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## ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION IN THE PROVINCE OF COCLÉ, PANAMÁ

For the past century ancient Indian graves in Chiriquí, the southwest province of Panamá, have been systematically looted by the natives. The vast amount of gold jewelry thus obtained has for the most part been melted down, but many pottery vessels, figurines and carved stone objects have reached our museums. The most important collections belong to Harvard, Pennsylvania and Yale Universities and to the U. S. National Museum.

Among the Chiriquí finds are a few pottery vessels and gold ornaments which had been obtained by trade from what is now the Province of Coclé. For many years these were interpreted as the products of unusually able artisans rather than as samples of a different and more vigorous culture.<sup>1</sup> In 1925–26, however, Mr. A. Hyatt Verrill discovered in Coclé a large enclosure outlined by crudely carved stone columns, and his excavations in adjacent rubbish beds established the general nature of Coclé remains. In 1928 the Peabody Museum of Harvard University secured by purchase a large collection of jewelry from a burial ground located several miles away from the Verrill site. Arrangements were then made with the landowner and permission obtained from the government to conduct excavations, which were carried out during the dry seasons of 1930, 1931 and 1933. Two archaeological sites were investigated, one near Palo Verde<sup>2</sup> and the other on the banks of the Rio Grande de Coclé.<sup>3</sup>

The scene of our principal excavations is known as the Sitio Conte. Here refuse had accumulated over an area of several acres on an ancient living surface, now covered by a yard of loam deposited by the river. Under the refuse were graves. Both the discovery and destruction of a large part of the archaeological remains were due to a radical change in the course of the river, which, cutting into its new banks, exposed objects of gold to the keen eyes of passing natives.

From Spanish records of the Sixteenth Century we learn that burial in Panamá was a rite reserved to the chiefs and nobility while the bodies of the common people and slaves were carried to some deserted spot and there abandoned. Favorite wives and retainers, however, often accompanied their masters into the grave. In certain districts they took poison during the funeral feast and in other places they were buried alive while stupefied by alcohol. The first custom prevailed at the Sitio Conte, for the position of the bodies indicated that they were dead when interred.

Graves at the Sitio Conte often were superimposed one over another, the longest sequence embracing eight separate burials. The most recent graves, in contrast to those of an earlier period, were small, contained a single body in a flexed position and were meagerly furnished with funeral offerings. It is probable that the inhabitants of the Sitio Conte were impoverished by tribute when these graves were dug, for at the

<sup>1</sup> The outstanding studies of the archaeology of Chiriquí have been published by W. H. Holmes (1888) and G. G. MacCurdy (1911).

<sup>2</sup> Under the direction of Mr. Douglas Byers.

<sup>3</sup> Mr. H. B. Roberts was in charge during 1930 and 1931, the writer in 1933.



FIG. 1.—POLYCHROME PLATE AND CARAFE. SITIO CONTE, COCLÉ, PANAMÁ



FIG. 2.—GOLD PLAQUES FOR ATTACHMENT TO CLOTHING. SITIO CONTE, COCLÉ, PANAMÁ. WIDTH OF *d*,  $5\frac{1}{8}$  IN.

time of the Spanish conquest one of the most powerful chiefs in Panamá lived only a short distance away. This ruler and his ancestors had subdued a majority of the natives in the vicinity.

Graves of another type were of greater size and age. They contained two bodies, male and female, buried in an extended position, characteristically face downward, head to the northeast and arms flexed. Jewelry of stone, bone, copper or gold often



FIG. 3.—GOLD PLAQUE. SITIO CONTE, COCLÉ, PANAMÁ. WIDTH,  $11\frac{3}{4}$  IN.

had been placed with the dead, as well as 30 or 40 pottery vessels, tools, weapons and fabrics.

The most ancient graves were the largest, measuring up to a dozen feet on a side. On the flat rectangular floor there were one or more large fire-marked stone slabs upon which the owner of the grave had been placed. It is recorded that some tribes in Panamá did not bury their chiefs but kept them in a special house. To preserve the bodies they were placed on stone benches and dried out by fires maintained for several days. At the Sitio Conte it would have been possible to dig graves only during the dry season, for the land is flooded during the rains. Hence it is probable that the bodies of chiefs were temporarily preserved by fire until interment could take place and that the stone slabs used in the process subsequently were buried with the body.

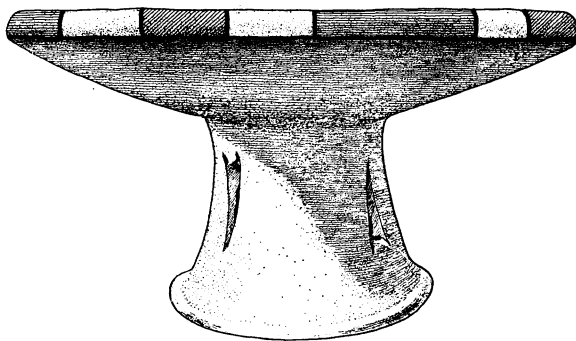
In addition to the owner, the large graves contained individuals of both sexes ranging in number from three to over a score. Sometimes we found so many skeletons



that there was not enough room for them all on the floor of the grave and they had been piled up one over the other. Furthermore, funeral furnishings were introduced in such large quantities that they completely roofed over the dead. There usually were at least 200 pottery vessels—plates, bowls, carafes, bottles and jars—as well as all kinds of weapons and tools. Occasional vacant spaces probably once were filled with perishable materials such as provisions, fabrics or objects of wood.



FIG. 4.—POTTERY BOWL PAINTED BLACK, BLUE AND TWO SHADES OF RED. SITIO CONTE, COCLÉ, PANAMÁ. WIDTH, 8 IN.



Almost all the bodies in large graves had been provided with articles of personal adornment, with great lavishness in the case of the principal occupant. There were necklaces of bone, animal teeth or of gold, headbands of gold, cuffs and greaves of gold, nose rings of stone or gold, golden spools for insertion in the ear lobes, and long sticks of gold or of stone tipped with gold for the same purpose. Pendants were cast in gold, carved from manatee bones or brightly colored stones such as agate. Clothing was adorned with plaques of gold or gilded copper which sometimes were as much as a foot in diameter. The smaller plaques came in sets running up to two dozen in number which probably were sewn to garments so as to form simple patterns. Shirts

decorated in this fashion have been found in the coastal deserts of Perú where the dry climate has preserved the fabrics.

All evidence now available indicates that Coclé culture was of late date, that is to say, it flourished in the centuries just before the arrival of the Spaniards. This conclusion is based primarily on the fact that the most ancient graves contain examples of metallurgical technique known to be comparatively recent. It is borne out by stylistic links with other regions where chronological sequence of the arts has been determined. It is confirmed by Spanish descriptions of the natives which portray a material culture corresponding to what excavation has brought to light.

Coclé designs are noteworthy for their balance and vigorous curved lines. Like most New World art, the patterns are largely derived from life forms, conventionalized at times past recognition. It is our present impression that the painted pottery is most closely related to that of eastern South America but that it also has drawn inspiration from southern Central America and northern Perú. It is generally agreed that most aboriginal processes and alloys used in metalworking were invented in Perú and Bolivia and thence spread north and south. Coclé metal objects are linked to Perú both in technique and design, but are more closely connected with the Quimbaya and Sinú regions in Colombia whence many articles came in trade. While it is possible to point out connections between Coclé and other cultures, the quality of Coclé art must be regarded as a purely local development, ranking among the foremost in indigenous America.

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FIG. 5.—DESIGN FROM PLATE PAINTED IN RED, PURPLE AND BLACK.  
SITIO CONTE, COCLÉ, PANAMÁ. WIDTH, 11½ IN.