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UTILITARIAN LITHICS AS PRESTIGE ITEMS: A PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION OF
SOME LOWER CENTRAL AMERICAN MORTUARY PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

The distribution of ground stone celts at a number of prehistoric cemetery sites in Costa Rica and Panama is discussed. These artifacts consistently occur as offerings in the most elaborate and richest graves in the region and seem to be associated primarily with elite males. Some possible explanations for this pattern are suggested.

RESUMEN

Se discute la distribución de hachas pulidas en sitios mortuorios precolombinos en Costa Rica y Panamá. Hachas pulidas ocurren repetidamente en las tumbas más adornadas. Los individuos en estas tumbas más ornadas generalmente son masculinos, aparentemente de rango alto. Se presenta algunos posibles explicaciones para este patrón.

INTRODUCTION

Ground stone celts, often referred to as ungrooved axes, are ubiquitous in the archaeological record of the New World. These artifacts, most frequently made by chipping, pecking, grinding, and polishing igneous rocks, are generally associated with agricultural activities and are thought to have been important for clearing fields for planting. Numerous other functions have been determined for celts including use as adzes, intermediate tools, percussors, grinders, and wedges (Bernstein 1980a, 1980b; Ranere 1975, 1980).

While the study of the past uses of these artifacts and utilitarian lithics from lower Central America in general has made great strides in the past decade (see the numerous reports in Linares and Ranere, 1980 for recent advances), comparatively little attention has been paid to their role as significant items in mortuary rituals. Throughout the region, particularly during the last 700 years of the prehistoric period, ground stone celts appear as offerings in rich and elaborate graves. These interments frequently contain numerous articulated and/or disarticulated skeletons in association with one principal individual and are often among the more remarkable graves encountered in any particular cemetery complex.

This paper reviews the evidence for the importance of ground stone celts in the mortuary practices of a number of prehistoric Lower Central American peoples (Fig. 1). I have drawn on published materials from four areas: the Guanacaste-Nicoya, Atlantic Watershed, and Central Highland areas of Costa Rica, and Cocle in central Panama. Only burials for which complete, relatively unambiguous, and readily accessible published inventories are available have been included in this study. Many of these sites were excavated well over half a century ago and in some cases recording procedures were not up to today's standards. Rather than be restrained by this state of affairs I have decided to forge ahead even though the extant data base may be less than ideal. I have, for the most part, maintained the terminology used by the excavators of the sites discussed in this paper and have altered the format of their descriptions as little as possible.

Guanacaste-Nicoya

There are a number of accounts of ground stone celts appearing in mortuary contexts in Guanacaste. Burial I at Nacascolo (Wallace and Accola 1980), a spectacular interment dating to the Monte del Barco Phase (A.D. 1000-1200), contained, in addition to a utilized celt, twelve ceramic vessels, two shell bracelets, a copper bell, and an iron pyrite tablet (Table 1a). The principal individual is a middle-aged male, presumably of very high status (Snarskis 1981:36). In addition to the grave goods, the skeleton was accompanied by six crania and a large quantity of disarticulated bones. A neighboring grave at this site (Burial II) yielded two additional skulls, one showing substantial dental mutilation.

In contrast to this elaborate burial at Nacascolo, is the cemetery complex at La Guinea in the Tempisque Valley (Hoopes 1980). Here no celts were found and, in general, the interments are much less elaborate than those at Nacascolo (Table 1a). None of the

approximately 19 skeletons recovered at the site could be identified as an adult male and ceramics are, by far, the most common grave item.

The Bolson cemetery (Baudez 1967), also in the Tempisque drainage, is similar to La Guinea in that it lacks ground stone celts in its interments and that it contains relatively unelaborate grave offerings (Table 1b). Of the twelve graves which Baudez excavated here only one yielded the remains of an individual identified as an adult male. The single grave encountered at the Tempisque Valley site of Birmania contained the skeleton of an adult male along with a ground stone celt and two ceramic vessels. This interment probably dates to the Middle Polychrome Period (Baudez 1967:45-46).

At the site of Las Huacas in Guanacaste, Hartman (1907) recovered merely six ground stone celts in his excavations, though numerous others are known from the site. Of these, only one was recovered from a relatively intact grave, the rest being found in confused, but probably funerary contexts. Burial XI, the interment containing this celt, has been placed in the San Bosco Phase (A.D. 500-800) by Graham (1981:115). Fonseca and Scaglione (1978), on the basis of their stone pendant analysis, suggest the site was utilized from approximately A.D. 180-525. An examination of the distribution of goods in the sixteen burials (Table 1c) excavated by Hartman indicates that Burial XI is not necessarily one of the richer graves at Las Huacas, though the carved metate, which is the only other offering in the tomb, is said to be particularly elaborate and unique (Graham 1981:115; Hartman 1907:22-23). It has been described as the only example from the site showing "carved slab legs with openwork decoration" (Graham 1981:115).

An additional five celts were recovered in excavations near the major burial concentration and they also seem to be associated with human remains. It is interesting to note that one of these artifacts (catalogue no. 2793/54) appears to be virtually identical to ground stone tools typically found in midden and habitation contexts in Guanacaste, but in this case it seems to have been perforated, possibly to facilitate suspension so that the celt could serve as an item of adornment or display. The perforation technique employed on this celt is remarkably similar to that commonly used on the intricate jade pendants found throughout the Greater Nicoya area (see for example, Hartman 1907: Plate 1).

The impression one gets when looking at the published accounts of cemetery excavations in Guanacaste is that Las Huacas and Nacascolo stand apart in that they contain extremely elaborate grave goods such as carved metates, jade pendants, mace heads, and copper bells. I also suggest that if good skeletal data were available from Hartman's early work and from the extensive "commercial" excavations at Nacascolo, one would find that an extremely high proportion of these graves contained the skeletal remains of adult males. In contrast, cemeteries such as Bolson and La Guinea seem to contain less elaborate offerings (Snarskis 1981:30) as well as the skeletons of children and females. Interestingly, ground stone celts are entirely absent in the mortuary offerings from the latter two sites.

Atlantic Watershed of Costa Rica

The placement of ground stone celts and utilitarian lithics in

general in burials does not seem to have been as prevalent on the Atlantic Watershed as it was in other areas of Costa Rica. Snarskis' (1978) excavations in this region found no celts in unequivocal burial contexts dating before the Transitional Period (A.D. 500-1000), though celts do occasionally appear in other archaeological contexts (Table 2a). The one Transitional Period (A.D. 500-1000) burial, located at the La Montana site, in which celts (five) were found has been termed "special", and it contains an unusually rich assortment of offerings including a number of ocarinas and figurines (Snarskis 1978:413).

During the Stone Cist Period (A.D. 1000-1500) celts were occasionally included as grave offerings. Snarskis notes their presence in tombs at La Zoila in the Turrialba Valley (Table 2b), and Hartman (1901) found one celt in Grave 7 at Las Mercedes. This particular artifact appears to have been used or even irreparably damaged prior to its placement in the cist tomb.

Central Highlands of Costa Rica

In the Central Highlands of Costa Rica ground stone celts appear in mortuary contexts with about the same frequency as they do on the Atlantic Watershed. As is the case elsewhere in lower Central America, ceramics are by far the most abundant sort of grave offering. Hartman (1901), who excavated approximately 386 Stone Cist Period tombs at the sites of Santiago, Chircot, Los Limones, and Orosí notes the occurrence of ground stone celts in only eighteen graves, even though there is an apparent abundance of stone for manufacturing these artifacts in the immediate vicinity of at least one of the sites (Orosí). These eighteen graves do not appear unique except for the fact that they contain celts (Table 3). Unfortunately, no age or sex data is available for the skeletons excavated by Hartman.

Cocle

At Sitio Conte (Lothrop 1937) the association of ground stone celts with the most elaborate and presumably high status interments is most clearly evident. Over 62% of the celts recovered by Lothrop in grave contexts ("caches" are not included in this analysis) were found, in what he termed, "large" graves (Table 4). These are the tombs which yielded the largest number of individuals, the greatest quantity of grave goods, and the most magnificent material remains. In contrast, only slightly more than 5% of the celts were placed in the "small" category graves even though nearly one-quarter of the skeletons occur in these interments. As can be seen in Table 4, there is a pronounced tendency for the number of celts per individual to increase with tomb size.

The examination of the presence or absence of ground stone celts among the various grave types is even more instructive since it avoids problems encountered by the tendency for the large graves to contain more of all sorts of grave goods, not just celts. All six of the "large" graves excavated by Lothrop yielded celts (at least five each) while they were absent in over three-fourths of the small interments (Table 5). A statistical evaluation of the presence/absence data for the classified graves suggests that there is a relationship between grave type (as defined by Lothrop) and whether or not a celt appears in a particular grave. At Sitio Conte, as was also the case for

Guanacaste, there is a greater likelihood for these artifacts to appear in tombs which seemingly contain the remains of high status individuals.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It has been suggested throughout this paper that the lower Central American ground stone celt was not just a versatile utilitarian implement, but also an item endowed with other less tangible, but equally as significant qualities. While it is difficult, at this time, to be very specific it may be reasonable to propose that they served, along with selected other items, as status markers for elite or privileged males. These individuals may have been warriors as Linares (1977) feels was the case at Sitio Conte or religious and/or social luminaries as Graham (1981) and Snarskis (1981) have described for Guanacaste.

Clearly, a great deal of effort was expended in the production of these artifacts and few members of society seemed to have merited them as mortuary offerings. Just how much labor was invested in the manufacture of ground stone celts is hinted at in the ethnographic literature. Kapches (1979), for example, in her synthesis of the available information on celt production, notes that they may take as long as three weeks to make, though shorter periods of time are typical. Probably the best recorded case of traditional ground stone celt manufacture among New World groups is the account of Kozak (1972) who studied the Heta Indians of Brazil. It takes the Heta from three to five days to complete a ground stone axe, an estimate which includes the time spent pecking, grinding, polishing, and hafting the tool. When observations such as these are considered, the 57 ground stone celts found in Grave 26 at Sitio Conte seem especially significant.

In conclusion, I would like to caution that the appearance of similar mortuary practices throughout a widespread region, in this case lower Central America, does not necessarily imply that these practices carried the same meaning regardless of when and where they were found (Binford 1971:16). I have covered a broad expanse of space and have drawn examples from over a thousand years of prehistory. The cultural contexts in which these practices appeared were certainly much different from each other, a factor which clearly needs to be considered in future research.

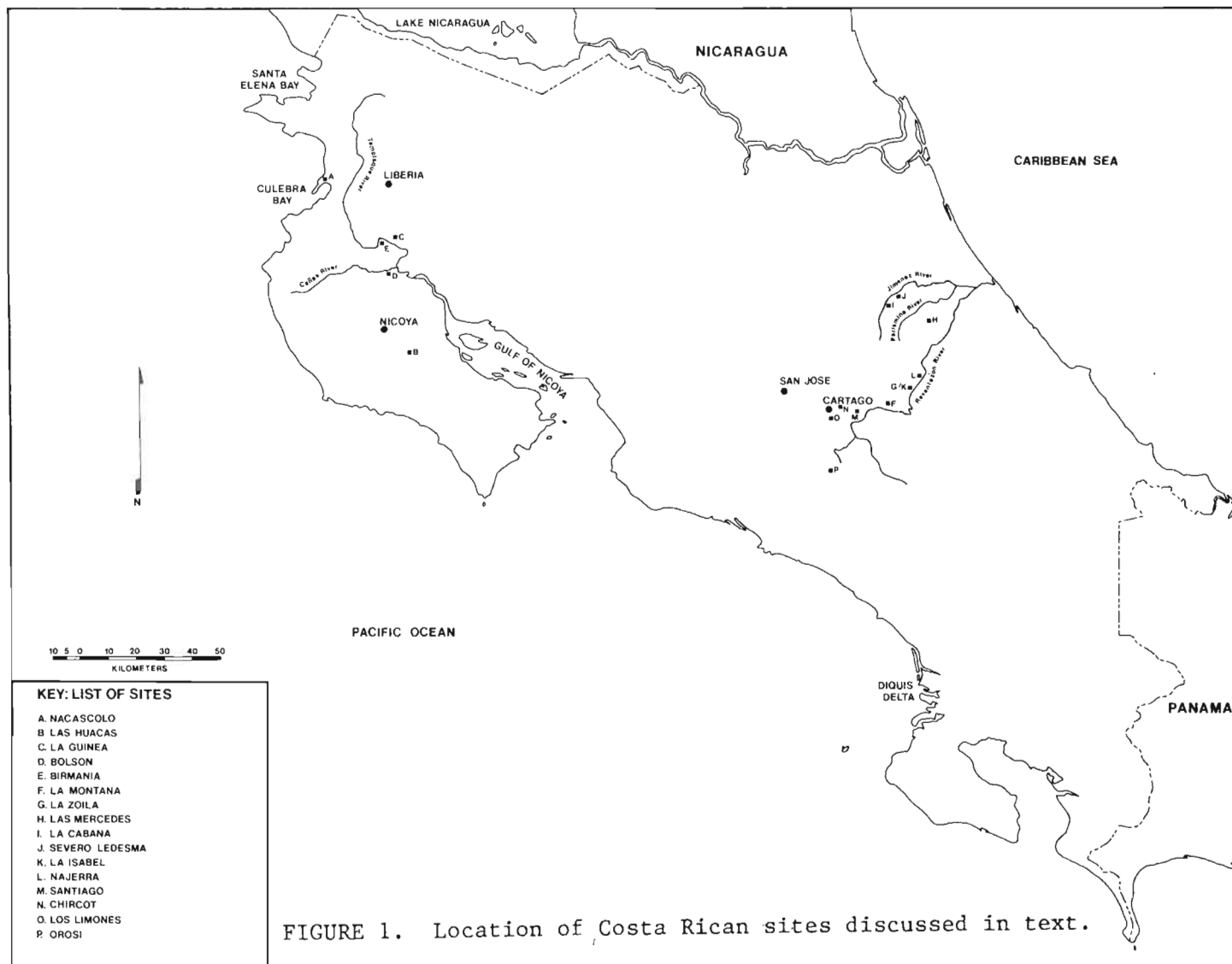


Table 1a. Inventory of graves from La Guinea (Hoopes 1980) and Nacascolo (Wallace and Accola 1980), Guanacaste, Costa Rica.

Site	Grave	Ind.	Sex ¹	Age ¹	Celts	A/P	M	O	C/V	F	P/S	S/B	P/P	CS	S/M	O	Period ²
Nacascolo	1	7	M	A	1				12							5	MP
"	2	2	M	A					1							2	MP
La Guinea	IA	1							6				1				MP
"	IIA	4(?)	F	YA					1			1					LP
"	I	2(?)							1								
"	II	1	F	A													MP?
"	III	1		A												1	
"	IV	1		A					1				1				
"	V	1							1								
"	VI	1	F	C													
"	VII	1							10								MP
"	VIII	1		C					2								
"	IX	1		A					1							2	
"	X	1		A									1				
"	XI	?															
"	XII	1		C				1	2								EP?
"	XIII	2		I&C													

Legend. Ind.=Individuals; A/P=Amulets/Pendants; M=Metates; O=Ocarinas; C/V=Ceramic Vessels; F=Figurines; P/S=Polishing Stones; S/B=Stone Beads; P/P=Projectile Points; CS=Chipped Stone; S/M=Stone Mortar; O=Other

Table 1b. Inventory of graves from Bolson and Birmania sites, Guanacaste, Costa Rica. Compiled from Baudez (1967).

Site	Grave	Ind.	Sex ¹	Age ¹	Celts	A/P	M	O	C/V	F	P/S	S/B	P/P	CS	S/M	O	Period ²
Bolson	1	2						1	5			3					EP
"	2	?							1								
"	3	1		A			1		7							1	
"	4	1	M	A					5								
"	5	3						1	7							1	LD
"	6	1		A					1							1	
"	7	?							4							1	
"	8	?							2								
"	9	2							6(?)								LD
"	10	?							3								
"	11	?															
"	12	?															
Birmania	1	1			1				2								MPorLP

Legend. Ind.=Individuals; A/P=Amulets/Pendants; M=Metates; O=Ocarinas; C/V=Ceramic Vessels; F=Figurines; P/S=Polishing Stones; S/B=Stone Beads; P/P=Projectile Points; CS=Chipped Stone; S/M=Stone Mortars; O=Other.

Table 1c. Inventory of graves from Las Huacas, Guanacaste, Costa Rica. Compiled from Hartman (1907).

Site	Grave	Ind.	Sex ¹	Age ¹	Celts	A/P	M	O	C/V	F	P/S	S/B	P/P	CS	S/M	O
Las Huacas	1	5					3			1						
" "	2	1									4					
" "	3	2					1									
" "	4	1					1									
" "	5	2														
" "	6	2					1									
" "	7	1														2
" "	8	3				2	3			1						1
" "	9	1				1	1	1			1					
" "	10	?														
" "	11	1			1		1									
" "	12	1					1				1					
" "	13	1				1			1		2					
" "	14	1														
" "	15	4							1			5				
" "	16	1					3	1				2				

Legend. Ind.-Individuals; A/P=Amulets/Pendants; M=Metates; O=Ocarinas; C/V=Ceramic Vessels; F=Figurines; P/S=Polishing Stones; S/B=Stone Beads; P/P=Projectile Points; CS=Chipped Stone; S/M=Stone Mortars; O=Other.

Table 2a. Zoned Bichrome II and Transitional Period graves from the Atlantic Watershed of Costa Rica.
Compiled from Snarskis (1978).

Site	Grave	Ind.	Sex ¹	Age ¹	Celts	A/P	M	O	C/V	F	P/S	S/B	P/P	CS	S/M	O	Period ²
La Cabana	1								2								ZBII
" "	2								1								ZBII
Severo	1					1	1		5			1				3	ZBII
Ledesma																	
" "	2						1		5						1	4	ZBII
" "	3						1		4								ZBII
" "	3A								3								ZBII
" "	3B								4								ZBII
" "	7.2/1						1		8						1	6	ZBII
La Isabel	2A						1		1								TR
" "	3A								2								TR
" "	3B								1								TR
" "	3								3								TR
La Montana	"Special"				5			4	4	3				1		3	TR

Legend. Ind.=Individuals; A/P=Amulets/Pendants; M=Metates; O=Ocarinas; C/V=Ceramic Vessels;
F=Figurines; P/S=Polishing Stones; S/B=Stone Beads; P/P=Projectile Points; CS=Chipped Stone;
S/M=Stone Mortars; O=Other.

Table 2b. Stone Cist period graves from the Atlantic Watershed of Costa Rica. Compiled from Snarskis (1978).

Site	Grave	Ind.	Sex ¹	Age ¹	Celts	A/P	M	O	C/V	F	P/S	S/B	P/P	CS	S/M	O
La Zoila	6A				1				2							
" "	6B								2							
" "	7				1				4							
" "	8								3							
" "	9								3							
" "	10															
" "	11								1							
" "	12				1				3							
" "	13								1							
" "	14								2							
" "	16															
" "	17								1							
" "	20								2							
" "	21				2				5						1	
" "	22								4							
Najera	1								3				1			
La Cabana	1								4							
" "	3								2							
" "	4															
" "	9								3							

Legend. Ind.=Individuals; A/P=Amulets/Pendants; M=Metates; O=Ocarinas; C/V=Ceramic Vessels; F=Figurines; P/S=Polishing Stones; S/B=Stone Beads; P/P=Projectile Points; CS=Chipped Stone; S/M=Stone Mortars; O=Other.

Table 3. Graves containing celts from the Central Highlands of Costa Rica. All date to Stone Cist Period. Compiled from Hartman (1901).

Site	Grave	Ind.	Sex ¹	Age ¹	Celts	A/P	M	O	C/V	F	P/S	S/B	P/P	CS	S/M	O
Santiago	9				1				3							
"	22				1				2		1					
Chircot	29				1				3							
"	43				1				1							
"	72				1				2							
"	112				1				3		1					
"	125				1				1							
"	141				1				1							
"	166				1											
Los Limones	1/10				1				1							
"	"				1				1							
Orosi	1/4				1									2		
"	1/11				1				2					3		
"	11/5				1				1							2
"	V/7				1											10
"	V/25				1									1		
"	V/52				1				1					1		
"	V/56				1				1					1		

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Legend. Ind.=Individuals; A/P=Amulets/Pendants; M=Metates; O=Ocarinas; C/V=Ceramic Vessels; F=Figurines; P/S=Polishing Stones; S/B=Stone Beads; CS=Chipped Stone; S/M=Stone Mortars; O=Other.

Table 4. Frequency of celts and number of individuals by grave type at Sitio Conte. Grave 2 not included because of disturbance. Compiled from Lothrop (1937).

<u>Grave Type</u>	<u>Celts</u>	<u>Individuals</u>	<u>Celt/Individual</u>
Small	13(5.3%)	26(22.6%)	0.50
Intermediate	43(17.4%)	18(15.7%)	2.39
Large	155(62.8%)	54(47.0%)	2.87
Composite	24(9.7%)	6(5.2%)	4.00
Unclassified	12(4.9%)	11(9.6%)	1.09
Total	247(100.1%)	115(199.1%)	2.15

Table 5. Occurrence of celts by grave type. Unclassified and composite graves not included. Compiled from Lothrop (1937).

<u>Grave Type</u>	<u>Present</u>	<u>Absent</u>	<u>Total</u>
Small	5	17	22
Intermediate	8	6	14
Large	6	0	6
Total	19	23	42

NOTES TO TABLES

1. Sex and age refer to principal individual only.
Abbreviations: M=male
F=female
I=infant
C=child
YA=young adult
A=adult
2. Time period abbreviations.
Guanacaste: LD=Linear Decorated (A.D. 300-500)
EP=Early Polychrome (A.D. 500-800)
MP=Middle Polychrome (A.D. 800-1200)
LP=Late Polychrome (A.D. 1200-1500)
Atlantic Watershed and Central Highlands:
ZBII=Zoned Bichrome II (A.D. 1-500)
TR=Transitional (A.D. 500-1000)
SC=Stone Cist (A.D. 1000-1500)
3. A chi square value of 12.565 was obtained for the 3x2 contingency table in Table 5 (Blalock 1979:279-292). This figure indicates significance at the .01 level for 2 degrees of freedom.

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