

Proceedings
OF THE
*Eighth American Scientific
Congress*

HELD IN WASHINGTON

May 10-18, 1940

Under the Auspices of
THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



VOLUME II
ANTHROPOLOGICAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
WASHINGTON
1942

This volume has been prepared and edited
in the Secretariat of the Eighth American
Scientific Congress, in collaboration with the
Division of International Conferences of the
Department of State

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DATA ON ARCHEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS MADE IN NICARAGUA

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During seven years spent in my native country of Nicaragua I dedicated myself exclusively to the study of our pre-Columbian civilizations or culture. My search for tombs, monuments, vestiges of temples or any form of architecture, pictographs, et cetera, led me into many remote and well-nigh inaccessible places. I travelled by water, paddling a canoe up many of the small streams and rivers of the Atlantic Coast, then over a thousand miles on horse-back through Chontales, Esteli, Jinotega, Segovia, and on through the west; through León, back to Managua, up into the mountains of Jinotepe and Diriamba, then down through Rivas, the Islands of Ometepe, Zapatera, Solentiname, Isla del Muerto, all these islands being on Lake Nicaragua, and finally back to Granada, my starting point.

I first made my headquarters in the beautiful old Indian town of Juigalpa, and from there I investigated the surrounding country during a period of over one year without returning once to what we are wont to call civilization.

I found only one kind of burial in Chontales. These were mounds of stone, some carefully concealed by large quantities of earth thrown over them, others just huge piles of stone thrown up over the place where the bones and objects lay. These mounds are often difficult to detect as they do not always have any superficial indication of what they are. The surrounding terrain is full of hills and small rolling mounds very similar to the gentle slopes of the sides of the larger cairns. Often on the side which faces the East (the bodies are buried for the most part lying with the head to the east) there is found a marking stone, a sort of pillar sunk well into the ground so that only a few inches are visible. If there are any fragments of pottery, arrows of flint, or stone hatchets near, there is invariably a burial. But many times these cairns contain absolutely nothing but broken pieces of stone and terracotta. I found mounds varying in size from a few feet in circumference to as much as two hundred feet. Their height varied from surface level to as much as twenty feet, some of them which I found near the great "Piedra de Coapa" (which rises ninety-nine feet above the surrounding plains in the northern part of the Department of Chontales) are large enough to permit as many as five horsemen to travel abreast.

Without doubt these Indians of Chontales were very primitive in their customs. They buried the bones of their dead directly in the earth and not in large urns like their neighbors to the east. Small terracotta jugs or bowls often appeared filled with ashes or teeth, sometimes with fine beads of green or bluish stones. The bodies always lay full length and in one grave I found several, the skulls placed together and the bodies stretched out in a star-like formation. Most of these bones completely disintegrate as soon as the air touches them. The teeth however are in fine condition and I do not recall having found any with cavities. For the most part they were in complete sets, though occasionally some were missing. In some graves I found the teeth filed in the middle, in deep grooves.

In the partial burials or places where there are fragments there are occasionally, but not often, some scattered bones. Whether these were tombs that had been despoiled, a most likely thing to have happened, or whether they were just left over from some large burial in the immediate vicinity, I was not able to tell.

In Chontales the graves are lined with myriads of stones. Though apparently carelessly placed, when once removed it is a case of "all the King's horses and all the King's men," for no human hands could ever replace them. These stones were undoubtedly taken from the rivers or streams nearby, for all burials were made in close proximity to water, the lake, river or innumerable brooks which abound throughout the district. The pre-Columbian Indians had two ceremonies for the burial of their dead. The first was when death actually took place and the body was suspended between two trees after it had been carefully wrapped up in a cotton cloth woven around it, similar to a hammock. This was left to dry for twelve moons. At the end of this period, the bones having dried and the flesh disappeared, then they were taken by the high priest to the nearest watering place and carefully washed. Again they were placed in the sun and when completely dried they were buried, being placed in urns or directly in the ground according to the tribal custom.

As there is often almost no superficial indication of the burial places, the phosphorescent lights visible at night over the place where the bones lie often serve as a guiding light. The natives are superstitious about these eerie lights and often are loath to go near them. Many times my efforts were frustrated, for after hours of digging in search of a cairn, only animal bones would appear, some domestic or wild animal having died on the spot.

Near these burials are many large mounds which appear to be a primitive form of pyramid. Although in these I found stone steps carefully cut and laid, I found no evidence of any kind of masonry. These pyramids rose to a height of some thirty or forty feet. In the District of Copelito about two leagues to the south of Juigalpa on the road to the famous mining district of La Libertad, there are many of these mounds. Inclement weather, together

with the planting season during which no Indian will abandon his "milpa" made it impossible for me to thoroughly investigate these interesting mounds.

In this region of Copelito there are many fine examples of stone carving. Large idols or effigies weighing more than a ton lie grouped here and there unnoticed and unseen, now covered over by underbrush or entirely overgrown by large trees whose roots have wound themselves about them. These are often lying face down. They range from five to seven feet in height and are usually made of round stones of red or blue granite. The lower portions which originally stood in the ground were left rough. The carving of the head-dress and belts is sometimes as fine as lace and of the most beautiful patterns. The insignia of the headbands often indicated authority, spiritual or worldly command. A few are of female figures, the wives of the caciques or princesses. These were either statues of their gods or their chieftains. With great difficulty I removed two of these, each weighing over a ton, to Managua, the capital. Many of the designs show a strong Mayan influence. They are mostly geometrical, with the plumed serpent occasionally appearing. There is much character and expression in the faces. There is dignity and a noble mien.

I did not run across these large idols anywhere else excepting near the "Piedra de Coapa" and those were taller and not so large in circumference or so well carved. They followed the natural line of the stone.

These Indians were very skilful stonemasons. In one large tomb that I opened I found thirteen small statues or effigies, evidently of the thirteen persons whose skeletons I found in this common burial. This tomb was one of the largest I opened. Besides the bones of human beings there were also many of those of deer and small wild animals which had probably been consumed at the feast of death. There were fine stone metates or grinding stones. These have fantastic animal heads over the foreleg while the sides and two hind legs are elaborately carved with intricate and highly artistic designs. Implements of war, arrows of beautifully colored flint, stone hatchets, and rings probably used for throwing, tools of the apothecary, mortars and an instrument for making pills (such as are used today by medicos in the small pueblos), tiny scales for weighing, disks for spinning cotton (spindle wheels), rollers for printing and dyeing cloth, and many fragments of finely painted pottery, as well as many beautiful ornaments of jade and jadeite, malachite, amber, et cetera, were buried near the skulls of women. Thus, almost a complete variety of the work of artisans of the period were buried in the same tomb. These were apparently interspersed throughout the enormous amount of stones, which were mostly uncut and of medium size, though some very large flat slabs usually lie immediately over the body.

Almost no whole pieces of pottery were taken from the tombs in Chontales. They were all broken into bits and it was never possible to assemble

an entire piece. The legs of the tripod plates, so popular with the Indians, were highly colored with yellow, red and black designs. Some of these are allegoric, but they are for the most part geometrical and amazingly symmetrical.

In the mountain range of Amerrique, on a peak, which is in fact a high plateau overlooking much of Lake Nicaragua to the southwest of Juigalpa, there are enormous and important burials, the largest I found anywhere. These are made exactly as the ones in the plains below, but of better construction and on more imposing locations. They are doubtless burials of the high priests and of the most important personages of the Chontals. Here I found no painted pottery, but a few whole and very delicately made bowls of large size and of a dark red clay. They all were geometrical and decorated with chiseled designs, colored with a mineral red.

There were no dragon-heads, eagles, human faces, or any array of colorful arrows such as those I found below. In one large tomb, at a depth of about fifteen feet below the surface, I found a fine hatchet, a ceremonial piece of dark green translucent stone. Everything here in Amerrique abounds in mystery. It is said by the Theosophists that it was here that the first lodge in this hemisphere was formed, and the eminent geographer of the past century, Jules Marcou, believed this range gave its name to the great western continent, that the name *America* comes from the name Amerrique. Many have accepted this theory. Torrential rains prevented my terminating the excavations in Amerrique. Farther down I opened some small burials which contained terracotta dishes and spoons exactly like those used by the Chinese and, most interesting of all, a head of a Pekinese dog perfectly made in clay. There are many small stone statues of idols, as the present natives are wont to call them, about half way down the side of this mountain. I found also many pictographs hidden in the deep woods thereabouts.

These pictographs are found in secluded spots throughout Chontales and the country to the north. Some of them are very primitive, others bear symbols, signs, dots, curves and hieroglyphics. Near the ancient town of Boaco, almost on the border of Matagalpa, there is a field in which there are over fifty huge flat-surfaced rocks upon whose surface many inscriptions are chiseled. There are also figures of monkeys, dragons, and very clearly defined figure writings. Strange to say all the writings are made on the side of the rocks facing the south.

OMETEPE

The Chorotegas inhabited the western coast of Lake Nicaragua and the adjoining islands. The largest, the twin volcanic island known as Ometepe, which in Aztec means Twin Mountain, was the residence of the caciques and royal families.

These burials were not made of stone, though occasionally some *are* found,

but they were more shallow and near the surface. They buried exclusively in large terracotta urns over the mouth of which was placed an inverted plate, painted with symbolic designs. Their pottery was extravagantly decorated and the designs were symbolic, the plumed serpent and lefthanded God of War predominating. There are many fine ceremonial pieces found in these burials, incense burners of fantastic shapes and exotic designs. The jewelry from these urns is beautiful and includes necklaces of turquoise, jade and gold, as well as of seashells, and many miniature, marvelously carved beads of the black coyol. Here I also found bells and rattles of copper with a gold alloy.

There is a curiously shaped burial urn found commonly in these parts, an elongated shoe-shaped urn in which only males were buried; this I knew from the size of the bones as well as from the ornaments or artisan tools found in them. This particular form is said to be found occasionally in Honduras and Perú.

The designs of the pottery from Ometepe and the neighboring shore of Rivas, twelve miles to the west, were so beautiful that I made over a thousand designs copied exactly from the ceramics. I think these speak more eloquently than I can in words, and the collection on exhibition here at the Congress is taken entirely from the pieces I myself excavated.

The only stone idol of importance which I found on this island is on the southern side, and now stands on a spot known as Mérida. It has in all fourteen clearly defined faces carved on its four sides and is the finest of its kind so far found in Nicaragua. Its companion lies at the bottom of the lake; it fell overboard when an unsuccessful attempt was made some years ago to transport them both to the city of Granada. I spent three years and a half on this island, during which time I collected nearly two thousand pieces of pottery, et cetera.

Contrary to the burials in Chontales, here nearly all the ceramics are in a fine state of preservation. The soil is soft and sandy, there are few rocks, and the trees are smaller and not abundant. However, there is not so much stone work in these burials.

Discovering the "materia prima" used by the Indians for coloring their pottery, after three years of work, I finally succeeded in preparing and perfecting it for my own work, so that it is applicable to paper as well as to clay. Since it is vegetable, the Indians baked their pottery, applying to it first what is called a white or cream-colored slip, and after taking it from the kiln it was decorated and painted. These colors—a deep velvety black, glowing red, soft grays, and bright yellow, in variable tones—appear for the most part as bright and lustrous as if they had been painted but yesterday.

The clay used by the Indians was of the finest quality. They used black, a rich cream color, and yellow, as well as several different tones of red, the

deposits of which are found along the shore of the lake just about a mile from the present site of the village of Moyogalpa. The pottery was baked under a high fire and was for the most part of fine quality.

To the south, near the mouth of the San Juan River, lies the group of islands known as Solentiname. Here I found several fine idols of gold, fantastic little figures of phallic origin. The tombs, made like those of Chontales, contained very few entire pieces of pottery.

Near the city of Granada lies the second largest island in the lake, known as "Zapatera," and originally called "Teocalli" by the Indians. This island was non-residential and only burials of priests or the victims of sacrifice are found here. The burials are similar to those of Chontales, containing much stone. Some of the finest ceremonial pieces in my collection I found here.

There are huge stone monoliths still standing in Zapatera and 18 of these were taken from there years ago and placed in the yard of the Jesuit college in Granada. They are all of human figures whose delicate lines show that those artists were serious students of anatomy; many of those in a sitting posture have a huge animal form covering the head and extending down the back. The figures of alligators or wild beasts are reminiscent of the lycanthropy of Tibet.

I found many sacrificial stones, both for animals and human beings. There are vestiges of temples and masonry with broad, well-graded steps leading up to the ruined temple.

While I found few musical instruments in Chontales aside from a few small whistles and several fine percussion instruments, from the islands of Ometepe and Zapatera I took over forty instruments, mostly of the ocarina type, but all of them capable of being played and some having a most beautiful liquid tone. They are of many varieties of form: fantastic birds and animals, many distinct figures on the same small piece in Oriental style mostly in a brilliant black clay. The musical tones produced vary from one to five. The scale used by the Indians was the same as the old Chinese pentatonic scale omitting the first and fourth tones of the scale as we know it. Time has left no traces of the drum in all its variations as the Indians used it.

It was on the "Isla del Muerto," the small Island of the Dead as it is called, adjoining the Island of Zapatera, that I found a most unique musical ceremonial piece, three strata below the surface, under two volcanic eruptions. From this same tomb I took some long, turned blue beads which an eminent authority and erudite archaeologist in Paris believes to be of Phoenician origin.

I do not pretend to put forth any original theories. I tell here only exactly what I myself saw and discovered in the seven years I spent in search of the lost art of a great people which once inhabited this beautiful and fertile land that we now know as Nicaragua.