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THE CIRCUM-CARIBBEAN TRIBES

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# THE TRIBES WEST AND SOUTH OF THE PANAMA CANAL<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

The tribes west and south of the Panamá Canal appear to have been fundamentally similar culturally to those of the *Talamanca* Division, but 16th-century data reveal certain differences that warrant their separate treatment (maps 2 and 5).

Beginning with the first Conquest of the Panamanian Savannas (Espinoza, 1514, 1516, 1519; cf. also Oviedo y Valdés, 1851-55), Spanish writers made clear statements that the region was inhabited by peoples speaking languages which were mutually unintelligible. Some must have spoken *Chibchan*; others perhaps did not. That the indigenous population was practically obliterated before the end of the century, and that as early as 1600 enclaves of people speaking *Guaymí* and other dialects were moved into the area by the Spanish administrators, are reasons for seriously questioning whether the tribal identities of recent groups and of neighboring enclaves are any indication of the affinities of the population of the 16th century. In view of certain characteristics of their culture, these people are tentatively considered as a larger unit in a general *Guaymí* group.

## CULTURE

### SUBSISTENCE ACTIVITIES

Apparently the food supply was plentiful and the people cultivated and preserved maize, peppers, manioc, sweetpotatoes, calabashes and gourds, and possibly squashes and other plants.

Meat, preserved by smoking, was supplied by hunting deer, peccaries, iguana and other lizards, sea turtles, curassows, ducks, and small mammals. Game and fish were taken with nets made of various kinds of fiber or of hide thongs. The game was driven by dogs into these nets or sometimes into pits. During the dry season the grass was occasionally fired and a great number of animals were driven down upon a line of hunters armed with darts or bows and arrows. Birds were shot over

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<sup>1</sup> A more complete summary of these data may be found in Lothrop (1937).

decoys or caught in nets. Fish occupied an important place in the diet, and shellfish were eaten.

Salt was not used in cooking but a lump was licked between mouthfuls of food. It was an article of commerce. Chicha, a beer made of maize or fruit juices, was the principal drink.

#### VILLAGES AND HOUSES

The people lived in towns which the Europeans named after the principal chiefs or caciques. Some of the towns had as many as 1,500 people. They were compactly built and often fortified. The log palisades or fences, which usually sprouted and grew into high dense hedges, were said to be intended to keep out wild animals, but the Spaniards found them effective barriers to military operations.

Oviedo y Valdés reports round houses with vertical walls and a conical roof. Chiefs' houses were of great size and were divided into many rooms. Espinosa states that he fed his expeditionary force for 4 months on the provisions discovered in the residence of the Chieftain Natá. These stores included the smoked carcasses of 300 deer, dried fish, and fowl.

Houses were furnished with hammocks or low benches which were used as beds. The beds were made up with cotton blankets or possibly sheets of bark cloth. Baskets with lids, a great variety of pottery, gourds, metates, and possibly wooden log mortars were part of the equipment of every house.

#### CLOTHING AND ORNAMENTS

It is probable that the common people went naked or nearly so. The caciques and other influential men were dressed in cotton cloaks studded with gold plaques. Archeological evidence adds small decorated aprons to the list of garments. The women wore a cotton skirt or apron, reaching at least to the knees. Information from eastern Panamá suggests that possibly longer skirts were worn by women of rank.

Except for the bearded warriors of the town of Escorúa, both sexes everywhere removed all the facial and body hair. Everyone painted and tattooed himself. Tattooing indicated rank, and each chief had his own device, which was likewise used by his subjects. There were also special marks for slaves. Outstanding articles of personal adornment were various types of jewelry and precious stones, helmets of gold, greaves, circlets, feather headdresses, nose plugs, stone, bone, and gold ear spools of several types, necklaces, and pendants of metal, stone, and carved bone. Apparently some of these ornaments were worn only by persons of rank as both insignia and identifying ornaments.

## MANUFACTURES

All industries were well developed, and the people had a plentiful supply of cloth, baskets, carved wooden tools and ornaments, pottery, and such. Metalworking was very highly developed, and many techniques of casting, plating, soldering, and cold-hammering were known and used in making the most intricate ornaments.

Fire was made with three sticks, two of which were lashed together and placed on the ground. The point of the third stick or drill was set in the notch between the two and rotated between the palm of the hand.

## SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

Native communities were divided into four social classes. The supreme chiefs, such as Parita, Natá, and Escoria, exercised despotic authority and lived in great luxury with many wives and retainers. They were surrounded by a nobility, who won their titles in battle or inherited them if they dedicated themselves to war. These men had subjects and property of their own, often living in their separate villages, subject to the call of their head chief. Of the common people little is known except that they were allowed to marry into the nobility. Slaves were prisoners of war. Their faces were either branded or tattooed, and a front tooth was often extracted. In spite of its complexity this society seems to have been less developed than the most advanced cultures in South America and Meso-America.

## WARFARE

War was a recognized activity of a large portion of the male population, and all the towns supported a permanent army. Weapons were bows and arrows, darts, and spears. Statements that the arrows were not poisonous are direct and precise. Spear throwers to project darts are recorded from Darién (Oviedo y Valdés, 1851-55) but curiously not from the Savanna. As they occur in the protohistoric graves, it is possible that the 16th-century Indians knew and used them. Clubs are illustrated in the gold figures from the region, but the Spaniards make no specific reference to them.

## BALL GAME

These Indians had a native ball court (*juego de pelota*), which, however, definitely was not of Mexican or Central American type, for it was compared to the *Arawak* ball courts seen by the Spaniards in the West Indies, a type which differs radically from those of the mainland. In Panamá the ball court was reported from the base of the Asuero Peninsula, in the land governed by Cacique Jabraba.

## CEREMONIAL LIFE

Of ritual associated with such functions as birth, puberty, marriage, divorce, dances, games, war, and religion little can be said except that no detailed account has come down to us. The complex symbolism found on archeological objects together with the meager observations of the Spaniards, however, suggests a rich development.

## BURIAL

No descriptions of the disposal of the corpses of common people have come to light. Burial in the ground was a right which may have been confined to the chiefs, nobility, and their wives and retainers. In 1519 the Spaniards discovered and described the body of the Cacique Parita prepared for burial in sumptuous array, including gold ornaments which weighed 355 pounds. The most famous burial ground, today known as Sitio Conte, is situated on the Río Grande de Coché. Here the graves of important men in protohistoric times have been exhumed. (See Lothrop, this volume, p. 147.)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Espinosa, 1514, 1516, 1519; Oviedo y Valdés, 1851-55; Lothrop, 1937.