which are dated 9.14.0.0.0 and 9.17.12.13.0 in the Mayan system or 452 and 523 A.D. From this we may safely infer that these two monuments, and indeed the whole group under discussion, are comparatively early, and that their makers occupied the Copan region before the arrival of the Maya.

The small jade figure known as the Tuxtla statuette (fig. 71, a) bears the date corresponding to 96 B.C. Mr. S. G. Morley, on the evidence of the glyphs themselves, believes that this date is contemporary. It is therefore the earliest date yet known on the American continent which is not of obviously legendary character. It has been recognized that the Tuxtla statuette did not accord stylistically with other Mayan remains of any period whatsoever. However, it can be connected with two large stone figures from the Nicaraguan area (fig. 71, b and c) and with certain jade pendants from the nearby peninsula of Nicoya. The distinguishing characteristic of the Tuxtla statuette is the appendage which covers the mouth, which may be a beard but more probably represents the bill of a bird. The two Nicaraguan statues here represented are marked by the presence of objects on the lower part of the face which I feel confident are intended to represent the bill of a bird, for when we examine the jade pendants from Nicoya (fig. 72) we find forms almost identical with those of the statues, the evolution of which into bird types can be definitely traced. It is also of interest to note that in the Nicoya jades we can trace the transformation of this bird type into forms which are well known in South America in the early Peruvian cultures.

The question who made these statues now arises. On artistic grounds our search can at once be limited to three peoples, the Maya, Nahua, and Chorotega, and I believe that they may be definitely ascribed to the Chorotega for the following reasons:

I. The majority of the statues are in territory not known to have been occupied by anybody but Chorotega, while all the statues occur within the extreme limits of this stock, i.e. between the State of Chiapas in Mexico and northwestern Costa Rica.



FIG. 71.—The Tuxtla statuette (a) compared with two large stone figures from the Nicaraguan area (b, c).

II. We may eliminate the Maya, because it is certain that they never came to Costa Rica and Nicaragua. From archaeological remains it seems that Maya art once dominated Salvador, and certain Mayan motives appear on Costa Rican and Nicaraguan pottery, but, in the words of Dr. Spinden, these designs are “carried so far from the original that only an expert can see the connections.”

III. The Nahua came to Nicaragua at a comparatively late period—probably in the early part of the fifteenth century—and surely never occupied more territory than at the time of the conquest. They certainly did not settle near La Florida and in the Uloa Valley, so they could not well have been the makers of the statues.

IV. While the statues are not Maya or Mexican in style, yet they are related to ceramic and jade remains from Nicaragua and Costa Rica which are universally ascribed to the Chorotega.

A word must now be said about the Chorotega. At the time of the Spanish conquest they were divided into four geographical groups consisting of: (1) the Chiapanecs in Chiapas, or southwestern Mexico, (2) the Choluteca in the Honduran Department of Choluteca, (3) the Mangué in the region between Leon, Managua, and the Pacific in Nicaragua, and (4) the Orotiñans in northwestern Costa Rica. Their language bears relationship to that of no other people, although at one time Brinton thought that it might be a branch of the Aymara tongue of Peru. The Chiapanec possessed a legend that they had come from Nicaragua, while all the Spanish historians of Nicaragua agree that the Chorotega were the "ancient and indigenous" inhabitants of that land.

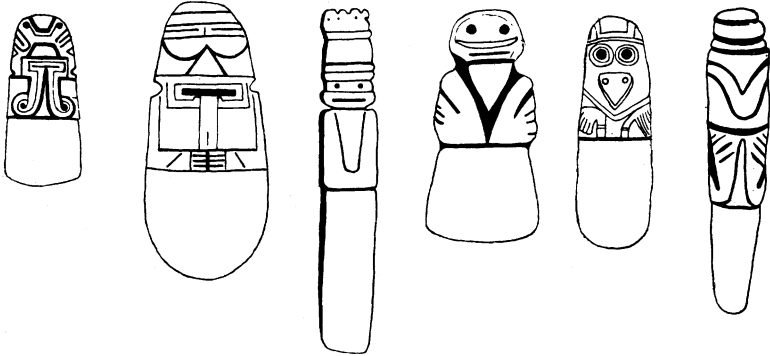


FIG. 72.—Jade pendants from Nicoya.

With this information before us, we are now prepared to advance certain hypotheses as to the movements of population in Middle America:

I. The Chorotega, who on archaeological grounds show relationship with South America, probably moved from that continent into Central America in very early times. Archaeological remains show that they occupied, at one time or another, the highlands of Chiapas and Guatemala, the eastern and northern portions of Honduras, the central and western parts of Nicaragua, and the northwestern corner of Costa Rica.

II. The Maya, who probably came originally from the district to the south of Vera Cruz, in the centuries immediately preceding the Christian era occupied the region of the Peten in northern

Guatemala. At the beginning of the first century A.D. they expanded to the southeast, and settled in the Copan-Quirigua-Uloa Valley region, driving out the previous inhabitants, who were Chorotega.

III. In the sixth and seventh centuries A.D. the Maya civilization was uprooted, probably through the failure of agriculture, and the population moved into Yucatan and the highlands of Guatemala. In the latter region they again encountered and drove out Chorotegan tribes, of which the remnants today are the Chiapanecs and Mazatecs.

IV. Various tribes of which we have not spoken, the Lenca, Xicaque, Ulva, etc., are almost certainly of South American origin and perhaps speak a South American language. They appear to have moved northward in the wake of the Chorotega, whom they drove out of Honduras and central Nicaragua.

V. A third migratory wave from South America consisted of such Chibchan tribes as the Corobici, Guetar, and Talamanca. At the time of the Spanish conquest the Corobici and Guetar had come into contact with the Chorotega of Costa Rica, and were rapidly exterminating them.

VI. Nahua tribes started to work down the west coast of Central America in comparatively early times, yet no group of this people passed the Lempa River in Salvador until the beginning of the fifteenth century. At that time, however, the Nicaraos entered Nicaragua and displaced the Chorotegan tribes occupying the Isthmus of Rivas, the narrow strip of land which separates the Lake of Nicaragua from the Pacific.

The hypotheses which have been advanced above rest on a complex of facts, for which as yet no other explanation has been offered. The outstanding features to which attention is invited are: (1) that stone figures of several distinct types distributed from southern Mexico to Costa Rica apparently form a unified group; (2) that this group, in part at least, is very early, as is shown by the presence of these statues under the Copan altars and by their artistic connection with the Tuxtla Statuette; and (3) that one and only one race, the Chorotega, has ever occupied the full and exact limits of the region wherein these statues occur.