Central American Archaeology

PART I
SOUTHERN CENTRAL AMERICA

INTRODUCTION

THE subject of this book is twofold; the first section deals with the life and customs of the inhabitants of the modern countries of Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, as they were before they came in contact with the white man, and with the archaeological remains which are found throughout their territory; the second treats in a similar fashion of the ethnology and archaeology of the West Indian Islands.

From a strictly historical point of view, the order of precedence might be inverted, since the Islands were discovered by Columbus on his first voyage, while he did not touch at the Isthmus until his fourth journey. As a matter of convenience, however, the order adopted is the better, for the following reason. In two former volumes I have dealt first with the archaeology of the Mexican and Mayan peoples to the north of the region now to be considered,[1] and second with that of the inhabitants of the Southern Continent.[2] Just as this volume forms a connecting link between the other two, so we shall find that, as we pass down the Isthmus from north to south, there is a regular transition from the

[1] *Mexican Archaeology.* [2] *South American Archaeology.*

culture of Mexico and Guatemala to that of Colombia and Peru. The southward pressure of the Nahuatl tribes, which I have described in the first of the two above-mentioned volumes, affected Nicaragua deeply, Costa Rica slightly, and its influence can be traced even in Panama, as far south as the Chiriqui Lagoon. Southern influence appears to have been for the most part recessive rather than progressive. That is to say the general ethnography of Panama and Costa Rica seems to have been originally of a character more nearly related to that of South America than to that of Mexico and Guatemala, but we can recognize no active influence exerted upon the tribes of this region by those of Colombia and Venezuela except in eastern Panama.

In the West Indies the case is different. Here there is practically no trace whatever of contact with Mexico or Central America, but, on the other hand, very definite evidence of two successive waves of immigration from South America. The first of these waves gave the islands a population of South Americans belonging to a widely extended people known as Arawak, while the second colonized the Lesser Antilles with immigrants of an even more widespread stock, the Carib. Wherever found, these two peoples, Arawak and Carib, are mutually antagonistic, and, at the time of the discovery, the only Arawak remaining in the Lesser Antilles were women who had been enslaved by the later comers.

Thus in the first section we commence with a region where Mexican influence is strong, and pass gradually to districts where South American ethnography is paramount. In the second we examine an area which is indirectly related to the southern and eastern portions of the Isthmus, in so far as a common South American element is present in the ethnography of both. At the same time, owing to insular life, the original culture of the Arawak and Carib had become rather specialized,

This is in particular true of the Arawak, who had evidently been settled in the islands for a considerable period before the arrival of their hereditary foes.

First as regards Nicaragua and the Isthmian region. The physical geography consists in the main of a mountainous "back-bone," often, in the more northerly portion, enclosing table-lands, and fringed on either side by a strip of coast, that on the Pacific side being the narrower until Panama is reached, where the conditions are reversed. There appears to be a tendency for the land to rise upon the Pacific slope, and to sink on the Atlantic side, and there is evidence that much ground has been lost to the ocean on the east. At the same time the elevation of the Isthmus is comparatively recent, to speak in terms of geological time, and the mountains at one period probably formed a chain of islands similar to the Antilles. The line of the Rio San Juan, which flows from Lake Nicaragua to the Atlantic, is usually taken as the physical boundary between North and South America, though not on very good grounds. Southern influences certainly reach further to the north, while the flora characteristic of the north persists locally as far south as Costa Rica. In fact no line can be drawn across the Isthmus to mark any definite contrast existing on either side of it; the contrast which does exist lies between the two coasts, Atlantic and Pacific. The cause of this is the central mountain range, which robs the moist easterly winds of a great part of their humidity, so that, whereas the rainfall on the Atlantic slope is both constant and excessive, the Pacific slope has a definite dry and rainy season. The dryest and healthiest regions are those sheltered by high ranges from both Oceans. The difference between the two coasts is of course reflected in the vegetation, the character of which is, moreover, dependent upon elevation. The Atlantic watershed, to speak in general terms, is for the most part covered

with dense forest, enclosing small settlements on the rivers, and traversed by narrow footpaths along which passes a restricted trade parallel with the coast and inland over the mountains. In fact as means of communication the streams are almost more important than the forest tracks. On the Pacific slope are found woods, park-land, bush-steppes, and savannahs, while thick forest is confined to the beds of streams.

In Nicaragua there are three more or less definite zones of country, consisting firstly of the coast between the highlands and the Pacific, which is mainly of igneous formation, secondly of the uplands of the interior, and thirdly of the Mosquito coast, which is partly coralline and partly alluvial. The last-named is an exception to the statement made above concerning the Atlantic coast, since it appears to be gaining on the sea. A feature of Nicaraguan geography is the lacustrine system in the west, extending for 300 miles, and consisting of the two lakes Managua and Nicaragua, which are not more than 140 feet above the sea-level. These lakes at one time formed arms of the Pacific, and marine forms are still found in them, but at the present time Lake Nicaragua drains into the Atlantic, like most of the Nicaraguan region.

The lakes contain several islands of volcanic origin, the most important being that formed of the twin cones of Ometepec and Madera, the former rising 5000 feet above the level of Lake Nicaragua. The uplands of this country enjoy a relatively mild climate, but the others are tropical. Each zone is distinguished by different vegetation, the most important of the flora being pitch-pine, mahogany and rubber. In the east the fauna include beasts of prey such as the jaguar, puma and ocelot.

In Costa Rica the main range turns rather more to the south and branches so as to enclose the elevated table-lands of San José and Cartago, forming a rugged

central region 3000 to 4000 feet high. The volcanic character of the high country is maintained, and indeed extends into Panama. On either side of the uplands we have the two coastal regions, the Atlantic forests and the Pacific savannahs.

In Panama the same main characteristics persist, especially as regards the difference between the two coasts, though the lower latitude brings with it a greater exuberance of vegetation, especially as the South American continent is approached.

With these few words of introduction we may now proceed to consider the life and customs of the natives such as they were when Columbus first coasted down the Mosquito shore and Vasco Nuñez de Balboa first descried the waters of the Pacific "on a peak in Darien."

CHAPTER I

NICARAGUA AND N.E. COSTA RICA

THE first group of tribes which falls under consideration is that which composed the population of what is practically the modern state of Nicaragua, together with the peninsula of Nicoya, and the coast opposite, now belonging to Costa Rica. Of this area, the comparatively small portion which drains into the Pacific Ocean is by far the more important culturally, and more extensively explored than the rest; the archaeology of the interior and of the eastern side is still very imperfectly known, while the literature dealing with its inhabitants is very scanty and defective.

Even in the west a great deal remains to be done in the way of excavation and classification of remains; in fact at present, owing to the gaps in our archaeological knowledge of the whole area, the only satisfactory method of grouping the various tribes composing the population is provided by the study of their languages, which has advanced further than that of their early culture. The following classification therefore is based upon the researches of philologists, but it corresponds very conveniently with the cultural evidence provided by early chroniclers and later archaeologists.[1]

The two most important peoples on the west were the Chorotega and the Nicarao or Niquiran. Of these the former, at the time of the Conquest, inhabited the western region from the Bay of Fonseca to the southernmost point of the Nicoyan peninsula, as well as a narrow

[1] See the Appendix to this chapter, p. 28, and Map 1, p. 30.

strip of the Costa Rican coast opposite the latter, with the exception of a small region around Leon, and a piece of territory between Lake Nicaragua and the sea. They were thus broken into four sections, known as Mangue to the north of the Plain of Leon, Dirian to the south of the latter, Nicoyan on the peninsula of that name, and Orotiñan on the opposite coast. A small isolated branch of this Chorotegan tongue is found as far north as Chiapas, representing probably an early extension of this people in that direction, afterwards cut off and isolated by the numerous tribal movements which have made the reconstruction of ancient American culture a matter of such difficulty.

The first break in the line of Chorotega, proceeding from north to south, occurs, as said above, in the region of the Plain of Leon. Here the Subtiaba tongue was current, a dialect which it has been impossible as yet to relate to any other. The second break, to the west of Lake Nicaragua, brings us in contact with an immigrant body of that stock which played so important a part in Mexico during the years immediately preceding the discovery. Here lived the Nicarao or Niquiran, speaking a Nahuatl language which to all intents and purposes was identical with that of the Aztec. Nor was this point the furthest south of that indefatigable stock of wanderers; enclaves of them were present in Bugaces, Nicoya, and even in the Telorio Valley at the western end of the Chiriqui Lagoon, where a colony was discovered by Juan Vasquez de Coronado in 1564.

The Nicarao preserved the tradition of their immigration, stating that they came from the west (i.e. north-west) from a country called Ticomega Emaguatega; Torquemada alleges that previous to their arrival they lived in Soconusco, and it may be concluded that they were an early wave of that great tribal movement from north to south which broke up the "Toltec" power in the Mexican Valley, and of which

the Aztec were the rearguard. With them they brought the typical Mexican calendar and religion, together with the practice of human sacrifice by tearing out the heart of the victim. This would bring them to their new home by Lake Nicaragua somewhere in the eleventh century A.D.[1] At the time of the Conquest, the Nicarao domain extended to the islands in the lake, but there is archaeological evidence to show that these islands had previously been inhabited by Chorotega.

South of Lake Nicaragua, between the Nicoyan peninsula and the river San Juan, were the Corobici, a people about whom practically nothing is known, but who had attained a considerably higher culture than might be expected from the present condition of their descendants, the wild and primitive Guatuso. North of the San Juan, as far as a line drawn, approximately, from Monkey Point westwards to the lake, were the (linguistically) kindred Rama, also a tribe of primitive habits.

The inhabitants of the rest of Nicaragua, by far the larger portion geographically speaking, though never so thickly populated, may be grouped under the term Sumo-Mosquito. These speakers of related dialects may further be divided into four; the Matagalpa to the west of the Mangue and Dirian, the Sumo their eastern neighbours, the Ulua between the last and the Rama, and the Mosquito fringing the eastern coast from Cape Gracias a Dios to Monkey Point.

As remarked above, little is known of the tribes of this area from any source, though an interesting migration story has been preserved concerning the Mosquito. According to this legend the Mosquito were originally called Kiribi and inhabited the department of Rivas, later occupied by the Nicarao. Late in the tenth century they were invaded by a tribe of immigrants from the north, and eventually, after a long

[1] The question of the migrations of the Aztec and kindred tribes, and their date, is discussed in full in my *Mexican Archaeology*.

struggle, were compelled to leave their old home,which was occupied by their supplanters, no doubt the Nicarao. They retreated to the other side of the lake, the present department of Chontales, where they resided for more than a century. Later, still under pressure, this time probably exercised by the Sumo, they migrated to the coast. Their leader was a man named Wakna, whose son, Lakia Tara, became their ruler, and conquered the whole coast from Honduras to Costa Rica. The tradition is interesting, and supported to some extent by archaeology, since certain objects discovered in Chontales (notably stone axes of the type figured on Pl. I, Fig. 1) have their parallels in the Mosquito region, while the name Kiribi suggests a connection with the Corobici. A further tradition relates that about the twelfth century a cannibal people, called Vivises, of unknown origin, settled on the coast, and to them are attributed certain *tumuli*. The visitors eventually departed, but no man knows whither. As far as history is concerned, the Mosquito have shown a tendency to expand towards the interior, subduing several Sumo and Rama tribes, the former until recently paying a tribute in the shape of cedar dug-out canoes.

The connection of the Mosquito with the Sumo, however, apart from linguistic evidence, is enforced by a tradition current among the latter people. They trace their origin to a certain rock situated west of the Caratasca (Cartago) lagoon, between the Patook and Coco (Wanks) rivers. This rock is said to bear the mark of an umbilical cord, and here the tribal ancestors were born, a "Great Father," Maisa Kana, and a "Great Mother," Ituana. The latter is identified with the "Mother Scorpion," Itoki, of the Mosquito. The Sumo and Mosquito were descended from these primal ancestors, who cared for their children and gave instruction to them. But the Mosquito were disobedient, and ran away to the coast. After this, other

tribes, the Tuacha and Yusco, were born, of which the latter turned to evil ways and were conquered by the Sumo; they now live around the headwaters of the Coco. Finally were born the Ulua, who so profited by the instruction of the tribal ancestors that they became especially skilled in medicine and song, and won the name of Boa, "Singers." Meanwhile the Sumo lived on the rivers and in the bush; they were wild and unkempt, their hair fell to their knees, and they were full of lice. Finally the ruler of the Mosquito sent and captured them, had them washed and altogether regenerated them, so that he won their love and obtained their support. Apart from the interest of this legend it possesses also the advantage of having no moral.

As regards the more civilized peoples of this area, the Chorotega had been deeply influenced by the Nicarao. In fact Oviedo states that the religion of the two was identical, and, as will be seen, the religion which he describes is in essentials that of Mexico. It would be unreasonable to suppose that the influence had not extended further, and indeed it is not easy to make a sharp distinction between the customs of the two peoples. The difficulty is increased by the fact that Oviedo, our principal informant, is often very vague himself as regards which of the two he is discussing. Two forms of government prevailed in the west; the inhabitants were divided into communities, some of which were under absolute chiefs termed by the early chroniclers *Caciques* a title which they had found current in the Antilles, while others lived under a republican form of government. From what we know of the primitive Nahuatl tribes, it is reasonable to conjecture that the latter form of constitution was on the whole characteristic of the Nicarao. At the same time, just as among the Aztec, the change from a wandering to a settled life led to the supersession of the old tribal council by a single ruler. Under the older constitution,