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***THE SIMILARITY TRAP: ENGINEERING THE GREATER-CARIBBEAN,  
A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE ISTHMO-COLOMBIAN AREA***

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***Abstract***

*Macro-regional studies, such as the proposition to investigate mobility and exchange in the pan-Caribbean are dominated by an emphasis to study stylistic similarity in material culture. For the specific case of the Isthmo-Colombian area we argue in this paper that observed lack of stylistic comparability, culture historically invariantly interpreted as socio-political disunity, is in fact far less determining than previously assumed. By drawing on localized social dynamics from synchronic perspectives in central Nicaragua, and a discussion on recent interpretations of the semiotic form, opportunities for future explorations of the pan-Caribbean thesis are created.*

***Résumé***

*Les études macro-régionales, comme les travaux sur la mobilité et les échanges pan-caribéens, sont dominées par l'étude impérieuse des similitudes stylistiques dans la culture matérielle. Dans le cas spécifique de la région Isthmo-Colombienne, nous démontrons dans cet article que l'absence de comparabilité stylistique observée, généralement interprétée dans la tradition historique culturelle comme une désunion socio-politique, est en fait beaucoup moins déterminante que ce que l'on a pu penser jusqu'alors. En s'appuyant sur la dynamique sociale locale, du point de vue synchronique, dans le Nicaragua central, et grâce au débat sur les interprétations récentes de la forme sémiotique, de nouvelles perspectives d'analyse de la thèse pan-caribéenne émergent.*

***Resumen***

*Estudios macro-regionales, como la proposición para investigar la movilidad y el intercambio en el pan-Caribe son dominados por un énfasis en estudiar la similitud estilística dentro de la cultura material. Para el caso específico de la zona Isthmo-Colombiana se argumenta en este ensayo que la observación de la falta de comparabilidad*

*estilística, típicamente interpretado dentro del marco de la historia-cultural como falta de unidad socio-política, es en realidad mucho menos determinante que anteriormente pensado. Apoyándose en la dinámica social localizado desde la perspectiva sincrónica de la región central de Nicaragua, y una discusión sobre interpretaciones recientes de la forma semiótica, se crean oportunidades para futuras exploraciones de la tesis del Pan-Caribe.*

### **Introduction**

*“We must not forget that an object is the best messenger of a world above that of nature: one can easily see in an object at once a perfection and an absence of origin, a closure and a brilliance, a transformation of life into matter (matter is much more magical than life), and in a word a silence which belongs to the realm of fairytales.”*

(Barthes 1972:88 [1957])

For decades, the definition of culture areas has held a commanding conceptual grip on the study of the pre-Columbian Americas. Almost all archaeological studies make reference to it; symposia invariably use it in their titles; colleagues are identified by the Society for American Archaeology on the basis of their culture area of expertise; and journals validate their *raison d'être* by focusing on a specific region (e.g., *Revista del Área Intermedia*, *Ancient Mesoamerica*, *Mesoamérica*, and, albeit somewhat less explicit, the *Journal for Caribbean Archaeology*). In short, the culture area is arguably the foundation on which studies rest seeking to understand the mobility and exchange of material culture in the past. Archaeologists, however, have struggled to explicitly validate culture areas in light of the processual as well as post-processual new directions that the discipline took in the last four decades. When attempting to understand social meaning from material things, discussions of culture

areas seemed a-historical and depersonalized. As a result, periodic reformulations of the culture area divisions of for example Central America have resulted in many names and minimally as many debates.

Most recently a new refinement, the Isthmo-Colombian area, was proposed and expanded upon in a few publications by John Hoopes and Oscar Fonseca (most relevant are Hoopes and Fonseca 2003; Hoopes 2004, 2005). This proposal is based on multiple lines of evidence, principally linguistics, genetics, art history and archaeology. Ideas on structures in Isthmo-Colombian oral traditions are also invoked in the analysis. The renewed regional definition has enabled the inclusion of Northern and Central Colombia as well as Western Venezuela in the analysis, following earlier suggestions by Helms (1979). This model then makes a conscious effort to analyze Isthmo-Colombian iconography by bridging regions and periods to identify several basic themes. It is an important push forward in advancing our findings for this region, but what remains problematic is that after identifying similarities and interpreting them as indications of interaction or a mutual cultural background, a daunting amount of differences in material culture style and object categories remains to be discussed. Seldom though are these differences in material culture the focus of comparisons in Isthmo-Colombian archaeological studies. We propose here that lack of similarity in material culture is not a reason to adjust or abandon definitions of

culture areas. Rather, it is our contention that these differences were fundamental to social interaction in the pre-Columbian Greater-Caribbean. Merely explaining stylistic similarity in material culture as a result of sociopolitical and economic relations of power is insufficient. Differences in material culture are actively maintained. This point will be demonstrated, using the semiotic concept of abduction, through the analysis of a local case study from central Nicaragua. Stylistic and formal homogeneity would be expected as a consequence of the close spatial distribution settlements in this local setting, yet instead significant differences are observed. This in turn holds implications for explorations of a Greater-Caribbean thesis. By using a local focus in order to argue macro-regional interaction, we conclude that the premise of inferring identity and social interaction out of similarity in form is not only inconclusive, but also incomplete.

### **Boundaries**

Approaches to contact and exchange in the wider Central American and Northern South American region have been designed principally by means of three foci: (a) exchange patterns, including mobility of material culture and agricultural practices throughout the area); (b) political complexity, being development and contrast in hierarchies of leadership throughout the area); and (c) iconography and form of material culture, that is semiotic comparison of decorated ceramic and stone material). Combined, these foci feed into studies attempting to understand pre-Columbian interregional connections in this southwestern rim of the Caribbean Sea. Exchange analyses have generally indicated some form of interaction within spheres of the circum-Caribbean, based on similarity in material culture, at times complemented by

thematic overlap in oral tradition. Emphases are on links between northern and southern Middle America (Cooke 2005), as well between the insular Caribbean and the tropical Lowlands of South America (Boomert 2000). But other vectors of interaction are included as well. For example comparative study of political complexity is a frequent topic of investigation (Cooke et al 2003; Haller 2004; Helms 1979; Redmond 1994). This may take the form of settlement pattern analysis; examples can be found throughout the area, but with particular abundance in Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia. Lastly, iconographic analysis is represented as well through studies that have looked at the identification and interpretation of painted and sometimes incised or carved symbols on signifiers such as pottery, carved stone, metals as well as semi-precious stone.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, lithics can be mentioned as an object category that still holds considerable potential for evidencing direct contact through compositional data analysis, that is, physically attested presence and directionality of object movement. The high contrasting geography and ecology of Central America will have co-determined how raw materials were procured and to what degree technology and exchange would have been locally circumscribed. Central Nicaragua, the case under review here, is exemplary in this regard, consisting of plains with rolling hills as well as rugged mountainous terrain, roughly following a southeast to northwest pattern.

As mentioned, macro-regional studies on the pre-Columbian past of Central America have underscored a concern with interregional ties, influences and interactions. Nicaragua has featured for some time in this debate, starting with Julian Steward including Nicaraguan indigenous cultures among the Circum Caribbean Tribes in his

sociopolitical model (Steward 1948; also Strong 1948 in the same volume). Since then, numerous scholars have debated, refuted, modified and nuanced this proposal, predominantly based on archaeological data (Baudez 1967, 1970; Coe 1962; Graham 1993; Haberland 1957; Healy 1980; Hoopes 2004; Hoopes and Fonseca 2003; Lange and Stone 1984; McCafferty and Steinbrenner 2005; Magnus 1974; Salgado Gonzalez 1996; Sheets 1992; Willey 1959, 1984), or ethnohistorical data (Fowler 1989; Ibarra 2001; Incer 1990; Newson 1987; Stone 1966) or an explicit combination thereof (Carmack and Salgado 2006; Tous Mata 2002; Van Broekhoven 2002). The archaeological investigations were mostly aimed at identifying culture boundaries by describing differences in material culture, or to confirm ties by describing similarities in material culture. Nicaragua is generally recognized as having one of these boundaries in its modern territory, formed by the subculture area of Greater Nicoya. This southernmost extension of Mesoamerica holds boundaries which are seldom speculated on, but it is assumed to have involved Central Nicaragua to some degree.<sup>2,3</sup> The uncertainty of this boundary is addressed by taking the better known Pacific and Caribbean coastal areas as two opposites from which this culture boundary is extrapolated to lie roughly northeast or southwest of respectively. Archaeological investigations in Nicaragua historically predominate on the Pacific side, including the Rivas region, the greater Managua-Granada area (Healy 1980; Lange et al. 1992; McCafferty and Steinbrenner 2005; Salgado Gonzalez 1996). In contrast, the extensive northern and north-central areas (Fletcher et al. 1994; Kühl 2010) as well as the northeastern part of Nicaragua have hardly seen any systematic archaeological research, with the notable

exception of recent work on the Caribbean coast by Gassiot and Clemente (2007), based on early work by Richard Magnus (1974, 1975).<sup>4</sup>

Combinations of ethnohistoric and archaeological data have also been applied to define north-south boundaries, most recently by Robert Carmack and Silvia Salgado (2006). They argue that Post-classic period Pacific Nicaragua formed part of the Mesoamerican world system (Smith and Berdan 2003), whereas the southern Pacific coast in Costa Rica made up part of an extra-systemic area what they call the Mesoamerican frontier (Carmack and Salgado 2006). Their analysis includes the political systems and economic exchange patterns, known through early colonial documents and archaeological findings. For both cases the presence or absence of exchange of material culture northward, in combination with descriptions of particular cultural elements by the Spaniards, are the fundamental motifs to deduce levels of integration and exchange. Carmack and Salgado induce some of the well-known cultural features such as ranked chiefdoms versus status based city states, marriage systems, the use of gold as currency, the nature of formalized rituals, and the presence of iconographic systems of communication, and last but not least differences in cosmological beliefs.

As such, Central Nicaragua is periodically appropriated by archaeological and ethnohistorical projects focusing on the Pacific side, and to a lesser extent on the Caribbean side. Archaeologically, this extensive watershed area is poorly known; the nature of interaction across this area thus also remains to be considered.<sup>5</sup>

### ***The similarity trap in Isthmo-Colombian iconography***

We put forward some considerations here as to how interaction might be analyzed without falling into, what we call the ‘similarity trap’. The similarity trap is found in research that analytically structures semiotic form to emphasize homogeneity in social dynamics. The workings of this trap go at the expense of variability in form and the assertive generation of meaning. The emphasis on ‘sameness’ inherent herein, is mentioned by Martin Wobst in his influential conceptualizations of style in archaeology (Wobst 1977, 1999). By instead accepting difference as potentially just as meaningful, we are taken away from ‘tradition’ and move more toward the practical dependency and historicity of meaning in what is read (or ‘seen’ if one prefers) in the known iconographic complexes of this region.

This focus on practice continues to legitimize style as that element of material culture which is the clearest window to the social human choice: “Style is seen as the key to the social” as Boast (1997) describes it. This does therefore not necessarily imply that style can merely communicate coded information, as can be drawn from some structuralist approaches. It is recognized that perceived meanings of styles and objects are very much contingent upon social and historical contexts, thus the meaning and purpose of objects will be open to interpretation and prescription as they change owner in exchange relationships. Engaging with this potential of “stylistic form that interferes with humans” (Wobst 1999:125), archaeologists using post-structural theoretical approaches have begun to see style as actively involved in discourse, power and so forth (Boast 1997).

These developments have not left Isthmo-Colombian iconographic studies

unaffected. As John Hoopes notes that “considering iconography over a broad area defined by *multiple variables*, holds the potential to facilitate in a *holistic manner*, the interpretation of the role of actors as *dynamic agents* in the modification or *resignification* of ideologies and behavior” (Hoopes 2004:143, own translation and emphases). Here, Hoopes addresses the multiplicity of meaning, highlighting not only the arbitrariness of the sign but also the Saussurian arbitrary relation of sign to the signified. Even though his discussion rests on a structural basis of power and ideology by means of his identification of the particular ‘tradition keepers’, his proposition contributes to the research agenda for the interregional study of variability and heterogeneity in semiotic form. Following up on identifying the continuous reinterpretation of iconography in the past, Hoopes and Fonseca discuss the term ‘diffuse unity’ as a working model to broach the complexity of similarity and difference (Hoopes and Fonseca 2003:53). This model is argued on the basis of a deep historical genetic and linguistic origin. The purpose of this concept is to enhance the identification of specific themes in Isthmo-Colombian iconography (e.g., the Meditative Shaman, double-headed saurians, beak birds, spiral ornaments, the Crocodile Man, and the Bat Man) whilst arguing the stylistic variation these themes may assume.<sup>6</sup> This concept of diffuse unity is an argument to see material culture as indexical signs; what is depicted has in some way something in common with what it refers to (Charles Peirce, as discussed in Preucel 2006). To see Isthmo-Colombian material things as indexical restores the importance of social and historical dimensions and asks for the archaeological investigation of concrete circumstances which lead to this continuous process of signification. This is

the rationale for avoiding the similarity trap. If meaning is open-ended and in a way 'questionable', that is, readings of meaning are contingent, then the diversity and apparent dissimilarities observed in Isthmo-Colombian material things are not *per se* a sign of socio-political fragmentation or even a looming failure of the interaction sphere thesis. Rather, it indicates the presence of meaningful interpretation through what Alfred Gell refers to as abduction, the 'hypothetical inference of a non-semiotic kind' (Gell 1998:14).

It is likely that the identity of people in the Greater-Caribbean was shaped by frequent and impacting forms of interaction. But rather than assume that this would be ideally evidenced by expecting the adoption of encountered differences in materiality leading to the adaptation or assimilation of one's own, the real social tension is in the moments where knowledge of others did *not* lead to these similarities. Abduction of a sign's meaning would then speak for resistance, made explicit through reifying one's own identity, say, through continued production of a particular style of material culture. This conceptualization of interaction may indeed have profound effects on the parties involved, but this is then not channeled through a resulting similarity, but rather through the continued representation of existing differences whether in degree (signifier) or kind (signified).

The approaches to exchange and contact in the Isthmo-Colombian area revolve to a significant degree on stylistic comparability in iconography. Old habits die hard in archaeology. This is true for many post-structuralist inspired orientations that still seem to reify the distinction between things and ideas. Binford regarded ideas as epiphenomenal in comparison to the real stuff; those at the other side of the spectrum view material forms as singular ex-

pressions of meaning. Specifically pottery has traditionally been approached as a culturally de-contextualized object. Evidence of this is found in studies throughout circum-Caribbean region where, to varying degrees, pottery specimens have for decades been analyzed in typological schemes (e.g., Rouse 1986); leaving aside for a moment whether any knowledge of the physical context is available to begin with or not. Style is often seen in these analyses as non-discursive, its role as a mediator of the material and immaterial in the social *habitus* seldom emphasized (following Bourdieu 1977). For example, in past studies of decorated ceramics from the Conclé site in central Panama, one can reflect on analyses that were (a) classificatory, and fundamentally non-interpretative (e.g., Lothrop 1942); (b) interpretative from a self-reflexive standpoint (e.g., Linares 1977); and (c) semiotic studies aimed at understanding the symbolic codified nature of the decorations (e.g., Cooke 1998; Helms 1995, 2000, 2006).

Given the rich variety in form, decorations, appendages and so forth that characterizes a significant part of Central American pottery, the interpretation of pottery has tended to fetishize some of these individual aspects at the cost of viewing the pot as all of the above. It is essential to look at the social context of pottery: the practice of production, the practice of use, the practice of discard etc. This focus toward practice would allow us to move away from the sticky equation of pots which *are* people's identities and shift the emphasis to the practices that constitute these subject identities to begin with.<sup>7</sup> Not only does this bring the social more under scrutiny, but analytically it will also allow us to better understand semiotic *differences* in the circum-Caribbean region instead of being forced to search for *similarities*.

**Central Nicaraguan archaeology**

An example from the archaeology of Central Nicaragua will illustrate the mentioned social complexities of similarity and difference in relation to the local spaces of this study (Figure 1).

Ethnohistorical and linguistic research describes a less than straightforward situation in the area, and in fact stress cultural difference rather than similarity. The only clear division that can be made during the early colonial period is between the intrusive Nahuatl speakers on the Pacific side and Misumalpan language family speakers to the north, northeast. Linguistic maps of the watershed area project different and overlapping language realms of Nahuatl,

Misumalpan and Rama (Constenla 1991; Newson 1987; Incer 1985, 1990; Van Broekhoven 2002). This linguistic diversity makes it likely that mother tongues may have differed from community to community, not unlike parts of the Amazon Basin. It is here in this central Nicaraguan watershed area where the problematic nature of spatial distributions of culture manifests itself,<sup>8</sup> where it is viewed as the spatial limit (referred to in terms of ‘break’, ‘border’, ‘periphery’ or ‘frontier’ etc.). Central Nicaragua seemingly is a fragmented region, to which past research into interactions and material culture has contributed.

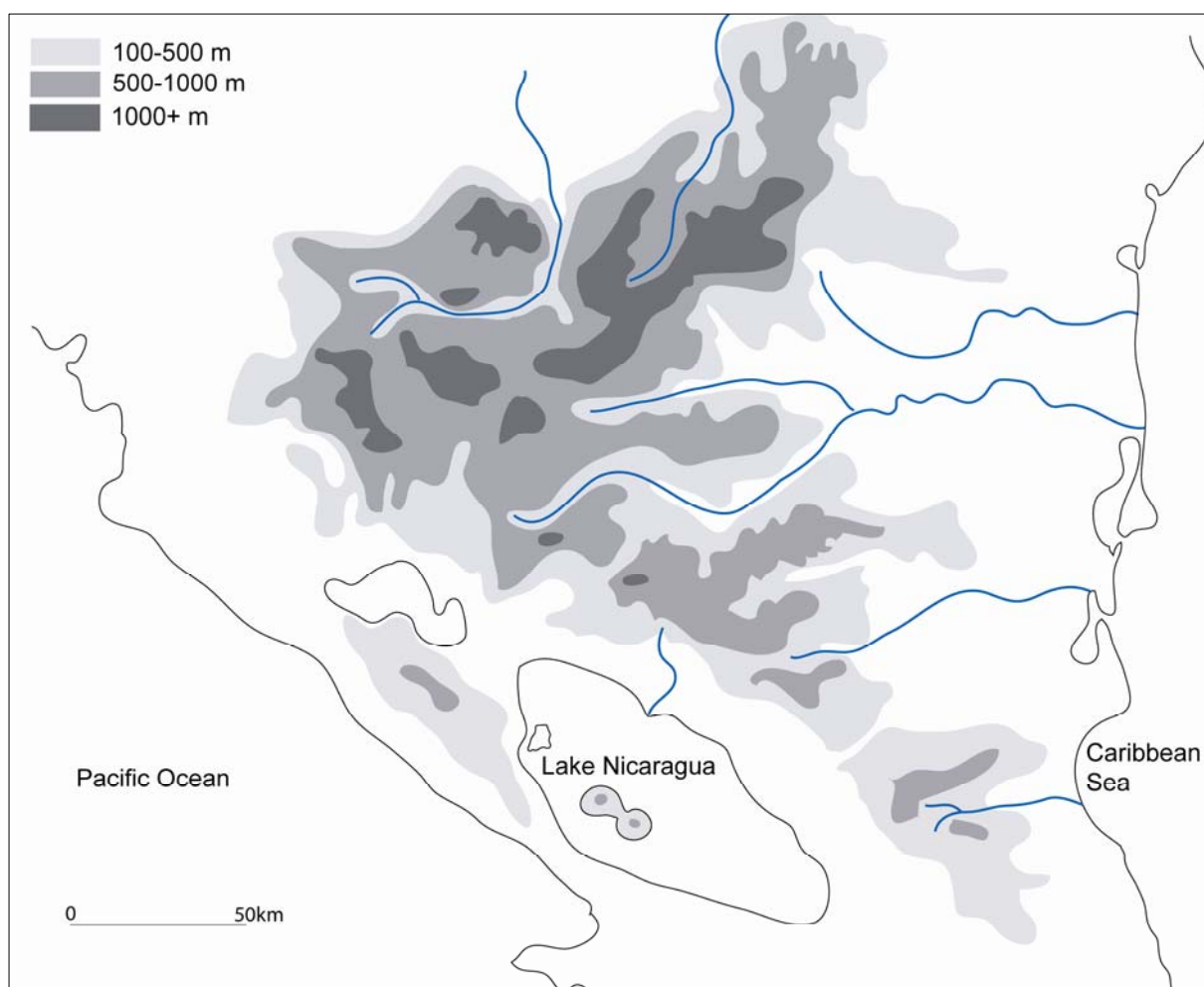


Figure 1. General map of Nicaragua and its mountainous watershed interior.

Archaeological findings indicate different cultural affiliations, both on different sides of the watershed, but also changing through time. In general, artifact distributions do not correlate to the language data available for the sixteenth century. Richard Magnus' surveys and test excavations yielded nineteen sites in the early 70s, both on the Caribbean coast (i.e., Bluefields, Pearl Lagoon, Kukra Point and Italia) and four years later in the Chontales highlands (i.e., Cerna, Copelito and Sabana Grande) (Magnus 1974, 1975). His findings at the coast established a ceramic sequence as well as initial knowledge on subsistence patterns. An analysis of the material collected during the subsequent *Proyecto Arqueológico de la Meseta Central* in the Chontales department of the watershed, was never published, with the exception of a later study of lithics found at Sabana Grande (Gerstle 1976). Magnus' finds related ceramic types both on the coast as well as in the eastern watershed, principally for the Late Formative period (300 BC – AD 300). His interest for Central Nicaragua lies in part in testing the hypothesis of the regional line of development during the final pre-Columbian period, for a particular decorative style, Luna Polychrome, which has been proposed to originate on the Caribbean coast (Magnus 1974:15). In his conclusions, Magnus offers a remarkably clear perspective: "One must ask why all of Lower Central America is not a zone of South American influence and Upper Central America a zone of Mesoamerican influence, the two grading into each other gradually. [...] The answer is quite simple: all other things are not equal in Central America" (Magnus 1974:218). Despite the sins of the time of to equating change with diffusion, the overall argument is straightforward: In this relatively localized area of central Nicara-

gua, pervasive contact would have been likely, however, synchronic distinctions can be observed in the material culture and thus merely recognizing relations of interaction through similarities is at best a partial analysis.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Central Nicaragua*

To address Magnus' observations on questions of interaction in central Nicaragua and to be able to insert them as part of a much larger debate on the interpretative value of similarities in material culture, we briefly illustrate here the results of recent archaeological activity on the western side of the watershed. The Central Nicaragua Archaeological Project aims at gaining a general understanding of the pre-Columbian settlement patterns and material culture in a topographical cross-cut of the central mountainous watershed area, characterized by floodplains near Lake Nicaragua and foothills leading to increasingly mountainous terrain cut by several river drainages, and ultimately the mountainous *cordilleras* overlooking the Caribbean plains to the northeast. The project aims to look specifically at spatio-temporal dynamics along this presumed frontier of culture areas, as such providing information on the ways in which the local river valley landscape was used and modified by indigenous settlers. To gain insights into mobility of material culture and potential links to and from the eastern half of Nicaragua, the principal drainage system on the western side of the watershed, the Mayales River valley was investigated by means of a full-coverage field prospection (Geurds 2008).

The survey was conducted by walking in teams diagonally or perpendicular to the sloping angle of the terrain at intervals of 25-40 meters, exploring and when needed recording cultural features on the surface. The general topography of the terrain con-

sisting of relatively flat areas used for agricultural purposes, allowed maintaining the systematic walking patterns. Where foothills began to slope at steep gradients, probability walking along ridges and paths was chosen. All surrounding hill tops, ridges and spurs were covered. With the exception of the immediate urban surroundings of Juigalpa, we covered the sides of the river with a width of at least 1 km on both sides. On average we covered around 3 km on a side depending on topography (Figure 2).

Following the Mayales river valley southward, 38 pre-Columbian sites and 59 findspots dating from AD 400 to 1521 were identified.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, five sites on the outskirts of Juigalpa were visited as well as a local museum collection in La

Libertad, approximately 25 kilometers northeast. The majority of sites in the main survey area are habitational sites smaller than 0.5 ha. In addition to these habitational settlements, four hill top sites were recorded.

Settlement behavior generally, but not exclusively, favors the low banks in close proximity to river courses. Most habitation sites were recorded at distances of 1.5 kilometers or less from the river. Hilltops higher than 350 meters never showed any traces of cultural use and were used here as a topographical limit of the survey area. These preferences show up in other sectors of the watershed as well (Gorin 1990). Given the compact character of most multi-component sites, spatially delimiting occupations of specific time periods proved im-



Figure 2. Surface surveying in progress near the Mayales river.

possible. Furthermore, characteristics of individual sites revealed moderate variation, the majority of sites lack mounded structures (32 of 38) and were most likely habitation sites, and a minority displays extensive amounts of generally low mounds of unworked stone (6 of 38). The smallest of these six sites featured seven low stone mounds and the largest over 200 (Figure 3).

The mound architecture is often round and at times rectangular in shape and up to three meters high. The hilltop locations favored for these mound complexes often forces arrangements of mounds along the linear axis of the hill. Mounds predominantly consist of piled up loose stones, with remarkably little constructive material fill-

ing up the cavities. Additional research into the constructive nature of this monumental architecture is needed, but there does seem to be clear distinction between this area and the nearby Granada and Pacific coast beyond, where monumental mounds are predominantly built of earth instead of the unworked stone observed here (see Lange et al. 1993, for similar observations). A remarkable correlation appears to exist between the monumental sites and a scarcity of materials on the surface (see, for example Gorin 1990 and Lange et al. 1993:261). Our investigation remained inconclusive as to the reasons why this was so. Suffice it to say that it does present a significant impediment for the analysis of regional developments when the monumental sites can



Figure 3. El Salto site, a monumental site featuring four mound platforms. Note the worked stele fragment fallen over in the foreground.

only tentatively be assigned to a temporal phase of use.

The habitation sites are often found in open fields and consequently with disturbances, and exist in varying states of preservation, depending on agricultural activities that may have contributed to leveling of the contours of these low earthen mounds. This made site size determinations only approximate; in such cases we preferred conservative estimates.

Considering the relative richness of ethnohistoric as well as ethnographical data on burials in Central America, nature and location of burials was of particular interest to us, at least as far as they were marked on the surface. Our findings indicate that burials were at least partially if not exclusively placed in clusters and away from nearby habitational areas. Site M3 is an excellent example of this (Figure 4).

Twenty-six ovaloid burials, many of which in linearly arranged, were placed on a small embankment close to the Mayales river. Individual burials are characterized by slight elevations on the surface ranging from 5 cm to about 25 cm which are covered by rocks along the extremities. The top area of the burial seems to have typically been left uncovered by rocks. Excavation contexts of similar cemeteries in Chontales have revealed secondary indirect burials in large urns (Gorin 1990:643-654). The practice of locating this type of cemetery away from communities is observed in other locations of the Isthmo-Colombian area, and though the meaning of this practice has been viewed differently, a dominant thought is that these locations served as communal areas, socially and spatially bonding the surrounding villages (McKee et al. 1994). In addition, cultural analogy

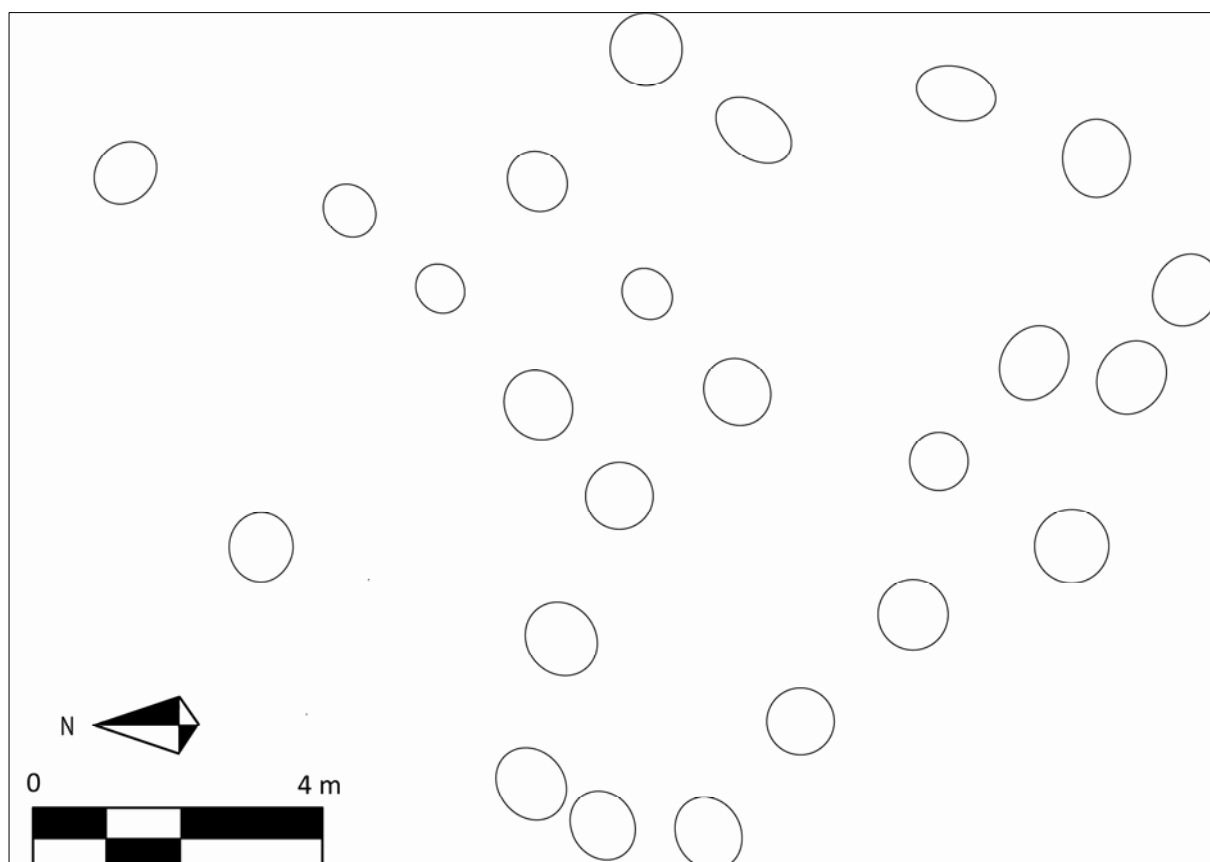


Figure 4. Site M3 featuring twenty-three linear aligned burials, marked on the surface.

from later ethnographic data reflects similar practices. The Bribri in Costa Rica argued their practice of burying the deceased at a distance from settlements so as to keep the living and the dead separated, thus fitting the settlement data we find in the Mayales river valley (Stone 1962).

Lastly, two sites with petroglyphs were registered, one on isolated basalt boulders without any habitation associated to it, and a second extensive group of petroglyphs on one of the largest sites in the area (Figure 5), San Isidro (referred to in Rigat 1992 and Lange et al. 1993:49-50 as Agua Buena). How these latter petroglyphs, their specific locations and depicted themes, relate to the site lay-out is unclear, as often is the case with this type of feature.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Collected surface materials*<sup>12</sup>

A total of 722 ceramic sherds were collected from 17 sites, of which 169 (24%) were classified following existing typologies (Baudez 1967; Bonilla 1990; Gorin 1990; Lange et al. 1992). The sequence proposed by Gorin based on ceramic variability (1990:658-670), is by and large consistent with the types from the Mayales river valley. The diagnostics from the earliest three periods in this sequence (Mayales I and II, Cuisalá, 500-200 BC / 200 BC – AD 400 / AD 400-800) show significant differences in form and decorative patterns when compared to materials in all known surrounding areas. Some imports from the Pacific coast are present, but consistently form a minor segment in the inventory. The following Potrero period (AD 800-1200)



Figure 5. Detail of zoomorphic petroglyph at Site M13 (Agua Buenas).

begins to demonstrate more ceramic types with a consistent presence on the Pacific coast, which Gorin concludes to be imports from that region. The concluding Monota and Cuapa periods overlap in the sequence (respectively AD 1200-1550 and AD 1400-1600) and this is explained through assuming: “the arrival of a new population which does not merge with the residing one” (ibid: 669, our translation). The western side of the watershed was thus characterized by two coeval ceramic traditions that lasted for at least a century. The conclusion of Gorin that the ceramic style dis-

tribution is bounded almost to the individual community level, is mirrored by the local ceramic distribution zones on the Pacific coast (Lange et al. 1992:58-62) (Figure 6).

As Figure 6 shows, the western watershed, represented by Zone 4, is analyzed as sharing minimal similarities to Zones 2 and 3, which are located adjacent to Zone 4 on the northern edge of Lake Nicaragua. Overall thus, we find relatively little similarity in ceramic form and decoration in a very reduced spatio-temporal period.

The lithics recovered represent a substantial part of the total inventory; the density at some sites approached that of the ceramics, and allows for a few general observations. Andesite axes and porphyry bifaces represented the bulk of the specimens, with a small amount (< 0.8 percent) of obsidian blade fragments completing the sample. Regional reference material is based on the study of the lithic material from the Sabana Grande excavations by Richard Magnus (1975; subsequent analysis in Gerstle 1976) and the study by Dominique Rigat (1992). The richness in igneous rocks in this volcanic area

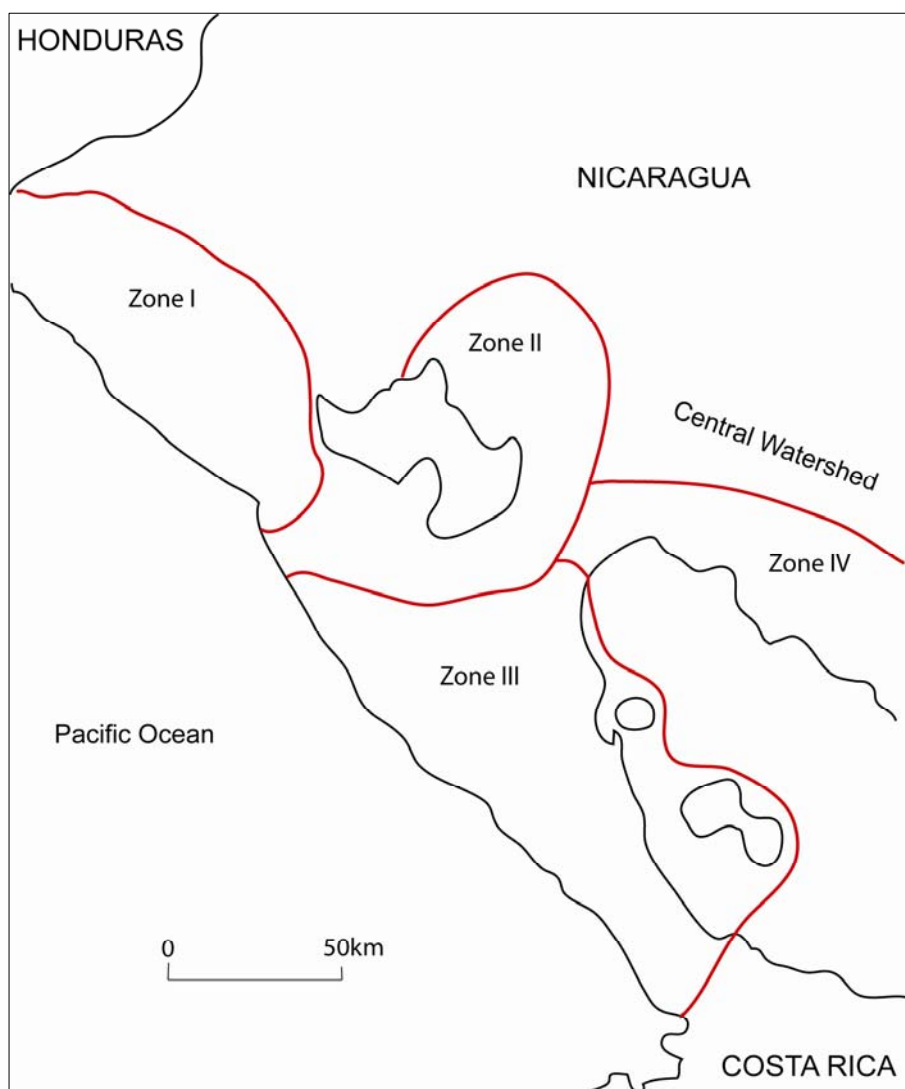


Figure 6. Locations of Ceramic Zones in Central and Pacific Nicaragua (modified from Lange et al. 1993:59).

leads to similar patterns in the types of chert used in the lithic industry. The minor role for obsidian, on the other hand, is explained by the absence of sufficiently large nodules to exploit a substantial core-blade technology, and the subsequent emphasis in developing technical knowledge to process the chert into different types of bifaces (Lange et al. 1992:163-176).

The existence of obsidian sources more to the northeast towards the mountains was mentioned several times by local guides, but sources were not registered. Moreover, the existing Sabana Grande data analysis by Gerstle does not indicate any presence of significance for obsidian tools to be found in future investigations. Even if obsidian cores would be traded into the Chontales area, the existing advanced technological skills to work the locally abundant lithics would have made it unlikely for specialists to switch to obsidian or even incorporate it in their workshop production. The data show that the procurement and use of lithic materials such as andesite and porphyry, contrast to a minimal working of obsidian cores into prismatic blades, whereas the latter material abounds in the northwestern extremity of Nicaragua or southern Honduras and El Salvador.

#### *Community relations*

Based on the preceding general analysis, complemented by data from past surveys along neighboring watercourses (Espinosa and Rigat 1994; Gorin 1990; Rigat 1992), the archaeology in this geographical frontier region indicates relative stability in the material culture until AD 400, after which the first significant cultural developments take place. Marked by exchange relationships to the Pacific coast that shift in intensity through time, the material culture in the Chontales region begins to show influence from the western Pacific coast by

means of introduced ceramic types. Subsequently this development reverses, with principally ceramics showing a stylistic pattern distinct from that of neighboring areas, a development we cannot adequately explain at this time. Certainly seeing these changes as being caused by: "Principally men, warriors, whose women they [locally] marry, would continue to make vessels according to their traditions, with little or no change", as suggested by Gorin (1990:668) based on Samuel Lothrop's original proposal, does not seem like a particularly socially informed analysis anymore.

It is fair to say that the Nicaraguan Watershed, and Chontales specifically, are a blank spot on the map in terms of settlement patterns, diversity in site morphology and intra-site characteristics. This is not to mention the total absence of any form of household archaeology. What can our initial investigation add to the analysis of local processes of interaction, and what in turn can this reveal about the viability of the macroregional Greater-Caribbean thesis?

First, our data point to a rather consistent dispersal of communities across the foothill landscape of Western Chontales. We see this lack of nucleation of villages throughout the pre-Columbian sequence as a strong indicator for networks of contact across the landscape. Although the precise nature of these inter-community relations in the area cannot be precisely evidenced at this time, one can speculate that a likely scenario would have been social ties through marriage. Relationships were established through intermarriage, kinship ties, and exchange. These all are likely candidates and the short distances between communities, would strongly argue for these linkages. Moreover, aside from a small percentage of significantly larger settlements, the strikingly small size of the bulk of these

communities (we would estimate no more than 50 occupants in these individual locations), would have needed to establish and maintain marriage alliances with members of different communities to support the small number of inhabitants in these individual villages. This thus would speak to a closer knit network of interaction than the dispersed pattern perhaps initially might indicate.

Second, the exchange of objects would also be an anticipated pattern in the archaeological record, considering the role it is deemed to play in building and maintaining these intercommunity relationships. Yet this does not seem to be the case. The ceramic inventory of the Chontales region vis-à-vis directly neighboring regions, such as the Granada area between the two lakes, and the Rivas area on the other side of Lake Nicaragua, is distinctly different. The same can be concluded for the lithic assemblage. The paradox is that these differences persist in a landscape in which distances are never more than one days walking distance. This makes contact and knowledge of others an arguable scenario. All the indications are that the individual village and the landscape of the western watershed in which it was located, would have been a space of contact and exchange. The similarity trap, however, argues primarily for contact through similarity, reversing the burden of evidence in cases of morphological and stylistic differences in material culture. Looking at the comparability of the material culture complexes though, presents only a partial picture and most likely an erroneous one at that. What our findings in Central Nicaragua indicate, combined with the outcome of previous investigations in neighboring regions, is that the establishing and maintaining of interaction on the community and inter-community regional level, appears to have been a necessary and common practice, but that this

did not result in comparable material culture.

The archaeology of Central Nicaragua presents significant potential for understanding regional dynamics beyond the Pacific coast and toward the potential interaction with the Eastern part of Nicaragua and the Caribbean coast and beyond. Obviously controlled excavation and more extensive surveying are needed in order to further address interaction on a regional or even macro regional scale.

### ***Discussion***

Past syntheses concerned with the archaeology of Central America were defined largely by structuring data into homogenous types, i.e., the identification of complexes of stylistic similarities indicating regular interaction across this vast geographical area. As our research in Nicaragua indicates however, a great deal of variability in social, political, and economic organization is noticeable on the local level. Much of this observed variability appears to be related to basic differences in adaptive strategies and spatial organization, and can be seen as characteristic for dealing with the mosaic pattern of environmental diversity that characterizes Central America. Against these kinds of social and economical backgrounds, contrasts in material culture can arise, but what kind of dynamics are at play between them is one of the questions that certainly still needs to be addressed more profoundly. What the localized archaeological example from Central Nicaragua has shown, is that on the inter-community level, where interaction and the mobility of people would have been the rule rather than the exception, differences in settlement pattern and structural dissimilarity in the material culture can still be seen. These differences are so stark as to warrant the earlier mentioned denominations of 'frontier', 'periphery' and so forth.

The literature on the archaeology of Lower Central America is practically defined by definitions of self, that is, considerable attention has been given to exploring what historically united it, and how it differed from Mesoamerica and the Andean regions (Sheets 1992). Remarkably similar observations can be made for the insular Caribbean region. The Greater-Caribbean thesis goes beyond this and we this edited volume represents a further and significant next step in this teleology of territory. In previously proposed definitions, analyses of the visual, iconographic aspects of material culture in the Isthmo-Colombian area have taken center stage searching for a profound form of sameness; the “the essential unity of the esthetic products” as Lothrop referred to it more than 80 years ago as (Lothrop 1926:105). This notion of essentialism in Isthmo-Colombian art is still echoed today as reconsiderations of universalism have tentatively resurfaced (Helms 2006). Anthropology has by now extensively critiqued this form of categorizing of material culture. The implicit assumptions in these essentialist studies regard cultures as isolated, the emphasis is on the collective instead of on individuality and the relation between time and material expression is largely excluded in studies of this universalist kind (e.g., Fabian 1983).<sup>13</sup> Therefore, instead of searching for similarities in semiotic expressions of Isthmo-Colombian material things, we propose to consider these objects (whether painted ceramics, sculpted stone or jadeite) as catalysts of social activities. The identities created depended on particular contexts and should thus not solely be judged on equations of stylistic similarity. The interpretations given to these objects did not necessarily favor and certainly not exclude difference.

We argue that this change is not to be recognized as difference and thereby as lack of interaction. We can briefly address this through two arguments. Firstly, the oral tradition, as invoked by Hoopes and others (Bray 2003; Helms 2000; Hoopes 2004) in ongoing discussions on principally Costa Rican, Panamanian and Colombian material culture, is adaptive over time and when we assume a relation between this orality and a visual expression thereof, we should not be discouraged by the seemingly overwhelming diachronic and as well as synchronic plurality in iconography but in fact encouraged by it. Following Hoopes, we can say that the semiotic readings of this iconography will indeed also change (Hoopes 2005:143). Secondly, regional or inter-regional synchronic diversity in iconographic expression is also not as problematic as perhaps traditionally perceived in studies in sub-regions of the Greater-Caribbean. The evidencing of interaction and contact through analysis of a symbolic system, as is the case from example in Hoopes’ ‘diffuse unity’ concept, need not solely take place through the establishment of links through similarity. When comparing localized predominance of one form of iconic expression, as opposed to another in a neighboring region, the implicit supposition is that the producer or consumer of expression A would be unable to interpretatively bridge to understand expression B, thus leading to a pessimistic conclusion regarding potential interaction. This however disregards all social embeddedness that this ‘strange encounter’ would have accompanied. It is to be expected that transmission of meaning would have resolved many of these problems, opening up a radically different view on the recognition of interaction in the archaeological record.

### **Conclusion**

In light of the foregoing, the Greater-Caribbean thesis of this issue may in fact seem oddly out of place for Central America. Weren't we just moving toward revalorizing this latter geographical area in terms of its proper cultural significance, and changing the long-standing negative comparative perspective, voiced famously through Michael Coe's view that: "The Intermediate Area itself, remained a cul-de-sac open at both ends, within which civilization never appeared" (Coe 1962:181). This in reaction to a generally felt sentiment of an 'Intermediate Area' that is betwixt and between the Mesoamerican and the Andean regions, as Robert Drennan (1996) analyzed it not too long ago. How can these two seemingly conflicting views be meaningfully united in a research hypothesis such as the Greater-Caribbean area?

In their introduction to this issue, Hofman and Bright optimistically signal studies that show indications of contact between various areas around the Caribbean Sea, but at the same time warn that "the available information is too fragmentary to unravel the intricacies of human mobility, regional communication networks and the mechanisms behind them. Furthermore, the articulation of engagements between societies of different socio-political complexity and the role played by the sharing of ideas in the realm of cosmovision in the wider region through time remain to be elucidated" (Hofman and Bright 2008). Our sense is that their description of potential for cross-regional study in a field where the specificity of the data sets at times still leaves to be desired, is probably a good judgment on the current situation. To be sure, lamenting the fragmented nature of the archaeological field is a commonplace, and should not discourage from seeking

broad spatio-temporal analyses on the basis of local contextualized projects.

The reflections on discussions of Central American data sets, and certainly the findings presented for Central Nicaragua, only represent a fraction of the Greater-Caribbean area. This surely requires further testing and comparison to other regions. Whilst the currently available data may still be too limited to properly tackle some of the mentioned issues, our present findings may be used to problematize research subjects relevant to the Greater-Caribbean thesis. We recognize here that "the generalist is always in danger of being criticized by the specialist because of the exceptions to the rule" as Jeffrey Quilter recently put it (Quilter and Miller 2006:10), but at the same time we acknowledge the irony that criticism is indeed also what brings researchers together.

In the majority of the sub-regions of the pan-Caribbean it has become increasingly apparent that the analysis of social interaction, be it mobility of material or immaterial things, must include, as an integral part, an appreciation of localized processes of development at the level of technology, material procurement and semiotic patterns before the regional system can be elucidated. In this regard, Hofman et al. (this volume) convincingly argue for the necessity to move away from non-explanatory understandings of exchange of material culture as somehow resulting from migratory movements as argued in the past (Rouse 1986), and instead adjust the analytical lens to focus on the movement of material things, however thereby not depersonalizing the process. This indeed seems a more fruitful way to generate insights in the ambitiously vast area under scrutiny for this symposium and is in tune with current evolutionist convictions from linguistic and genetic research, both of which favor a sce-

nario of relatively little population movement, at least for the Isthmo-Colombian area (Constenla 1991; Barrantes et al. 1990).

The emphasis on discrete data sets, which is an integral tenet in any archaeological project and certainly for investigating the Greater-Caribbean, will inevitably entail the de-emphasizing of others. Once the material mobility analyses are beginning to show patterns, the questions as to how this is to be understood must also be posed. What does the sharing of iconographic themes mean? To paraphrase Mary Helms (2006), are we firm on why the homological comparison of differences in similarity, takes precedence over the analogical comparison of similarities in difference? Does this sharing, from the archaeologists' perspective, confirm some form of closer ties between two communities or groups? How will we address the question of meaning in these objects? Certainly one of the principal social questions to be investigated should be how these moving objects were perceived and valued, and thereby not stopping at equating semiotic similarity with understanding, and dissimilarity with strangeness. Our goal here was to provide archaeologists with a tool in the project of answering some of these questions and advancing our understanding of uniformity and difference of spatially widespread iconographic expressions in the Greater-Caribbean.

In sum, we see the evidence of interaction not as an end in itself. The goals should not be to establish outmoded trait-lists that would prohibit a diachronic perspective. Rather, the Greater-Caribbean thesis is best understood as a spatial model perhaps most resembling that of the old favorite interaction sphere (e.g., Abdel-Vidor 1981; Freidel 1979). This model allows for thinking about a geographic area

where exchange processes are studied for singular time periods. It is a truism that the culture area concept is a much castigated product of our discipline. But contemplating the Greater-Caribbean requires this type of generalization, and as long as the theoretical emphasis is on constructing it and not on 'finding' it there is little theoretical concern needed. Therefore we should not look with too much comparative concern to Mesoamerica (cf. Hoopes and Fonseca 2003); Mesoamerican scholars overwhelmingly use the culture area as heuristic shorthand, and it is never introduced to serve as the ultimate base to which material things can be reduced. In this regard we can follow Clifford's opinion for whom culture is "a deeply compromised idea I cannot yet do without" (1988:10). A Greater-Caribbean perspective can continue to utilize proven successful subheadings of culture area studies, such as social organization and ecological settings. When combined with studies of materiality of the objects we encounter, a study of meaning construction in space and material culture emerges that will shed light on how different peoples in the Greater-Caribbean represented themselves through objects in social interactions.

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1. Regarding the latter category it is problematic to merely involve designs and other morphological characteristics as the only aspects of material culture that are able to inform the archaeologist. Technological features are similarly culturally specific, and technological pottery studies have neglected this finding in favor of viewing the procurement and manufacturing of ceramics a 'technique', seemingly devoid of cultural value, and determined by environmental constraints and functional requirements. This critique has been voiced for other regions (Van der Leeuw 1991), and we propose to follow it for the Greater-Caribbean.

2. The Pacific side of Nicaragua has seen many relations being drawn between archaeological sequencing and ethnohistorical accounts. The specific data by itself as well as how these sources can be fitted together, has been the focus of some interest in the recent past (e.g., Fowler 1989). These sources, speaking of two primary migrations of ethnic groups, the Chorotega around the 8th century AD and the Nicarao around the 12th century AD, have frequently been regarded as being related to changes in the ceramic sequence (Coe 1962; Healy 1980, but see Baudez 1976 for a differing analysis). Recent advances in verifying the sequence through C14 dating, have problematized this correlation of ethnohistoric mention of social groups and decorative patterns (McCafferty and Steinbrenner 2005).

3. In terms of geographical diversity, Central America demonstrates considerable variability. Whereas it is marked by volcanic activity on the Pacific lateral side, the regions beyond the mountainous area of the central watershed area, and outlining the Caribbean coast are largely flat, and humid, defined by dendritic systems of rivers that cross-cut these flats before discharging into the Caribbean Sea. The territory of Nicaragua is no exception to this; topographic and climatic diversity seems the rule rather than the exception and this makes archaeological reflections on a geographical unit of this kind particularly challenging.

4. Other than the journals *Vínculos* and *Ancient Mesoamerica*, publications reporting on archaeological research in Nicaragua are extremely rare in any of the major journals. For example, *American Antiquity*'s most recent article is a one-page report by Matthew Stirling dating back 44 years (Stirling 1964:500-501). Now in its 19th volume, *Latin American Antiquity* is still looking for its first contribution from archaeology conducted in Nicaragua. Partly as a consequence of this, a significant part of published data consists of grey literature, at best in the form of circulating conference papers, and in the

worst case by means of technical reports leading phantom lives at local institutions in Nicaragua.

5. This is not to mention the Northwestern and Northern parts of Nicaragua, which are largely left out of the regional boundary discussions. The great majority of the area is still lacking extensive regional and site-specific investigation to establish ceramic sequences, or minimally gain insights into the characteristics of local material culture.

6. In this setting, diffuse unity is rather comparable to the concept of 'common difference' proposed by Richard Wilk (2004). Common difference describes practices that delimit the expressions of an iconographic style through agreed upon standards and rules. As such, it also echoes Hoopes and Fonseca's concern with power, in asking who the agents are that steer these systems of common difference.

7. As mentioned, particular care should be administered in equating style – that is, the way and form in which material culture is made and decorated- with ethnic identity. Although style has been an attractive signifier for archaeological interpretations of interaction on a regional scale for many decades (Plog 1983), a clear definition of what constitute the extremities of such interaction is often lacking.

8. The statuary of the central Nicaraguan watershed receives similarly ambiguous interpretations as to their form. Samuel Lothrop in the synthesis on the archaeology of Central America for the Handbook of Middle American Indians, points to the slight "South-American" bas-relief style carvings, but also emphasizes the presence of animal companions on this statuary as being indicative of Mesoamerican traits (Lothrop 1966).

9. Magnus ascertains that Luna Polychrome does not originate on the Caribbean side of Nicaragua (judging by the fact that he does not recover ceramics of the Luna type), but many other problems remain unresolved to this day: The Preceramic is unknown for the Caribbean side; on subsistence patterns we only have scanty data, and burial practices await detailed study.

10. Findspots were designated as such, based on low quantities of surface materials (< 10 artifact fragments per square meter).

11. Several of the petroglyph complexes at San Isidro appear to have suffered extensive damaging in recent years due to looting activities. Looters have apparently intended to remove, to varying levels of success, the upper layers of the protruding bedrock, destroying the petroglyph when they failed in their attempts.

12. Materials collected at sites were selected based on potential diagnostic features; representative sam-

ple collections were not established due to the low densities that were many times encountered at sites. The still insufficient grip on site lay-out characteristics in the region and therefore population size, may well be an important factor in this matter. The recovered materials, analyzed by Geurds and Zambrana are stored at the Museo Gregorio Aguilar Barea in Juigalpa. Apart from ceramics and lithics, surface collections yielded some evidence of typical household appliances, such as corn grindings stones, but by and large the quantities are rather limited.

13. Calls of this kind, for more attention to time related issues such as development and scales of change, should be particularly well received by archaeology, considering its needed grasp on the temporal, as recently has been argued once more (Lucas 2005).

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