

THE STORY OF THE RIVER OF GOLD

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The ancient societies of Panama, along with those of the rest of lower Central America, have long been overshadowed by the more famous Precolumbian civilizations of Mesoamerica and the Andes. Over the past few decades, archaeological investigations in Panama have yielded results that, when combined with information from earlier excavations, as well as ethnohistoric, ethnographic, and environmental data, have produced detailed reconstructions of the evolution and complexity of Precolumbian Panamanian society. The first "scientific" excavations in Panama were conducted by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University at a site called Sitio Conte in the early 1930s (FIG. 1.1). In 1940 J. Alden Mason returned to the site with a team of experts from The University Museum. This is the story of the discovery of one of the greatest treasures ever uncovered in the New World; a story that begins when the Río Grande de Coclé flooded over its banks, changed its course, cutting a new channel to become the "river of gold."

Along the Pacific coast of central Panama, a number of rivers of varying sizes flow down the slopes of the western sierras, across broad flat plains to the coastal bays of the Gulf of Panama. The coastal plains become parched during the dry season (January to April) and flood annually during the rainy season (May to December). One of these rivers, the Río Grande de Coclé, has a history of changing its course during periods of heavy flooding. As early as the first years of the twentieth century, stories about local children playing marbles with gold beads found on the banks of the Río Grande began to circulate in the vicinity of Natá, a small town in central Panama. In time, native people found other gold ornaments and polychrome pottery along the Río Grande.

In shifting its course yet again in 1927, the river exposed a major burial, depositing some of the grave's contents—including human bone fragments, polychrome pottery

sherds, and exquisite pieces of worked gold—along its banks. On its new course the river was cutting through and gradually exposing a Precolumbian cemetery used by ancient Panamanians.

The Sitio Conte Cemetery

The cemetery site, later named Sitio Conte after the Conte family, owners of the five to six acres of land on which it is situated, lies in Coclé Province, about 100 miles west of Panama City and 10 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean (FIG. 1.2). The site is located in a dry subregion around the Bay of Parita in which trees and shrubs grow mainly along the rivers that flow through the flat plains. The land in this region has been used for centuries primarily as pasture for the local cattle industry.

As early as 1915, the Conte family had displayed some spectacular examples of polychrome pottery from the site at the Pacific-Panama Exposition in Panama City, organized in honor of the opening of the Panama Canal. In 1928, shortly after a major burial was exposed by the river, the Contes made several unsuccessful attempts to excavate the site by digging some exploratory pits. Expecting to find burials rich in gold ornaments and colorful pottery like those previously brought forth by the flooding Río Grande, they found instead only some crude stone columns, architectural elements associated with the site. The Conte family generally discouraged others from digging, so that the site was protected from looting.

Plundering of graves has been a problem in the Isthmus since at least the time of the Spanish conquistadors in the sixteenth century, and there is evidence that the ancient Panamanians cut through older burials in digging for new ones, furnishing their graves with treasures looted from these earlier interments. Much of the exquisite goldwork looted

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FIGURE 1.2. A view of the Río Grande de Coclé at Sitio Conte shows one of two docks built by Mason's workers for the use of dugout canoe passengers, as well as for washing laundry and bathing.

from these burials by the Spaniards was melted down, but many museums throughout the world have collections of Precolumbian Panamanian materials—pottery, figurines, stone objects, and some gold jewelry—that have been looted from sites throughout the area. Without any documentation these objects are of little value to scholars seeking to reconstruct ancient Panamanian history and culture.

Sitio Conte remained untouched by the Spaniards

despite the fact that it was only a short distance from the town of Natá, Spanish headquarters for the region in the sixteenth century. The Spaniards apparently missed the cemetery because it was no longer in use at the time of the Conquest, and there were no surface features to distinguish it from other fields in the surrounding coastal plains. For a thousand years the cemetery lay unnoticed until the Río Grande exposed it.

The Peabody Museum Excavations (1930, 1931, and 1933)

Burial goods washed out by the severe flooding of the Río Grande in 1927 first sparked the interest of professional archaeologists. Some of these pieces ended up in antique shops in Panama City. Mr. Karl P. Curtis, associated with the Panama Canal Hospital in Ancon, saw these objects and recognized that they were similar in style to examples displayed by the Contes at the Pacific-Panama Exposition in 1915. He brought them to the attention of Dr. Thomas Barbour, Director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University, who was working in Panama. Dr. Barbour helped make the arrangements for the purchase of these artifacts by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. In 1928, Peabody Museum archaeologists Alfred M. Tozzer and Earnest A. Hooten visited the Sitio Conte site and made arrangements for future archaeological investigations. Archaeologists from the Peabody Museum eventually conducted three field seasons at Sitio Conte (1930, 1931, and 1933). The first two were under the direction of Henry B. Roberts; in 1933 Samuel K. Lothrop became the project director and had ultimate responsibility for the final publication of the excavations.

During the three seasons of field work, the Peabody team uncovered 59 graves and 38 caches along with a few architectural elements including roughly carved 2-m-high columns, two floors, and a large pile of roughly worked stones. The caches were simple pits dug into the earth for a depth of 1–2 m, containing deposits of materials without relation to a burial. Lothrop divided them into three types on the basis of their contents: one group contained small scattered examples of very fragmentary pottery with burned materials, a second type had quantities of broken pottery, and the third had a variety of stone objects.

Lothrop also set up a simple system to classify the graves according to the number of interments and the associ-

ated grave goods.¹ Six graves were classified as large. These contained from 3 to 22 skeletons, about 200 ceramic vessels, and a large quantity of goldwork. The largest and wealthiest of these was Grave 26, which had 22 skeletons in a single interment and a treasure of gold ornaments—helmets, pendants, plaques, necklaces, ear rods, cuffs—together with many pieces of polychrome pottery and stone objects. This grave was also unique in shape, having a very concave floor with sides sloping outward toward the rim. All the other graves had relatively flat floors and straight sides. Fourteen of the graves were classified as intermediate by Lothrop. These had only one or two extended skeletons, about 40 pottery vessels, and some jewelry. Frequently these intermediate interments were located over the large burials. Small graves (22 examples) contained only one flexed skeleton with fewer than ten pottery pieces, and only an occasional example of jewelry. Many of these small graves were situated over the top of the intermediate burials, creating a three-level burial.

The Peabody Museum had no plans to conduct any further excavations after 1933. Three seasons of field work produced a large quantity of data and thousands of artifacts to be studied. Lothrop thereafter directed his efforts toward the publication of the results of these excavations.² As a result of his two volumes recording the results of the Peabody Museum's field work, Sitio Conte became the best-known site in Central America south of the Maya world.

The University Museum Plans for the Field

The Conte family, however, was interested in having the excavations continue. In the late 1930s, Héctor Conte wrote several letters on behalf of his uncle, Miguel Wenceslao Conte, the landowner of Sitio Conte, to Donald Scott, Director of the Peabody Museum, asking him to consider conducting further excavations at Sitio Conte. He informed Scott that no attempts to excavate the site had been made since the

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Peabody Museum's last field season in 1933. "The larger part of this territory [ground] has scarcely been touched. We have left it thus, hoping you might tell us if the Peabody Museum has determined not to return any more to continue the work of excavation which, in reality, has hardly been started."³ Although the Contes preferred to deal with the Peabody Museum, the family was willing to consider other American universities recommended by Scott. "We should prefer the Peabody Museum to any other scientific body. But if the Museum does not wish to come back again, then I beg [ask] you to indicate to me to what University or Museum in the United States we could direct ourselves to make a contract for excavating more or less in the same terms as with the Peabody Museum."⁴ The Conte family felt that "in this way the excavations would be scientific, and likewise, well-organized and beneficial for culture."⁵ Scott replied that the Museum had already obtained enough information from the site for "its scientific purposes" and declined the offer. He suggested Conte contact The University Museum in Philadelphia, "who might be interested in securing for themselves collections from your area."⁶

By the fall of 1939, J. Alden Mason, Curator of the American Section at The University Museum, began making plans to excavate at Sitio Conte during the coming field season, January through April 1940 (FIG. 1.3). Donald Scott agreed to turn the site over to The University Museum with the stipulation that if any new types of artifacts were found, the Peabody Museum would receive representative pieces to round out their Sitio Conte collection.⁷

Lothrop played an important role in helping Mason complete all the necessary arrangements for the excavations, explaining how to negotiate a contract with the Conte family and how to secure an excavation permit from the Panamanian government. Lothrop also advised Mason on personnel matters, suggesting he take along a person experienced in recording very complex graves, such as those uncov-

ered at Sitio Conte by the Peabody Museum, and another skilled in handling poorly preserved bone, ivory, and copper objects. At a meeting between Mason and Lothrop in late December 1939, Lothrop even volunteered to accompany The University Museum's Panama Expedition for the first few weeks in return for the Museum's paying his transportation and field camp expenses.

Lothrop felt he could get the excavations off to a good start by helping the team to determine the extent of the previous excavations and was optimistic about finding more graves. Lothrop was very encouraging about future excavation at the site: "Your prospects of getting valuable material are very good. We stopped work in contact with stratified graves, of which the deeper ones are large and richly furnished—almost certainly. I can explain to you exactly where to dig and why."⁸

Mason had only a few months to select a field staff, prepare a budget and secure funding, make travel plans, and handle all the other necessary arrangements. The excavations had to begin as early as possible after the new year since field work could only be conducted during the short dry season from January through April.

Horace H. F. Jayne, then Director of The University Museum, funded the Panama Expedition with money originally earmarked for archaeological projects in Egypt and Mesopotamia that had been canceled due to the deteriorating political situation in Europe. Mason's budget of \$4,000 barely covered his anticipated expenses: transportation, equipment, salaries and wages, construction of a field camp, and a reserve amount for the purchase of gold found at the site. Mason worried about the financial arrangements from the outset, and money problems were to plague him throughout the excavations. He had based his budget on figures obtained from Lothrop, but soon after his arrival realized that costs had risen for supplies and wages in Panama in the seven years since Lothrop had worked there.

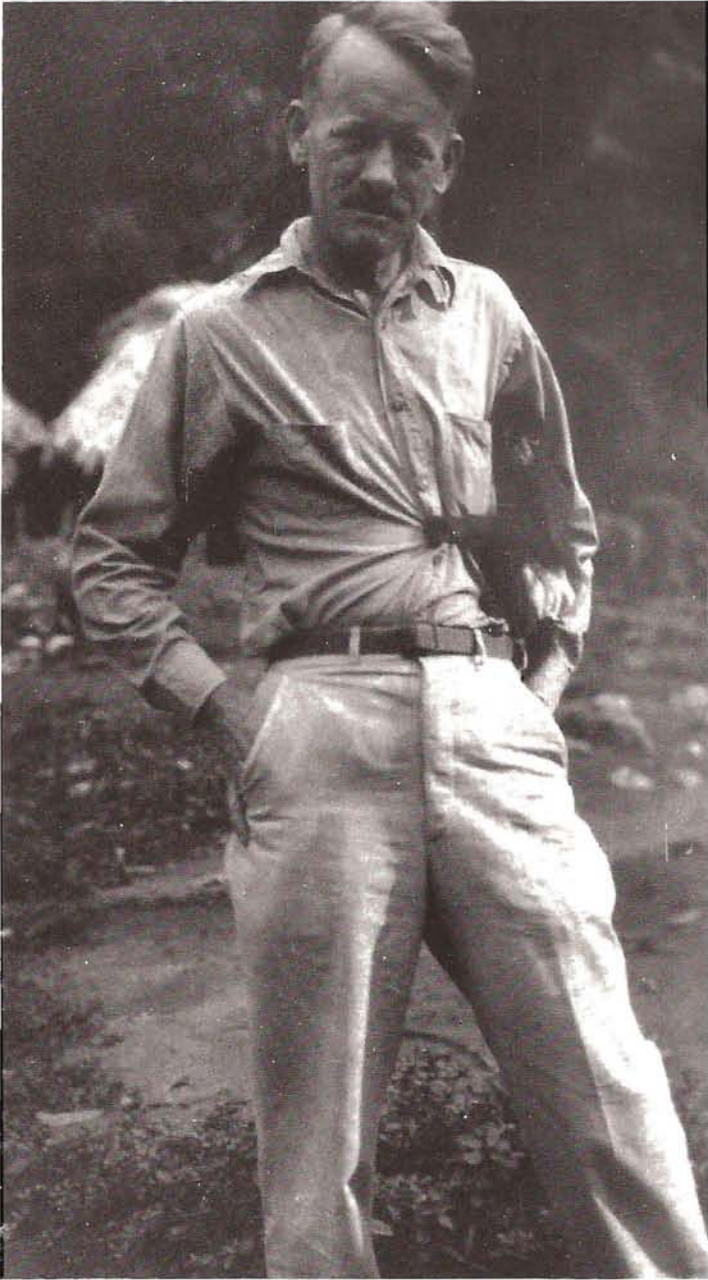


FIGURE 1.3. J. Alden Mason, Curator of the American Section at The University Museum from 1926 to 1955, led the Museum's Panama Expedition in 1940. Mason was a well-rounded anthropologist whose field work extended from the United States to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Guatemala, and Panama. This photograph of Mason was taken in Piedras Negras, Guatemala, in 1932.

On January 9, 1940, George Schaeffer, employed by the Chase National Bank of the City of New York in Panama and the Museum's agent, cabled Mason that he had managed to secure an excavation permit from the Panamanian government.⁹ Schaeffer also drew up a contract with landowner Miguel Wenceslao Conte that was very similar to the one that had been signed by the Peabody Museum. According to the terms, Conte granted The University Museum permission to excavate on his property for six months in 1940 for a fee of \$250. The Museum would retain all unique metal specimens, but would pay half of their current market value to Conte. The Museum also agreed to give Conte any duplicate metal artifacts and to pay him half the current market value of duplicates retained by the Museum. Intact, unique stone and clay objects would be the property of the Museum, and any duplicates were to be given to Conte. Broken examples would be shipped to the Museum for restoration; a representative collection of restored artifacts would later be returned to Conte. A 1 percent export tax would also be levied on the market value of the gold by the Panamanian government.

Mason assembled a small field team for the three-month season of excavation; each member would have to perform several jobs. John B. Corning, a research associate in the Museum's Education Section, was named assistant director of the project. He had a background in anatomy and was therefore charged with the analysis and preservation of any skeletal material uncovered (although, based on the experience of the Peabody Museum team, little if any skeletal material would be salvageable) and also put in charge of the conservation of the artifacts. Robert H. Merrill, a retired engineer from Grand Rapids, Michigan, served as surveyor, draftsman, and photographer. In 1936 Merrill had worked with Mason on the excavation of a site in Durango, Mexico. Julia Corning, John's wife, catalogued the objects and was general housekeeper for the camp. Mason's teenage son, John A. Mason, Jr., helped around camp and did some excavating.

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Lothrop and his wife Eleanor accompanied the excavation, but, as agreed, they remained at the site only a few weeks. Lothrop assisted Mason in the preliminary stages of excavation; his wife shared her previous camp experiences in assisting Julia Corning with both the cataloguing and the housekeeping duties.

The University Museum Excavations (1940)

On January 12, 1940, Mason, his son John, and the Lothrop family sailed from New York City to Panama City by steamer. They intended to get the camp constructed and prepare for excavation work before the rest of the team arrived. Six days later they arrived in Panama City, where they purchased supplies and took care of the necessary legal work for the excavations. The 100-mile journey to the site of Sitio Conte was very arduous in those days. On January 25 they hired a driver to take them and their equipment, baggage, and supplies to Penonomé, where Conte's ranch house was located. Near Penonomé they had to transfer to dugout canoes for the last leg of the journey to Sitio Conte. Their equipment and supplies were later transported to the site by oxcart (FIG. 1.4).

The four advance team members slept in tents until the camp, built by some 30 workers from the Conte ranch, was completed. Within a week the workers had constructed two houses with wooden floors, thatched roofs, canvas and netting walls, a separate kitchen and latrines, and two docks on the river (FIG. 1.5). One house served as camp headquarters and the other as housing for the Cornings (and also the Lothrop family during their brief stay). The others slept in tents for the entire field season. By the time the rest of the expedition members arrived from the United States on February 2, the camp was ready. Mason kept on a half dozen of the construction team to help with the work of excavation.

Camp life proved to be relatively comfortable. During the three-month period, despite temperatures of over

100 degrees every day, the weather was pleasant due to lack of humidity and constant winds blowing from the northwest. Mason hired an excellent native cook who had been in charge of preparing meals for the Peabody Museum's 1933 expedition. Provisions were replenished by a local boy who traveled by horseback to nearby villages to get supplies. Fish were caught in the river, and occasionally venison and other game were brought to the camp by natives who lived in settlements scattered along the Río Grande.

The Museum's excavations began in early February and ended the first week in April. With Lothrop advising him, Mason formulated a plan to excavate two trenches—a minor one at the periphery of the site and a major one in the center of a concentration of burials and caches discovered earlier by the Peabody Museum archaeologists. In the first trench, the topmost 1.5 m of earth was devoid of any artifacts, representing an accumulation of soil from the time when the site had last been in use. The trench was dug to a depth of about 4 m, just short of the water table in the dry season. In this minor trench Mason uncovered five burials and six caches; he was somewhat disappointed in both the quality and the quantity of the grave goods.

Mason then turned his attention to the second, larger trench. He had already established the extent of the Peabody Museum excavations and knew precisely where to dig. The trench measured 16 by 8 m and was also carried down to the 4 m level (FIG. 1.6). Portions of this trench were dug slightly deeper, right down to the water table, to ensure that the lowest levels of remains had been reached. Mason was hopeful that this second, larger trench, so close to the area where the most important burials had been uncovered by Lothrop, would be more productive. Mason was so confident of finding large wealthy burials similar to those of the Peabody Museum's Grave 26 that he immediately wrote to Director Jayne: "But the main trench near where Lothrop quit digging seven years ago and where he found his best stuff is



FIGURE 1.4. Ox carts were used to transport the expedition's supplies, equipment, and luggage between Sitio Conte and the Conte ranch near Penonomé. Members of the Museum's archaeological team traveled the distance either on horseback or in dugout canoes on the Río Grande.



FIGURE 1.5. A general view of the Sitio Conte field camp shows (left to right): Robert Merrill's tent; the house that served as camp headquarters; John Mason's tent; a dishwashing stand; J. Alden Mason's tent; the kitchen; worktables with bags of specimens; and the house built for the Cornings and Lothrop.

now getting down near the level of the richest graves and we hope to be working on spectacular stuff by early next week."¹⁰

Unfortunately, after little more than a week of work, Mason was forced to request an additional \$1,000 from Jayne as "everything has cost about twice as much as the budget allowed."¹¹ By February 15, Mason still had not received additional funds from the Museum; he explained that his greatest expenses, such as transportation and construction of the camp, were now behind him, and the remaining costs for digging would be minimal. He wrote: "If I cast up a balance and prepared a budget allowing enough for everything, I'd have to quit work at once. . . . I'm sure that your reaction will be to this that with such slight expense we should keep digging as long as we are getting good results, at any rate until we get down to the level of the deeper and richer graves. . . . But Mr. Jenks' [John Story Jenks, President of the Museum's Board of Managers] talk with me in which he informed me that I must on no account exceed the present

appropriation puts me in a bad boat. I feel sure the results will justify a little excess in his eyes."¹² Jayne eventually wired nearly \$1,000 more to Mason, and would continue to find more money to meet Mason's requests.

Mason was proved correct—deeper and richer graves soon came to light in the second trench. Of the 30 burials and caches the team discovered in the second trench, 9 contained large, multiple graves. It was the burial that Mason was forced to excavate last of all, Burial 11, that proved to be the largest and wealthiest. It lay in close proximity to the Peabody Museum's Grave 26, but when Mason and his crew first uncovered indications of Burial 11, they had to cover its rim with a tarpaulin and leave it for several weeks while they continued to excavate other graves. As Mason wrote to Jayne: "Our greatest hopes are on a grave, No #11 [sic], one edge of which was discovered long ago when the Lothrop's were here, but as it ran into the trench wall we left it until we had gone to the bottom of the trench as then opened. We had to cut ten feet wider to come down on this [Burial 11]. . . . This



FIGURE 1.6. A view of the north side of Trench 2 shows the excavations of several burials, including Burial 11. In the foreground are excavators John Mason, Julia Corning, and John Corning.

grave has every indication of great richness, and we will be greatly disappointed if it doesn't pan out well."¹³ In the same letter Mason thanked Jayne once again for additional funds: "The new \$400 ought to see us through nicely, unless we find quantities of gold in this new grave."

When actual excavation of Burial 11 at last got underway, Mason was further encouraged by finding unusually rich caches of stingray spines, stone celts, and projectile points. Mason's high expectations for a wealth of luxury grave gifts from Burial 11 were more than met; it proved to be exceptional in many respects.

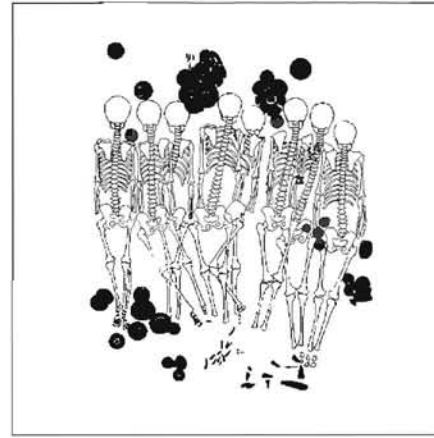
Burial 11

Unlike most of the Sitio Conte graves, which had relatively flat floors with a slight horizontal concavity, Burial 11 was so extremely concave as to make it bowl shaped. The burial contained 23 interments, arranged in three levels, and thousands of mortuary objects. In comparison, the second-largest burial excavated by Mason's crew had only eight interments. The only similar burial in shape and scope to this one was Grave 26 excavated by the Peabody Museum team.

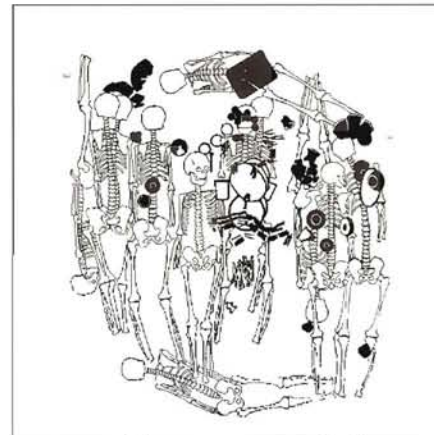
Mason and The University Museum team were disappointed by what they discovered on the first level of the burial. They encountered eight skeletons laid out on a floor in extended positions.¹⁴ They were in a row face down, parallel to one another, with heads to the east (FIG. 1.7). Although the skeletal material was in poor condition, as were most of the skeletons found at the site due at least in part to the burials being below water level for almost eight months of the year, Corning was able to identify six skeletons as male; five of these were of mature age or older. The main burial offerings associated with these eight skeletons were pottery, agate pendants, and stone projectile points and celts. Only one example of goldwork, a series of small gold bells that had once formed a necklace, lay on the upper back area of one skeleton.

The grave itself was roughly oval in outline, 4.2 m (N-S) by 2.4 m (E-W). The walls sloped gradually inward as the excavators continued downward; beginning at the very rim, the earth walls on the north and south were lined with "ceramic walls" about 0.3 m thick formed of pottery sherds and some intact vessels (FIG. 1.8).

The remains and objects from the upper level were cleared from the flooring, and excavation was continued. After digging down about 0.45 m below the first floor, indications of a second level containing burials began to emerge. The ceramic walls of the first level of interments con-



UPPER LEVEL



MIDDLE LEVEL



LOWER LEVEL

FIGURE 1.7. Plans of the three levels of Burial 11 with many of the grave goods and skeletons *in situ*.

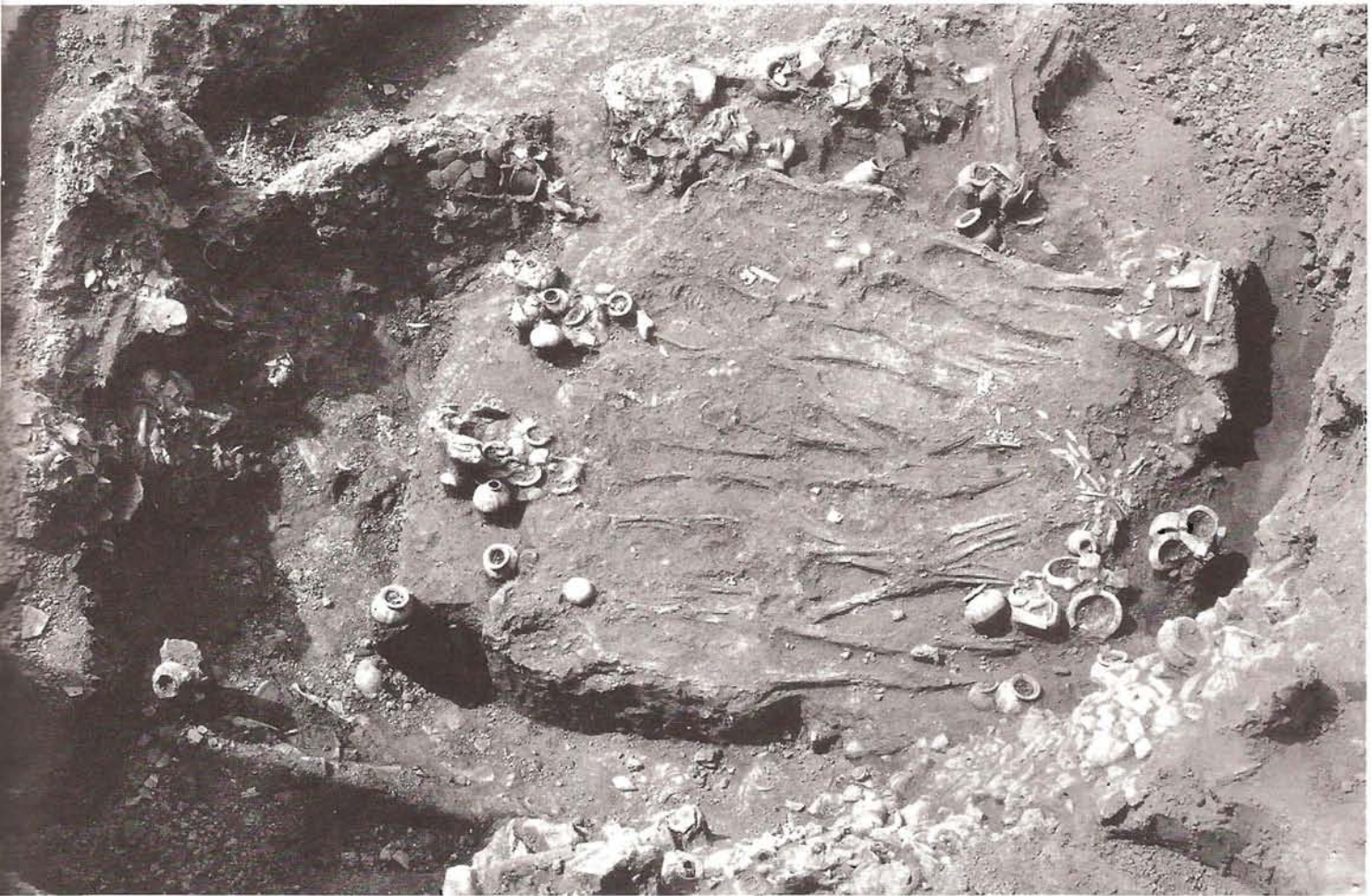


FIGURE 1.8. On the upper level of Burial 11, eight skeletons, lying parallel to one another, were accompanied by a relatively sparse assemblage of grave goods. This photograph was taken looking down on the north section of the steep side wall lined with pottery fragments. In the background is the base of the south ceramic wall. These side walls connected with the floor of the middle level.

continued down and ended at the floor of this second level.

This second level of interments had the wealth of gold ornaments and polychrome pottery that Mason and his colleagues were hoping to discover. This burial included 12 extended skeletons accompanied by thousands of grave goods, including the great majority of the gold ornaments

recovered by Mason at Sitio Conte. Most of the skeletons were laid out roughly parallel to one another in a line running north-south with heads facing to the east. Two additional skeletons were aligned with their heads to the north, one on either side of the line of skeletons. Some of the skeletons were placed in superimposed pairs. Corning had some

difficulty sexing and aging the skeletons on this level. Of those he identified, one of them was probably female, another was a young male, and a third was an adolescent.

As the archaeologists worked to expose the skeletons completely, they encountered scattered small deposits of objects, such as stone projectile points and celts, and perforated animal teeth, not associated with any particular skeleton. But the most spectacular ornaments made of gold—plaques, ear rods, pendants, cuffs, anklets, and beads—as well as objects of precious stone, ivory, and bone were amassed on or near the two skeletons lying on top of each other in the center of the grave. Mason assumed that the bottom one of this pair was the principal occupant of the burial.¹⁵

While clearing the middle level, Mason wrote to Linton Satterthwaite, Jr., an assistant curator in the American Section at the Museum, "With due exaggeration, the gold glittering in this grave makes Schliemann's treasure of—was it Agamemnon?—and that of Ecuador look like pikers. Every time we take up another potsherd or knife out another piece of dirt there's another gold ornament." He conveyed his excitement upon finding gold: "Give it a wipe or a little scrape with a stick and it's as beautiful as it ever was or ever will be."¹⁶

It is possible to reconstruct something of the splendor of the main skeleton's funerary wardrobe from the positions of the objects that lay around and on the skeleton (FIG. 1.9). On and near the skull were numerous small embossed gold discs that once must have been affixed to a headdress. A pair of gold ear rods were found on either side of the skull. Quantities of both round and tubular beads were found in the neck and chest area, and pelvic region, indicating gold necklaces and a beaded girdle at the waist. Below each elbow were embossed gold cuffs with smaller plain cuffs underneath. Since the narrow ends of the cuffs were pointing toward the skull, it seems likely that the arms of the

deceased originally had been crossed over his chest. Smaller plain gold cuffs were found near the ankles. Five large gold embossed plaques with anthropomorphic designs were found on or near the skeleton. This same individual was also associated with the most famous object from Mason's excavations at Sitio Conte, a unique animal effigy pendant with an emerald set in its back, found on the skeleton's chest.

Further clearing of the burial revealed that the interment had been placed on a thick bed of broken pottery. Fragments of bark cloth found mixed with and beneath the pottery on the floor of the grave indicate that the ground was covered by a lining. Similar linings and beds of pottery had been found in some of the graves excavated by the Peabody Museum.¹⁷

When the second level of Burial 11 was uncovered, Mason wrote Jayne describing some of the gold ornaments and brought up the subject of money yet again. The \$400 Mason had received to cover all his remaining expenses should have sufficed "... and it would have," he wrote, "but for this recent great find. I also know that if we had quit work a week ago in order to keep within the budget we wouldn't have found this hoard. As I wrote Linton [Satterthwaite] we have done nothing more than finish all the graves that we had in sight several weeks ago. From the point of view of the budget it was just our bad luck that we struck it rich just at the bottom of the last grave."¹⁸ Mason's financial situation was complicated by the fact that he could not accurately estimate what expenses might be incurred before the excavations were concluded. "Two costs we are unable to estimate at the present time, the payment for the gold and the freight to Philadelphia. We don't know how much gold we may find yet, and have no scales for weighing it, nor much idea of the value of gold per gram. Also no data on freight rates, and only a hazy idea of the weight we have."¹⁹ Mason then suggested to Jayne that an additional \$1,500 should cover expenses until their departure.

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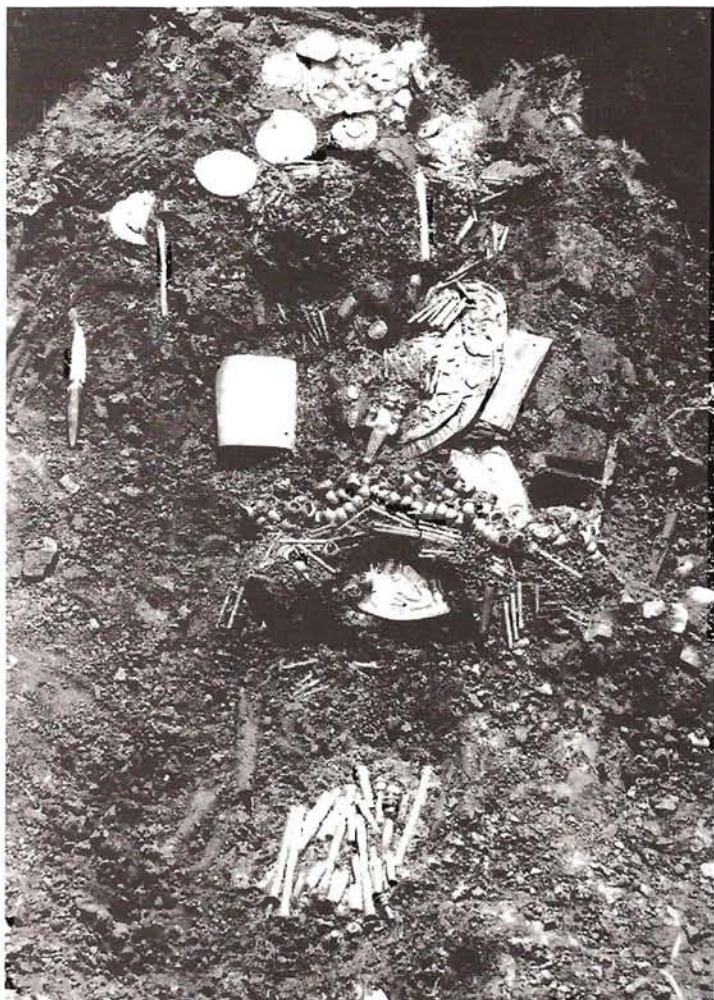


FIGURE 1.9. On March 27, 1940, this photograph was taken of the skeleton most lavishly adorned with gold jewelry, evidently the main occupant of Burial 11.

Mason then made some contingency plans in the event Jayne failed to raise the additional money. He told Jayne that the Cornings were willing to lend \$500 to the cause, and he could try to negotiate a loan with the Chase National Bank of the City of New York in Panama for the money that would still be needed to pay Miguel Conte for the gold. Mason figured that some of the gold could be held by



FIGURE 1.10. On the lowest level of Burial 11, at a depth of 3.3 m, three skeletons were placed together with a large quantity of pottery, stone celts, and some fine gold objects, including a large plaque.

the bank until the loan was repaid. In the end, Jayne wired the \$1,500.

The excavators proceeded to remove the bed of pottery sherds lining the bottom of the second level and continued digging down through the floor level of this second mass interment. After excavating about 0.3 m of earth they came upon the third, and what was to be the last, level of the

burial. Beneath yet another covering of pottery sherds, one of the first objects to be discovered was another large embossed gold plaque, similar to those of the middle level.

Somewhat surprised, Mason wrote Jayne suggesting that the burial on this lower level might be even richer than the one above: "This may be the only piece of gold, luckily hit at the first dig. But the probability is that there's much more. And from logic and local experience one would expect that the fellow at the bottom would be the main occupant of the grave and the most richly attired. . . . This new find may upset our plans [to leave for Philadelphia on April 17] though we have been going along so well that even if it proves pretty rich we may be able to follow them out."²⁰

Continuing the excavation, Mason's team found three skeletons on the floor of the pit (FIG. 1.7) (which was, at this lowest level, reduced in size to about 2.4 x 2.4 m) together with a number of ceramic vessels, some stone celts, and several other gold items, including a bat effigy pendant and some ear rods (FIG. 1.10). But there was only the single large plaque; the lowest level of the burial was much simpler than the middle one, which proved to be the major burial of the complex grave. The gold plaque was associated with the central skeleton, which rested on its side. The two flanking skeletons lay face down. Corning was unable to sex these skeletons, but did determine that one was a mature adult.

In some respects Mason was actually relieved to find that the burial in the lower level was not as rich or even richer in gold ornaments and other mortuary objects as that in the middle level. One concern was that it was near the end of the dry season and he was running out of time before the rains began. Another serious consideration was funding. If the lowest level of interments had been extremely rich in gold finds, Mason would have needed even more funding to pay Conte his half-share of the market value of the gold and the 1 percent export duty to the Panamanian government.

Return to Philadelphia

Plans had been made to pack the artifacts during the last few weeks at Sitio Conte and to depart from Panama City on April 17. For about ten days before departure, the team worked to close down the excavations. Mason hired more local workers to pack the sherds in newspaper and bunchgrass—a plant used to thatch roofs in the region—into 60 wooden boxes that they had constructed. They packed complete vessels into several larger wooden crates. Over three tons of artifacts were loaded onto oxcarts and transported to Penonomé, where they were transferred to trucks and delivered to Panama City. The trenches were refilled with dirt, as specified in the contract, to ensure the safety of cattle grazing on Conte property.

Mason and Conte made a division of the metal artifacts and other materials. In Panama City a jeweler weighed and evaluated the gold items, and determined that the Museum owed Conte \$1,611.93, half the value of gold bullion at the current market price in 1940. Mason also paid the export duty and arranged to ship all the artifacts C.O.D. except for the gold, which he opted to take with him aboard the steamer to New York City. Thousands of artifacts were sent back to The University Museum for analysis, conservation, and study.

Significance of the Data from Sitio Conte

The University Museum conducted only this one brief season at Sitio Conte, and Mason never wrote any comprehensive final report for the 1940 Panama Expedition. Whereas full reports of the Peabody Museum's work were published by Lothrop in 1937 and 1942, Mason's excavations are known only from a series of brief articles.²¹ One reason Mason never published the results of the excavations was that he felt they

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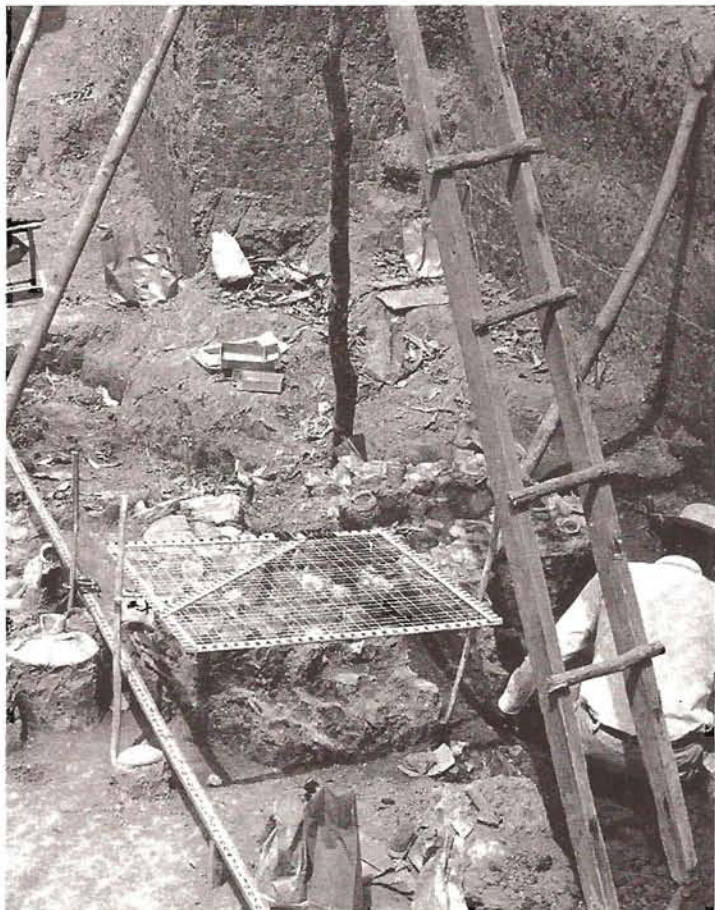


FIGURE 1.11. Expedition photographer and draftsman Robert Merrill designed a square grid for photographic recording by coordinates. Duplicate exposures were taken of each group of artifacts: the first with the grid in place, the second without it to show artifacts without obstruction.

only confirmed Lothrop's chronology for the site and did not reveal any new information or unique types of artifacts. Thus the Peabody materials from Sitio Conte are well known to scholars and public alike, whereas those recovered by Mason are known only to a handful of scholars.

Judged by today's standards, the pre-World War II investigations at Sitio Conte were somewhat primitive. The work of both Lothrop and Mason has been criticized for both lack of consistent control over artifact recording and unclear

field notes.²² There are obvious inconsistencies between Mason's diary, Merrill's field notes and drawings, Corning's final plan and section drawings, and Mason's articles about the excavations at Sitio Conte. Inconsistent data make it difficult to draw conclusions about Burial 11. Nevertheless, they were the first controlled excavations conducted in Panama and served to help establish a context and chronology for the masses of looted material in museums and private collections.

The archaeologists were faced with a complicated site for which it was difficult to work out associations and sequences. A number of factors at the site made excavating difficult. Seasonal flooding left skeletal and other perishable materials badly preserved, making it impossible to determine the sex or age of nearly half of the skeletons, and no skeletal material was able to be recovered for later study. Most of the pottery was smashed, probably ritually broken at the time of burial, and graves at the upper levels were often disturbed by later interments.

But, in fact, Mason's team did develop several innovative procedures to record artifacts. Merrill used a graduated string grid in much of his photography to record accurately the location of exposed artifacts, thereby providing photographs to scale (FIG. 1.11). Another photographic innovation was the use of color and black-and-white motion picture film to record the excavations (part of which forms the basis of the video accompanying the exhibition). That the site was excavated by professional archaeologists who recorded the context of their discoveries in their notes, drawings, and photographs renders the evidence from this site invaluable for the reconstruction of a long-vanished ancient Panamanian society.

The Spanish Chronicles: The Ethnohistoric Evidence

Both Lothrop's and Mason's interpretations of the mass burials excavated at Sitio Conte were heavily influenced by the accounts given by Spaniards who witnessed burials of Panamanian chiefs in the sixteenth century. Lothrop and Mason incorrectly dated Sitio Conte to A.D. 1300–1500 because they felt that the accounts of the Spaniards matched up so closely with the contents of the multiple graves at the site that the cemetery probably was in use until the time of the Conquest.²³

At the time of the Spanish Conquest (1515–1520), Panama was settled by a series of related, densely populated chiefdoms. The development of these societies can be traced back in time for over 1,000 years by archaeological evidence.²⁴

The Spaniards observed and recorded a great deal of information about contemporary Panamanian society. At the time of the Conquest the region around Sitio Conte was under the control of chief Natá and was one of the most powerful of a series of competing chiefdoms west of the Gulf of Panama.²⁵ These chiefdoms were organized into three basic social levels: an elite group that controlled most of the wealth and power; a far more numerous commoner group; and slaves.²⁶ Each chiefdom was ruled by a paramount chief (*queví*). The administration of the *queví*'s territory was assisted by secondary chiefs (*sacos*), who made up a hereditary noble class. Subordinate to the *sacos* were *cabras*, once commoner warriors who were rewarded with elite status and administrative powers in recognition of their achievements in battle.²⁷

The chiefs settled disputes and maintained order in their territories, led their warriors in battle, and supervised a network of trade relationships with their neighbors, far and near. Commoners were expected to provide labor for the elite, such as tending their fields and building their residences, in exchange for produce. When one chiefdom raided another, commoners served as warriors.²⁸ Slave laborers (*pacos*), who were captives either acquired in war or traded for commodities, worked as servants for the elite.²⁹

The elite class was distinguished by its wealth, privileges, powers, and symbols of status. Gold was the most important symbol of power and rank. Although some gold jewelry was worn by commoners, elite men and women wore an array of gold ornaments.³⁰ High-ranking warriors wore gold ornaments to battle, but the variety and elaborateness of a *queví*'s gold ornaments surpassed all others.³¹

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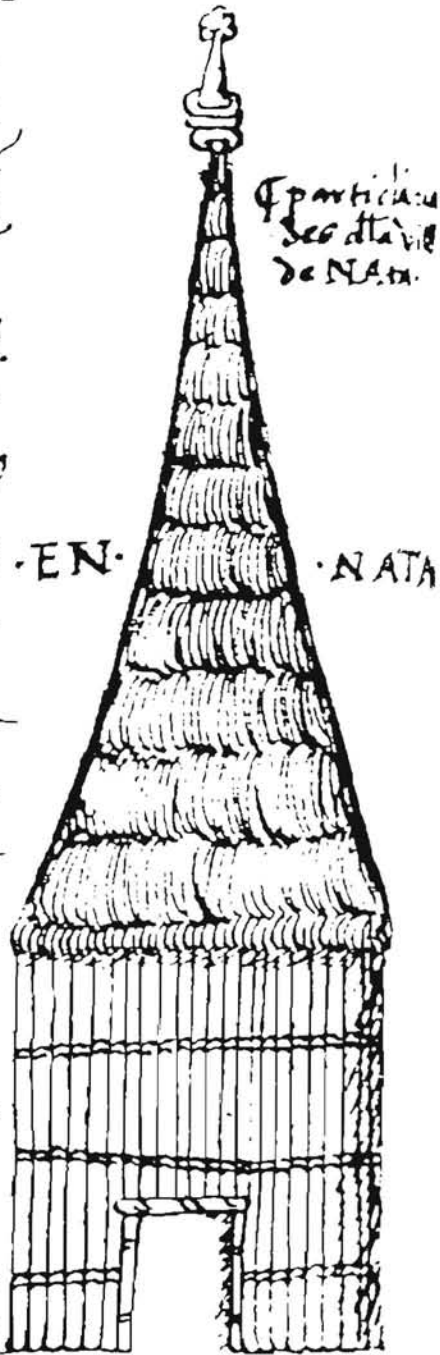


FIGURE 1.12. Drawing of a native house in the densely populated town of Natá, Coclé Province, Panama. Oviedo describes large round houses at Natá with thick cane walls and pointed thatched roofs decorated with pottery objects on top.

Each *queví* lived in a compound called a *bohío*, fortified by palisades or stone walls, that was the center of a town composed of the smaller thatched houses of the commoners (FIG. 1.12).³² A typical *bohío* contained several buildings, some to house warriors and retainers. But the largest and most elaborate of these served as the *queví*'s residence. Here the *queví* would hear disputes, hold ceremonies, and host lavish feasts.³³ There was also a treasury for the *queví*'s wealth, including a hoard of gold adornments, a mortuary containing the mummified bodies of chiefly ancestors, clothing, ceremonial paraphernalia, and foodstuffs such as maize, fruits, root crops, smoked venison, dried fish, and fermented beverages.³⁴

A *queví* normally married a woman of suitable elite status to be his principal and legitimate wife, called a *hespode*. The sons of these marriages inherited the *queví*'s property—the eldest usually assuming the office of his father.³⁵ Multiple secondary wives were also the norm for *quevís*. These women were commoners taken as concubines; from this pool of secondary wives, several were chosen to accompany a *queví* through sacrifice or suicide at the time of his death.³⁶ Marriages might be arranged between chiefdoms, with the *queví* of one group arranging to wed an elite woman of a neighboring group (FIG. 1.13).³⁷

The various Panamanian chiefdoms competed with one another in both trade and warfare to secure more wealth and resources that would openly demonstrate their powers and abilities, thereby reinforcing their authority.³⁸ In war, one objective of a *queví* was to capture his rival's *bohío* and add the gold booty within it to his own holdings. Control of trade networks gave *quevís* access to local goods and resources, as well as more distant items, such as emeralds from Colombia.³⁹

Several descriptive accounts of native mortuary practices throughout the Isthmus were recorded by sixteenth-century Spanish chroniclers, whose interest in these funerary



FIGURE 1.13. Drawing of chief Lacenta, a powerful chief in the Darién region of Panama. Lacenta is shown in the company of his retinue on the way to a visit or a feast.

customs stemmed from their unsuccessful search for rich gold mines in Panama, which forced them to settle for booty seized from the treasuries of chiefs or gold offerings dug up from native cemeteries. The Spaniards melted down these gold ornaments and assayed the metal as to its gold content. Much of it was sent to Spain in the form of gold bullion for payment of the royal levy.⁴⁰

The earliest information regarding native mortuary practices in Panama is found in the accounts of Columbus's fourth voyage to the New World in 1502–1503,

which describe the inhabitants of the Caribbean coast in the region between Almirante Bay and Nombre de Dios in northwestern Panama. Columbus's son Ferdinand, who accompanied his father on his last New World voyage, reported that when the Spaniards went ashore to reconnoiter they saw some native sepulchers housed in a wooden palace in which embalmed bodies were wrapped in cotton cloths.⁴¹ The bodies were covered with *guanín*, the native Caribbean (Arawak) term for an alloy of gold and copper, and other objects held in high esteem.⁴²

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During the years of the conquest of Panama, the Spaniards recorded details about funeral rites, which were reserved only for chiefs and other elite members of society.⁴³ The bodies of chiefs were either interred in mass burials along with selected members of their retinues or preserved and placed in mortuary chambers with the bodies of their chiefly ancestors.⁴⁴ In some regions of Panama, the mummified body of a chief was kept in a mortuary chamber for an indefinite period; possibly this was done to preserve the body until it could be buried at some future time. At Sitio Conte, the cemeteries were under water most of the year, so the deep complex graves could have been dug only during the dry season.⁴⁵ There were also some rare cases of cremation reported in Spanish records.⁴⁶

Several Spanish chroniclers describe chiefly burials in the sixteenth century similar to the mass burials that took place at Sitio Conte. In 1519, while leading an *entrada* into central Panama, the conquistador Gaspar de Espinosa recorded details of the burial of the powerful chief Parita, who controlled the territory south of the Río Santa María to Pocri on the Azuero Peninsula.⁴⁷ On the night before the funeral, Espinosa and other Spaniards entered the chief's house and observed the elaborate funeral preparations. Parita's body, which was lying in a hammock and was wrapped in fine painted cloths, had already been desiccated by smoking over fire. As usual the Spaniards were searching for gold and so removed the wrappings on Parita and found:

... he was all armored in gold, and on his head was a large gold basin, like a helmet, and around his neck four or five necklaces made like a gorget, and on his arms gold armor shaped like tubes ... and on his chest and back many pieces and plates and other pieces made like large coins, and a gold belt, surrounded by gold bells, and on his legs the same kind of gold armor, so

that in the way the said body of the dead chief was armored, it looked like a coat of mail or a braided coat of armor.⁴⁸

Espinosa's account also describes those who were to be buried with Parita. The mummified bodies of two other chiefs and two women were also arrayed with gold ornaments:

In the other two bundles there were two chiefs who they say had succeeded him [Parita] and had also died ... and they were covered in gold armor in the same way although not so rich or elegantly or with as much quantity as that which covered the said chief [Parita]. ... at his head was a dead woman, and at his feet another ... at the feet of both of them there were also placed many pieces of gold.⁴⁹

There were also 20 captives from competing chiefdoms, bound with ropes, waiting to be sacrificed and buried with Parita the next day.

Ethnohistoric sources also provide information about the motivations for these mass burials. According to Spanish historian Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdéz, burial customs varied considerably throughout the Isthmus. In the region between Natá and Panama City the wives and servants of a dead chief voluntarily killed themselves by poison to accompany him. Only chiefs and other members of the nobility were assured eternal life, with the exception of those who accompanied the chief in death who were also entitled to an afterlife:

When the chief dies all the laborers and domestic servants of his household are killed. Because they believe ... that the person who is killed when the chief dies will

go to heaven with him and there will serve him, give him food or drink, or do whatever job he did for the chief in his house when he was alive.⁵⁰

Another Spanish historian, Pascual de Andagoya, reports similar facts about a chief's companions in death:

It was the custom in the land that, when a chief died, the wives whom it was supposed he loved best, should voluntarily be buried with their husband, and, if the chief had them pointed out, this was done whether they liked it or not. These were the girls who had not been legitimate wives.⁵¹

Chronology and Interpretation of the Site

More than 50 years later, we can attempt to reconstruct the ceremony surrounding Burial 11 on the basis of the excavations at Sitio Conte and more recent archaeological data substantiated by sixteenth-century Spanish accounts. The chronological framework for this period has been established on the basis of the sequence of polychrome pottery and goldworking styles. The goldwork and polychrome ceramics from Sitio Conte date the use of the cemetery there from about A.D. 450–900. The first burials correspond to the earliest period of goldworking in Panama, about A.D. 450–700. Based on the motifs and style of the goldwork and the pottery, Mason's Burial 11 is now placed in the next period, about A.D. 700–900. Sometime over the next two centuries the cemetery was abandoned as a burial site, although domestic occupation in the area continued.⁵²

It must be stressed that the accounts written by sixteenth-century Spanish conquistadors and chroniclers describing indigenous Panamanian society date to a time at

least 600 years *after* the placement of Burial 11. Because that is a long time for social and political processes to remain unchanged, we must be cautious in using this rich body of information as a guide along with the archaeological evidence to theorize about life in Precolumbian Panama during the first millennium A.D.

Goldworking was central to the Precolumbian chiefdoms. Localized styles and motifs for goldwork soon developed, and several distinctive form and decorative traditions are recognized for Panama alone, including the Conte style seen in most of the gold artifacts from Sitio Conte. Ancient goldwork from Panama was traded into South America and northwest into Mesoamerica. Several famous gold objects found at the Maya site of Chichén Itzá in Yucatan probably originated in Panama.⁵³

Although the earliest evidence of metallurgy in the New World comes from Peru in the second millennium B.C., by the first few centuries A.D. the technology had spread northward to the Colombia-Panama-Costa Rica area from the Andes.⁵⁴ Thereafter, however, distinctive goldworking techniques developed in Panama and northern South America, including lost-wax casting, gold-copper alloying, and depletion gilding (see Appendices A and B). It is assumed that the ancient peoples of Panama utilized gold acquired either by placer mining from local alluvial deposits or by panning.⁵⁵ They also obtained gold, copper, and other materials, such as emeralds, by trade with peoples in Colombia.⁵⁶

Archaeological evidence indicates that chiefdoms were the political form of Prehispanic political organization in central Panama in A.D. 700–900, when Burial 11 was placed in the Sitio Conte cemetery. Chiefdoms are reflected in the grave size and the type and quantity of goods found in the burials from this period at Sitio Conte.⁵⁷ In the multiple burials excavated at the site, a paramount chief can be identified by the special attention lavished on one skeleton at the time

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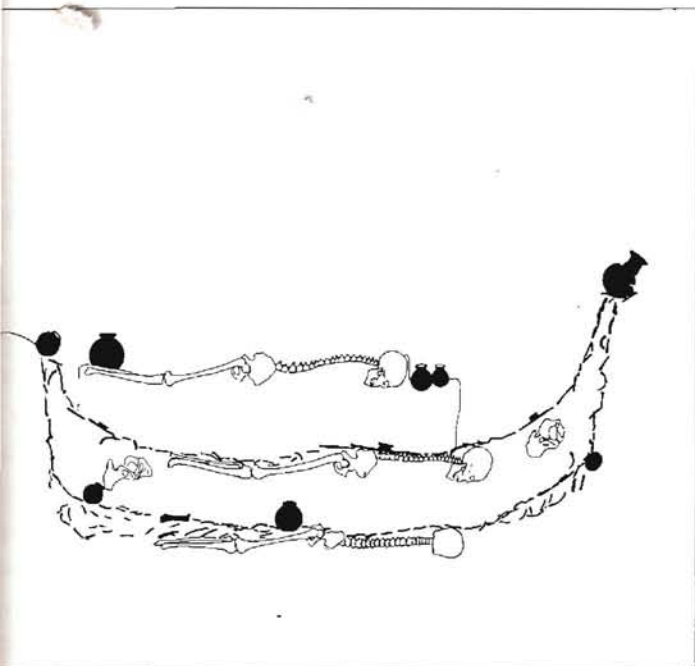


FIGURE 1.14. Section of Burial 11 showing the relationship between the three burial levels.

of burial. When identifiable, these skeletons were always adult males.⁵⁸ Judging from the amount and quality of the grave furnishings associated with one skeleton in Burial 11, it seems certain that Mason excavated the grave of a paramount chief.

Lothrop thought that the grave companions of the paramount chief were the wives and retainers who were selected "to accompany their lords into another world."⁵⁹ Mason was in complete agreement with Lothrop when he wrote:

According to historical reports burial seems to have been limited to the chiefs who were interred in large graves together with their regalia and many other persons, probably slaves, captives, retainers, and favorite women; these were stupefied and then buried alive.⁶⁰

But Mason also offered an alternate interpretation specifically to deal with the skeletons in Burial 11, who, in addition to the paramount chief, were associated with large gold plaques, which according to Spanish accounts were the marks of chiefs. Mason suggested that "in such cases where graves contain bodies of a number of persons of apparently high social position, these were chiefs and warriors slain in a single battle."⁶¹ Mason doubted that subordinate chiefs would be sacrificed to accompany the dead paramount chief, although he was aware that "in Mexico, sacrifice was an honorable death which was welcomed even by men of high rank."⁶²

The eight skeletons on the upper level were accompanied by few grave goods and were therefore probably commoners. All of those sexed were male, so they might have been non-elite warriors, servants, captives, or slaves, and were probably sacrificed.

In the main burial on the middle level, the eleven companions of the paramount chief were arrayed with large quantities of gold ornaments, indicating that they were from the elite segment of society. In addition to the paramount chief, two skeletons were associated with large gold plaques; they were possibly subordinate chiefs. One of the skeletons on the middle level was identified by Corning as "probably female," suggesting a paramount chief and his retinue.

The three unsexed individuals buried on the lower level of Burial II were adorned with some gold jewelry, including a large gold plaque, indicating that they might be subordinate chiefs either killed in battle with the paramount chief or sacrificed to accompany him, although it is possible that the lower interment level predates the other two and was the burial of the paramount chief's ancestor accompanied by two of his retinue. Mason recognized this possibility but contended that it was more likely that all three interment levels were made at one time. It is interesting to note, however, that the north and south pottery-lined walls of the upper and middle levels did not extend down to the lower level (FIG. 1.14).

The End of the Ancient Panamanian Chiefdoms

From 1515 to 1520 the Spaniards fought to defeat the natives of central Panama. In their quest for gold, the Spaniards waged major military campaigns against the chiefdoms in central Panama. Although the Indians had greater numbers and were by all accounts fierce and experienced fighters, they could not withstand the force of European weapons. One by one the chiefdoms fell—their rulers killed, their treasuries looted. A combination of high death tolls in battle, forced labor at the hands of Spanish captors, and the decimation of the native population by new diseases effectively destroyed the Precolumbian cultures of the region.

Although we will never know the name of the paramount chief interred with all his splendid array of gold ornaments and colorful pottery, surrounded by his companions in death, Mason's excavations provide us with a glimpse into Panamanian society as it flourished more than a thousand years ago and show the continuities between that society and the one encountered—and so quickly destroyed—by the Spaniards some 600 years later.