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## **CENTRAL MEXICAN IMAGERY IN GREATER NICOYA**

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La mayoría de los antropólogos concuerdan en que un estilo de arte ritual muy distintivo, regularmente llamado el estilo Mixteca-Puebla, existió durante el período Postclásico en Mesoamérica. Este estilo no sólo ocurrió en la parte central de México sino también en áreas de la costa oeste de México hasta la parte baja de Centroamérica. Este artículo examina la aparición de este estilo en la región del Gran Nicoya de Costa Rica y Nicaragua. Así mismo, sitúa las figuras mesoamericanas relacionadas con este estilo en un contexto de tiempo y lugar, así como también sugiere una posible explicación de su presencia en el Gran Nicoya.

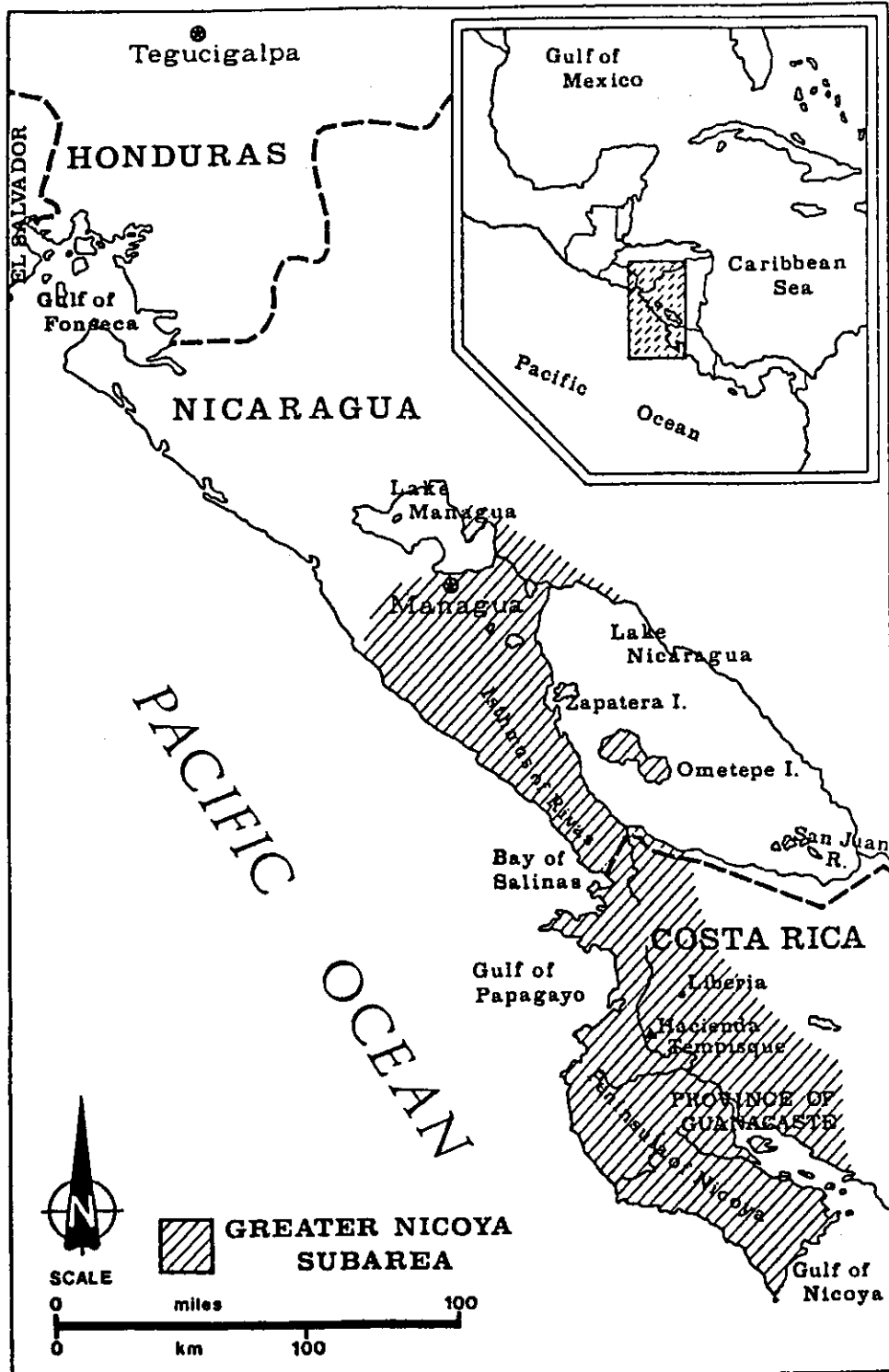


Fig. 1. The Greater Nicoya Subarea (from Day 1984).

Since George Valliant's proposal (1977[1940]) of the Mixteca-Puebla concept for Mesoamerica, through its re-examination by Nicholson (1960, 1961, 1973, 1982) and its discussion by numerous scholars over the years (e.g., Ekholm 1942; Robertson 1970; Ramsey 1975; Smith and Heath-Smith 1982), there have been many differences expressed concerning its origin, development, temporal placement, and spatial relationships.

Most researchers, however, do agree that a distinctive ritual art style existed during the Postclassic period, and that it occurred not only in the Mexican heartland but also in various peripheral areas of the Mesoamerican world. From Guasave in West Mexico to the Yucatan Peninsula, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, the style has been recognized and usually considered a reflection of the religious and artistic concepts of Postclassic Central Mexico.

This paper focuses on the Mixteca-Puebla style as it appeared in the Greater Nicoya area of Costa Rica and Nicaragua (Fig. 1). It will examine the shared iconography and the temporal and spatial occurrence of the style in Nicoya, and suggest possible mechanisms for its presence on the southern periphery of late prehispanic Mesoamerica.

The evidence for a Central Mexican presence or influence in Greater Nicoya rests principally on shared religious symbols painted on white-slipped mortuary vessels (Fig. 2). Over the years this visual imagery has been examined and discussed by a number of scholars (e.g., Lothrop 1926; Stone 1977, 1982; Day 1984, 1988), most of whom agree on a basic resemblance between certain Nicoya and Mexican motives during the period from about A.D. 800 to 1525,

In Nicoya the stylized iconography was painted in colors of black, red, orange, and blue on bowls and jars which had been coated with a heavy white base slip. This special slip technique was well suited to the presentation of colorful ritual imagery and was undoubtedly intended for this purpose in much the same way as were the prepared pages of the codices and the smoothed white walls of many Mesoamerican buildings.

The related imagery takes two forms. First are depictions of what appear to be actual Central Mexican deities or significant zoomorphic beings such as the plumed serpent, the jaguar, Mictlantecuhtli (a death deity), and the fire serpent (Fig. 3a-d). Second are associated motifs or symbols which often appear in bands circling the rims or bases of vessels. Among these are many of the ones that Nicholson (1960:614) has listed as common symbols of the Mixteca-Puebla style, the *xicalcolihqui* or stepped fret, *ehcacozcatl* or sliced spiral shell, and the "downy feather ball" (Fig. 4).

In addition, a solar disk and the grouped motifs of war (shield, arrows, and banner) often decorate the elaborate pottery (Fig. 5). In looking at the iconography it is equally interesting to note which of Nicholson's diagnostic symbols do *not* appear in Nicoya. Absent are the alternating rows of skulls and cross-bones, severed hands, human hearts, fire and flame motifs, celestial bands, and most of the twenty *tonalpohualli* signs.

As these illustrations demonstrate, the iconography itself clearly has strong relationships with Central Mexico, but there are continuing questions concerning the temporal and spatial distribution of the mortuary pottery decorated with this imagery. Recent evidence based on both stylistic and neutron activation research (Day 1984; Bishop, Lange, and Lange 1988) has shown that all of these elaborate white-slipped vessels were actually made in the Rivas region of the Nicaragua section of Greater Nicoya (Fig. 1).

These wares have been excavated, however, from elite burials, both there and in the Guanacaste segment of Nicoya in northwestern Costa Rica. The standardization of the imagery and its growing abstraction over time clearly suggest strong cultural integration and a mutually understood symbol system for Greater Nicoya during the years from around A.D. 800 to 1525. Several ceramic types including the well known Papagayo polychromes were painted with this standardized iconography. The vessels were obviously valued grave goods that were carefully made to be interred with the honored dead throughout the Nicoya area.

Temporally, vessels decorated with Mexican-related imagery began to appear in Greater Nicoya as early as A.D. 700. Paul Healy (1980:165) actually documents their appearance in Rivas shortly before that, at the end of his Palos Negros phase. The first of these white-slipped ceramics is the Culebra variety of Papagayo (Healy's La Paloma polychrome type). It appears first around Lake Nicaragua in Rivas and then at Culebra Bay in coastal Guanacaste (Lange et al. 1991). It is painted with only one motif, a depiction of a masked warrior with a spear apparently engaged in battle with a jaguar (Fig. 6).

The warrior-jaguar scene, often quite stylized or abbreviated, first decorates cylinder jars and then open bowls. The image was interpreted by Lothrop (1926) as depicting a Mexican myth concerning the battle of Mixcoatl against the jaguar of the night. For 200 years this is the only significant theme seen on the white-slipped pots, although the vessels begin to be found in status graves throughout Nicoya.

Around A.D. 1000 there is a proliferation of white-slipped mortuary ceramics in Greater Nicoya. These are



Fig. 2. Resemblances between the ceramics of Greater Nicoya and Postclassic Central Mexico (from Day 1984).

decorated with new Mexican-related iconography, primarily plumed serpents, warriors with feathered head-dresses, jaguars, and effigy faces (Fig. 2a-d; Fig. 8; Fig. 9b). Rim bands carry the standardized motifs connected with the Mixteca-Puebla style (Fig. 4). Tripod or pedestal effigy jars often resemble Plumbate pottery forms, while shallow tripod bowls or plates commonly have abstract feathered serpents on the interior.

Between A.D. 1200 and 1350 the most closely related of the Mexican motifs appear on Vallejo polychrome vessels. Found in elite graves throughout Nicoya they are decorated with painted and incised versions of the fire serpent, Ehecatl, sun symbols, the earth monster, and various Mixteca-Puebla-like elements. Forms are typically bowls, pedestal jars, and shallow tripod bowls (Fig. 3a-d).

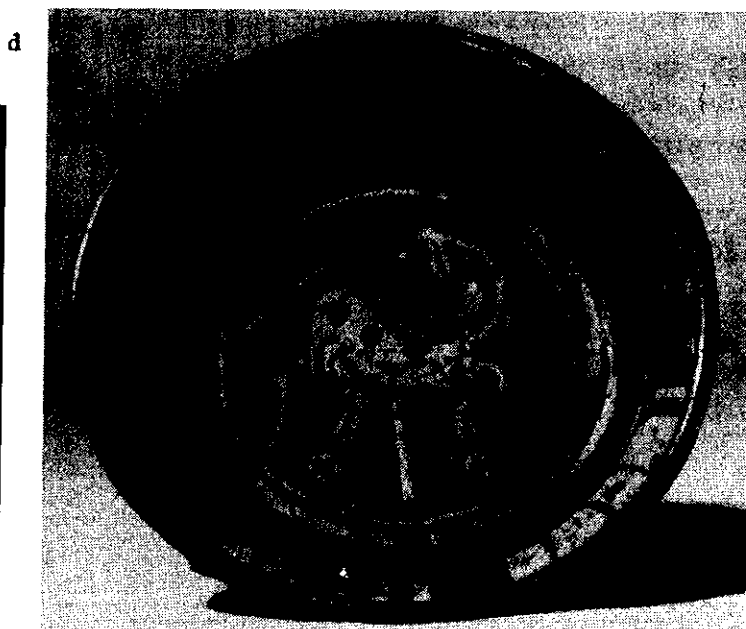
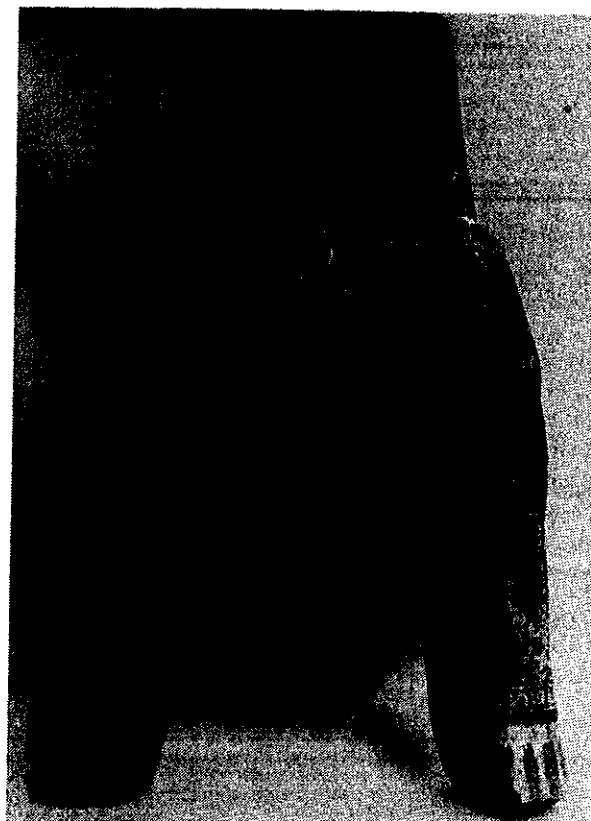
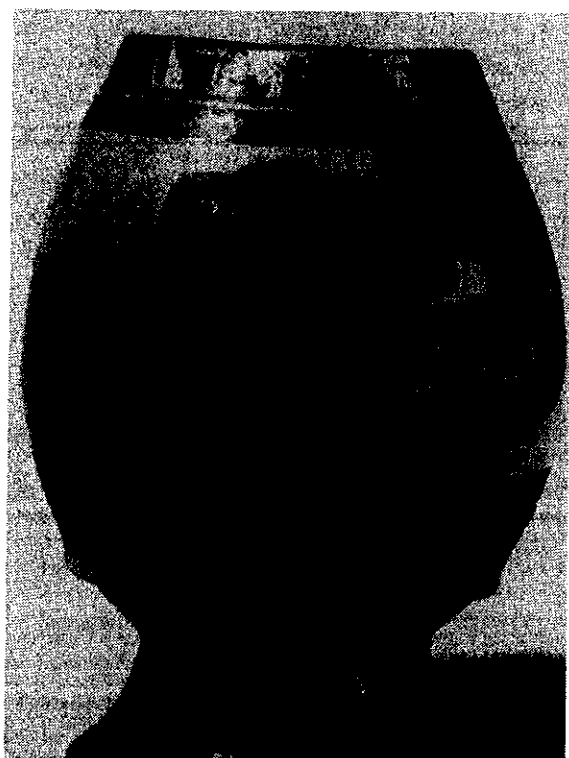


Fig. 3. Central Mexican images in Greater Nicoya: a. plumed serpent. b. Mictlantecuhtli. c. fire serpent. d. jaguar.

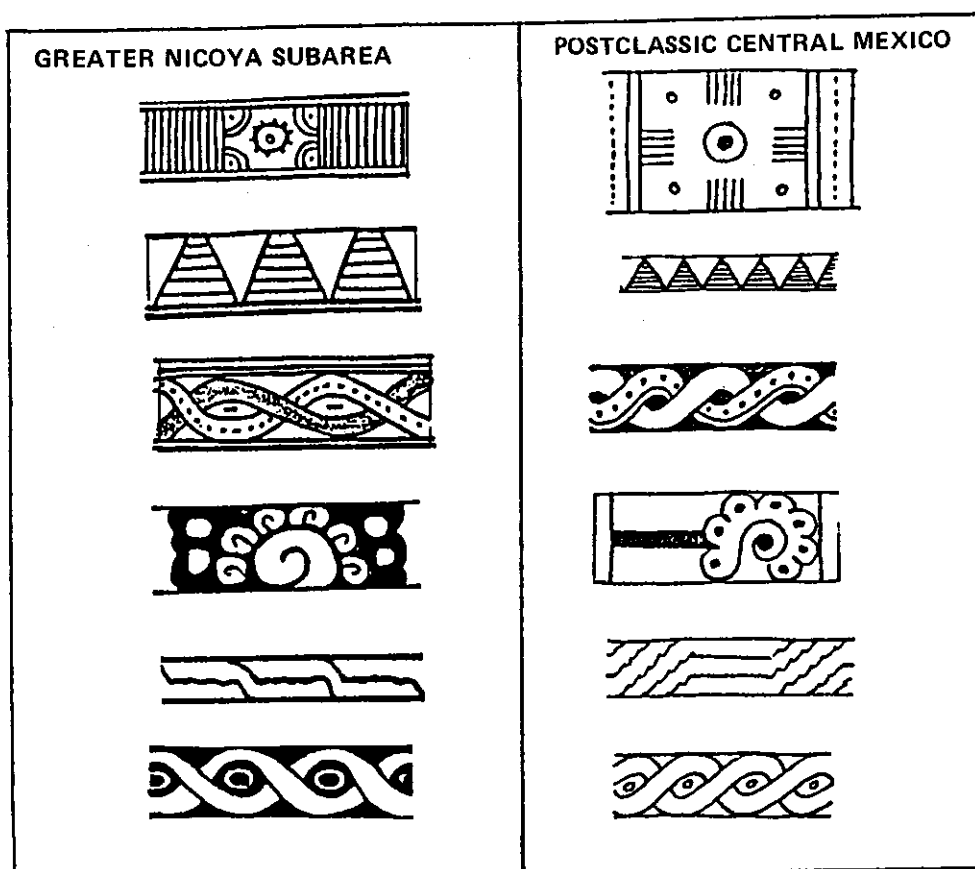


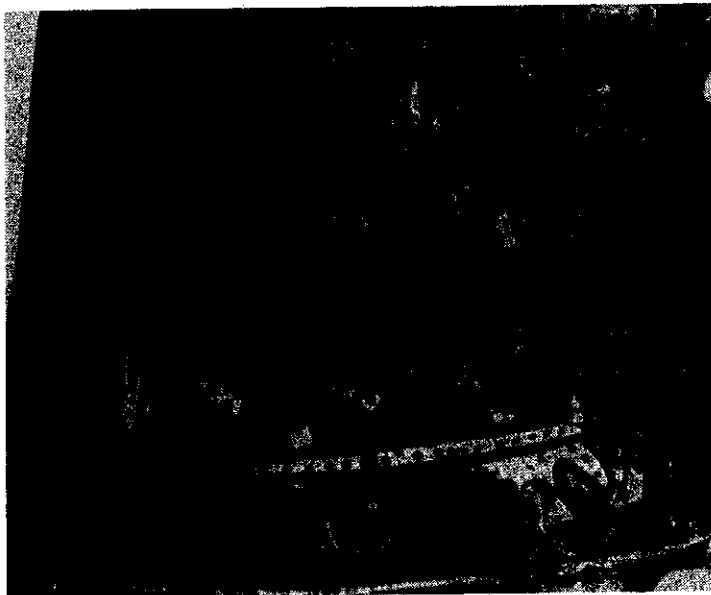
Fig. 4. Comparisons between ceramic design elements in Greater Nicoya and Central Mexico (from Day 1984).

Fig. 5. Central Mexican motifs on Greater Nicoya pottery: a. rabbit with solar collar. b. battle scene with banners and feathers.

a



b



After A.D. 1350 there are fewer innovations in pottery. Images become abstracted into symbols, and there are repetitive associated geometric rim bands. The flamboyant Papagayo pots disappear and the specific relationship with the Mixteca-Puebla style is lost. The Mexicanized symbols themselves, however, of serpents, jaguars, feathers, and an effigy face remain as ritual images on late period vessels, but the art style has clearly changed (Fig. 7).

What does this evidence from the Greater Nicoya ceramic sequences tell us? First of all, the geographic evidence is quite clear. In Nicoya the white-slipped pottery painted with Mixteca-Puebla iconography was made in the Rivas area of Nicaragua. Its geographical distribution as a major elite burial offering extended from the southwestern Nicaraguan lakes area through Guanacaste Province and the Nicoya Peninsula of Costa Rica. Though occasionally it has been recovered from burials in other regions of Costa Rica (Snarskis 1978) and as an exchange or trade object in areas to the north (Boggs 1944; Lothrop 1936), there is no doubt that its homeland was Greater Nicoya.

The temporal evidence indicates that in this area the pottery began to be made as early as A.D. 700, appearing first in Rivas and slightly later at coastal sites in Costa Rica. The distinctive ceramic tradition lasted until about A.D. 1350, when art styles in Greater Nicoya, though not the iconography, changed. What is notable in this evidence is the early date for the presence of white-slipped pottery painted with recognizable Mixteca-Puebla imagery on the southern periphery of Mesoamerica.

This date is, of course, far earlier than most authorities suggest for the appearance of related Mixteca-Puebla imagery and pottery forms in Central Mexico (Ramsey 1975; Robertson 1959). Additionally, it should be noted that the style itself, though not the iconography, disappeared in Nicoya just at the time most scholars think it reached its height in the Mixteca-Puebla area.

The iconography and its temporal relationships present some interesting problems. The first Mexican icon to appear on white-slipped Nicoya polychrome pottery was the man/jaguar image. Though becoming increasingly abstract on the colorful vessels, it persisted for 200 years, and there was no significant addition to the ceramic imagery until about A.D. 1000. It is as if one group of people arrived in Nicoya with their tribal or cult symbol and continued to decorate funerary vessels with that single image for many generations. Even when new images were added, around 1000, the iconography was still fairly limited. In addition to the jaguar, we find only a distinctive effigy face, a plumed serpent and a few animal effigies (turkeys, jaguars, and rabbits) in the ceramic

repertory (Day 1984).

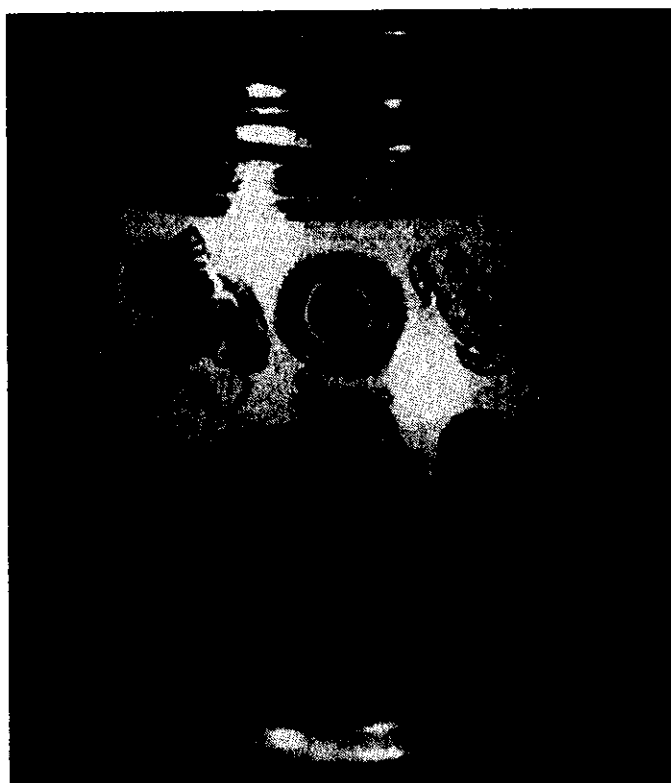
Quite suddenly, around A.D. 1200, many new images begin to appear on ceramic vessels. Clear depictions of such Central Mexican deities as the fire serpent, the earth monster, and *Mictlantecuhli* are painted and incised on white slipped pottery; but by 1350 they have disappeared, and for the remaining years of the prehispanic period only the plumed serpent, an effigy face, and at times a jaguar decorate polychrome burial vessels. Again we see a long continuity and preference for a limited number of icons.

The association of Greater Nicoya imagery with the pan-Mesoamerican Postclassic art style is a complicated one. Based on Nicoyan Chorotega and Nicarao legends recorded at the time of the Spanish entradas (Oviedo y Valdés 1976), the style has been assumed to have been carried into the area by migrating peoples. While this model may be overly simplistic, it does account for the Otomangue and Nahuatl languages found in Nicoya and for the ethnohistoric picture of Mexican-like cultural traits described by Oviedo.

The ceramic evidence cited above adds a new element to the migration stories, as it points out at least three instances of clearly observable change in ceramic imagery in the region between A.D. 700 and 1525. These changes and additions in the iconographic record seem to indicate the presence of new peoples or contacts in Greater Nicoya who carried new ritual imagery with them. What is lacking in this explanation, however, is a mechanism explaining the retention and reinforcement over 800 years of what was apparently an external symbol system.

Trade or exchange has been suggested by various authors as the mechanism for the spread of the Mixteca-Puebla style and associated symbols. In Greater Nicoya such things as cotton, feathers, pearls, cacao, and purple dye would certainly have been desirable objects for long-distance traders of the Postclassic period. Recently Fowler (1989) has made an excellent case for cacao as the most significant crop and trade item associated with the Pipil groups in Lower Central America, and his argument is clearly relevant to Greater Nicoya as well. However, I would like to suggest that in Nicoya it was primarily gold that attracted the bearers of Central Mexican imagery and insured the continuity of symbolism in the region.

In examining the evidence for a relationship based on gold, it is interesting to note that the period of time covered by the shared iconography corresponds to the period of metallurgy in Mesoamerica. There is general agreement that metallurgy was introduced to Mesoamerica from the Isthmus region by A.D. 800 and perhaps even



6. Man/jaguar theme on a Papagayo polychrome jar (private collection, Denver, Colorado).

earlier (Bray 1977). A search for sources of precious metals must soon have become a concern of Postclassic trading groups, and a prime source for gold was northern South America and Lower Central America.

While gold was not a prime natural resource in Greater Nicoya itself, its presence is documented there both archaeologically and by the Spanish chroniclers. I have argued previously (Day 1988) that the role of Nicoya chiefs may have been as middlemen on a long-distance trade route for the exchange of the precious metal.

Certainly the evidence for the presence of gold and its association with the Mixteca-Puebla symbol system is clearly recorded on ritual polychrome pottery. One of the major images of the Nicoya polychrome tradition is an effigy face. Painted on bowls or jars that were made from about A.D. 1100 to 1525, these faces are shown wearing gold jewelry (Fig. 8). Some of the jewelry is depicted realistically in the form of nose plugs, ear ornaments, and mouth masks.

On certain types of pottery, however, only a symbolic gold element is present; this element represents the most common gold ornament from Costa Rica, a frog (Fig. 9a). The symbol occurs as a golden pendant hung from a necklace (Fig. 9b). As a pendant the whole figure of the frog is not shown; we see only the creature's splayed out-turned feet. It is this particular symbol that most

clearly documents a relationship between Nicoya and the Mixteca-Puebla area of Mesoamerica.

If, as we have seen, Mixteca-Puebla art styles and imagery were present in Greater Nicoya, then it should not be surprising to find that ideas and iconography also flowed the other way, from south to north. The most convincing evidence for this lies with gold. In Central Mexico's Mixteca-Puebla region, separated from Greater Nicoya by almost 2000 kilometers, the symbol for gold was the familiar out-turned feet of the Nicoya frog.

This is clearly demonstrated in the Codex Zouche-Nuttall from Postclassic Oaxaca. On its painted pages (1975: 47,80) are several depictions of a man holding a gold frog with splayed feet, and of personages wearing the ornament. In addition, one section (1975:77) illustrates a gold frog with out-turned feet personified as what appears to be an anthropomorphic symbol for gold itself (Fig. 10a-b). Several well known gold pendants from Tomb 7 at Monte Albán and from Tomb 2 at Zaachila retain these symbolic splayed feet as the bottom section of the ornament, even though elaborate Mexican deities decorate the upper portions (Fig. 11).

Further evidence of stylistic influence from Costa Rica is the great number of gold disks depicted in the Mixtec codices and in Aztec tribute lists. Round gold plaques, drilled to be worn as pendants or attached to garments,





Fig. 7. Luna polychrome ceramic vessel with a detail of the abstract serpent motif, A.D. 1350-1525 (from Day 1984).

Fig. 8. Greater Nicoya Pataky polychrome vessel with effigy face and gold jewelry.



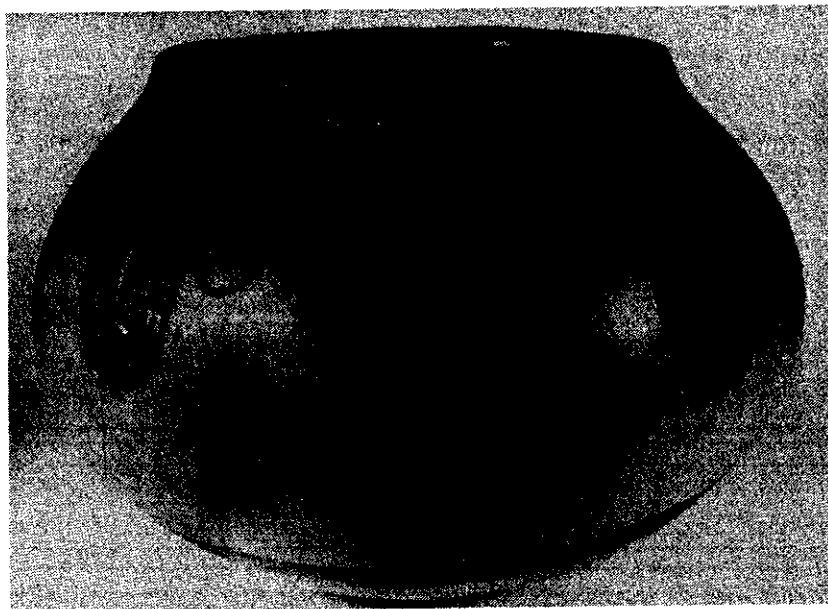
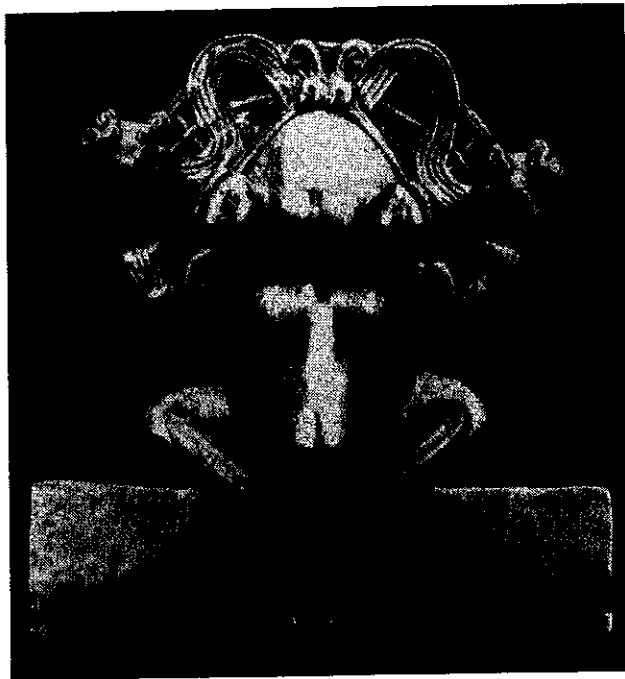


Fig. 9a. Nicoya gold frog pendant (private collection, Denver, Colorado). b. Nicoya polychrome bowl with effigy face and gold frog-feet pendant.

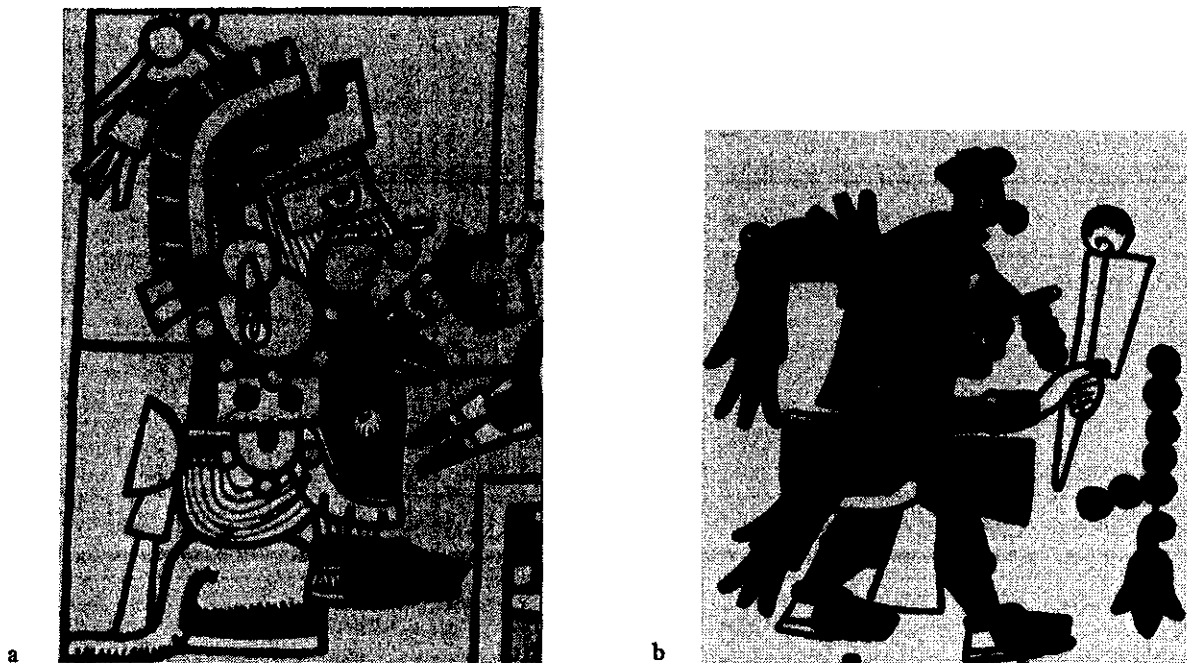


Fig. 10. Details from the Codex Zouche-Nuttall (1975). a. man holding a gold frog pendant (p. 79). b. anthropomorphic gold frog pendant (p. 76).

were the most common gold ornament in Lower Central America (Fig. 12a). Warwick Bray (1977) suggests that these gold disks of various sizes were imported into Mexico from the south and used as pectorals, shield plaques, and ear ornaments.

These ornaments are seen clearly in the Codex Zouche-Nuttall (1975:44,45) (Fig. 12b) and in the Codex Mendoza tribute lists (1978:52,58). The abundant depictions demonstrate the popularity of these highly desirable gold disks, which were stylistically derived—if not actually imported—from Lower Central America.

### Conclusions

This paper has documented the presence of the Mixteca-Puebla art style and imagery on polychrome pottery in Greater Nicoya and placed it in temporal and spatial context.

We have seen that the style and its symbols occurred on elite mortuary vessels between about A.D. 700 and 1350, but that the imagery continued to be used for ceramic decoration until the Spanish entradas of 1521. The evidence is also clear that the pottery was actually made in the Nicaragua section of the area but buried as a status item with elite members of society throughout Greater Nicoya.

In addition, it was pointed out that only a limited number of images from the Mixteca-Puebla repertory of

icons are found in the Nicoya symbol system, suggesting, perhaps, that only specific groups or cults made their way into the region. Stylistic influence was also seen flowing from south to north, as documented by the use of symbolic gold frog feet and gold disks in western Oaxaca.

These data raise questions that are not easily answered. For example: Why did Mixteca-Puebla-style images and vessel forms appear in Greater Nicoya long before they did in the Central Mexican heartland? And why did the style almost disappear from Nicoya before its florescence in Central Mexico? Did some of the distinctive vessel forms and ritual images actually originate in Nicoya? Why are only certain cult images found in the region, and who were the groups that were responsible for their presence there?

Based on the ceramic evidence from Greater Nicoya, one might speculate that the tumultuous years of the Mesoamerican Postclassic period brought various new people to Rivas and coastal Guanacaste. These may have been either trading parties or actual migrations, dispersed after the fall first of Teotihuacan, then Tula. Whoever they were, they carried with them a new ritual symbol system and art style that was accepted by local elites in Nicoya—elites who increasingly chose to be buried with mortuary vessels decorated with the new iconography from the north.

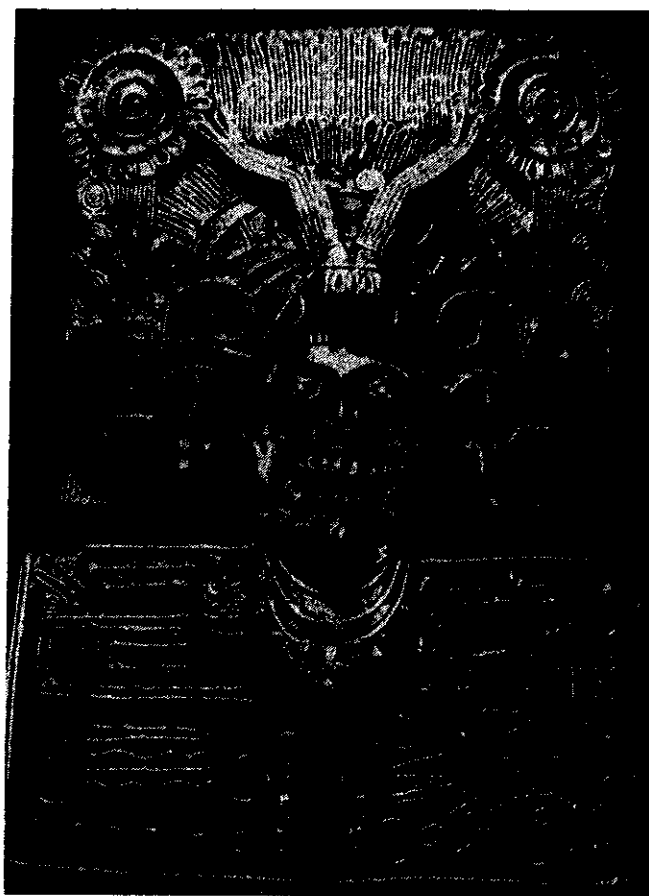
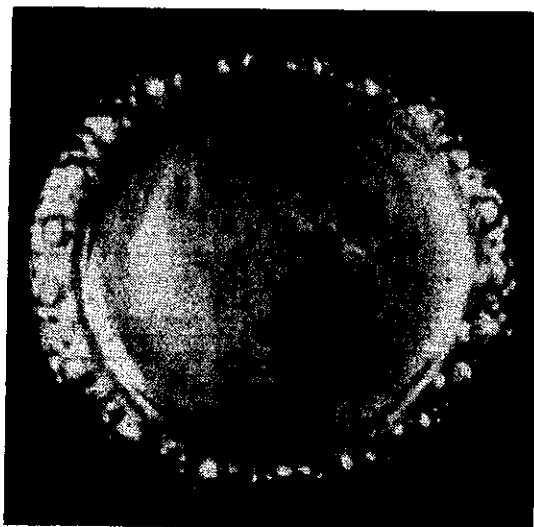


Fig. 11. Elaborate Mixtec gold pendant with out-turned gold frog-feet motif from Monte Albán Tomb 7, Oaxaca (Regional Museum, Oaxaca).

Fig. 12a. Typical gold-disk pendant from lower Central America (private collection, Denver, Colorado).  
b. personage wearing gold disks (Codex Zouche-Nuttall, p. 42).



a



b

Whether these coastal traders or settlers were responsible for the introduction and eventual movement of gold into Mexico is uncertain. However, the association of gold with the ceramic imagery is clear, both in Nicoya and Central Mexico, and it certainly seems to be an underlying factor in the shared iconography of the two distant regions.

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