The potters' perspectives: A vibrant chronology of ceramic manufacturing practices in the valley of Juigalpa, Chontales, Nicaragua (cal 300 CE - present)

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1 Central Nicaragua: when the center is the periphery

I have many blurred memories about my ideas, preconceptions and biases regarding Nicaragua before setting foot for the first time in the country. As far as I remember, my first encounter with the land of Sandino happened when I was about 14 years old and I listened for the first time to the song *Canción urgente para Nicaragua*, by Cuban songwriter Silvio Rodríguez. The lyrics elated me because they spoke about a Latin American nation, united against dictatorship, oppression, and colonialism. Similar to many teenagers growing up in Argentina during the 1990s, I had a mild obsession with the work of Julio Cortázar. Therefore, I became curious about his participation in the Sandinista revolution, which I was completely ignorant of. Pictures and footage of the *Rayuela* author that showed the active involvement writers could have in sociopolitical processes gave me hope that humanistic and artistic endeavours could act as agents of social transformation. Years later, while I was in college at the Universidad Nacional de Rosario (Argentina), we dedicated a whole unit of the class "Social Latin American History" to the Sandinista Revolution. We read texts by Mires (1986), Vilas & Harris (1985), and Lozano (1985) to compare the Nicaraguan insurgency to other revolutionary processes in Latin America, such as those underway in Mexico, Bolivia, and Cuba. Through authors like Knight (2016) and Löwy (2007) we tried to understand these movements within our Latin American context, taking into account biopolitics and the influence of Marxism in our continent.

During my university years in Mexico, Nicaragua was briefly mentioned as the southeastern border of the pre-Hispanic macrocultural area called Mesoamerica (Kirchhoff 1943), or through afternoons reading the beautiful poems by Rubén Darío.[1] Finally, living in Panama I was faced with a different spectrum of Nicaraguan reality and history, when I met numerous Nicaraguan migrants who had fled the civil war and economic constraints to find better opportunities. Hope and discrimination were daily meals for these parents, who in some cases spent decades away from their children in order to provide them with food, shelter, and—under the best circumstances—an education. The legendary rivalry between Nicaragua and Panama regarding the trans-isthmian canal fed the Panamanian self-image of progress and first-worldliness, which blinds them against the brutal inequality and unequal distribution of wealth inherited from their American colonial "past". The renewed hopes for a canal project in Nicaragua, fed by the Ortega regime at the beginning of the last decade, echoed this historical antagonism.

This mosaic of impressions was the clouded view I possessed in June 2014, when I first hopped on a plane from Panama City to Managua. The person sitting next to me, a Nicaraguan middle-aged man who had lived in Miami since the 1980s, was very excited to hear about the purposes of my visit and gladly gave me advice, as well as offering me a summary of his country. First, he spent several minutes telling me about Rubén Darío's life, his work, and how his beautiful words were the expression of what Nicaraguan idiosyncrasy was capable of creating. He assured me that the best cities to visit were Granada, León, and Managua, where I would find good food, cultural activities, economic development, and progress. He reminisced about

1 In this book, terms such as pre-Hispanic, pre-conquest, and pre-European are used interchangeably to signal the development of indigenous communities before and after European invasion. However, these concepts do not neglect the historicity of these societies prior to this historical event; on the contrary, this text challenges the pre/post-colonization classical divide.

the 1972 earthquake and its devastating outcome. He was sad to know that my final destination was Juigalpa, in the central department of Chontales, east of the big lake, where he was convinced there were more cows than people. He was not relieved when he heard that I was originally from a country with exactly the same demography, so a higher ratio of people versus cows was not really a problem for me.

Chontales was mainly seen as cowboy land, where large pickup trucks, leather boots, plaid shirts, *sombreros*, *machetes*, rifles, AK-47s, pistols, and *machismo* were part of daily life. According to him, the province lacked culture, education, and progress; the *hípico* parade, the *carnavales*, and the *fiestas patronales* were described as Roman bacchanals where alcohol, drugs, pickpocketing, lust, fights, and even murder were the rule. In sum, the area was only good for its meat, cheese, and milk production. When I asked him about the Caribbean coast, the expression on his face darkened. He explained to me that those were "Other" people, darker, with other ways of being, and a different food and language; he told me in a worried tone that some of them did not even speak Spanish. In his view, the east of Nicaragua was not really even part of the country. There are in fact two autonomous regions, the *Región Autónoma de la Costa Caribe Sur* (RACCS) and *Región Autónoma de la Costa Caribe Norte* (RACCN), that—in his opinion—governed themselves, and their development was very much independent from the rest of the nation. Additionally, he made it very clear that while the Pacific coast and the central mountainous regions were very safe, the Caribbean watershed was characterized by crime, so he did not suggest visiting it—although he somewhat ignored the problematic northern border with Honduras. Instead, he advised me to fly to Corn Island and see the Nicaraguan Caribbean from the nice beaches of white sand and turquoise water, not from the ugly mainland mangroves.

In a way, I was familiarized with this *othering* of Caribbean populations in southern Central America, with the historical processes that differentiated them from the Pacific coast settlements, such as the British and then American presence, the higher numbers of descendants of enslaved people, and their isolation from national policies and narratives. Also, I was aware that this *othering* was directly related to the denial of African as well as indigenous roots in modern southern Central American populations, in spite of clear cultural and genetic connections.[2]

However, once I started delving more in the archaeology of the country, I realized that this contemporary divide had been almost literally translated to the archaeological discourse **(figure 1)**. Since Kirchhoff's mostly unquestioned proposal (Kirchhoff 1943), which regarded Mesoamerica as a pre-European conquest macrocultural area, the cultural region baptized as Greater Nicoya (Norweb 1961), which spanned from the Gulf of Fonseca all the way down Pacific Nicaragua until the Nicoya peninsula and the Guanacaste region in northwest Costa Rica, served as the southeast frontier of Mesoamerica. Accordingly, the Nicaraguan Pacific was directly associated to Mesoamerica through stylistic approaches in material culture, especially ceramics, which appeared to show a shared polychrome tradition. However, this only partially represents pottery manufacturing and consumption practices, as well as practices more generally. Next was the central region—where Chontales is situated—which was considered no man's land, or *tierra de nadie* (van Broekhoven 2002). Very scarce indigenous populations lived here in pre-conquest times, and their most outstanding achievements consisted of a local stone sculpture tradition, as well as their connections with the polychrome tradition from the Greater Nicoya cultural area.[3] Finally, there was the Caribbean coast, where nothing remarkable had happened in the pre-colonial past, except for some isolated shell midden sites.

Unfortunately, the archaeology of southern Central America has been signated[4] by a discursive agenda that involves narratives about migration, cultural diffusion, and spheres of influence, stressing the "intermediateness", "lowness", and "middleness" of its ancient groups of people. Within this meta narrative, names such as Intermediate Area (Haberland 1957; Willey 1959)—in the middle

2 See Perego *et al*. (2012) for a good example of the contrast between identity discourses and genetic legacies in the region, focusing on a case study from Panama.

3 Representation of these materials either produced in the Pacific coast of the country or manufactured locally, following Greater Nicoyan standards, was extremely low in the archaeological record of central Nicaragua, comprising less than 5% of excavated materials (Gorin 1990).

4 Throughout this book, this verb is used in Agamben's sense (Agamben 2010).

Figure 1: Map of Nicaragua schematically displaying the three main cultural areas reflected in archaeological discourses as well as modern geographic and idiosyncratic narratives.

of what, or who?—were acceptable and valid. Consequently, the classifications of material evidence from ancient communities, especially in the case of ceramics, have been often designed and executed to understand the movement of groups described by early ethnohistoric accounts. The presence or absence of certain aesthetic and morphological traits, regardless of their frequency, has been uncritically associated to specific ethnic groups. More specifically, the presumption that around cal 800 CE diverse groups from Mesoamerica arrived at Greater Nicoya has played a crucial role in not only the history of the archaeology of that specific sector, but of the history of the entire Nicaraguan nation. Consequently, chronological overviews of different regions throughout the country, especially Central Nicaragua (Gorin 1990), have been designed with a sampling strategy favoring Greater Nicoyan-like ceramics and have forced the local data to match supposed inter-regional trends.

As a result, a biased portrait of the life of ancient Nicaraguan indigenous communities emerged and came to dominate both academic and non-academic views. Their supposed lack of monumentality, low social complexity, and the presumed simplicity of their artistic styles—especially when compared with Mesoamerica and the Andes—provided the perfect excuse to focus more on external influences than local developments (Lange & Stone 1984). The extent of this bias favoring culture historical boundaries and conceptions related to social complexity is overwhelming. For example, ceramic polychromes were traditionally believed to originate either in South America (Coe 1962) or Mesoamerica (Baudez 1967). Their iconography and morphology, especially in the Greater Nicoya region, has been directly connected with the Gulf of Mexico, the Mixteca-Puebla tradition, and the southern Maya area. In spite of the fact that the earliest evidence for ceramic

polychromy in the country was recovered from the Caribbean watershed (Gassiot Ballbè & Palomar Puebla 2006; Vásquez Moreno 2016), research on Pacific polychromy (Lange 1971a; Hoopes 1987; McCafferty & Steinbrenner 2005b; Steinbrenner 2010; Dennett 2016) has been disproportional when compared to the amount of studies in the Caribbean (Magnus 1974). In turn, other traces of ancient practices that would have been interpreted very differently if found in Greater Nicoyan contexts, such as griddles (Martínez Somarriba 1977), monumental mound building (Clemente Conte & Gassiot Ballbè 2004; Clemente Conte *et al.* 2013; Geurds & Terpstra 2017; Auziņa 2018), stone sculpture associated to public spaces and integrated within architecture (Geurds in press), are systematically ignored in culture historical and chronological meta-narratives.[5] It appears that the archaeology of southern Central America has been solely focused on writing a history of asymmetrical interactions with Mesoamerica based on the presence and frequency of Greater Nicoyan types instead of first studying local histories and then establishing how these communities interacted with both their close and distant neighbors.

1.1 GOALS

This book, which is part of the Proyecto Arqueológico Centro de Nicaragua (PACEN), under the direction of Dr. A. Geurds, aims to question these dominant narratives through the study of specific practices, primarily ceramic manufacture, in a small valley located northeast of Lake Cocibolca **(figure 2)**, an area originally included in the Greater Nicoya maps only due to the scarce presence of a series of ceramic types associated to Pacific Nicaragua. Clay sources—and therefore clay related industries—are readily available throughout the research area. In fact, scholars have pointed out that the meaning of the word Mayales—the name of the river that irrigates the valley—means "muddy river" in Matagalpan language (Incer 1985; Gorin 1990). Ever since humans first occupied this valley, clays were an integral part of the local landscape. Therefore, the interrelationships between these communities and clay outcrops, as well as the different processes that have transformed them, can be historicized.

In an attempt to transcend overly abstract, textualized, and mentalistic approaches to culture (Basu & Coleman 2008), this manuscript conceptualizes material culture as an embodiment of the intersecting itineraries between people, things, and environment. Accordingly, culture is seen as "(...) a series of processes by which new and old practices are adapted and adopted" (Harrison 2010, 36) and not as a collection of objects associated to a certain group or groups of people. Therefore, as a ceramicist, I study the gestural (dis)continuities of communities of practices related to pottery production, a daily and socially learned bodily practice in both pre-Hispanic and current times. To do so, ceramic *chaînes opératoires* are examined as the physical traces of historically and socially situated non-textualized gestures, taking into account that they are less prone to manipulation than oral and written histories (Gosselain 2018, 2).[6] This research aims to explore the microhistories of ceramic *chaînes opératoires* situated in the context of sites featuring architecture. Ceramic production in the research area is a traditional practice that has been active for at least the last 1600 years. Nowadays, the craft has been deeply transformed through the utilization of vessels produced with materials introduced following European colonization and globalization, such as metal, glass and more recently plastic, as well as by the increasing economic hardships that have forced migration out of rural areas. Technological changes such as these are discourse shifts (Foucault 1968), rearrangements of power that permeate the ways people live, including how they move and eat (Bourdieu 1977; Dietler 2007; Twiss 2012), as well as the objects they create (Gosselain 2018). In this book, continuity and change in ceramics is not separated from the rest of practices that shape human experience. The chronology of the valley of Juigalpa presented here is not a ceramic chronology, but a history of the unfolding traces of different practices entangled in human-valley interactions through space-time. The results of this research are therefore not organized in Cartesian chronological

5 Clemente Conte and Gassiot Ballbè (2004) reported massive concentrations of basalt columns or monoliths that were circular in cross-section at Las Limas and Bella Vista. These monoliths were also documented as construction materials for mounds.

6 See chapter 3 for a detailed definition and discussion of the concept chaîne opératoire.

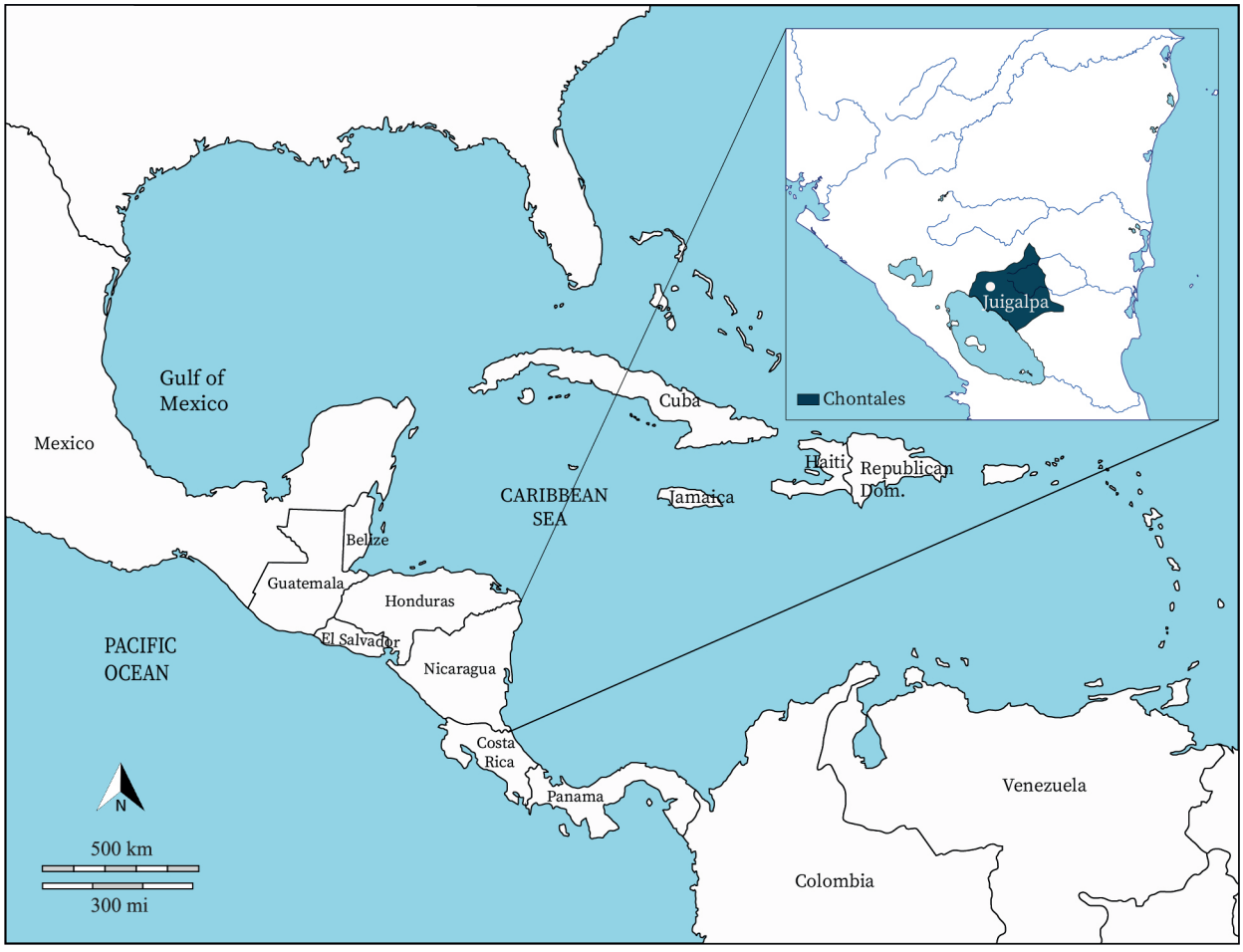

Figure 2: Map of Nicaragua showing the location of the valley of Juigalpa.

charts that are designed according to a geometric paradigm of time, which simplify history into the intersection of X and Y axes. Instead, a chronology is presented here as a vibrant narrative in which the divergent itineraries of practices intersect and interweave in diverse bundles over various time scales.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to fulfill these goals, this manuscript is structured according to a series of general and specific research questions. These inquiries not only aim to establish a chronology of human itineraries in the valley of Juigalpa, but also to challenge the craft of chronology building in archaeology from a practice theory approach, incorporating multipe time scales and rhythms of change.

- To what extent is the current map of archaeological sites in the valley of Juigalpa and the ceramic sequence proposed by Gorin (1990) biased towards finding connections with the Greater Nicoya? Does this bias extend beyond Chontales to other areas? (see chapter 2).
- In what manner does the dominant concept of time in archaeology signate our chronology building efforts? (see chapter 3).
- How can these theoretical biases be challenged through a comprehensive research plan? (see chapter 4).
- What archaeological evidence found in the valley of Juigalpa can aid in the construction

of a chronological narrative? (see chapter 5). Which strategies should be applied to build a chronology based on technical gestures and not ceramic types? (see chapters 3, 6, 7, and 8).
- What types of approaches and analyses would shed light on socially situated (dis) continuities within the research area? (see chapters 3 and 6).
- How can we visually represent intersecting microhistories as chronological narratives? (see chapter 8).
- How can these new data regarding human interaction within the valley of Juigalpa aid in challenging the current conception of time in archaeology? (see chapter 8).

1.3 OUTLINE

In order to answer these questions, this manuscript is structured in seven different chapters, in addition to this introductory chapter. The second chapter, *Narratives of place(s) and time(s)*, begins by providing general information about the location of the research area, the history of its plate tectonics, and its geology, geomorphology, hydrography, soils, flora, fauna, and climate, as well as a brief overview of its historical geography. Afterwards, the various ceramic chronologies that have been proposed to organize Nicaragua's archaeological past are discussed, mainly focusing on the Caribbean watershed, the Pacific coast, and central Nicaragua, the regions with the longest history of archaeological research. In the third chapter, *Just a matter of time?*, an overview of the theoretical (and therefore ideological) views from which this research originated is included. An outline of the conceptions of time within archaeology, systematized as the chronological paradigm that rules the discipline today, is provided. Also, the chapter discusses the palimpsestic ontology of materiality, its intersecting relationships to bodily gestures, and how the study of the different steps involved in ceramic manufacture can shed light in ancient lifeways. Also, ideas regarding style are defined, and a model for vibrant chronologies is proposed. Chapter 4, *Fieldwork methods*, provides a detailed explanation of the methods and techniques applied during the five fieldwork campaigns conducted in Nicaragua between 2015 and 2016, which were designed to sample ceramics for this technological study. Chapter 5, *Spatiotemporal dataset*, presents the complete and detailed description of the seven different contexts where the analyzed samples were retrieved from, through controlled stratigraphic excavations. A general overview of each of the archaeological sites is included, as well as a detailed stratigraphic analysis. Then, in *Laboratory methods and techniques for ceramic analysis*, the different approaches applied to study the ceramic fragments recovered from excavation are explained, which include macrofabric, macrotrace, petrographic, and morphometric analyses. Alongside that, a brief overview of the absolute and relative dating methods applied in this research is presented. In chapter 7, *Ceramic technologies in the valley of Juigalpa*, the results of the ceramic analysis are presented, including a reconstruction of operational sequences. Then, in the section *From traces on sherds to the vitality of human experience*, the data collected both in the field and in the lab is discussed in order to compose a vibrant chronology of different itineraries of practices in the valley of Juigalpa. This overview is compared with the previously accepted chronology (Gorin 1990). Some thoughts regarding AMS dating methods in the region of study are shared, as well as some ideas regarding future research in the area. Finally, the manuscript includes some concluding remarks.

1.4 FROM PAST TO PRESENT

After spending 12 months in Nicaragua, I am happy to confess that the country has left invisible but deep marks on my body, in the way I speak my native language, I eat, and I view "my" continent and its turbulent history. I felt the emotional palimpsests present in a society that is recovering, forgiving, and rebuilding itself from a long and painful civil war; a dormant conflict that the repression of 2018 and subsequent incarcerations and disappearances woke up from a long and oppressive slumber. I acquired the skill to respect certain silences and to listen to tough stories when their protagonists decided to tell them. I discovered the marvelous poetry of Ernesto Cardenal and his fascinating experience on the Solentiname Islands. I saw more poverty and inequality than what I was probably prepared for, I met outstanding human beings that taught

me to experience my surroundings with different eyes: to view soils, water, trees, animals, winds, rain, and sunlight as allies. These—and many more—connections that I built with Nicaragua, its history, its people, its landscapes, its biodiversity, its lakes, lagoons, sea, and ocean have permeated my research from the beginning. Therefore, in this text, ceramics are not regarded in the traditional way that dominates southern Central American archaeology, in which the study of materiality encounters a dividing wall between pre-European and post-European societies. In contrast, I opted to write a history of a traditional craft that continues through the present because I believe that viewing potting traditions as an intersection between people, objects, times and places, can aid in the production of locality (Appadurai 2001) in a bottom-up view of heritage. Therefore, research that goes from the local to the regional not only challenges the authorized or authorizing heritage discourse (Smith 2006) but also transforms archaeological inquiry into a critical assessment of the relationship between things and people through practice in the present, the past, and the future.