

INTERREGIONAL INTERACTION AND THE PREHISTORIC SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT OF THE RIVAS REGION, PACIFIC NICARAGUA

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ABSTRACT

Prehistoric social complexity emerged within the Rivas region of Pacific Nicaragua between 300 and 800 AD, followed by a restructuring of this organization from 800 to 1522 AD. The placement of Rivas within a greater sociopolitical and economic context indicates that interregional relationships were a significant factor in the sociopolitical development of the region. However, assessment of the extent to which these relationships were a factor is limited by the current state of Nicaraguan archaeology and to a lesser extent that of northwest Costa Rica. It has become increasingly necessary to refocus research energies within this part of lower Central America at a purely regional level in order to understand better the cultural forces operating throughout its prehistory.

INTRODUCTION

Recent archaeological survey near the modern town of Rivas, Nicaragua has identified 48 prehistoric sites dating from 500 BC to AD 1522 (Niemel 2003) (Figure 1). Based upon site characteristics and ceramic and lithic data, settlement patterns were reconstructed and inferences drawn concerning

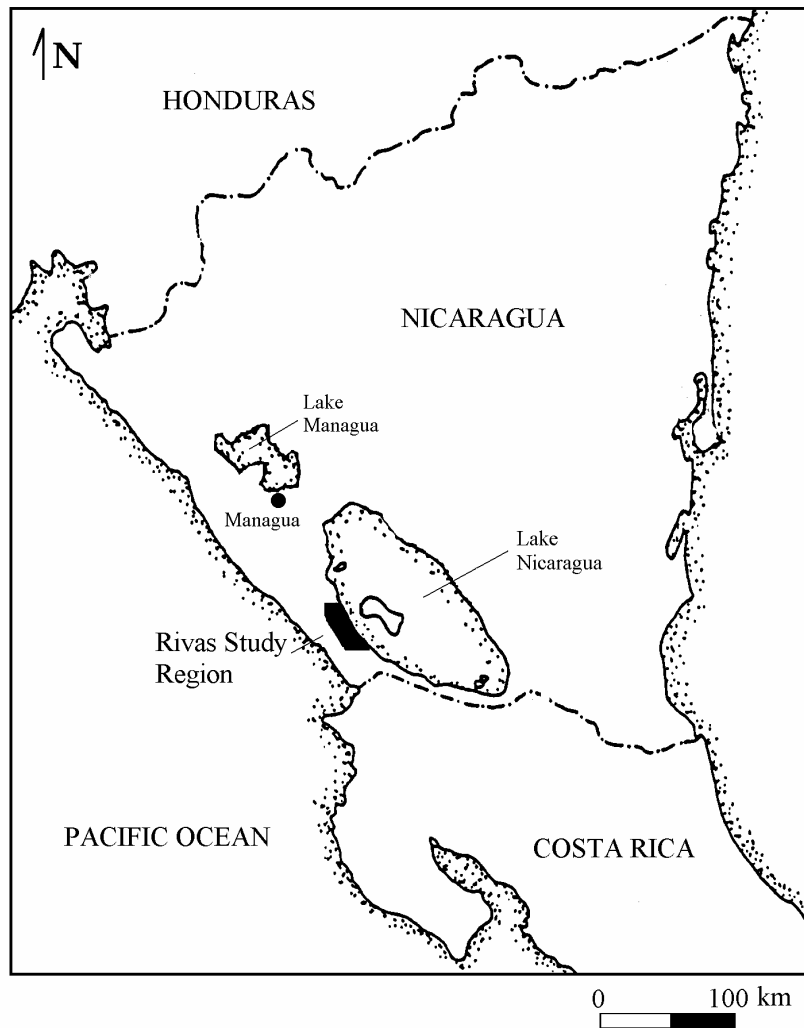


Figure 1. Location of the Rivas Study Region within Nicaragua.

sociopolitical organization. The results of the analysis indicate that social complexity emerged within Rivas between 300 and 800 AD, as reflected by a three-tiered settlement hierarchy. Size, artifact density, and a large mound distinguished the regional center, Santa Isabel. Despite maintenance of the settlement hierarchy after 800 AD, changes occurred in micro- and macro-settlement patterns. There was an increase in the number and size of sites, the replacement of earlier settlements by new ones, and the occupation of coastal areas. A new occupation center with a plaza and more than 10 mounds also

marked Santa Isabel. The examination of Rivas within a larger sociopolitical and economic context illuminates the extent to which relationships with regions to the north and south were a factor in its sociopolitical development.

MACROREGIONAL CONTEXT

During the last few decades, there has been a significant increase in large-scale research conducted within Pacific Nicaragua and northwest Costa Rica (Figure 2). This includes the regions of Chontales, the Lake Managua Basin, Madriz/Estelí, Ometepe and Zapatera islands in Lake Nicaragua, Granada/Masaya, the Bay of Salinas/Sapoá River, the Bay of Culebra, the Guanacaste-San Carlos corridor, the Gulf of Nicoya, the Nosara Valley, and the Lake Arenal Basin. Unfortunately, difficulties arise when using much of this work for comparison or discussion. First, only a small portion of this research has specifically addressed questions of social organization. Second, most of the methodologies used are not equivalent, as reflected by the shifts in archaeology from the 1970s to the present day. Third, the amount of fieldwork conducted in nearly every region is so low that basic culture historic questions remain unanswered.

For example, a lack of diagnostic material from the Lake Managua Basin, and thus chronological control over sites, obscures reconstruction of regional settlement patterns. Despite differences in size and architectural features (e.g., mounds), it has not been possible to date 49 out of the 78 known sites (Espinoza

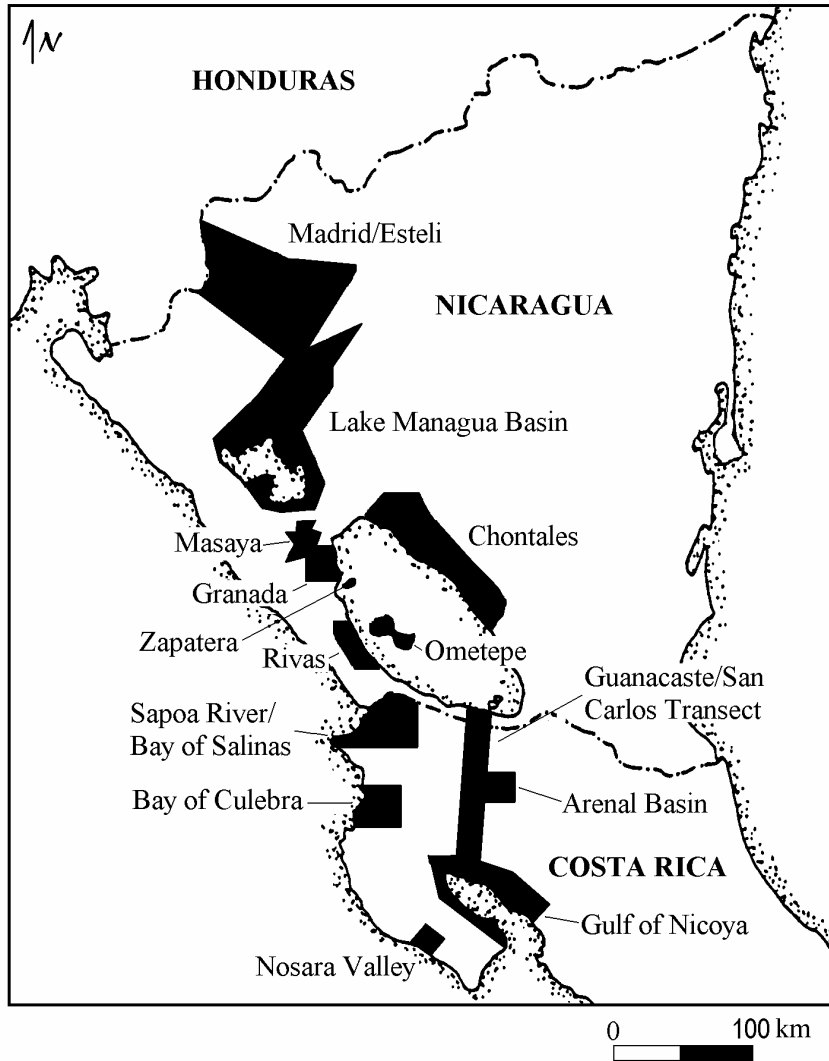


Figure 2. Locations of recent large-scale research within Pacific Nicaragua and northwest Costa Rica.

et al. 1994). A more widespread chronological problem persists throughout Pacific Nicaragua stemming from low numbers of diagnostic ceramics dating after 1350 AD and a carryover of earlier types. This effects the identification and interpretation of late period sites that can only be resolved by extensive excavation and radiocarbon dating. Research conducted on the lake islands of Ometepe and Zapatera is also limited. There are 53 known sites on Ometepe Island, which has the longest occupation sequence in

Nicaragua (Haberland 1992). Unfortunately, there is not enough information to hypothesize how the sites relate to one another. More is known about the sites on Zapatera. On this island, the sites, Punta de Las Figuras and Sonzapote, are differentiated by size and layout from other settlements (Bruhns 1992:340). Both sites may be ceremonial centers, as defined by the presence of statues placed around their perimeter. In addition, these settlements were likely above others in terms of access to labor and general wealth; likewise they could have been specialized sites, with stonework supported by others for an, as yet, unknown reason (Bruhns 1992:342). Their main occupation occurred between 800 and 1522 AD (Baker and Smith 1987; Bruhns 1992). Thus, any sociopolitical differentiation would pertain to this period. At least one researcher has speculated that Zapatera—if not both islands—was part of a larger system involving mainland sites (Salgado 1996:156). If this is true, future research could clarify relationships with the mainland as well as cultural sequences.

Shifting south, many previous surveys within northwest Costa Rica have not identified sites with clear-cut central place or hierarchical status (Lange and Norr 1986). In some instances, it seems that the concept “central place” applies only if sites were comparable to Teotihuacan, Monte Alban, or Quelepa (e.g., Lange 1992:112). For example, near the Bay of Culebra, there are distinctions between sites based upon total area and material culture (e.g., quantity/quality of polychrome ceramics, the presence or absence of imported trade items). However, researchers have not hypothesized how this connects with regional social organization (e.g., Lange 1984:183). Lacking the “traditional” features thought necessary to establish site hierarchies, such as architecture or evidence of communal labor projects, many Costa Rica analyses have looked at

intrasite organization, focusing on ceramics, lithics, human skeletal remains, and, when possible, structural evidence. Despite limited evidence suggesting social ranking at individual sites (e.g., Vasquez 1986), the regional implication of this, if any, remains unknown. In the end, comparison with data from Rivas or other regions relying upon settlement patterns as a primary database is problematic.

Prehistoric sites identified near the Gulf of Nicoya reflect population growth and a shift from inland to coastal areas (Creamer 1983, 1986). Although a definitive settlement hierarchy has not been identified, at least two site types are indicated by surface collections. In particular, the Carrizal Site, was a ceremonial center distinguished by both size and material remains (Creamer 1986). The site, which dates between 300 and 800 AD, may also have been an important trade center but its relationship to other settlements within the region remains unexplored. After 800 AD, materials recovered from gulf sites are similar to those identified in other parts of northwest Costa Rica and both habitation and burial sites have been recorded (Creamer 1986). Distinctive local traditions developed after 1200 AD. In particular, ceramics appear to have formed a social boundary between the Gulf of Nicoya and adjacent regions (Creamer and Haas 1985:748). Settlements show no evidence of architectural features or communal labor projects—only shell middens—and there is little indication of specialized production. Despite burial data indicating a range of social statuses (e.g., differences in associated burial goods), consistent classes could not be defined (Creamer and Haas 1985).

Within the Lake Arenal Basin, inferences regarding social organization are limited due to enlargement of the lake that left the most extensive areas of flat land under water (Mueller 1994:543) (Table 2). The most substantial occupation within the region

occurred between 500 BC and 600 AD, when settlements increased both in size and frequency (Mueller 1994:62). There was also a high degree of similarity with ceramic assemblages to the west (see Hoopes 1987). Between 600 and 1300 AD, populations shifted away from the lake towards the Piedra River Valley (Mueller 1994:64). Highland sites during this time included a cemetery and two repositories for *lajas*, or flat stones, used in tomb construction. In the Piedra River Valley, one large habitation site and two cemeteries with stone-faced masonry were identified. Two other probable elite cemeteries were in the middle reaches of the Arenal River Valley. Based upon the types of grave goods, architectural features at some cemeteries, new site types (e.g., the *laja* repositories), as well as the presence of a few large habitation sites, it is probable that there was an increase in social differentiation (Mueller 1994:63). This occurred roughly coeval with developments in Rivas. A high level of contact between this region and those to the west is reflected by shared ceramic production techniques (e.g., specific polychrome decorations and fine line incision) and polychrome vessels found in burials from nearby regions (Hoopes 1994:192). The period after 1300 AD was relatively unstable (Mueller 1994). Although some sites increased in size, others decreased or were abandoned. No new sites were established. A divergence also occurred from ceramic assemblages to the west; in particular, large, coarse ceramics appear that were similar to those from the south near the Gulf of Nicoya (Hoopes 1994:192).

Archaeological surveys conducted within the Sapoá River Valley and adjacent regions also did not identify evidence of settlement hierarchies at any point in time (e.g., Lange 197, 1986, 1996). However, based upon recovered ceramics, this region represents a distinct transitional zone between Nicaragua and northwest Costa Rica

(Lange 1996:139). Prior to 1350 AD, it was likely peripheral to existing interaction routes and only scarce numbers of the ceramics found throughout other parts of northwest Costa Rica and Pacific Nicaragua were present. After this period, interaction apparently increased with regions to the north. This conclusion is based on higher ceramic frequencies within Rivas of northwest Costa Rican types and Banda Polychrome, produced within the Sapoá River Valley.

Given the presence of a transitional zone just to the south, it is no surprise that developments within the Nicaraguan regions of Chontales, Madriz/Estelí, and Granada/Masaya most closely parallel those of Rivas. Within all three regions, archaeological survey has specifically addressed questions of sociopolitical organization. In Chontales, site differentiation first occurred between 400 and 800 AD, roughly contemporaneous with Rivas (Espinoza and Rigat 1994; Gorin 1990). Both mounded and non-mounded sites were present, which reflects a regional hierarchy of at least two levels. Between 800 and 1200 AD, this pattern increased in complexity. Sites were larger with more mounds. The settlement pattern was the most complex after 1200 AD when as many as 197 mounds and multiple plazas characterized the largest sites.

Within Madriz/Estelí, a three-tiered settlement hierarchy emerged between 300 and 600 AD (Braswell et al. 2002). Stone mounds of variable sizes and, at times, an open plaza-like space characterized the largest sites. Significant quantities of long-distance trade goods from areas of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (e.g., obsidian and Ulúa, Delírio Red-on-White, and Tenampúa Polychromes) were found primarily at these sites. This site differentiation—as well as the limited distribution of imported goods—indicates the appearance of politically centralized polities concurrent with the

development of Rivas. Between 600 and 950 AD, sociopolitical organization was consolidated (Braswell et al. 2002:13). The settlement pattern reflects a hierarchy consisting of four levels. Regional centers were over 10 hectares in size and characterized by numerous mounds and more than one plaza. A significant increase in imported material indicates intensified contact with cultures to the north, particularly those of Honduras and El Salvador. Due to the problem with ceramic chronology already noted, the late period settlement pattern cannot be discerned from the available data.

Within Granada/Masaya, there was an increase in the number and size of sites between 300 and 800 AD (Salgado et al. 1998). A two-tiered settlement hierarchy was present with the Ayala Site as the regional center. Long-distance trade goods—the same types as those found in Madriz/Esteli—were found only at Ayala (Salgado et al. 1998:12). These factors indicate the emergence of political complexity coeval with developments in Rivas. After 800 AD, sociopolitical organization was significantly restructured (Salgado et al. 1998). For the first time there were permanent sites located on the lake coast, also similar to developments in Rivas. The number of settlements increased, while important sites from the preceding period were smaller or abandoned altogether (Niemel et al. 2001). A three-tiered settlement hierarchy was present with the site, Tepetate, as the regional center. A high frequency of figurine molds at this site provides evidence for specialized ceramic production (Niemel et al. 1997:678). Stone sculpture is found at two second-order sites, providing a strong indication for not only the regional hierarchy, but also specialization.

DISCUSSION

Data from the regions surrounding Rivas suggests that its sociopolitical development occurred within a greater regional context. During much of prehistory, similar processes were apparently happening in surrounding regions of Pacific Nicaragua and, to a lesser extent, northwest Costa Rica. In Rivas, there is no evidence that the emergence of sociopolitical complexity was triggered by population pressure, scarcity of resources, or any form of circumscription. In fact, during the early contact period, populations were estimated to be well below the carrying capacity (Salgado 1996; Niemel 2003).

An alternate explanation is that social change was stimulated by the dynamics of interregional interaction. Reports by early Spanish visitors support the importance of interregional relationships, which presumably extends back into prehistory. When the Spanish arrived, at least four ethnic groups inhabited the area, forming a series of inter-functioning, complex societies (Stone 1966) (Figure 3). Regional centers had plazas with market places, in which only women, boys, and male allies could enter (Chapman 1960). Exchange flourished and there are indications of production differences between groups: the Nicarao controlled the production of cacao, which functioned as a form of currency; the Chorotega reportedly had a monopoly on certain fruit trees (the *nispero*); and the Matagalpa made black dye that was traded for goods or cacao beans in the market (Stone 1966). Endemic warfare was common, resulting from disputes over territorial boundaries and the desire to seize prime agricultural land (Fowler 1989:207). Certain accounts also suggest political alliances between groups. For example, a force of 4,000 Chorotega warriors once attacked a group of Spaniards in the region of Granada; the Spanish fled south only to be attacked again by the Nicarao in Rivas (Oviedo 1959:119:295).

CONCLUSION

Largely due to the state of Nicaraguan archaeology, the reconstruction of prehistoric interregional interaction is limited. Similarities in ceramic assemblages from different regions have sometimes been interpreted as reflecting the degree of closeness or interaction between regions (Niemel 2003; Salgado 1996). The frequency and distribution of specific ceramic types across regions has also been used in a similar manner in the hopes of defining

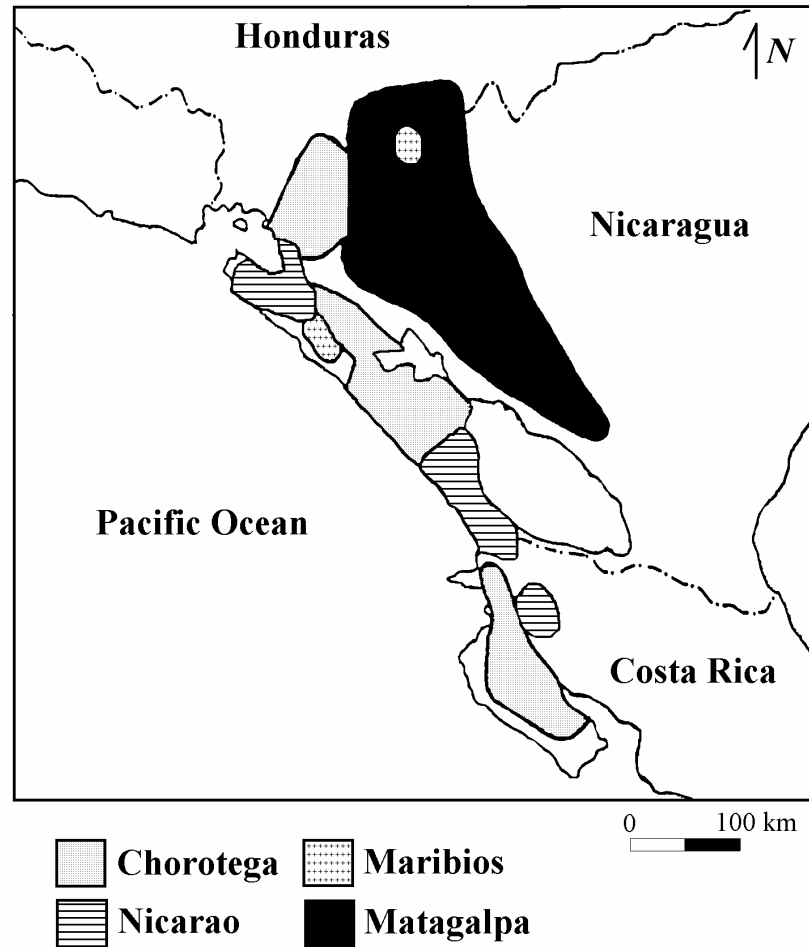


Figure 3. Distribution of ethnic groups within Pacific Nicaragua and northwest Costa Rica, circa AD 1522 (from Salgado 1996).

interaction routes (e.g., Niemel et al. 1997). Among the regions discussed, the ceramic chronology of Masaya/Granada most closely resembles that of Rivas. In particular, ceramic change occurs at approximately the same time within the two regions, a striking complement to their apparent matched developmental trajectories. Much of the research within Pacifica Nicaragua has emphasized the Mesoamerican connection, using exchange with areas to the north or the arrival of Mexican migrants after AD 1200 as an explanation for social change (Niemel et al. 2001). While certainly these macro-regional

processes were important, it has become increasingly necessary to refocus research energies at a purely regional level in order to understand better the forces operating throughout the prehistory of this area.

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