

THE HISTORICAL SOURCES FOR THE GREATER NICOYA ARCHAEOLOGICAL SUB-AREA

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ABSTRACT

Development of the anthropological potential of historic documents bearing on the Contact period in Greater Nicoya has been seriously underrated as an investigative approach by both historians and archaeologists working in the area. The range of available sources and the anthropological topics which they can illuminate are discussed. Specific inferences about the indigenous society at Contact, based in both historic and archaeological data, are offered. It is suggested that historic investigation can produce archaeologically-verifiable hypotheses which can help guide future research in the region.

RESUMEN

La explotación del potencial antropológico de los documentos históricos que se refieren al período de Contacto en la Gran Nicoya se ha menospreciado como técnica de investigación, tanto por los historiadores como los arqueólogos que trabajan en el área. Se discuten las fuentes aprovechables y los problemas antropológicos que ellas pueden resolver. Se ofrecen algunas inferencias específicas relacionadas con la sociedad indígena, al momento del Contacto, basadas en los datos históricos y antropológicos. Se sugiere que la investigación histórica puede generar hipótesis que son arqueológicamente comprobables, y que pueden a su vez guiar las investigaciones futuras en el área.

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Introduction

The nations of Lower Central America have long suffered an only cursory interest in the early history of their conquest and colonization by the Spaniards, and in the implications of that period for the archaeology of the region. Far from the major centers of indigenous wealth, population and empire in Mexico and Peru, the lakes region of Pacific Nicaragua and its satellite colony of Nicoya lay between Guatemala and Castilla del Oro (Darien) and were for a period disputed by conquistadors setting out from both early colonies in search of more gold, human labor and land. In these years, the Spanish Crown was primarily concerned with the organization of the exploitation and settlement of the more important colonies to the north, the seat of the great Meso-american civilizations of the Postclassic period. The colonies of New Spain and Guatemala, joined by Peru in the 1530s, absorbed the vast majority of attention from both state and Church. Both institutions found themselves unprepared to meet the magnitude of the challenge, suddenly charged, as they were, with the governance of massive urban and rural populations, their exploitation for economic benefit of Crown and conquistador and their religious conversion as the appointed agents of Rome. Even in the key areas of Central America, at least twenty years passed after the first contact before systematic government and religious instruction were firmly established (Mac Leod 1973:44; Sherman 1979:9).

Pacific Nicaragua and Nicoya [including Guanacaste, and known in the literature as the Greater Nicoya Archaeological Sub-area (Norweb 1964: 551-561)], thus came to be first explored and described by a party setting out from Castilla del Oro and was initially governed by officials from that Panamanian colony, but soon was incorporated into the jurisdiction of Guatemala, although it remained a remote and poorly administered frontier. It was just this peripheral nature of the Nicaraguan colony which permitted rapid decimation of its Indian population to take place without incurring extensive documentation of the process, nor effective efforts to curtail it. By the time the magnitude of the human toll came to be recognized by both

Church and Crown officials outside the colony, the damage was already irreparable. When compared with the corpus available for New Spain and Guatemala [see Nicholson (1973) for review of these sources], there is relatively sparse contemporary literature which describes the Indians of Nicaragua-Nicoya at Contact. Oviedo is the most famous exception to this, but there is also material available in sources of several genres which yield to patient scrutiny important socio-cultural information about the 16th century native populations between the lakes and the Gulf of Nicoya. Little of it has been sufficiently utilized by anthropologists concerned with the pre-hispanic and early colonial Indian and mestizo societies inhabiting this circumscribed zone (Lange, this volume, mentions some of the specific archaeological problems of the Late Polychrome Period which historical research may help to resolve).

I. The Nature of Ethnohistory

Ethnohistory, although notoriously difficult to define, comprehends the areas of mutual interest to the disciplines of anthropology and history. By consensus among most anthropologists concerned with this interface, ethnohistory does not qualify as a distinct academic discipline, but rather utilizes the methods of the historian to approach questions of interest to the anthropologist through a variety of sources, principally documentary (e.g. Carmack 1971, 1972; Fenton 1962; Sturtevant 1968). Social history, practiced by historians, obviously involves a very similar focus and method. Carmack (1972: 234-35) spells this position out most clearly:

To return to the problem of defining ethnohistory, we have seen that it involves a set of techniques for gathering, preparing, and analyzing oral and written traditions. The aims for which these methods are employed are those of cultural anthropology in general, and have to do with theories of culture. Therefore, ethnohistory itself cannot be considered an independent discipline. In that ethnohistoric methods do not differ from those of history except for a somewhat greater emphasis on combining these methods with those of archaeology, linguistics, etc., ethnohistory is less easily defined as a subdiscipline than archaeology or historical linguistics. Yet many anthropologists who consider themselves to be ethnohistorians feel that it has a subject matter, however vaguely it might be defined, and that this, combined with its historical methodology, qualifies it as a subfield of anthropology.

Sturtevant (1968: 452) sees ethnohistory as a potentially powerful synthetic explanatory approach, combining the more synchronic, structural-perspective of many ethnologists with the more diachronic perspective favored by both historians and archaeologists. The greatest contribution that ethnohistory may therefore make to either ethnology or to archaeology lies in the special capacity of the approach to link diachronically the data relevant to both:

Theories of acculturation, culture change, and cultural evolution may initially be based on field ethnography, broad-scale typology, and general archaeology, but it is plain that their testing, refining, and elaboration require the use of all available evidence, including the details of specific sequences provided by documentary materials.

(Sturtevant 1968: 455)

Much ethnohistoric work falls under the label of "historical ethnography," which is a particular type of historical reconstruction (all historiography being a reconstruction of some nature) employing written records dating to a specific stage in the past of a given culture or group to develop a synchronic picture of that culture, as if the documents were truly ethnographic in the contemporary anthropological sense of the term (Sturtevant 1968: 454; Carmack 1972: 238-39). Presumably because of its structural parallels with the "ethnographic present," this genre has proven popular with anthropologists, particularly but not exclusively those seeking to understand critical past stages of *present* societies. In the area with which we are concerned, however, use of the "direct historical approach" or "upstreaming" (Fenton 1962: 12) is more problematic than elsewhere in Mesoamerica or in Andean South America because of the peculiarly violent cultural discontinuity characteristic of the Nicaraguan colonial

experience (Abel 1978: 33-37 and section IV of this article). For examples of the historical ethnographic approach in description of Greater Nicoya, see Lothrop (1926), Chapman (1960), and Ferrero (1977: 111-34).

The Contact period in the Americas, during which aboriginal cultures first entered into relations with European cultures, has received special attention from anthropologists, historians and ethnohistorians. Two major difficulties afflicting historical ethnography need to be pointed out: (1) the documentary sources available for interpretation are unlikely to be precisely contemporaneous in a context where culture change was rapid, and (2) no single source is likely to be culturally "comprehensive." Hence, the picture developed in an historical ethnography utilizing multiple sources demands a certain amount of generalizing and blurring of potentially significant temporal differences in the observations being studied. The "moment" in the past, the synchronic image, may therefore actually reflect several decades of documentary evidence.

A more serious difficulty lies in the methodological necessity of accepting as essentially valid, data on conquered cultures collected by non-anthropologists from a conquering culture at a more or less distant point in time. For this reason, as Carmack astutely reminds us (1971: 129,131), it is as much the responsibility of the ethnohistorian to study the nature of the literate society and culture recording the historical information as it is to try to study the nature of the nonliterate one through the eyes of the recorders. It is only in this way that some measure of sensitivity in criticism of the sources may be achieved, and it is precisely the absence of this historian's meticulousness that characterizes too many of the anthropologist's forays into interpretation of historical materials. For all of these reasons, many historical ethnographies remain "superficial, topical, and largely descriptive" (Carmack 1972: 239).

If historical ethnography represents the synchronic focus of ethnohistory, then the diachronic focus may be designated the "historiography of [usually] nonliterate cultures" (Sturtevant 1968:454). Although the latter also necessarily conceals the same pitfalls as historical ethnography insofar as it must rely upon the testimony of often non-contemporary written materials, because of its emphasis on change over time, historiography of nonliterate cultures makes more positive use of the lack of precise contemporaneity in sources and is better equipped to use a broad range of non-written materials to complement and balance out the picture provided by documents alone.

This paper discusses the documentary materials available to the archaeologist, ethnographer, and historian working in the sector of Pacific Nicaragua and adjacent Nicoya, and offers examples of the problems which seem most current and compelling for anthropology and archaeology of this early colonial epoch. It is my hope that, by pointing out that a much broader range of documentary sources is available than is generally recognized, greater interest may be stimulated in the anthropological exploitation of these materials, both to illuminate the picture of the Late Polychrome period, ca. 1350-1550 A.D. (see Lange, this volume), and to focus on the little-known events of the first decades following Contact.

Two important works of social history by non-anthropologists deserve special mention in this context as examples of skillful historiographic use of documents in the area of concern. Both contain much of direct interest to the anthropologist, although the latter's approach to indigenous cultures is more anthropologically naive than the former's: MacLeod's *Spanish Central America* (1973) and Sherman's *Forced Native Labor in Sixteenth-Century Central America* (1979). Sherman's book is valuable for the author's extensive use of documents in the *Justicia* section of the Archives of the Indies in Seville and Guatemala, a resource which has been only barely tapped by anthropologists or historians and which represents perhaps the single most important such section for both.

After discussing the range of sources, it will be useful to consider three topics: the anthropological-archaeological problems most fruitfully approached ethnohistorically; the Conquest of Pacific Nicaragua and Nicoya; inferences on the specific importance of the Bay of Culebra zone during the Conquest period.

II. The Sources for Ethnohistoric Research

Nothing like comprehensive coverage of the sources can be offered here. The reader is referred instead to the excellent series of critical bibliographic essays in volumes 12-15 of the *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, particularly to volume 13, which represent the first attempt of such scope and depth to collect in one place reliable biographical and bibliographi-

cal data on the published and unpublished authors and materials of relevance to ethnohistoric investigation.

Contrary to what might be expected, the fruitful sources are not limited to those most commonly employed in ethnohistoric summaries for the area (e.g. Chapman 1960; Stone 1966b). While included here are the commonly-cited chronicles, most importantly Fernández de Oviedo (1851-55), it should be stressed that material of great potential value to anthropological research and therefore also to archaeological inference is to be found in documents which were never intended to be published nor circulated to a wide public; these are documents which remain unpublished in the colonial archives in Spain and the Americas—for our purposes, primarily in Guatemala— or which have been transcribed and published in one or more of the collections of edited or unedited documents referring to the Conquest and colonization of the New World. For discussion of the systematization and genres of documents to be found in archives and collections of their transcriptions, the reader is referred to Gibson (1973), Gómez Canedo (1961), Hill (1945), MacLeod (1973: 472-74), and the list of manuscripts by archive in Sherman (1979: 459-64). These non-chronicle documents are extremely important for the study of the conquering society and the political rivalries affecting the Indians, as well as for information on the implementation of policies and institutions of conquest and colonization. These include records of legal proceedings, among them the sparse but critical *juicios de residencia*, and litigation records dealing with land disputes, which may provide invaluable data on pre-hispanic territorial boundaries.

There are other types of sources which may be divided conveniently into paired categories for mention here. Of the colonial materials, chronicles and all other documents have already been distinguished, most of the latter being letters or official records of some form, either of the Church or the Spanish administration. A further important distinction is between religious and secular authors; both cross-cut the previous categories as well. All four groups include works of both a primary and secondary nature, and modern scholarship has at times erroneously identified some of the early secondary sources as primary, as in the cases of Torquemada, Herrera and López de Gómara. Complicating this issue is the fact that what we today deplore as "plagiarism" was normal historiographic practice in the 16th and 17th centuries; references in such secondary works to their original sources are therefore rare.

While ethnographic data on native cultures may be found in sources in all these categories, it was often the religious writers who had the most serious interest in and were the best observers of native practices. Although many of the early religious writers were indeed scholars, with a true scholarly interest in the recording of these data, of equal if not greater importance was their pragmatic concern with the success of the "spiritual conquest" (Ricard 1933), which was founded in turn in a strong ideological conviction that these native American heathen were not "by nature" slaves, but that they were eminently capable of receiving the Faith [see Ceballos (1610) for an example of this sentiment, as well as Las Casas' many such vociferous assertions]. The priests and friars who arrived in the New World in the 1530s and 1540s, "apostolic, ascetic missionaries" very different from the less militant representatives of the Church in the initial years of the Conquest, also had powerful political motives which pitted them against the interests of the conquistadors and *encomenderos* in a struggle for the allegiance and services of the Indians (MacLeod 1973: 106-8). Much of the voluminous documentation in all source categories forms part of the argumentation best viewed in the context of this conflict. The missionaries knew that in order to convert and control their Indian flocks they would have to learn their languages and study their customs. Their approach was much more anthropologically sophisticated than that of their lay competitors, and they have left for modern scholarship a rich corpus of information on native languages, cultures and society as well as on their own policies and ideology. Biobibliographic discussion of the many important Franciscan authors writing and working in Central America is provided by Adams (1953) and Scholes (1952). The Franciscans were the most active missionaries in the southern part of the Kingdom of Guatemala, of which Nicaragua and Nicoya were a part [for a history of the order, see Vázquez de Herrera (1714-16)]. Burrus (1973) discusses the lives and works of the religious writers; the important Franciscan author, Fray Juan de Torquemada, is treated in detail by Alcina Franch (1973).

Contrasting with the general class of colonial materials, there is a large and important class of more modern syntheses, which employ a variable range of colonial sources with variable skill. These serve as extremely useful introductions to the history and historical ethnography of the period which offer to the contemporary reader much more accessible treatments of the

relevant issues than do the colonial works, and they are cited extensively in this paper. They offer no substitute for use of the original sources, but serve to orient the investigator in his research by providing an indispensable modern overview. Important syntheses which deal at least in part with Greater Nicoya include Ayon (1887), Bancroft (1882; 1882-87), MacLeod (1973) and Sherman (1979). For an overview of the historical materials most relevant to archaeological interpretation in the Greater Nicoya area, Lothrop (1926), although not sufficiently analytical or critical in his approach, is still the most useful source; Ferrero (1977) and Stone (1966b) also gather much of this disparate data together.

The list of sources is presented in seven subdivisions, which will hopefully aid the reader in its use. No pretense is made here to encyclopedic thoroughness; the aim is to offer a sufficiently extensive listing to serve as an initial reference for the reader who wishes to investigate some of the issues raised in this paper. The categories are:

- A. articles on the nature of ethnohistory and its practice in Mesoamérica;
- B. bibliographic articles on historic sources, and descriptions of archival collections in Europe and America;
- C. post-colonial and modern historical overviews;
- D. colonial period chronicles by both secular and religious authors;
- E. collections of transcribed documents from archives on both sides of the Atlantic;
- F. a selection of individual non-chronicle documents mentioned in the text or otherwise of direct interest to ethnohistoric research; these represent only a handful of thousands;
- G. an eclectic list of a few modern works specifically cited or which treat themes discussed in the text.

The bibliography appears at the end of this paper.

III. The Anthropological Potential of Ethnohistoric Research for Greater Nicoya

By their very nature, as documents written by members of the conquering society, the historic sources of all genres yield information about both Spanish and Indian cultures [Oviedo (1976: 305) and Gómara (1941: 347-48) tell us that the Nicaraguans had screenfold texts, but none of these native sources has survived]. Conquest society abruptly brought into a dominant/subordinate relationship the European culture with the American; that new society demanded extensive compromise on both parts, however, perhaps more than is generally recognized. Spanish society and culture were not imposed wholesale upon the existing pre-columbian society and culture. Nor were the indigenous peoples forced to completely renounce their traditions and institutions. The products of the Conquest—a complex mestizo society and a new cultural synthesis called by Nicholson (1973: 498) a “larger Indo-Hispanic Middle American socio-cultural universe”—made their impact on colonial writing and Spanish colonial institutions designed to manage the new society. As Nicholson (1973: 499-500, 502) points out in his assessment of the state of ethnohistoric research in Mesoamerica, there is a vast amount of documentation on the colonial institutions most directly involved in manipulation and accommodation of the Indians, including the *encomienda*, *repartimiento*, the policy of *congregación* and the institution of the *cacicazgo*. Thus, the results of modern scholarly investigation into the legal natures and practical implementations of these institutions form an integral part of the documentation of Indian society as it is reflected in the historic materials (see Nicholson 1973: 502 for major authors).

The anthropologist researching the nature of the native cultures during the late Pre-columbian, Contact or post-Contact (colonial) times must bear in mind that the original Spanish documents are not ethnographic materials in the modern sense; we cannot assume that we fully understand the peculiar distortion of the cultural “lens” through which the writer was gazing until we have become as conscientious as the best historians in our evaluation of the life, times, socio-cultural and political environment of the writer himself. Because many of the writers who have left descriptions of New World societies for future generations were members of an intellectual elite, whether lay or religious, it becomes evident that study of the intellectual history of the Spanish of this period is critical, and forms a variable of essential anthropological concern.

Some of the other areas of interest to the anthropologist which may be approached through study of the documentation for Nicaragua and Nicoya are considered below. Nicholson (1973) divides his overview of Mesoamerican ethnohistory into Prehispanic and

post-Contact categories, a division with greater applicability further to the north than in Greater Nicoya, where no such division is possible because all surviving sources date to the years of the Conquest or thereafter. It should nonetheless be obvious that there exist both pre- and post-Contact aspects of the following areas of concern, whose relative importance in any single document must be carefully evaluated, taking into account its author and genre as well as the probable provenience of its primary data. This listing cannot be considered definitive or exhaustive, but I feel that it does cover the majority of the realms which attract the anthropologist to historical investigation.

(1) Demography: population at Conquest and the impact of epidemics, war, the slave trade and other forms of forced labor upon the population. This topic is dealt with in section IV, and remains a fruitful one for future research and aggregation to the important work of the "Berkeley School" of Cook, Simpson and Borah, largely for Mesoamérica (Dobyns 1976). Radell (1969, 1976) has made a strong contribution to the study of the historical demography of Nicaragua.

(2) Settlement pattern: the relative sizes and distribution of native populations over the landscape. As is well known, depopulations and the effects of colonial policies precipitated major changes in these patterns (see below, item 9). A related topic includes land tenure practices during both pre- and post-Contact periods; there is a large body of legal documentation relating to post-Conquest land claims which bears directly on Prehispanic landholding patterns.

(3) Internal settlement organization and types of structures: although material on this topic is hardly abundant, it is of great importance to archaeologists as well as to those interested in socio-political organization (topic 4) and subsistence (topic 6).

(4) Socio-political organization: there are local, micro- and macro-regional aspects of this subjects. It is clear that Nicaragua was characterized by stratified, ranked societies, but there seems to have been no single dominant type of government. Oviedo (1976: 460) is explicit about the Spaniards' imposition of the *cacicazgo* system—which they first encountered in the Caribbean—upon communities previously governed by groups of elders, in order to simplify their management of those populations. From the variety of terms employed by the Spanish in referring to community leaders, it seems likely that a number of systems may have been in use in neighboring communities, and probably within communities. Sherman (1979: chapter 13) and MacLeod (1973: 29, 134-42) discuss socio-political organization for Central America, the former with specific reference to Nicaragua, but this topic is deserving of much more thorough study for the Nicaragua-Nicoya area, particularly insofar as it compares with organization further north in Mesoamerica and as it may contrast with the case in the balance of Costa Rica.

It is worth noting here the sometimes equivocal use by the Spaniards of the term *cacique*. Although it was used to designate a native "chief," the conquistadors customarily employed this term for Indian leaders even if their positions were not of the same genre as in the Caribbean.

By extension, the Spaniards also used *cacique* to designate the territory of that leader's group, regardless of whether or not the group exercised true territorial claims over the land. And the towns where *caciques* resided acquired as a permanent toponym the name of the first leader whom the conquerors encountered there.

(5) Religious practices: this is a broad topic with multiple facets of specific relevance to the archaeologist and the socio-cultural anthropologist. We may include under this rubric: religious ideology and ritual, and the extent to which these may be characterized as reflective of Central Mexican beliefs and practices; the social role of religious practitioners and the varieties of such practitioners; burial practices and their relationship to ideology [see, for example, Bobadilla (1976) and Carlos I (1537)]. All these facets are of special importance to the interpretation of the archaeology of the Late Polychrome Period—and, by extrapolation, to the Middle Polychrome—and remain insufficiently investigated. The iconographic study of ceramic style, which may include motifs of religious significance, has seen little progress since Lothrop's pioneering work (1926), but the doctoral dissertation now in preparation by Jane S. Day (University of Colorado) promises to rejuvenate this important area of research.

(6) Economics: this topic comprehends subsistence patterns, including agricultural practices; art and craft specialization; and commercial and/or tribute relations with the Pacific Nicaraguan area as well as those linking it with the Mexica Empire and other potential resource zones. These latter patterns were obviously ruptured, then re-oriented to benefit the new overlords after the Conquest. There is sadly little information for Nicaragua on the arts, except

in Oviedo, but agricultural and other subsistence practices are fairly well known and significant to the archaeologist, ecologist and anthropologist. The island of Chira is the only site mentioned as a ceramic production center, and by the available descriptions, it would appear that the industry was highly developed commercially, its products being traded well beyond the immediate Gulf of Nicoya zone (mentioned by Oviedo, Castañeda, Torquemada, López de Velasco). The importance of Chira as a ceramic production center has not, to date, been confirmed by the archaeology of the island. Recent work by W. Creamer (Tulane University) may help to verify this attribution of the historic sources.

The role of cacao in the economic structures of both pre- and post-Contact society can hardly be overestimated (Bergmann 1969; MacLeod 1973: 32-33, chapters 5, 12), and may have constituted one of the major reasons why the Mexica sought to extend their commercial power this far south. Both Nicoya and Rivas were cacao-producing zones in the late 1540s (Bergmann 1969: 95), and paid tribute to the Spaniards in that commodity. While Bergmann makes the important observation that this production was not on a scale which might suggest extra-regional trade in cacao, at the time of the *Tasación* document on which his data are based, this does not preclude the strong possibility that the production may have been larger at the time of the Conquest, nor that it might have been developed to a much greater extent had the Mexica been able to more fully incorporate Pacific Nicaragua into their tribute sphere.

The coast of northern Guanacaste (also known as "Papagayo") was famous for centuries for its rich pearl fisheries. With the addition of the collecting of precious feathers, honey, beeswax production, and, possibly, the production of sea salt around the Gulf of Nicoya and the northern Guanacaste coast, there is good reason to believe that much of Nicoya may have been tapped for its extractable wealth even though the peninsula was not heavily populated in protohistoric times. In fact, the under-population of the peninsula has persisted throughout the colonial and well into the national periods, as have these same extractive industries, including indigo, purple shellfish dye, and textile production.

(7) Linguistic affiliations and ethnic groups ("cultures"): this topic seems to have occupied more early scholarship than any other, and yet the conclusions of writers like Lothrop (1926), Stone (1946, 1966b), Chapman (1960), Bancroft (1882-87), and Lehmann (1920), among others, fall short of more recent anthropological work on ethnicity and its relationship to spoken language [e.g. the volume edited by Barth (1969)]. For those archaeologists and anthropologists to whom these questions remain important, it is unfortunate that the research trends in linguistics have moved away from historical issues, but the recent increased interest in sociolinguistics may eventually produce a much clearer, dynamic picture of the inter-relationships between group identification and spoken idiom, which should be of direct relevance to the study of the polyethnic society occupying the small, fertile, agricultural zone of Pacific Nicaragua. The facile equation formerly drawn between language and "culture" has long since been discarded as a general rule in anthropology, and yet this simplistic notion continues to plague consideration of the nature of Lower Central American societies. Linares (1979) provides a summary discussion of the issue for Lower Central America, emphasizing the complexity of the frontier context in which many ethnic groups speaking a variety of languages and dialects not only co-existed but maintained social and economic ties among themselves.

Two major sources for identification of spoken idiom with specific towns and regions in Nicaragua are Oviedo (1976) and Ciudad Real (1873). The latter, although a relatively late source, dating to 1585, nevertheless is the most thorough recorder of this information. Because his data were gathered more than sixty years after the Conquest, the linguistic pattern he describes for Nicaragua cannot be considered an accurate reflection of the precolumbian one, but rather almost certainly demonstrates the further spread of nahuatl in the area as the *lingua franca* employed by the Spaniards throughout Mesoamerica. The extent to which nahuatl served as the precolumbian *lingua franca* is still under debate, but there is no doubt that the process of extension was accelerated under the Spanish. Ciudad Real's relation nevertheless describes a multi-linguistic society, and we may presume that the picture was even more complex, ethnically and linguistically, prior to the Conquest.

This complexity in turn raises a very large anthropological question: how this poly-ethnic society, occupying a rich but tightly circumscribed geographical zone, was articulated politically, socially and economically. That is, what sort of balance of power and influence, and what kind of economic integration characterized prehispanic society in the lakes region? Barth's stimulating introduction to the volume of essays on ethnicity (1969: 9-38) ranges through the issues involved in this question, generalizing from a broad spectrum of cultural

examples. Barth also reminds us that ethnic diversity can no longer be viewed usefully as if "each tribe and people has maintained its culture through a bellicose ignorance of its neighbors" (1969: 9), as has apparently been too blithely assumed for Lower Central American groups.

(8) Native histories: there are a number of versions of the so-called "historic migrations" linking the Nicaraguan and Nicoyan populations with displacements of Mesoamerican groups to the north. All were recorded by Spaniards working in both Central America and Mexico. Interpretation of these stories, usually focusing, conveniently, but misleadingly, on Torquemada's detailed version, must consider the issue of their historicity. Instead, too many authors have naively dispensed with even the most fundamental source evaluation, questioning who the primary source for the information was, and how, when, where and why it came to be recorded. Nicholson (1973: 490-91) raises two other significant issues affecting use of these native histories: (a) "distinguishing legendary 'pattern histories' from reliable chronicling of actual past events;" and (b) "allowing for local propagandistic bias." He elaborates as follows:

...it has been insufficiently recognized to what extent... the events have been fitted consciously or unconsciously into stylized patterns heavily influenced by religious and cosmological preconceptions. All the native histories represent a very selective and formalized image of the past, one which was obviously being constantly revised in response to various socio-political and religious changes within the groups in question.

(1973: 491)

The often-cited version of Torquemada (whose Central American data were largely derived from Motolinia's much earlier work) superficially appears to be "solid native history," and generally has been considered as simply a garbled version thereof. But a closer examination reveals details that strongly suggest that it is a politicized version incorporating post-Conquest events as well as prehispanic legend.

These "histories" may therefore be much more informative as indicators of the internal social relationships in a poly-ethnic or plural society than as true history, but their most essential elements, which persistently relate the presence of ethnic groups in Nicaragua and Nicoya who spoke languages with an original Mexican distribution to actual migrations towards the south, we must recognize as historically true. The number of migrations, their specific routes, and their placement in the prehistoric chronology remain highly problematic issues of major importance to the interpretation of the archaeological sequence in the area. It seems fairly certain, however, that none of these migrations took place by sea (as stated in some native histories), because the artifactual evidence for such a dramatic and precipitous event is entirely lacking. The archaeological and historical evidence together suggest a less mythologized scenario: a long term overland migration down the Pacific corridor, permitting a gradual permutation of the material culture while maintaining a fundamental Mesoamericanness in language and other non-material aspects of behavior (Sturtevant 1968: 470). We must consider the persistence of the conviction among both the Nicaraguan immigrants and their probable Mexican forebears that both groups were originally one as powerful evidence for the cultural reality of that connection, as well as for the political expediency of the maintenance of that claim (see Allegation... 1571 for a Mexican document relating to this connection).

(9) Formation of the colonial society: this is a very large subject, and is obviously that to which the ethnohistoric materials best lend themselves. The social historians interested in Lower Central America have been much quicker to exploit the available documents than have the anthropologists, to whom they can be of no lesser interest. Sherman (1979: xiii) reminds us of the infancy of social research for 16th century Central America:

Regrettably, our ignorance of race relations in sixteenth century Central America is such that another quarter century or so of what is fashionably disparaged as "traditional" research is necessary before a synthesis worthy of the ink can be written.

Among the aspects of the genesis and development of colonial society we may include: *mestizaje* (Mörner 1967, 1970), including the important concept of "social race" developed by

Wagley (1959); linguistic "acculturation" (Nicholson 1973: 504); legal history relating to Indians and other social races; changes in settlement pattern and land tenure [see Markman (1963: 21-25; 1968) for formation of *pueblos de indios* and *pueblos de españoles*; economic history; and the syncretic development of religion and folklore. The documentary materials are abundant for this kind of diachronic study, which in turn illuminates retrospectively the kinds of Indian societies encountered at Contact and the conquering society. Legal history reflects much of the intellectual history of the 16th century and its 15th century progenitor. But the existence of strong laws to defend the Indians from a multiplicity of abuses must be recognized for the ideals embodied in those laws rather than as effective legislation which materially bettered the lives of most Indians [for discussion of one of the most famous episodes in enforcement of laws protecting the Indians, see Sherman (1971; 1979: chapters 8-9)]. The very fact that the same abuses were periodically outlawed, for decades and sometimes for centuries, is solid evidence for the ineffectiveness of the laws in the Americas, despite—at times—the best of good intentions (Mörner 1970; Sherman 1979: xi).

IV. THE EXPERIENCE OF CONQUEST IN GREATER NICOYA

The existence of the Gulf of Nicoya became known to the Spaniards through the cursory explorations by sea of Juan de Castañeda and Hernán Ponce de León, lieutenants of Gaspar de Espinoza, in 1519 (Oviedo 1976: 149-50). The peninsula of Nicoya and the lakes region of Nicaragua were not explored by land, however, until 1522, when Gil González Dávila led an expedition on foot from western Panama to the Nicaraguan lakes—where he stayed a brief time—and back to the Gulf of Nicoya. There he rejoined his pilot, Andrés Niño, and ships, who had in the meantime explored the Pacific coast as far north as the Gulf of Fonseca. Andrés de Cereceda (1522) and Gil González (1524a) provide two eyewitness accounts of these explorations. Three important points become obvious from examination of these documents: (1) González noted a quantitative and qualitative difference between the populations contacted south of the Gulf of Nicoya, and those of the Gulf and of Nicoya as a whole; (2) he noted a further and more marked change as he approached the lakes region of Nicaragua; (3) the size of the Nicaraguan populations, and their relative material wealth, were impressive to the Spaniards.

Cereceda's terse listing of caciques contacted, distances travelled between caciques, wealth collected, and souls baptized bears illuminating comparison with González's letter to the Emperor of 6 March 1524, written from Santo Domingo (Fernández 1976: 33-35, 36-48). The main thrust of the letter is strategic: that is, Gil González emphasizes the locations of major populations only, making the interesting observation that he "met with the language of Yucatan" in the lakes region, although he had never been in the Yucatan. He is further concerned with noting the availability of ports, and the discovery of the tidal "mar dulce" (Lake Nicaragua), which he correctly reasoned must have a connection with the Caribbean. He recognized that the isthmus between the lakes and the Pacific is extremely narrow, and therefore that the Nicaraguan route might be easily developed to supersede the difficult Panamanian traverse from the Mar del Norte to the Mar del Sur. Even as early as 1524, the Spanish were beginning to doubt the existence of a strait between the oceans which would permit their ships to pass directly into the Pacific.

A comparison of size and locations of indigenous populations between Cereceda's inventory and Gil González's letter is instructive, in that there is a striking difference between the two accounts. Gil González selectively omits all mention of the caciques and groups between the cacique Nicoya and that whom he called Nicaragua, whose town was encountered on the shore of the lake in Rivas. From Cereceda's account, we learn that this omission actually consists of: eight caciques, 637 baptized souls, 1602 + pesos of gold or *tumbaga* (oro "de bajo ley," with a high copper content), and 22 pesos worth of pearls from one cacique on the coast (on the basis of its long-standing importance in the pearl fisheries, it is possible that this cacique lived in the Bay of Culebra). If we further compare the sizes of populations baptized and the amounts of gold or *tumbaga* obtained from each population, totalling for the Nicaraguan caciques only, we can appreciate at once the reason for Gil González's license in his account to the King: of a total of 31,648 persons reportedly baptized from the time the Spaniard first contacts the cacique Chorotega on the coast of the Gulf of Nicoya, until his retreat from Nicaragua, 21,624 (68.3%) were baptized in only two locations in Nicaragua, representing the people of seven caciques. These Nicaraguan "converts" also represent 67% of all the people baptized in the

whole expedition. Similarly, of a total of more than 101,293 pesos of gold or tumbaga collected from this same area, 70,758 pesos (69.8%) were given by the eight Nicaraguan caciques alone (62.9% of the total expedition wealth). This figure compares well with the lesser sums of purer gold recovered in the early Panamanian entradas (Oviedo 1976: 144-57). Gómara's account of the expedition also confirms that this was a respectable sum: "*Sin embargo, fue mucha riqueza, cual nunca pensara él, y lo ensoberbeció*" (1954:342).

The only other large population mentioned in either Cereceda's or Gil González's account is that of the cacique of Nicoya, who gave the Spaniards 13,442 pesos in gold (13.3%) and permitted 6,063 baptisms to be performed (19%). There are many further details of anthropological interest in Gil González's report that reward careful study; for instance, he reports that the people of the six caciques and towns lying six leagues beyond Nicaragua's town immediately submitted to baptism upon hearing that Nicaragua and his people had already done so. The Europeans were then attacked, for the first time in the course of the expedition, by 3000-4000 warriors wearing cotton padding armor. The Spaniards retreated towards Nicoya, harassed by Nicaragua's forces.

In his introduction to his letter to the King, Gil González says: "...yo anduvo a pie, CXXIII leguas, en las cuales descubrí grandes pueblos y cosas hasta que topé con la lengua de Yucatán". And in his summation of the account, Gil González says:

Todas las cosas de Yucatán avemos topado así en casas como en ropa y armas por do está cierto que por esta mar del sur tiene vuestra magestad descubierto tanto adelante como al poniente por la mar del norte.

(1524, in Fernández 1976: 44)

This identification of "Yucatecan" culture and language with the Nicaraguan is problematical: Gil González had never been to the Yucatán, nor to Mexico; he also did not know that the "montones grandes de gradas que en cada lugar en la placa ay" in Nicaragua's pueblo, where he planted a cross, were temples which regularly witnessed human sacrifices in the Mesoamerican tradition. There seem to be at least two possible interpretations for this attribution, both of which fit with what we know of the political and territorial ambitions of González himself, hinted at in the cited lines above.

The existence of the Yucatan was known well before Gil González's departure for Nicaragua; Cortés and Alvarado had recently defeated the forces of Tenochtitlán in 1521, although little was known at the time in Castilla del Oro about Mexico itself. The conquistadors ranging out from the Nicaraguan colony therefore knew they were in competition with the efforts mounted to be north, and that there was an uncertain expanse of land which lay between. Gil González was probably searching avidly for some clue that the southern bounds of that unknown territory had been reached, although the declared objective of the explorations was the location of the hoped-for strait between the seas which would open for Spain a western route to the Spice Islands. By the time González wrote his letter to the King in 1524, he would have been thoroughly informed about Mexico and its great wealth, so it is all the more curious that he would have specifically identified Nicaraguan culture with the Yucatecan. Either he did not clearly distinguish the latter from the Mexican, or he was drawing an analogy between Nicaragua and the Yucatan insofar as they shared a peripheral but contiguous position to Mexico.

An alternate possibility is that he may have somehow learned that the "*lengua mejicana corrupta*" (Ciudad Real 1976: 154) or nahuatl dialect spoken in parts of Pacific Nicaragua was the language spoken by peoples further north. The Spaniards also attributed virtual identity to the "material culture" of the Nicaraguan and the Mesoamerican peoples, which probably strengthened Gil's somewhat wishful assertion. Nahuatl certainly served as the *lingua franca* in much of Mesoamerica at the time of the Conquest, as has been discussed above, so it is possible that elites in the Maya area may have known it (although Cortés did not encounter the language until he had left the Yucatan for Veracruz). It would therefore appear that Gil, after his return from Nicaragua, seized upon clues in the material culture, language, and perhaps religion of that country to conclude that he had actually contacted the southeastern border of the by then fabled Mexican empire. He was thus misled in his identification of Nicaragua with the Yucatan, but he was correct in his perception of a connection between Nicaragua and a "nahuatlized" Mesoamerica.

The strong overall impression that can be gleaned from these early descriptions of the area is as follows: with the major exception of Nicoya and his pueblo, the rest of the peninsula of Nicoya and Guanacaste seems to have been occupied by small, scattered, mostly inland populations. The fact that there seems to have been a fairly extensive Late Polychrome occupation along the northern Guanacaste coast does not accord with this impression, however, suggesting either that the Ruiz phase (1350-1550 A.D.) effectively ended just prior to the Conquest in this zone, or that these coastal populations were of insufficient size to warrant attention from the Spaniards. The northern Guanacaste plains between the cordillera and the sea are not so vast as to permit any but the smallest settlements to remain undiscovered during a period when these plains lay along the principal communication route between Panama and the lakes region of Nicaragua (see section IV). The lakes region, by contrast, supported a number of large settlements with dispersed internal settlement organization (Oviedo 1976: 376-77; Gonzalez 1524a). Curiously, there is no mention of the Sapandí River (Tempisque) in Gil's letter, although we know from Cereceda that the Spaniards contacted the cacique whose name was given to the river. Several subsequent accounts characterize most of what is now Guanacaste province as dry and empty; Nicaragua, on the other hand, is described as fertile and well-watered, and able to support a large human population on its abundant agricultural production, lake fisheries, and hunting (e.g. Gómara 1954, I: 344).

Throughout the Americas, the conquistadors were in search of limited commodities in the early decades: portable wealth (chiefly mineral), and land with a sufficiently large and cooperative human population to produce further wealth for the Spaniards in the mines; failing these, there was always the lucrative possibility of the slave trade. It was not until these first sources were seriously depleted that the conquerors began to consider other forms of economic exploitation of the land [see MacLeod (1973) for a detailed discussion of the sequence]. It should thus be clear why the Nicaraguan lakes region was selected for direct colonization, while the peninsula of Nicoya remained an outlying province with a single *pueblo de indios*. The fact that Nicoya was included at all in the early Nicaraguan colony is, in the author's opinion, a reflection of two major factors: a recognition by the Spaniards of the cultural affinities and geographical continuity between the two regions, and an absence of these between Nicoya and the rest of what is now Costa Rica; and the desire to protect the strategic routes connecting Nicaragua with the Panamanian and the Peruvian colony via the Gulf of Nicoya, which offered the only safe harbors coming up from the south with access overland through non-hostile territory towards the north (Radell and Parsons 1971). I will deal with this issue shortly insofar as it affects the role of the Bay of Culebra in the late prehistoric and early historic periods.

León Viejo and Granada were founded in 1524 by Francisco Hernández de Córdoba on behalf of Pedrarias Dávila, Governor of Castilla del Oro, who became Governor of Nicaragua in 1527 (Meléndez 1976). Hernández founded at the same time the short-lived town of Bruselas, on the east side of the Gulf of Nicoya near Orotina, presumably to protect and supply the traffic between Panama and Nicaragua. But this colony could not be maintained because of political conflicts among the Spaniards and a lack of a sufficiently large and cooperative population to keep the town supplied with food or the colonists in high hopes of material gain. After the débâcle of Bruselas in 1527, Chira became the main transshipment point in the Gulf and was, in fact, better located for that role (Radell and Parsons 1971: 299; Castañeda 1529).

Although there is disagreement among both the 16th century writers and modern scholars as to the absolute size of the Nicaraguan population at Contact, there is no doubt that it was large. There is also no doubt that by about 1550 the population was so decimated by disease, war and the slave trade that it has become difficult for many scholars to believe the early estimates of the scale of the human destruction. The Spaniards were certainly prone to exaggeration in matters of population estimates, and it will never be possible to know exactly how large the population was in 1522, but several modern writers have made some estimates on the basis of the volume of the slave trade and the toll of epidemics introduced by the Spaniards (e.g. Radell 1969, 1976; MacLeod 1973; Sherman 1979).

Of the 16th century writers, one of the most reliable, Fray Toribio de Benevente ("Motolinía"), estimated the original population at half a million (1976:100). The Church's most vociferous and powerful defender of the Indians, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, claimed in 1552 that more than 500,000 Nicaraguan Indians were enslaved in a period of only fourteen years, from the Conquest to 1536, and that an equal number or larger died in wars against the Spanish (1976: 96). He does not even allude to the enormous toll known to have been taken by disease alone. Las Casas was prone to hyperbole in defense of the Indians, and most modern

writers feel that his figures must be considerably reduced (see, e.g. Sherman 1979: 75). Indeed, Sherman notes that Las Casas himself in 1536 had given a figure of 52,000 for the trade to Panama and Peru. This is Las Casas' 1535 "*Carta a un Personaje de la Corte*" (1976), written from Granada eight years before his appointment as Bishop of Chiapas, in which he gives the following account:

Todos nuestros españoles que por aquí están dicen que había hoy ha ocho años, en obra de cincuenta leguas de tierra en cuadra, mas de seiscientos mil personas; unas poblaciones admirables, ... Habrá en todos cuantos indios y indias hay hoy en toda esta provincia, por dicho de todos ellos los nuestros españoles, y no pasará de doce o quince mil almas... Han llevado de aquí a Panamá más de veinticinco mil ánimas por esclavos, ... Y al Perú, antes de los años dichos, más de otros quince mil... No va nao destos puertos que no lleve más de trescientas ánimas...

(1976: 71-72, 76)

Despite a considerable reduction in the number of Indians supposedly enslaved, note that Las Casas' estimate of the original population is in substantial agreement with Motolinía's, although the Bishop's estimate refers to 1527, five years after the discovery of Nicaragua.

MacLeod (1973: 52) argues that 200,000 would appear to be a conservative total for the whole period of the Nicaraguan slave trade, approximately 1528-1550. *Juez de Residencia* Lic. Diego de Herrera wrote in 1545 (Colección Somoza 9: 384-86) that the original population was 600,000, but that it was now reduced to 30,000, principally by slavery. Oviedo estimated the enslaved population at 400,000 (1976: 362) and offered the following conservative assessment of his own ability to accurately record ethnographic information, precisely because of the extent of this cultural devastation (1976: 361):

Más ceremonias é ritos é costumbres é cosas notables están por decir que no se han dicho desta gobernación é sus anexos, é decir las todas sería imposible, assi por no se entender tan particularmente como convernía, á causa de las diversidades de lenguas, como porque la guerra é conversacion de los chripstianos y el tiempo han consumido é dado fin á las vidas de los indios viejos é aun de los moços, é la cobdiçia de los jueces, é gobernadores é de otros que han dádose mucha priessa á sacar indios con nombre de esclavos fuera de aquella tierra, para los vender en Castilla del Oro é para otras partes.

Radell (1976: 69) argues that these estimates by Las Casas, Herrera, and Oviedo are credible ones, demonstrating that such a volume of the slave trade could have been achieved, based on the best information available from the period for sizes of slave cargoes, numbers of ships in the trade, sailings per year, etc. Lockhart's data from Peru (1968: 200), the beneficiary of much of this trade, lends further credence to the argument that the depopulation must have been on a massive scale.

MacLeod (1973: 98) and Sherman (1979: 352-53) summarize the documentation on Central American pandemics affecting the Nicaraguan population. In the two episodes recorded in letters dated 1531 and 1533 by Lic. Francisco de Castañeda, Pedrarias' *juez de residencia* and then briefly Governor himself, mortality among the Indians was extremely high: between one and two-thirds of the population in 1529-31, and a third again (i.e. 6,000 deaths) in 1532-34 (C.D.I. XXIV: 173-203). A tribute assessment of 1548, cited by MacLeod as being virtually complete for Nicaragua, lists only 11,137 tributaries (1973: 53; Radell 1976: 75). If we apply Borah and Cook's perhaps conservative 3.3 factor for estimation of overall population from tributary figures (Radell 1976: 75), we obtain a total population of 36,752. Recall that Herrera had stated in 1545 that the population was reduced to 30,000. Although the slave trade ended by 1550, the population continued to drop throughout the remainder of the 16th century and the whole of the 17th century (MacLeod 1973: 53). The surviving Indian populations were divided in *repartimiento* among the Spanish *encomenderos* and the Crown itself. Spanish cosmographer López de Velasco (1894) gives the first virtually comprehensive listing of Indian towns, their tributaries, and the Spanish towns to which the former were administratively linked, his data largely coming from the *relaciones geográficas* (1578-85).

It has thus become very difficult for anthropologists and archaeologists concerned with the pre-Contact populations of Nicaragua and Nicoya, and yet unfamiliar with this documentation, to grasp the magnitude of the cultural and demographic change which took place in those first decades after Gil González first discussed "*las cosas de Dios*" with the "*gran cacique que se llama Nicaragua*" (Oviedo 1976: 169; Angleria 1976: 23-27; Gómara 1941, II: 209-10; González 1524). A better appreciation of this fact, coupled with consideration of the implications of the settlement pattern described in Cereceda's and Gil González's accounts, would help explain the peculiarities of the archaeological record for the Late Polychrome period in Greater Nicoya as it is currently understood (see Lange, this volume). The only archaeological survey carried out to date in the area of concern in Nicaragua is that of Willey and Norweb (Norweb 1962), although Haberland has done extensive work on Ometepe Island. The results of the Willey-Norweb survey in Rivas are reported by Healy (1974; 1980). Insofar as archaeological verification of this large protohistoric Indian population is concerned, the survey results are equivocal but suggest support for the argument. The survey did not purport to be systematic, however, and the question of the reconciliation of this proposed demographic pattern with the archaeological evidence for the terminal Late Polychrome period must remain, for the moment, pending. This problem provides an excellent example of the potential role for historic research in defining problems for future archaeological investigation demanding an interdisciplinary approach.

IV. The Bay of Culebra in the Contact Period

The Bay of Culebra does not warrant mention in the early historic sources for the region of Pacific Nicaragua and Nicoya. The absence of references to the only large protected harbor between the Gulf of Fonseca and the Gulf of Nicoya must be attributed to two major factors: (1) as we have discussed above, on the basis of the two eyewitness accounts by Cereceda and Gil González, it seems highly probable that there was a relatively small indigenous population located in small communities in the region lying between the lands of the cacique Nicoya and his more powerful neighbors in Nicaragua. We know that Gil's party did not follow a coastal route, since only the cacique Namiapí is listed as living on the coast, and it seems most probable that they followed the more transitable route up the west side of the Tempisque River valley and north across the volcanic plains west of the cordillera of Guanacaste. The contingent captained by Andrés Niño did sail the coast and yet made no mention of any major embayments south of Fonseca. We must assume that during both of these transits, which were explicitly concerned with exploration for strategic purposes and location of exploitable human and natural resources, the parties would have made note of any important populations lying along the coast, had they existed. The fact that Niño's seaborne party did not apparently even observe the bay leads us to the second probable reason for the absence of the bay from the early records: (2) Niño's voyage was made during the summer months, when the coastal navigation is most dangerous because of the strong trade winds, known here as "*papagayos*," and their effect on the inshore waters. These winds blow from the northeast, sweeping across the isthmus and through the break in the cordillera north of Orosí volcano, and carry ships far offshore, making inshore navigation both hazardous and difficult. For several decades in the 16th century, because of the risks of these conditions, the Spanish preferred to sail from Panama or Peru north into the Gulf of Nicoya anchorages, then proceed to Nicoya, up the Tempisque, and finally to portage the remainder of the distance to Lake Nicaragua, or first to the headwaters of the Sapoá, which rise close to those of the Tempisque near the foot of Orosí. From there it is a brief trip down the Sapoá to the lake. Even when the port of Realejo ("*Posesión*") came into use in the 1530s, this Nicoya route remained a much-frequented alternative (Radell and Parsons 1971:300). Several authors refer to these awesome papagayos and their effect on ships and crews (Oviedo 1976: 187, 289; Saavedra y Córdova 1684, in Meléndez 1974: 70; Castañeda 1529a, in Peralta 1883: 149; Pineda 1594: 469).

It is debatable whether these conditions would have been considered as hazardous by Indians navigating the ocean-going dugouts and balsas known to have been in use in the Contact period by Mesoamerican and South American groups [for the Gulf of Nicoya, see Oviedo (1976: 185)]. Indeed, the presence of bones of deepwater species of fish in prehistoric middens along the coast of the bay and elsewhere in northern Guanacaste probably argues that the Indians had such navigation skills and that they utilized them in their subsistence activities (but see Kerbis, this volume). We have scant but incontrovertible archaeological support for

the argument that long-distance interchange of non-perishable items occurred in prehistoric times along this coast: Stone (1966a) and Ferrero (1976: 97, lám. XLIV) describe the presence at the bay sites of Nacascolo and Panamá of Tohil Plumbate, Ulua "marble" vessels, a Teotihuacán III-type cylindrical tripod Tlaloc vessel, and numerous motifs on ceramic vessels indicative of close but limited contact with Mesoamerican cultures from the Early Polychrome period onwards (see also Lange *et al*, this volume; Lange n.d.: 20). Evidence for contact with South American cultures is less secure, but remains suggestive of less direct or less frequent episodes than those experienced with Mesoamerican groups [e.g. some southern stylistic affinities of stone sculptures from the Nacascolo and La Molonga sites (30471-89-1, 30471-143-1), and the surface finds of three cameloid heads, two ceramic and one pumice, at the Vidor site (30471-253-1)].

The Late Polychrome occupation in sites around the Bay of Culebra is, however, neither extensive nor deep; indeed, as Lange argues in his article in this volume, there is every indication that the period was very brief—perhaps only 200 years—in this region. With the qualification about the Willey-Norweb survey voiced above, it would appear that a contrast to this situation may be offered by the data for the Rivas peninsula west of Lake Nicaragua, which indicate a pattern of more extensive Late Polychrome occupations (Healy 1974, 1980).

These two bodies of evidence together strongly suggest that the Bay of Culebra was not the site of large indigenous populations in the early 16th century, although, as stated above, it is very likely that northern Guanacaste was settled by a number of small communities, perhaps governed by caciques of less importance than Nicoya or Nicaragua or by councils of elders, an alternate system of government described by Oviedo (1976: 304). It must be considered of significance that the Spanish found no reason to directly colonize the lands between Nicoya and the lakes region. Lic. Castañeda's very important report on the state of Nicaragua, dated 30 March 1529 (Colección Somoza I: 493; Peralta 1883: 53-54) is relevant in this context:

...el cacique de nicoya ques el mas principal e este tendra a mas tener dos mill yndios e avn no creo que tiene tantos tiene mucha tierra de que se provecha e ynporta mucho al serujcio de vuestra magestad este cacique porque es muy amigo de christianos... e todos los que se desenbarcan en la yslla de chira para venir a esta provincia por tierra pasan en canoas y barcas a este cacique de nicoya e alli se proveen de comida para treynta e cinco leguas que ay hasta nicaragua... e les dan yndios que guien los que vienen e pasan con ellos hasta nicaragua que ay treynta e cinco leguas despoblado...

(emphasis mine)

Pedrarias' 1529 letter (Colección Somoza I: 447; Peralta 1883: xi-xii) states that:

...desde Orutina, hasta Nicoya que son 20 leguas está poblado de algunos Yndios, y desde Nicoya hasta el Cacique de Nicaragua hay 35 leguas poco mas, aunque no ponen sino 30, está despoblado porque es tierra inhabitable y sin agua...

The Governor then indicates that the large Indian populations are found in the areas of the Spanish towns of Granada and León.

This sparseness of human resources is therefore explained, at least in part, by the Nicoya region's lack of abundant freshwater sources. Moreover, the lesser fertility of her soils when compared with the lakes region, caused by more intensive leaching of less frequently renewed recent volcanic soils, must constitute another major disadvantage for a thoroughly agricultural population, as we know the Nicaraguans were at the time of the Conquest (Lange 1971: 22-23, citing Stevens 1964, discusses the soils in more detail). Wyckoff (1978: 5-6) suggests that there is a direct, positive relationship between the abundance of certain game and the amount of land cleared for agriculture, and proposes that this relationship may in part explain the apparent rise in exploitation of game in the Late Polychrome Period at the San Francisco and Santa Isabel "A" sites (see also Lange, this volume). In the lakes region, it is therefore at least plausible that an economy based on cultivation of traditional Mesoamerican cultigens, hunting, and fishing in the freshwater lakes may have offered a far more attractive alternative to the majority of the native Nicoya populations than did a continuation of the Middle Polychrome pattern of dependence on exploitation of seafoods, with an unknown proportion of the diet provided by

agriculture and hunting. The ecological aspect of the argument that the Late Polychrome witnessed an accelerated nucleation of population in the lakes region demands refining through extensive survey work. But the hypothesis is offered that the differences in natural endowments between Nicoya and Nicaragua acquired critical value for the first time during the late period, precisely because agriculture became critical to the subsistence strategies of the Nicaraguan populations.

It therefore seems probable that the same factors which combined to cause a relative diminution of population in northern Nicoya (Guanacaste) after a peak in the Middle Polychrome period and a concomitant increase in the lakes region may also help explain why the bulk of the historic materials refer more directly to indigenous groups in Nicaragua rather than in Nicoya itself. Such a change in settlement pattern—what Lange (this volume) calls “micro-regional” differences—obviously also entails a change in socio-political organization for the whole Pacific coastal zone. The Spanish exploitation of large Indian populations in Nicaragua reflects the Europeans’ penchant for taking advantage of existing masses of already organized labor, manipulating it to serve their own wants: in mining, in payment of tribute, in agriculture and in the slave trade. For all of these reasons, the Bay of Culebra seems to have been bypassed by the Conquest, despite its uniquely favorable natural characteristics. Its great potential was not to be seriously appreciated until near the end of the colonial period [see other 19th century accounts in Meléndez (1974); also Montero Barrantes (1892: 14,218)]

CONCLUSION

The Bay of Culebra was an important locus of prehistoric settlement along a uniquely rich portion of the Central American coast which offered human groups the opportunity to pursue for many centuries a diversified subsistence strategy with a strong reliance on marine resources. The bay represents one of the few known such concentrations of prehistoric sites between the Gulfs of Fonseca and Nicoya. Yet all the evidence indicates that by the time of the first Spanish entradas this sector of northern Guanacaste was only sparsely peopled. Historic sources further demonstrate that the major populations were encountered by the Spaniards in Nicaragua’s Pacific corridor, oriented towards her two great freshwater lakes. The purpose of this paper is to begin to develop the approaches toward explanation of this change which are suggested by the historic materials relating to the conquest and colonization of Greater Nicoya. Such micro-regional changes in settlement pattern and organization as are revealed by comparison of the historic with the currently available archaeological data must be explained by a complex of interrelated factors: ecological, economic, social and political. Much more archaeology is needed to fill out our still spotty knowledge of Late Polychrome settlement distribution. The archaeological investigation should not proceed, however, without a parallel development of the anthropological potential of the existing historic sources.

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