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COSTA RICAN ARCHAEOLOGY AND MESOAMERICA

MICHAEL D. COE

A BRIEF GLANCE at a linguistic map of Central America (Fig. 1) will make it clear that Costa Rica was aboriginally a frontier country. Within the sub-region which we propose to call Greater Nicoya were a number of languages of purely Mesoamerican affiliation. Chorotegan languages, belonging to the larger Oto-Manguean family centered in southern Mexico, were spoken at the time of the Conquest in a scattered distribution from the Bay of Fonseca down to the Nicoya Peninsula of Costa Rica proper. Moreover, almost all of the Rivas Peninsula as well as Ometepe Island of Nicaragua were occupied by the Nahuá-speaking Nicaraó; as a matter of fact, scattered enclaves of Nahuá speakers were located as far south as the Atlantic coast of Panama.¹

Both the Nicaraó and the Chorotegans stressed that they were *not* the ancient inhabitants of the region, having arrived not many centuries past from a homeland in Mexico. As confirmation of their own testimony, it should be noted that they were maize farmers, had elaborate markets, wore padded cotton armor, fought with clubs set with small flint blades, practiced human sacrifice and self-mutilation, and had permanent temples. The Nicaraó even had the 260-day calendar, the *volador* ceremony, and a pantheon of Mexican gods. In other words, they were thorough-going Mesoamericans.²

In contrast with Greater Nicoya, in most of Isthmian Central America below the Nicoya Peninsula languages of the Chibchan group, a linguistic family heavily represented in northwestern South America, were spoken. Among these tribes, sweet manioc rivaled maize as a staple, foods were prepared with the mortar-and-pestle of wood rather than the familiar metate-mano of Greater Nicoya, and there were many obviously southern traits, such as palisaded villages, the wearing of the penis sheath, drinking bouts during ceremonies, and head-taking.

This distribution has suggested to many students that Costa Rica was the real meeting place between the cultures of North and South America. In the original definition of Mesoamerica as proposed by Kirchoff, the boundaries of that great culture area actually dip down to include Greater Nicoya. Now, this makes admirable sense when only the ethnographic present is considered, but a question which logically comes to mind is this: if the Chorotegans and the Nicaraó were

1 Lothrop, 1926, pp. 20-25.

2 Lothrop, 1926, pp. 30-86; Chapman, 1960; Stone, 1959.

recent arrivals in the south, was the southern frontier of Mesoamerica in the very distant past exactly where it was in 1522 AD? Or was it once very much to the north? Furthermore, just when did the above-mentioned tribes arrive in Greater Nicoya, and from what region in Mexico were they derived? These are questions that present and future archaeology in Greater Nicoya perhaps can answer.

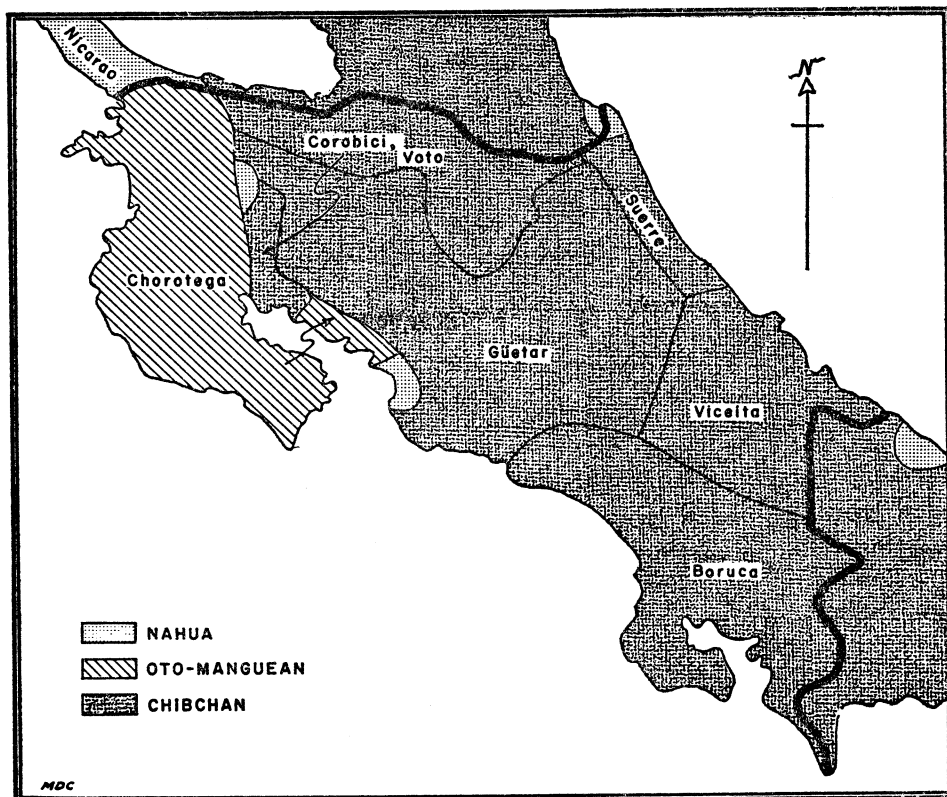


FIG. 1. Linguistic Distribution in Central America

But the most significant of all the problems to be investigated in Costa Rica is that of the cultural interplay between Mesoamerica as a whole, and the rest of Nuclear America. Part of the story of inter-areal contact certainly can be traced in Greater Nicoya. However, most of Costa Rica culturally lies within that

enormous and complex twilight zone termed by Willey³ and others the "Intermediate Area", extending the entire distance from Nicoya to the borders of Ecuador and Peru. Within that great province, there were no socio-political units greater than what Steward and Faron⁴ have termed "warring chiefdoms", and the exceptionally provincial nature of such an organization is reflected in the exceedingly diverse nature of the archaeological remains, a complexity which makes large-scale correlations within the Intermediate Area quite difficult. Part of this diversity is almost certainly dictated by the geography and ecological potential of the area, which is unusually varied because it lies along the volcanic backbone of the New World tropics. As a route for overland travelers between North and South America, the Intermediate Area would have offered few inducements. This is difficult terrain for travel, with swampy jungles in the lowlands and passes of 12,000 feet altitude in the highlands.

One might reasonably expect that because of the difficulty of foot travel, the major contact between ancient peoples in Mesoamerica and the Andean Area would have been by sea; this seems to have been the case, as evidenced by recent excavations in Guatemala and Ecuador. This contact may have begun as early as 1500 BC and continued as late as the Spanish conquest, mainly along the Pacific Coast of Nuclear America.⁵ But does this mean that no important interchange ever took place *through* the Intermediate Area? This problem can be investigated in Costa Rica.

As in the rest of the Intermediate Area, stratigraphic excavations and concern with problems of cultural sequence are in their infancy in Costa Rica. For only the "Mesoamerican" part of the country, that is, Greater Nicoya, do we have any clear idea of pre-historic development. The beginnings of a sequence for the southeastern sub-region of the country have been established by the work of Lothrop, but are as yet unpublished. Elsewhere, we must attempt to align various ancient remains, particularly those revealed by the brilliant excavations of C. V. Hartman⁶ at the turn of the century, within the framework provided by Greater Nicoya. This is not entirely impossible, since trade items of Nicoya origin occur with some frequency in the Costa Rican highlands, and certain Greater Nicoya ceramic traits appear to have horizon significance. At the upper end of the time scale, contact period sites can be identified by the appearance of Spanish trade goods, such as glass beads which occur in graves.

3 Willey, 1959.

4 Steward and Faron, 1959, pp. 202-238.

5 Coe, 1960.

6 Hartman, 1901, 1907a.

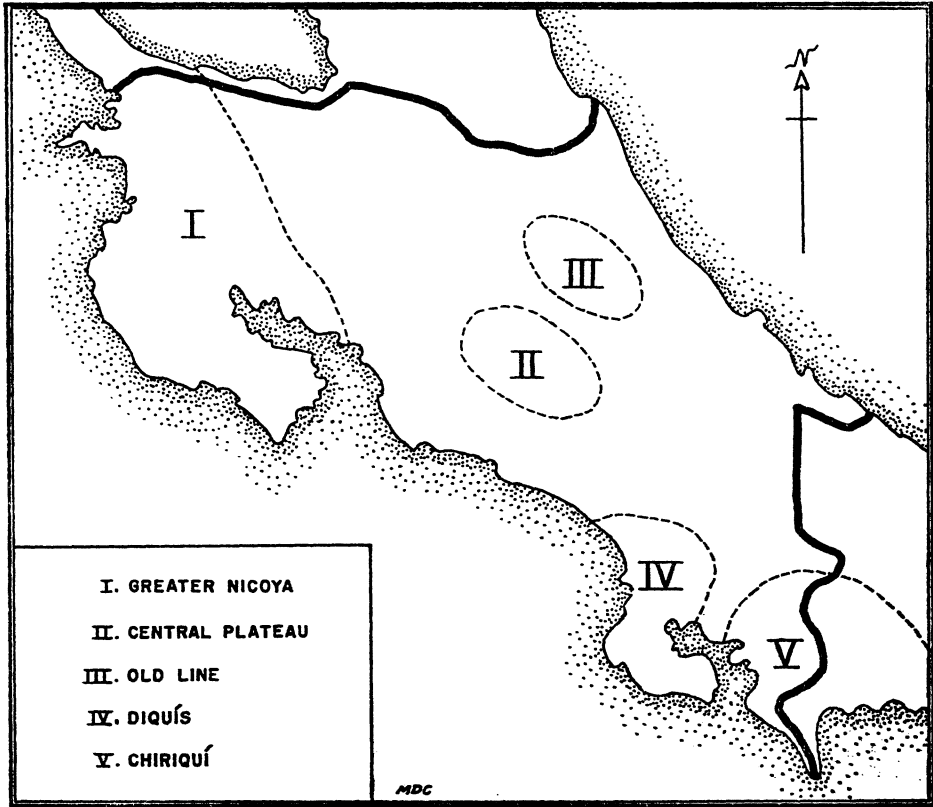


FIG. 2. Distribution of Archaeological Subdivisions in Costa Rica

Tentatively, Costa Rica has been divided into five major sub-regions (Fig. 2, 3), although these will be modified as the archaeology becomes better known. These are Greater Nicoya, already mentioned; the Central Plateau, which includes the high valleys around San José and Cartago; the Old Line, which is a portion of the Atlantic slope of the Costa Rican highlands; Diquís, in the southeastern lowlands near the Pacific; and Chiriquí, lying athwart the Costa Rica-Panama border.

The sequence now known for Greater Nicoya is the result of research carried out by Baudez, Coe, Norweb, and Willey, and will be briefly reviewed here.⁷

⁷ Paper read by Albert Norweb and Gordon R. Willey at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Philadelphia, 1961. The field work of Coe, Norweb, and Willey was part of a project of the Institute for Andean Research, supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation.

The earliest period thus far defined is the Zoned Bichrome period, which extends from about 0 to 300 AD. The ceramics of this period were decorated in two colors, usually red-and-black, outlined by engraved or incised lines. Other decorative techniques include dentate rocker-stamping, fork punctuation, and the use of a multiple brush to produce wavy black or red lines. Small handmade figurines are also known.⁸

The Early Polychrome period has been divided by Baudez and myself into two sub-periods, mainly on the presence in the lower levels of some Tempisque River sites of a distinctive ceramic complex characterized by painted linear designs. But in general the period has a good deal of fine polychrome pottery embellished with bold and somewhat geometric motifs, as well as well-made, hollow figurines in the same style. Of definite Early Polychrome affiliation are the magnificent metates, jade celts, mace heads, and other artifacts recovered by Hartman from secondary graves at Las Huacas on the Nicoya Peninsula.⁹ According to our chronology, partly based on radiocarbon dates, Early Polychrome extends from the 4th century AD to about 750 AD.

Characterizing the Middle Polychrome period are many of the so-called "Nicoya Polychromes" which are depicted in Lothrop's great compendium;¹⁰ in particular, the Mora and Papagayo types are represented in abundance. In some sites on the coast, modeling and incising of monochrome vessels reaches great artistry. This period not only represents the peak of population density in Greater Nicoya, but also marks a cultural peak, with large-scale stone sculpture appearing for the first time in the form of the well-known alter-ego representations, stone effigy seats and other works. We interpret this efflorescence in part as a result of exploitation of the purple-dye resources of the coast. In time, the period extends from about 750 AD to 1000 AD or perhaps a little later.

Late Polychrome marks a retrogression both in culture and in population, perhaps reflecting disturbances which we have reason to believe were taking place. The period is protohistoric to historic, extending probably a few decades beyond the Spanish Conquest itself, as demonstrated by Spanish goods found in association with the characteristic pottery type, Luna Polychrome.¹¹ Much monochrome pottery was produced at this time; the usual color was black and the vessels were highly modeled, with extensive appliqué ornament. Shoe-shaped vessels appear

8 Coe and Baudez, 1961.

9 Hartman, 1907a.

10 Lothrop, 1926. As examples of characteristically Middle Polychrome vessels shown in this volume, see plates 14, 41, 46, and 81. Early Polychrome types are represented by plates 40, 69, 75, and Figs. 72, 73, 75.

11 See Lothrop, 1926, pl. 88.

also at this time. There is little reason to doubt that in Costa Rica proper, at any rate, these remains represent the culture of the Chorotega themselves, whose modeled black pottery was praised so extravagantly by the Spaniards.

I will mention briefly the probable time placement of other archaeological manifestations, as they are known in terms of the Greater Nicoya sequence. In the Central Plateau, an extravagantly modeled, largely monochrome pottery termed Curridabat Ware may be the earliest material thus far.¹² More clearly placed in our scheme are the stone cist cemeteries associated with distinctive sculptures, excavated by Hartman near Cartago.¹³ The earliest of these burial grounds, or graves within them, sometimes have obvious trade pottery of Middle Polychrome date from Greater Nicoya. The very latest, the cemetery of Orosí, has glass beads in one grave.¹⁴ Glass beads placed in one of the graves at the rich burial ground of Mercedes, in the Old Line, offer evidence that the whole cemetery was in use after the Spanish conquest, and that the famous stone sculpture associated with the site is very late indeed.¹⁵ There is no reason to believe that these late materials from the Central Plateau and the Old Line were produced by any other than the historic inhabitants of the region, the Chibchan-speaking Güetar.

Until Lothrop's work in the Diquís zone is published, little can be said about the succession in southern Costa Rica. But it is clear that several phases are present in his cuts, extending from a very early ceramic culture with clear affinities both to Zoned Bichrome and to the obviously ancient Scarified Ware Complex of the Chiriquí zone, through something like the Middle Polychrome Period, to the protohistoric period, characterized by Palmar-style sculpture.¹⁶ In Chiriquí country, Haberland's Aguas Buenas complex is probably later than the Scarified Ware complex, and has resemblances to the Zoned Bichrome cultures of Greater Nicoya, but is difficult to place in general and may represent a mixture of several distinct archaeological phases.¹⁷ The "Classic" Chiriquí pottery types, such as Alligator Ware, definitely are very late, the latter having even been found associated with iron tools.¹⁸

Thus far, the Mesoamerican affiliation of these Costa Rican cultures has not been discussed. Nevertheless, resemblances are present, and are especially close

12 Hartman, 1907b.

13 Hartman, 1901, pp. 51-186.

14 Hartman, 1901, pl. 60 (Grave 43).

15 Hartman, 1901, pl. 5 (glass beads in Grave 5).

16 These statements are based on the paper given by S. K. Lothrop at the Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, New Haven, 1960, and on photographs kindly provided by Dr. Lothrop.

17 Haberland, 1959.

18 Stone, 1958, fig. 7.

and frequent for Greater Nicoya. There is no question that, given its full time depth and not merely the "ethnographic present," Greater Nicoya was as clearly a part of the Mesoamerican co-tradition as were, let us say, the Guerrero or Huasteca regions of Mexico. It was one of the many fringe areas of Mesoamerica which failed to share in the more spectacular developments such as cities, large-scale ceremonial centers, or dated stone monuments. Greater Nicoya has been for many centuries too closely bound up with Mesoamerican culture to be anything but part of it.

There can be little doubt that the Zoned Bichrome cultures of Greater Nicoya are but extensions of a generalized Mesoamerican Late Formative. Such traits as zoned dentate rocker-stamping and bichrome zoning are clearly older in Mesoamerica than anywhere else, and must have been introduced into Costa Rica from the northwest. In corroboration, the important black-and-red pottery type, Rosales Zoned Engraved, may be cited; this is very similar to Uatatlán Ware, present at a much earlier date in the Guatemalan highlands. It is suggested that during this period Greater Nicoya, and perhaps Costa Rica as a whole, were sharing in some, but not all, traits of the Formative period in Mesoamerica. Missing are some of the more elaborate concepts which found their way into Chavín from central Mexico, or some of the highly complex decorative techniques which reached Ecuador from Guatemala even earlier. These presumably diffused southward by sea, bringing to South America really important items like improved varieties of maize. The difficult overland route of Costa Rica was not a channel for the great Formative diffusion first hypothesized by Spinden.¹⁹

The Early Polychrome may be one of the few periods when Costa Rica and the Intermediate Area as a whole were contributing something to Mesoamerica. The very earliest polychrome in the Maya area appears suddenly in the Holmul I or Proto-Classic period at sites in the eastern Petén and British Honduras. Since Vaillant's first study,²⁰ it has been recognized that the Holmul I complex is intrusive and as a whole rather foreign in terms of the earlier Formative cultures of Mexico. Vaillant considered these traits to be part of the "Q Complex," hypothesized by Lothrop and himself as a group of elements including swollen tetrapod feet, high annular bases, and spouts, which spread at a very ancient time into the southern part of Mesoamerica but not into the Valley of Mexico. It was suggested that this complex was of South American origin. As a matter of fact, there is at

19 Spinden, 1917. For a general discussion of the problem of diffusion within Nuclear America, see Willey, 1955.

20 Merwin and Vaillant, 1932. The analysis (pp. 54-96) was by Vaillant. A more recent study of the Holmul I horizon is by Willey and Gifford, 1961.

least one vessel with the Holmul I burials,²¹ pointed out to the writer by G. R. Willey, which is almost certainly allied with several ceramic types decorated with wavy black lines produced by a multiple brush, all belonging to the Zoned Bichrome period in Greater Nicoya; moreover, since the Zoned Bichrome period largely predates the approximately 300 AD time position for Holmul I, we can suggest intrusion from the south. Although the Costa Rican data on the beginning of polychrome decoration itself is not conclusive, there is enough evidence from both the Intermediate and Caribbean areas to suggest a "sloping horizon" for this important trait—that is, from the Venezuelan coast up into the Maya area. South of central Mexico, polychroming apparently begins with the Tocuyano culture of Venezuela, radiocarbon-dated at 220 BC \pm 200.²² West along the Caribbean coast to Colombia and up to Panamá there is a closely related series of polychrome styles obviously related to Tocuyano. One of these, the Black-Line style polychrome at Venado Beach in the Canal Zone, is radiocarbon-dated to 227 AD.²³ And, as previously stated, polychrome appears for the first time in the Maya region at about 300 AD, in Holmul I, clearly suggesting a southern origin, perhaps through Early Polychrome A of Greater Nicoya. As for the "Q-Complex" itself, present evidence is against an origin outside of southern Mesoamerica, for few of the traits mentioned are of any greater age in Costa Rica or further south.

The cultures of the subsequent Early Polychrome B sub-period in Greater Nicoya are under powerful Maya influence, while naturally retaining some traces of southern elements. This influence was perhaps in part the result of trade, for at least one Early Classic Maya jade from the Guatemalan highlands was recovered in the Early Polychrome cemetery at Las Huacas.²⁴ In ceramics, Maya influence is to be seen in the appearance in Greater Nicoya of polychromes reflecting prototypes of the Tzakol 3 - Tepeu 1 phases of the Petén, and above all, polychromes modeled on the styles of the Ulua-Yojoa region. Closest of all are the resemblances between Yojoa Polychrome and Galo Polychrome vessels of the Early Polychrome B sub-period²⁵—these are so close that the Nicoya peninsula at this time seems like a ceramic outpost of the eastern Maya frontier.

With the Middle Polychrome Period, roughly equivalent to the last part of the

21 Merwin and Vaillant, 1932, pl. 18a.

22 Cruxent and Rouse, 1958-9, p. 248 and figs. 122-127. The polychrome pottery of Chupicuaro in central Mexico (Porter, 1956) is either contemporary with, or slightly later than, Tocuyano.

23 Lothrop, 1959.

24 Hartman, 1907, pl. 45.

25 See Lothrop, 1926, plates 40 and 69, for examples of Galo Polychrome and Strong, Kidder, and Paul, pl. 12b, for an almost identical specimen of Yojoa Polychrome.

Classic and to the whole of the Toltec Period of Mesoamerica, Greater Nicoya is even more closely bound up with the fortunes of the latter region. While it is evident that the dominant ceramic type on the Costa Rican side of the border, Mora Polychrome,²⁶ is a copy of a Tepeu 3 polychrome both in shape and decorative motifs (emphasizing the Maya *Kan* cross), the affiliations of other Middle Polychrome painted types range even further afield in Mexico proper. Particularly hard to explain are the affinities of Papagayo Polychrome in form (i.e., the bowl with feet in the shape of animal heads or the pear-shaped vase on annular base) and in decoration with post-Classic pottery styles extending in a broad band from Isla de Sacrificios on the Gulf Coast, across the highlands at Cholula, and down to the Pacific Coast of Mexico. Either we must postulate a direct migration from Mexico at this time, the kind claimed by the Chorotega and Nicarao themselves, or else we must look to a particularly intensive trade between Greater Nicoya and central Mexico—and for the latter there is not much evidence.

Nevertheless, Middle Polychrome pottery from Greater Nicoya has been discovered to the northwest, not only in eastern Honduras and eastern El Salvador, where it would be expected, but within the Maya area proper. Papagayo Polychrome vessels have been found in graves or caches associated with Tohil Plumbate at Cerro del Zapote, El Salvador²⁷; at Copan²⁸; and at Zacaleu,²⁹ all of which testify to some sort of trade across the Maya border in the Early Post-Classic.

The Late Polychrome Period of Greater Nicoya is equivalent in time to the Late Post-Classic, and one finds further Mexican traits appearing there and in other sub-regions of Costa Rica. Particularly striking are motifs taken from the Mixteca-Puebla codices which embellish some examples of Vallejo Polychrome in Greater Nicoya. These include the Mexican Earth Monster, as well as Quetzalcóatl in his guise as the Wind God. Among the demonstrably late sculptures of Mercedes, on the Atlantic side of the Cordillera in Güetar territory, there is even a Chac Mool—altered, it is true, from the Toltec-Aztec prototype but clearly recognizable.³⁰ From these examples, it is apparent that not many centuries before the conquest there was a renewal of contact with Mexico, or perhaps another migration. We will return to this in a moment.

What can be said about the introduction of metallurgy into Mesoamerica, from the Costa Rican standpoint? Given the meagre data now at hand, it is believed that the entire Isthmian region had little or nothing to do with such an

26 Mora Polychrome can be seen in Lothrop, 1926, pl. 80, c-f.

27 Boggs, 1944, fig. 3d.

28 Longyear, 1952, p. 43 (in Tomb 10).

29 Woodbury and Trik, 1953, pp. 194-195 (in Grave 15-1).

30 Mason, 1945, Plate 35c.

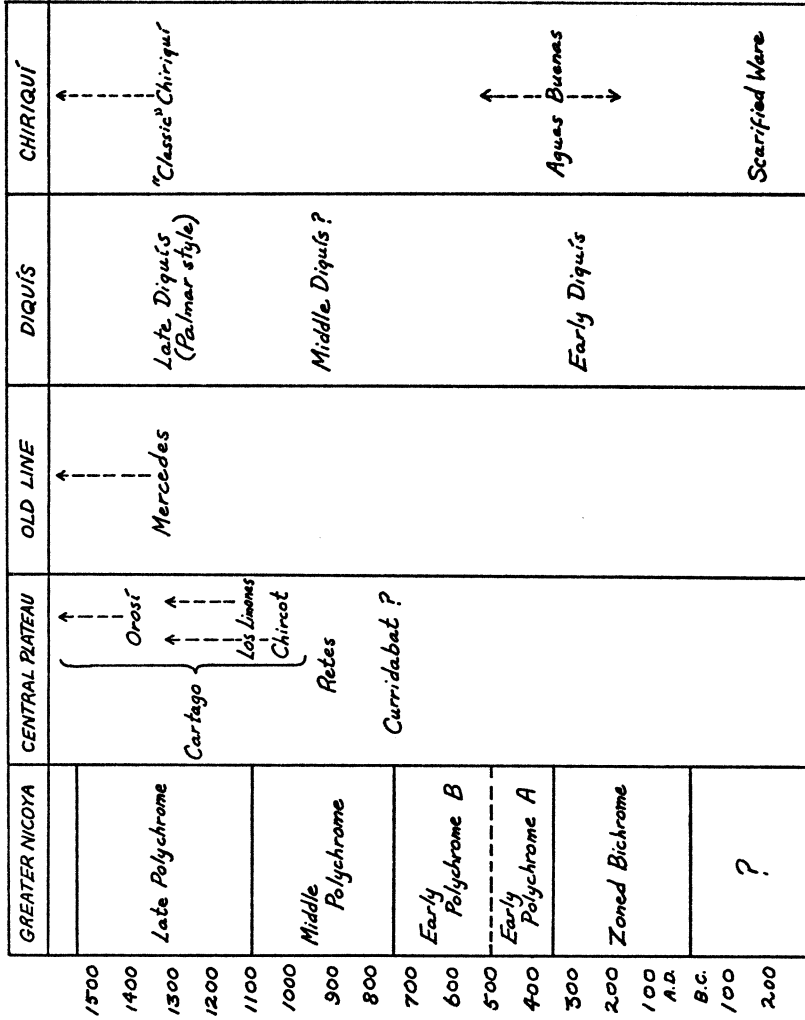


Fig. 3. Chronology of Archaeological Sequences in Costa Rica

introduction. The antiquity of metal-working in northwestern South America has been conclusively demonstrated by Lothrop³¹ and others; its lateness in Mesoamerica is likewise certain. Because it is highly likely that the art was diffused from south to north, it has usually been assumed that this was overland, via the Isthmian countries of the Intermediate Area. However, in Costa Rica at any rate, there is every reason to believe that metallurgy, particularly the lost-wax technique of casting gold objects, is very late indeed, certainly not earlier than 1100 AD. It has not yet been found associated with Middle Polychrome cultures or with other cultures on that time level. In southern Costa Rica, furthermore, gold objects, from what little is known, are associated with the kind of pottery that was in use at contact times, and there is testimony by Columbus and others that the Isthmian peoples were still making and using gold pendants as late as that. Furthermore, such objects are almost non-existent in the region between central Costa Rica and the Maya-Mexican area.

On the other hand, recent information³² suggests that metalworking had already reached the Pacific Coast of Mexico by the end of the Late Classic, implying a spread of the techniques involved directly by sea from coastal Peru or Ecuador, skirting Isthmian Central America. The Panamanian objects of gold that were cast into the Sacred Cenote at Chichen Itzá at some unknown but probably very late date may also have been traded by boat, this time along the Atlantic.³³ At any rate, metallurgy was definitely *not* a contribution of Costa Rica to Mesoamerica.

To summarize, Greater Nicoya can best be considered as the southernmost sub-region of Mesoamerica, being throughout its prehistory in the cultural shadow thrown by the higher civilizations of the Maya and Mexicans. Its closest contacts, as one would expect, were always with the Maya area, although none of the more advanced traits such as masonry temples and dated stelae were diffused to these frontier people. There is some indication, although it is hardly conclusive, for the kind of direct migration from central or southern Mexico which the linguistic and ethnohistoric evidence suggest. The first wave may have brought in the Chorotega around the 8th century AD to initiate the Middle Polychrome period. The second could have resulted in the invasion of Nahua speakers, later known as the Nicaraos;³⁴ if this happened at about the beginning of the 12th century AD, it

31 Lothrop, 1950.

32 Meighan, 1960.

33 Lothrop, 1952, pp. 94-105.

34 See discussion in Chapman, 1960, pp. 74-76, 91-96. This author also sees an initial migration from southern Mexico by the Chorotega, and an influx of Nahua-speaking Nicaraos from the Cholula region several centuries later. Utilizing early sources (Gómara and Motolinía), she fur-

would explain the sudden appearance of motifs in the style of the Mexican codices on Late Polychrome pottery. This latter migration might have been correlated with the collapse of the Toltec state and the subsequent fall of central Mexico into a condition of feudalism, at which time we know that many Mexican groups were dispersed far beyond their tribal frontiers.

Finally, it can be said that extra-Nicoya Costa Rica had no really profound effects upon Mesoamerica, other than the possible introduction of polychrome. Previous theories of a northern influx of traits from South America, such as were postulated by Lothrop and Kidder in 1940,³⁵ cannot be justified in the light of present evidence. On the other hand, a hypothesis of movement of high culture traits to the south *through* the Intermediate Area, proposed by Spinden and revived by Willey, Strong, Porter, and others, is apparently also untenable. The truth seems to be that Mesoamerica did exert an early and really important influence on South America, and that the latter did at later dates export to the north such techniques as mold-manufacture of figurines and metalworking, but these flows of culture traits were entirely sea-borne. Most of Costa Rica, and the Intermediate Area itself, remained a cul-de-sac open at both ends, within which civilization never appeared.

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ther suggests a third and final influx of Nahuatl speakers, who were said to have arrived by canoes as late as a hundred years before the Spanish Conquest.

³⁵ Lothrop, 1940; Kidder, 1940.

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