

Spearhead Shows Cultural Crossroads

By ROBERT GOODIER

Tico Times Staff

ON a pineapple plantation in north-central Costa Rica, a ditch-digging crew with a backhoe recently unearthed a thin, finely crafted fishtail – or Magellan – slate spearhead chipped to a point by the earliest humans who lived in what is today Costa Rica, probably 10,000 to 12,000 years ago. Birlen Montero, a field hand on the plantation, sought out archaeologist Magdalena León when she was investigating the construction site of a clinic in the area, La Virgen de Sarapiquí, and showed her several prehistoric artifacts from the nearby plantation. Most were ceramic shards, but the Paleo-Indian spearhead is only the second found in Costa Rica and is of the highest quality. Its thinness and low weight make it “super special,” León said.

The discovery fortifies archaeologists’ theory that Costa Rica took its post as a cultural crossroads between North and South America as far back as 12,000 or 13,000 years ago. Here, archaeologists have discovered both fishtail points, which are found throughout South America but not north of Costa Rica, and narrower, longer clovis points, which are scattered throughout North American sites but are not found further south than Panama.

“There’s no question about it: Costa Rica was a two-way bridge long before civilizations evolved,” consulting archaeologist Michael Snarskis said.

AS Snarskis tells it, the first humans in the Americas descended from the Bering Strait between Siberia and Alaska into North and South America. (He discounts the possibility that significant numbers of people crossed the Pacific or Atlantic – “When they landed they were all eaten,” he said.) They developed clovis and fishtail spear points, as well as others, and used the clovis design only in the north and the fishtail only in the south. It was a matter of function, he said.

“The game they were hunting was killed more easily with certain kinds of points,” he said.

Snarskis and León suspect the Sarapiquí plantation is a workshop site, not



Tico Times/Maisie Crow

FISHTAIL Marks the Spot: Archaeologist Magdalena León, shown with an ancient spearhead, was first on the scene after a ditch-digging crew on a pineapple plantation found the artifact earlier this year.

a kill site – they noticed some chipping debris, flakes of slate knocked from the tools as they were crafted.

“A good archaeologist can even piece the flakes back into the original stone they came from,” Snarskis said.

If the pineapple plantation was indeed a workshop site, it may be another pivotal find in Costa Rica, on par with the Turrialba site, on the Caribbean slope, where Snarskis discovered the first fishtail point in 1975. Both discoveries also represent the often accidental state of archaeology in the country: the first site, too, was churned up by farmers, on sugarcane fields plowed for 50 years before Snarskis led a team of archaeology students to collect the chipped stone tools and weapons after the cane was burned.

LEÓN negotiated the opportunity to research the pineapple plantation after the next harvest next January. She will team with a climatologist and try to determine what kind of climate the area had 10,000 years ago. The scant evidence found throughout the country suggests a cooler

Costa Rica where mammoths and mastodons plodded through the Central Valley and giant sloths and armadillos, saber-toothed tigers, cave bears, the American horse and other extinct beasts roamed the country’s forests. León imagines the pineapple plantation was probably the stomping ground for tapir, giant armadillo and deer hunters, but, she admits, “We don’t know what kind of animals there were.”

Judging by the quality of the spear point found and of others like it from the period, the first Costa Ricans were extremely skilled hunters. They pounded out points that were much lighter and better-made than those of the Neanderthals in the Old World, for example, who manufactured heavier, cruder and bigger points that they muscled into their prey from closer distances than the early Costa Ricans.

OVER time, however, points in Costa Rica and elsewhere became thicker and more poorly made as people became less dependent on hunting and settled into agriculture-based societies. The fishtail point was made at the height of craftsmanship quality – points found from later periods have not measured up.

The people who made the fishtail point were nomadic hunters and gatherers in bands of 20 or 30 who followed game routes and the fruits that were in season.

The point is at the National Museum, but not on display. If it were, it would be the only such point visible there, since the first fishtail was stolen from its display case in the early 1980s.

Vínculos Journal Celebrates 30th Anniversary

VÍNCULOS, the Costa Rican archaeology journal that represents the scientific overhaul of the largely ignored and somewhat mystic version of archaeology in Costa Rica before the 1970s, turned 30 this year – perhaps along with the rigorous pursuit of knowledge of prehistoric people in Costa Rica. It is the longest running peer-review journal of its kind in Central America.

“I gave it the name ‘Vínculos’ (‘Links’) because it would fill the empty lagoon of scientific information on archaeology (here),” said its founder, U.S. archaeologist Michael Snarskis.

Snarskis holds a doctorate in the field from New York’s Columbia University and has lived in Costa Rica for more than 30 years. In that time he has been the driving force behind the reformation of the country’s archaeological pursuits, beginning with the National Museum’s almost nonexistent operation.

“There was one archaeologist and his secretary when I arrived,” he said at the journal’s anniversary celebration, later telling The Tico Times that the archaeologist, Hector Gamboa, was a self-taught government overseer of anthropological and archaeological activities in the country at a time when the pre-Columbian artifacts hawked on street corners weren’t the fakes they are today – they were looted from ancient graves.

Snarskis himself became interested in archaeology while working here as a Peace Corps volunteer. He began collecting pieces he bought from grave robbers (called *guaceros*). Inspired, he returned to the United States to study archaeology.

“Only during the Ph.D. program did the scales fall from my eyes and I realized there was virtually nothing written on archaeology in the Atlantic watershed in Costa Rica,” he said.

Since then, he has relentlessly weeded out rumors of aliens and Pacific Ocean crossings, along with unrealistically advanced technology theories, from the popular body of knowledge on the region’s prehistoric roots. He managed all the first excavations in the country using part of a grant from the U.S. National Science Foundation he had been given for his doctoral dissertation, then began sharing the responsibility with two other archaeologists, one of whom, Ricardo Vásquez, has directed Vínculos for the past 10 years.

“We learned along the way about editing articles, graphics, reviewing the work of archaeologists,” Vásquez said.

The anniversary coincides with the IV Costa Rican Archaeology Congress, which will be held Dec. 6-8 at the State University at a Distance (UNED), and will feature presentations from archaeology students and professionals.

-Robert Goodier

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