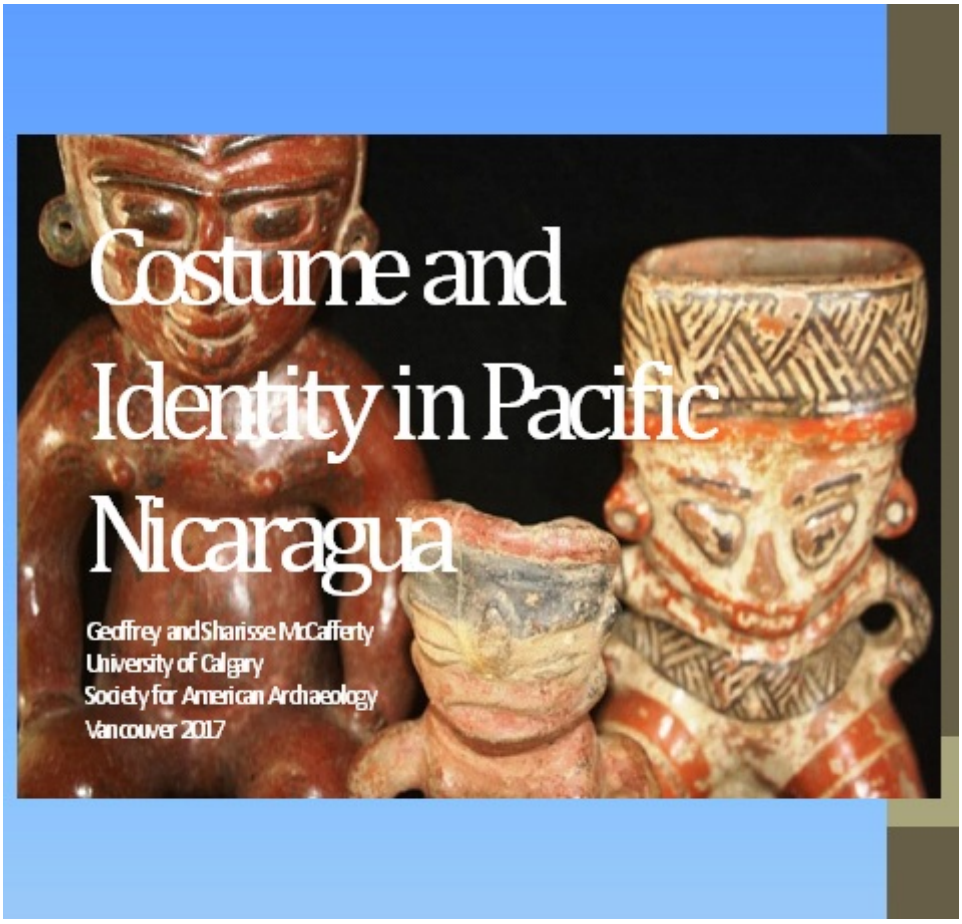

Ethnohistorical sources indicate that at the moment of European contact in the early 16th century Pacific Nicaragua was a complex mosaic of linguistically diverse communities. Enigmatic accounts describe the history, or perhaps better described as the *mythstory*, of this development, with Mesoamerican groups speaking Nahuat and Oto-Manguean dialects moving into the area in the centuries leading up to contact where they integrated with presumably Chibchan-speaking groups (Figure 2). This is the traditional culture history of the region which has *traditionally* formed the framework for the national identity. Yet Nicaragua is one of the least known regions of the Americas from an archaeological perspective, and as with many other parts of Latin America the archaeological evidence merely serves as a 'handmaiden' to history, seldom providing more than pretty window-dressing to 'official' interpretations.

For nearly 20 years, our research team based at the University of Calgary has sought evidence to evaluate the ethnicity and other forms of social identity of late pre-Columbian Pacific Nicaragua. This has been done through a series of excavation programs at sites along the shore of Lake Nicaragua, specifically targeting domestic contexts from the final centuries prior to contact. Annoyingly, however, so far we have found almost *everything but* Contact period deposits, leaving that as an ongoing source of ambiguity. We have excavated extensive deposits relating to the earlier Sapoa period, 800-1250 CE, when the supposed Mesoamerican Chorotega culture

Figure 2: Migration 'Out of Mexico' to Pacific Nicaragua

first arrived in the region, as well as earlier Tempisque (500 BCE-300 CE) and Bagaces (300 CE-800 CE) contexts, thus providing a comparative data base for before and after the migration. This integration of the new Oto-Manguean group with autochthonous Chibchans is being interpreted through the lens of ethnogenesis and hybridity (McCafferty and Dennett 2013).

While the archaeology of Nicaragua remains under-developed, it is currently undergoing a renaissance, with international projects from Canada, the US, the Netherlands, and Japan collaborating with Nicaraguans in various parts of the country. Due to political and environmental difficulties during the past century, most researchers ignored the region in favor of the more glamorous neighbors such as El Salvador and Costa Rica. Nevertheless, prominent early archaeologists such as Ephraim Squier, Samuel Lothrop, and Gordon Willey created a preliminary basis for subsequent interpretations. Lothrop (1926) in particular published on the beautiful polychrome pottery and life-sized statuary as indications of regional interactions tied to the ethnohistoric accounts. Nevertheless, the fundamentally diffusionist view of Mesoamerican migrations tended to ignore local developments, as pointed out by Frederick Lange (1992-3), and more southern influences as discussed by John Hoopes and Oscar Fonseca (2003) in reference to the Isthmo-Colombian culture of Chibchan-speakers. Thus the cultural mosaic of late pre-Columbian Nicaragua has been further complicated by a scholarly mosaic of competing interpretations.

The Calgary archaeological projects began specifically with the goal of understanding ethnic migrations into Pacific Nicaragua, and the development of Mesoamerican responses to the new environment (McCafferty 2015). This began in 2000 at the site of Santa Isabel on the shore of Lake Nicaragua. Santa Isabel was originally believed to have been the town of Quauhcapolca, historically the 'capital' of chief Nicaragua at the time of first Spanish contact (McCafferty 2008). Four years of excavation encountered rich material assemblages relating to Sapoa period domestic contexts – but not the Contact period occupation. In 2008 a new project began

excavations of the hoped-for Contact period site of Tepetate, near modern Granada and also on the lakeshore. Mounded architecture and poorly preserved cemeteries were found – but again dating to the Sapoa period and not contact. Since then, excavations have focussed on the site of El Rayo on the Asese Peninsula just south of Granada, at a complex of cemeteries and ceremonial structures currently being interpreted as a necropolis (McCafferty and McCafferty 2017). El Rayo was also initially believed to date to the Contact period, but all contexts span the Bagaces to Sapoa period when, presumably, Mesoamerican migrants first moved into the area and integrated with existing populations. Over these 17 years, numerous smaller projects have also been conducted to amplify the database, but never succeeding at locating and investigating a Contact period site.

By far the most intensively researched artifact class of Pacific Nicaragua has been the polychrome pottery, with occasional iconography reminiscent of the Mixteca-Puebla tradition of central and southern Mexico. Minor stylistic variations are useful for refining the chronology, and in combination with a robust sample of radiocarbon dates this late chronology is relatively well established. Traditional attempts to relate particular ceramic types and symbolism with Mesoamerican migrant groups have proven tenuous at best, and the recent PhD dissertation by Carrie Dennett (2016) has identified specific contemporary potting communities within Pacific Nicaragua. This supplements the previous dissertation by Larry Steinbrenner (2010) to provide a solid foundation for ceramic production, exchange, and participation in the larger 'constellation of practice' that integrates the region in a pan-Central American ceramic ecology.

Decorated ceramics indicate a complex symbolic network with dramatic changes occurring during the Bagaces to Sapoa transition, ca. 700-800 CE, and contemporary with the hypothesized arrival of migrant Mesoamericans (Figure 3). This transition is also apparent in changing settlement and mortuary practices. Yet other lines of material evidence suggest a more gradual change relating to ethnogenesis of new identities. In the remainder of this presentation, emic qualities of self-representation as well as etic elements of adornment will be considered from the perspective of commoner identity strategies.

Figure 3: Decorated ceramics from the Bagaces to Sapoa periods

FIGURINES

Terracotta figurines are the best artifact class for interpreting costume in the tropical Central American climate with poor preservation of organic materials. Figurines have a long history of use, yet a remarkably homogeneous format. Beginning in the early Tempisque period (ca. 500 BCE), Rosales redware ceramics were formed into hollow female figures, often seated with hands on hips or thighs (Figure 4). Black painted decoration provided highlights of facial features, possible clothing, and body decoration. Art historians such as Laura Wingfield (2009) and Jane Day and Alice Tillet (1996) have suggested that these figures may have depicted ritual specialists.

Figure 4: Tempisque and Bagaces period figurines

During the subsequent Bagaces period (300-800 CE) red-slipped female figurines were more commonly solid, but still seated and with hands on hips or thighs. Most were depicted in the nude, though one clearly had a loin-cover. The bodies are well-proportioned, with modest breasts and belly but accentuated buttocks. Some details were provided to model facial features, and black paint was again applied to represent costume and/or adornment. These artifacts are found in household refuse, suggesting a domestic use.

Sapoa period (800-1250 CE) female figurines continue to dominate the figurine assemblage. Although the basic body position remains essentially the same (seated or standing with hands on hips/thighs) Sapoa figurines conform to the innovation of polychrome decoration with much more elaborate depictions of woven textiles on the upper body and in the headdress (Figure 5). Other painted decoration represents facial details such as painted patterns around the eyes and mouth. Elaboration is also devoted to hairstyles and head scarves.

Male figurines are relatively rare throughout the cultural sequence with the exception of hunchbacks. These also appear from the earliest time period, though the only example from our

Figure 5: Sapoa period figurines

excavated contexts was found in the El Rayo Locus 1 cemetery in association with a Sapoa period burial. Some sexless figurine bodies may represent males, and some of the hairstyles can tentatively be related to ethnohistorically documented warrior styles.

A characteristic of the later figurines is that they were mold-made, suggesting a degree of mass production as well as standardization. Costume representations on figurines are most abundant in the later periods, with minimal clothing (mainly loin cloths) on the earlier female representations. The most common design pattern consists of panels of intersecting diagonal lines that represent the 'plaited twill' in weaving terminology. This is commonly found on polychrome figurines as an upper body garment tied in the back, as well as a headband. Interestingly this same pattern is often used to decorate Castillo Engraved pottery from the Sapoa period. Textile patterns are also common on carved grinding stones, perhaps to indicate their alternative function as thrones. Several figurine bodies may be represented with animal skin clothing, a characteristic of male costume based on Mesoamerican examples. It should be noted that artifacts relating to textile production have been found at both Santa Isabel and El Rayo, along with larger awls that may be have been used for hide-working.

In terms of figurine depictions of ornamentation, most have earspools (Figure 6). Figurines from Santa Isabel and El Rayo feature a circular pendant with multiple small perforations. One polychrome example of a female figurine from a museum collection is shown with a pendant around her neck that is highly reminiscent of the golden frog pendants so common in Costa Rica (but little gold has been found in Pacific Nicaragua).

Figure 6: Figurines with adornment

ORNAMENTATION

In terms of actual adornment from excavated contexts, ear ornaments are among the most common (Figure 7). Most are of thin clay in a short tubular form. They range in size from less than 1 cm to over 5 cm in diameter, perhaps relating to status or age grades. Other clay ear ornaments were longer tubes, tapering from wider to narrower. Fish vertebrae were also worked for use as ear plugs, and also came in different sizes. The most elaborate earplugs were solid clay with decoration; fragments of a matched set were found at Santa Isabel and two others were found in burial contexts from Tepetate and El Rayo. A single example of a labret was found at El Rayo.

Figure 7: Ear ornaments

Numerous beads have been found, made from clay, bone, and greenstone (Figure 8). A small bowl from the El Rayo Locus 1 cemetery contained nearly 100 small clay beads, probably as a grave offering. Similarly, six greenstone beads were found in a burial urn at the Zapatera Island site of Sonzapote. A large greenstone bead was associated with a burial urn cluster at Tepetate. Evidence for Mesoamerican influence is found in the form of a large clay bead from Santa Isabel with the modelled face of the storm god Quiateotl (a local variation on the Mexican Tlaloc).

Figure 8: Beads

Another form of ornamentation that was abundant at Santa Isabel was perforated worked sherds ground into circular, square, and other shapes (Figure 9). These were perforated at one end for suspension. Some of these were made from polychrome pottery, but most were plainware. About 500 of these pendants were found at Santa Isabel, yet almost none were found at contemporary sites in the Granada area, suggesting a regional distinction if these were associated with identity. A single example was found of an oval ceramic pendant with two holes at either end and hatched decoration down the spine of the convex object was found at Santa Isabel; a nearly identical object was illustrated by Carl Bovallius (1886) from Zapatera Island. A similar object but with four perforations was recovered from the El Rayo cemetery. These are tentatively interpreted as pubic coverings.

Other pendants were made from more exotic materials such as shell, bone, and greenstone (Figure 10). Perforated worked shell was found at Santa Isabel, along with evidence of local production using marine shell. Some of the most beautiful ornamentation is in the form of carved bone pendants, including a hollow bone with serpent/bird imagery at either end, a skeletal figure, a carved duck head, and what may be the mandible of a crocodilian. Other pendants include perforated teeth: human, mammal, and shark. True jade does not occur in Central America, but polished greenstone seems to have had intrinsic value perhaps relating to the life-force as it had in Mesoamerica. Evidence of greenstone jewellery manufacture was found at Santa Isabel, along with finished pieces.

Figure 9: Ceramic pendants

Figure 10: Bone, shell, and greenstone pendants

DISCUSSION

A fundamental research goal of the Calgary Nicaraguan research program has been to evaluate archaeological evidence for culture change and variation, especially in relation to *mythstorical* accounts of migration from Mesoamerica. Costume and ornamentation found on figurines and as actual objects of adornment provide a valuable data set for this analysis. Following theoretical models of embodiment such as suggested by Rosemary Joyce (2005), and Reisher and Koo (2004), the human body can be used as a canvas for presenting emic dimensions of self-identification (Figure 11). Decorated figurines may reflect idealized self-image, with stylized emphasis of particular characteristics such as facial features, textiles, and exaggerated

Figure 11: Facial characteristics of Sapoa period figurines

thighs, as well as minimization of other aspects such as torso, hands, and feet (McCafferty and McCafferty 2009).

Emic perspectives changed between the Tempisque/Bagaces period and the later Sapoa period. The typical red-slipped images of nude females with minimal painted decoration transformed into the painted and highly decorated figurines of the Sapoa. Yet other basic characteristics remained the same: seated females with hands on hips/thighs. Arguably, the function of the figurines remained the same despite technical changes in manufacture (mold-made) and decoration. Some examples of figurines from private and museum collections include seated females on a low bench that resembles the groundstone metate grinding slabs (Figure 12). Because these are often elaborately carved (especially in Costa Rica) and include textile patterns, they have been given the alternative interpretation as thrones (Preston Werner 2008). Since grinding is closely associated with female practice in Mesoamerica (at least), this stereotypically female object may have had symbolic association with female power, and therefore female figurines on effigy metates may have related to a consistent gender relationship throughout Pacific Nicaraguan prehistory. In support of this interpretation is a comment by Spanish chroniclers that the Chorotega culture 'allowed' their women to rule.

Whereas the overarching function of the female figurines may have remained unchanged, the degree of costume elaboration increased in the later Sapoa period. This is consistent with the introduction of spinning and weaving tools during the Bagaces to Sapoa transition (McCafferty and McCafferty 2008), as well as the tremendous increase in objects of adornment in the later period (Figure 13). Something apparently happened at this time that resulted in greater emphasis on costume and adornment, and this may reflect the development of the cultural mosaic as migrant groups moved into the area and social identities took on greater significance.

Figure 12: Female figurine seated on 'throne' and carved basalt throne

Figure 13: Spinning and weaving tools from Santa Isabel

Regional variation during the Sapoa period is seen in the relative abundance of worked sherd pendants at Santa Isabel, as opposed to their near absence in the Granada region. We have speculated about alternative functions for these objects, without any compelling interpretations. Santa Isabel was also a center for jewellery manufacture, with evidence for bone, shell, and greenstone production (Figure 14). Similarities in ceramic consumption across the region suggests an active exchange network, but apparently these exotic ornaments were not included. The small, tubular ceramic earspools have been found at all Sapoa period sites, so are perhaps tied into a different set of identity strategies.

Figure 14: Sapoa period ornamentation

One of the key methods for establishing identity in prehistory – meaning without or with only minimal historical context – is through mortuary studies. Unfortunately, the tropical environment of Pacific Nicaragua has made it almost impossible to identify skeletons by biological sex, and so engendering a skeletal population has not yet been possible (Figure 15). One adult male skeleton was found at Santa Isabel with a lapidary drill and pre-form greenstone blanks. Some individuals from the El Rayo cemetery were associated with stereotypically female objects, such as a spindle whorl and grinding stone, but lacking sexable skeletons ascribing gender identity is problematic.

Figure 15: Mortuary contexts with greenstone blanks, spindle whorl, and grinding stone

Evidence for costume and adornment is available from Pacific Nicaragua, particularly for the Sapoa period (800-1250 CE). Diachronic comparison with earlier periods suggests an increase in symbolic communication using these media (Figure 16). Some degree of variation between burials may indicate wealth differentials, although elaborate or exotic grave goods have not been encountered. Relative lack of biological sex attribution frustrates the ability to correlate specific objects of adornment with gender identities. Painted decoration on Sapoa period figurines suggests that woven textiles were consistently associated with females, while animal skin costume may be more of a male costume element. Regional variation in worked sherd pendants might indicate regional distinctions between Santa Isabel and Granada.

As additional sites are investigated across this cultural diverse mosaic, we expect to bring additional aspects of social identity into focus. Costume and adornment hold promise for future research.

Figure 16: Tempisque, Bagaces, and Sapoa period figurines

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