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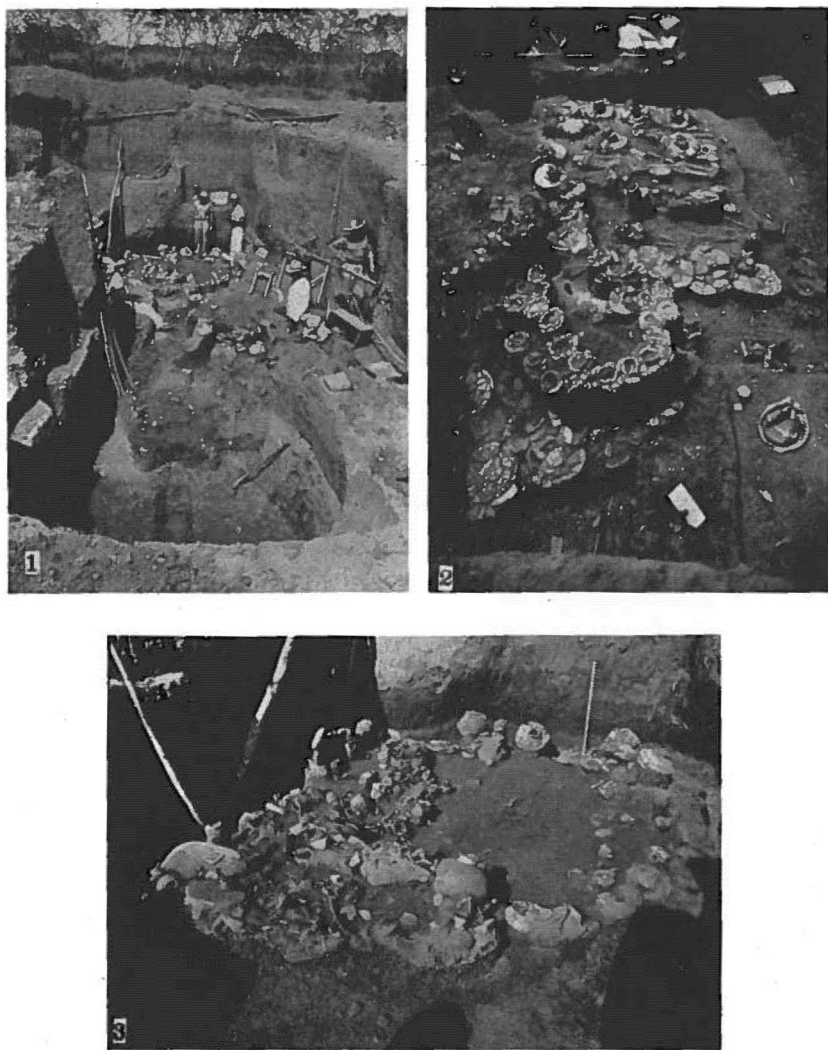


FIG. 1—The excavation pit, about 16 by 7 meters. Grave 19 is seen in the background at a depth of 3.3 m. Grave 18, at about 2.8 m. depth, in the center. In the foreground, dry-season water-level at about 4 m. depth.

FIG. 2—Graves 7 and 8, showing skeletons and broken pottery vessels. Note two levels of different pottery types in foreground.

FIG. 3—Grave 19, the largest, 2.8 by 3.3 m. In the large bare area is the principal skeleton with several pottery censers. Several metates are seen at the far left.

NEW EXCAVATIONS AT THE SITIO CONTE, COCLÉ, PANAMÁ

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The Panamá Expedition of the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, excavated at the Sitio Conte from January 25 to April 14, 1940. The personnel of the party consisted of J. Alden Mason, John B. Corning, Robert H. Merrill, Julia H. Corning, and John A. Mason, Jr.

Earlier excavations had been made at the Sitio Conte by the Peabody Museum of Harvard University in 1930, 1931, and 1933. One report on these expeditions has already been published by S. K. Lothrop,¹ the leader of the 1933 expedition. This treats of the historical background, excavations at the Sitio Conte, and artifacts and ornaments; Part II, on the pottery, is now in press. Dr. and Mrs. Lothrop accompanied the University Museum Expedition for the first few weeks, and much of the credit for the successful results is due to them; the Expedition wishes herewith to express its appreciation to them.

A succinct digest of the important points and conclusions in the above-mentioned publication may not be amiss here. The Sitio Conte, named for the owners, the Conte family of Penonomé, lies not far from this town, about one hundred miles west of Panamá City and some ten miles from the Pacific Ocean. In a flat open grazing country, there are no surface indications to distinguish it from any field in hundreds of surrounding square miles, since the aborigines made neither masonry edifices, mounds, nor pyramids. About the year 1900 the Río Grande de Coclé cut through and revealed the cemetery which covers five or six acres.

Our knowledge of the aboriginal peoples is limited to reports by the Spanish conquerors, supplemented by the results of archaeological work. These tally so closely as to indicate that the cemetery was used until the time of the Conquest, the people the same as those found there at that time. Their modern descendants or relatives are probably the Guaymí. In the small region of Panamá west of the Canal there seem to have been three distinct cultures, those of Coclé, Veraguas, and Chiriquí. There is practically

¹ Samuel Kirkland Lothrop: Coclé, An Archaeological Study of Central Panama, Part I. Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Vol. VII. Cambridge, 1937.

no resemblance to the cultures of México and Guatemala, little more to those of Perú, and not much specific to Colombia. Dr. Lothrop estimates that the period of this cemetery was roughly 1300-1500 A.D.

According to historical reports burial seems to have been limited to the chiefs who were interred in large graves together with their regalia and with many other persons, probably slaves, captives, retainers, and favorite women; these were stupefied and then buried alive. As the graves are under water-level most of the year, the deep "rich" graves could have been dug only at the height of the dry season, necessitating in many cases preservation of the body for many months during which time, presumably, much mortuary pottery was made. Most of the pottery was intentionally broken, probably by trampling, so that it requires restoration. So numerous are the graves that in making a late one, other earlier graves at higher levels were often cut through and sometimes, apparently, robbed of some of their fine furnishings, which were placed in the new deep grave. These factors greatly complicate the working-out of sequences and associations.

Probably only a small part of this cemetery has been excavated. The work of the University Museum Expedition was limited to two trenches. In one, towards the periphery of the site, pottery was found down to water level at about thirteen feet, and several burials, but none of great interest. The work centered principally in a large excavation about fifty-four feet (16.2 m.) in length, and less than half of that in maximum width. In few places was it carried down to the dry-season water-table at about thirteen feet (4 m.) below the surface.

About thirty graves or caches were found in this area, ranging from a few pottery vessels and/or stones without skeletons, to large graves with many occupants. Nine of these graves were of considerable size, the largest, at a depth of eleven feet (3.3 m.), measuring ten by eleven feet (2.8 x 3.3 m.) in area; the larger two contained eight and twenty-three skeletons respectively. Most of the grave floors were rather large and relatively flat with slight horizontal concavity except at the edges, but the largest grave found was extraordinary in many respects.

This grave, No. 11, was extremely concave or cup-shaped. Its upper rims were found at five feet (1.5 m.) from the surface. The sides connected with the middle floor level six feet (1.8 m.) lower. The diameter at the rim was about fourteen feet (4.2 m.), that of the floor about eight feet (2.4 m.). This made the side walls at an average slope of nearly sixty degrees and, being slightly concave, the slope was naturally even greater near the top. Nevertheless these sides were lined to a thickness of possibly a foot with pottery, mainly broken but with a number of intact vessels, imbedded in the clay. These pottery-lined sides were missing to the east and west, but there was no evidence that they had been cut away by later aboriginal grave-

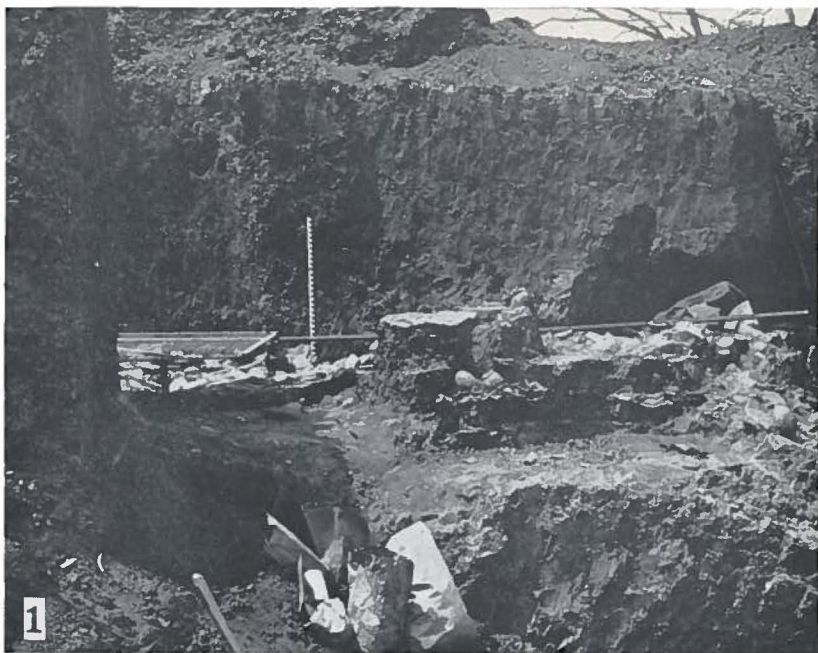


FIG. 1—A grave, No. 12, consisting of four levels. At the left, the use of the grid in plotting and photography is shown.

FIG. 2—Graves 11 and 12. The latter, at a higher level, is at the upper left. The upper level of No. 11, with eight skeletons, is in the center. The northern section of the steep side-wall, lined with pottery, is at the rear; the southern side-wall, in the foreground has been removed. The side-walls connected with the middle level.



FIG. 1—Several levels of Grave 12, showing broken condition of pottery, mainly inverted plates.
FIG. 2—The largest group of unbroken pottery vessels. Grave 14.
FIG. 3—The gold adornment of the principal occupant of Grave 11. Five large plaques, two cuffs, two pendants, and numbers of beads, ear-rods, bells, chisels, and small disks.

digging. There were two other interment levels of the same eight-foot diameter, one eighteen inches (45 cm.) above the main one, another a foot (30 cm.) lower, seven feet (2.1 m.) from the rim, and only one foot above water-level at about thirteen feet (3.9 m.) from the surface.

On the lower level lay three skeletons, on the middle one twelve, and on the upper, eight. Most of them lay parallel, east and west. The lower and middle levels were profusely covered with pottery vessels, mainly broken, those on the middle level being continuous with the pottery lining of the grave sides. The skeletons on these levels were also more lavishly furnished with gold ornaments; one of the eight large gold plaques accompanied one of the skeletons on the lower level. Most of the gold jewelry, however, was found with one skeleton on the middle level, evidently the chief occupant of the grave. The skeletons on the upper level were not so well furnished, with little pottery or gold, but a number of pendants of agate, which were few or missing in the lower levels.

Evidently the grave was made in the following manner. The excavation was made nearly to water-level and on the flat floor three bodies were laid with their adornment, together with quantities of offerings of pottery and other objects which were trampled on and broken. These were then covered over with a foot of earth. On this new level the main interment was made. As the number both of the bodies and of offerings was very great the former were laid in six pairs, each with a lower and an upper, and the pottery vessels were not only laid thickly on the floor but imbedded to the full height of the side walls. The floor was then covered with eighteen inches of earth, and eight more bodies of persons presumably of lesser rank were laid on the new surface, together with a little more pottery.

It is not impossible that the grave was filled up after each level and later reopened, but far more likely that all interments on the three levels were made at one time; possibly a future study of the pottery and other artifacts will determine this question. The skeletons on the upper level probably were sacrifices, but most of those on the lower levels wore some gold jewelry and other adornment, and three in addition to the principal occupant had great disks of gold, the mark of chiefs. To my mind it is unlikely that sub-chiefs were sacrificed to accompany their "king," although it may be that, as in México, sacrifice was an honorable death which was welcomed even by men of high rank. But it is more plausible that, in such cases where graves contain bodies of a number of persons of apparently high social position, these were of chiefs and warriors slain in a single battle.

Another grave, No. 12, consisted of four levels separated by only a few inches, and with only a few skeletons. This, like all except No. 11, was flat-bottomed.

The pottery is of many different types, as regards both form and decoration, and it is evident that several minor culture-periods are represented, in addition to trade pieces from other nearby related cultures, but no study of these has as yet been possible. Much of the pottery is painted in polychrome in which purple and blue are prominent, but plain red and plain black mortuary vessels are found, as well as quantities of heavy unornamented utilitarian ware. Painted designs vary from simple geometric to complex pictorial. There is almost no likeness to Chiriquí, and only a slight resemblance to the Quimbaya region of Colombia. Negative painting or "lost-color" ware is apparently entirely absent. Pottery figurines are very rare, and only two or three pottery whistles in animal form were found; these may turn out to be trade pieces. The most characteristic form is probably a large round plate with a ring-base; these were almost always interred upside-down. Rectangular plates are also found, and some high pedestal bases. Carafes with high narrow flaring necks are probably second in importance. Effigy vessels are common, sometimes very naturalistic, more often much modified.

Stone metates, always undecorated and generally with tripod feet, and quasi-cylindrical mullers or manos were found in some of the graves. Polished stone celts are common, always of a dark stone and of many sizes and shapes. The blades are always sharp, from straight to very convex, and sometimes beveled on only one edge; often the butts are unfinished. Quantities of projectile points were buried in the graves, sometimes scattered, but more often in caches on the abdomens of skeletons where they were probably interred in pouches. Generally these caches consist of points, sometimes several hundred, of the same color, either red, green, or translucent cream, and of small size, about one inch (2-3 cm.). Larger points, up to three inches, are of darker red, gray or black stone, and occur in smaller caches or independently. All of these are very rudely flaked, like modern Lacandon arrowpoints, without any retouching, and possibly were made exclusively for mortuary purposes.

The absence of jade is noteworthy. In contrast to the Tairona (Santa Marta, Colombia) region, beads of stone are rare; the only ones found were a few of green stone in one grave. Pendants of agate are rather common; these are of two main types, either in animal form, or broad-winged, possibly very conventionalized bats, very much like a form found sporadically from Venezuela to Oaxaca.

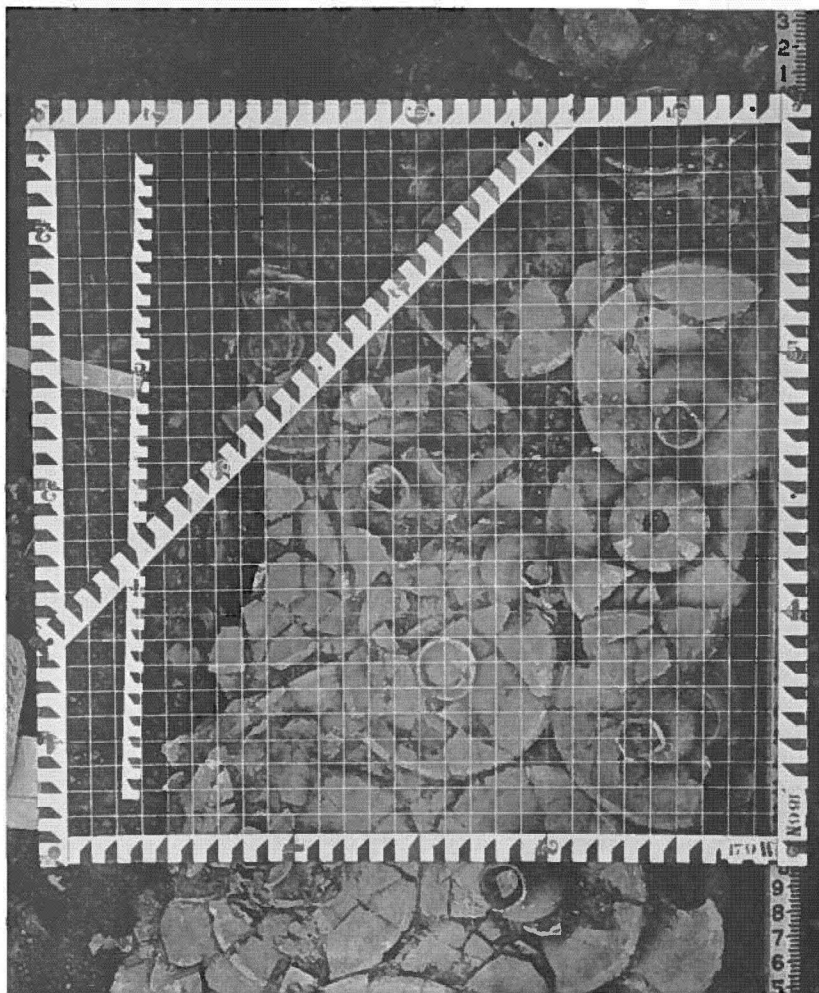
Several caches of spines of the sting-ray were found and quantities of animal teeth, the latter drilled for stringing as necklaces. These are of shark, peccary, carnivores, possibly of monkey, and possibly even of humans.

The ornaments of gold are of course the most spectacular objects excavated. These consist of plaques or disks, sequins, cuffs, ear-rods, nose-clips,



FIG. 1—Gold ornaments from the Sitio Conte, Coclé, Panamá. Found with the principal occupant of Grave 11. Large plaque, pair of repoussé cuffs and pair of plain cuffs, gold head for whale's tooth, under-side of animal figure pendant, human figure pendant, eight chisels, series of ear-rods and tips.

FIG. 2—Gold ornaments from the Sitio Conte, Coclé, Panamá. Found with the principal occupant of Grave 11. Four large plaques, animal figure with emerald in its back, pair of cuffs, small disks or sequins.



The use of the grid in plotting and photographing grave contents. The white strings mark tenths of feet. The edges of the grid are placed on surveyed coordinate points. Technique developed and grid made by Robert H. Merrill.

pendants, chisels, bells, beads, and bangles. The disks are of various sizes. Eight of heavy almost pure gold are from eight to ten inches (19.5-25.5 cm.) in diameter; one of these is oval, seven by ten inches (18 x 26 cm.). These and a pair of large cuffs, seven inches (17.3 cm.) long, are decorated with repoussé ornamentation. All were found in the large grave, No. 11, five of the plaques on one pair of skeletons, and possibly on one of them, and one on each of three other skeletons. Five other smaller repoussé disks four inches (10.5-11.3 cm.) in diameter were also found nested together with this chief. On his body was also found a large pendant over four inches (11 cm.) long in the form of a conventionalized crocodile with a large emerald over an inch in diameter set in the back. The setting of precious stones in gold is a technique rare in America and found especially in Coclé and in Oaxaca. The emerald probably originated in Colombia. Many of the pendants, nose-clips, and bells are exquisite examples of aboriginal gold-casting and of art. The "chisels" are small, with one pointed end and one short blade, but were probably not utilitarian. The beads are of many types and sizes, including spherical, ring and tubular. The ear-rods, some of which were found in situ at the sides of the skulls and others in caches, are tubular; the tips are of many different designs and of admirable non-pictorial art. Some are all gold, others have shafts of green stone, and probably other shafts were of wood or rosin.

Among the most interesting, unique, and exquisite objects are animal or human figures carved of bone, ivory or copal rosin with applied gold onlay features such as feet, claws, tails, arms and hands, ears, and crests. Other similar objects are whales' teeth with gold heads like gold-headed canes.