



Camp Granada, the Next Generation: Recent Excavations at the El Rayo site, Pacific Nicaragua

Geoffrey McCafferty and Sharisse McCafferty
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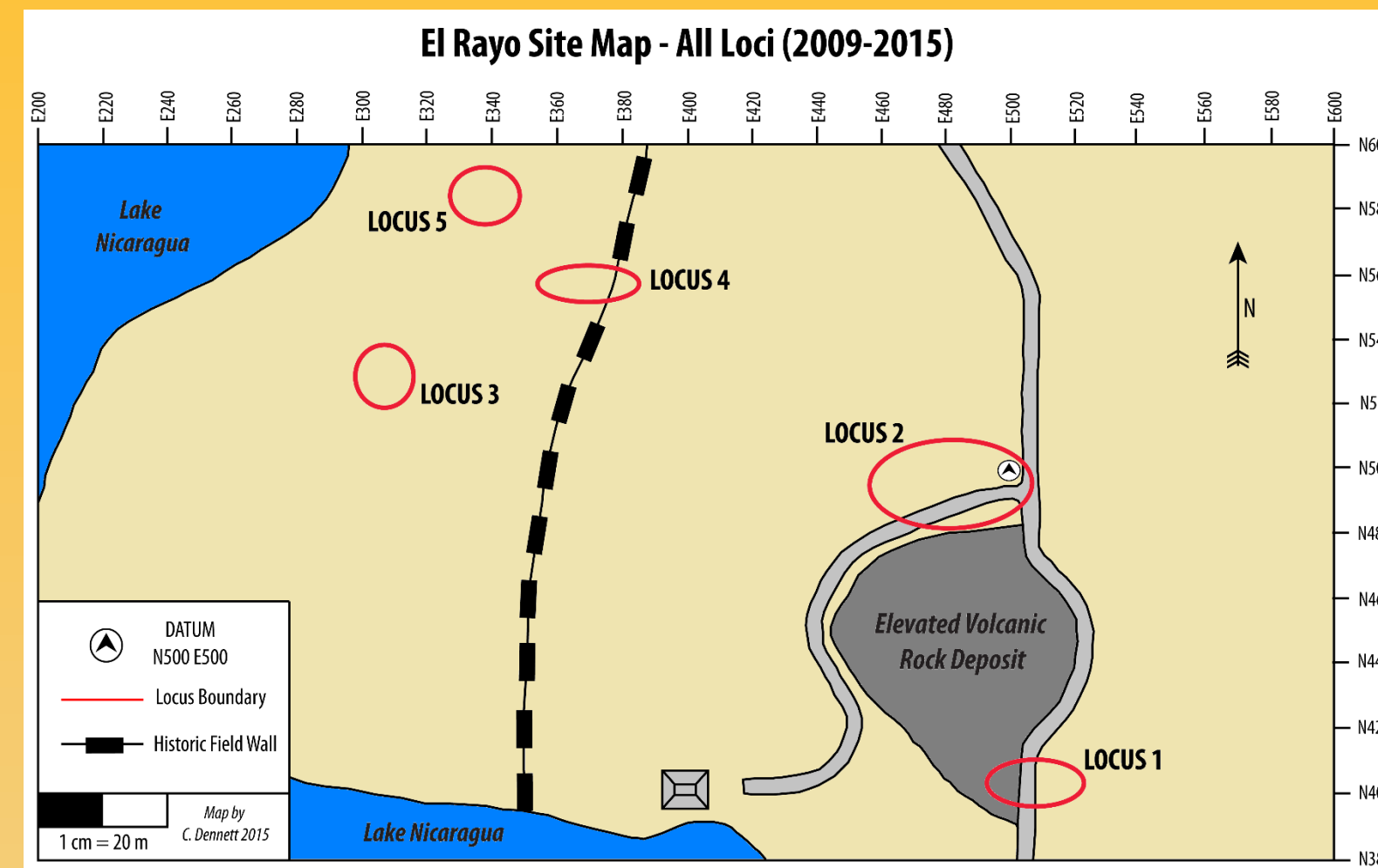


It has long been believed that Pacific Nicaragua was colonized by Mesoamerican groups beginning about 800 CE. According to ethnohistorical sources, Oto-manguan and Nahuatl speakers migrated south from central Mexico, settling in enclaves in the Soconusco region of Mexico, as well as Guatemala, El Salvador, and the Greater Nicoya region of Pacific Nicaragua and northwestern Costa Rica. Since 2000, archaeologists from the University of Calgary have investigated sites along the shore of Lake Cocibolca in search of evidence for Mesoamerican influences and resultant ethnogenesis of local cultural adaptations. In 2015, with funding from the Institute for Field Research, we returned to the site of El Rayo on the Asepe peninsula to continue exploration of the Sapoá period settlement (800-1250 CE).



EL RAYO

El Rayo was first identified by Silvia Salgado González during her regional survey of the Granada region. In 2008 road construction exposed burial urns and human skeletal remains, and as a consequence the University of Calgary project began excavations in 2009. Three site loci were initially explored: Locus 1 at the cemetery exposed in the road cut; a Bagaces to Sapoá period residential area at Locus 2; and a second mortuary zone atop a low hill, designated Locus 3. El Rayo is one of the only multi-component sites yet identified in Pacific Nicaragua, and because occupation spanned the Bagaces to Sapoá periods it provides an exceptional potential for investigating dynamic changes in material culture and mortuary practice over the transition when the Mesoamerican migrants supposedly arrived. Bagaces period interments, for example, were primary direct burials, either in extended or flexed positions, yet beginning in the Sapoá period oval 'shoe pot' urns were introduced throughout the Pacific Nicaragua region. It is also at this transition that a dramatic change in decorated serving wares occurred, including Papagayo, Pataky, and Vallejo polychromes replacing Granada Redware bichromes. Other artifact classes, however, remained unchanged leading to the interpretation of differential changes in domestic practice. Consequently the initial hypothesis of population replacement is not supported, and instead we are discussing cultural pluralism and hybridity.



Locus 1



Locus 2

EL RAYO 2015

The El Rayo Project resumed in 2015. The goal was to continue excavations at Locus 3, a burial locus in which the 2009 field season had encountered an alignment of 'shoe pot' urns beside a cluster of stone rubble interpreted as a small shrine. In addition to further exposure of the burial cluster, the 2015 season also excavated at Locus 4, a low mound anticipated to be a residential mound.



Locus 3

LOCUS 3

The 2015 field season sought to re-establish the location of the alignment of urns identified in the 2009 season. Due to the rapid tropical growth it was initially impossible to locate the former excavation units, and a trench was dug perpendicular to the original feature to intercept. This trench encountered four additional urns. Once the original feature was located it was again opened, and the urns were excavated to recover their contents. In most cases the urns were empty, without grave goods and few human remains. Instead, comingled human remains were found scattered around the outside of the vessels.



LOCUS 4

Landowner Mariano Salablanca helped identify a low mound that featured standing architectural stones, and this became the focus of extensive excavations to delimit the structure and attempt to infer its function. Two parallel rows of standing *lajas* (flat pieces of andesite), separated by 10-20 cm, extended for about 20 m on the north side of the mound. This is interpreted as a support foundation for a palisade wall of perishable materials. Larger stones were also found, representing possible standing monuments. A thick floor of *talpuja* (volcanic ash) was likely swept clean during occupation; two other walking surfaces were also identified. Polychrome ceramics date the structure to the Sapoá period, but relatively sparse artifacts suggest that this was non-residential, and therefore likely a civic-ceremonial structure, possibly relating to the mortuary function of El Rayo.



Locus 4



DISCUSSION

After three field seasons El Rayo continues to surprise. The Locus 4 structure is one of the largest ever found in Pacific Nicaragua, and its architectural detail is unique. The multiple mortuary contexts suggest that the site served as a necropolis, perhaps centered on the Locus 4 structure which may have served as a ritual space for preparation and/or celebration of the deceased. Investigations will continue in 2016.