AN EVALUATION OF THE MACRO-REGIONAL MORTUARY MODEL FOR THE CENTRAL REGION OF PANAMA

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I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence and development of social inequality have been a central theme in anthropological literature as it addresses a key change in human history (Flannery and Marcus 2012). Throughout Costa Rica and Panama, the Late Formative period (300-600 AD) corresponds to a period of rapid social and technological change (Hoopes 2005) that, including transformations of settlement patterns, the appearance of large architectural constructions and the development of formal artistic industries (Frost and Quilter 2012). In the Central Region of Panama, likewise, during the Cubitá era (500-700 AD) it was a decisive moment when a radical change occurred that led to greater group interaction and socioeconomic inequality. The apogee of the Cubitá style begins the chiefdom era as socio-economic networks were focused on "obtaining, producing and distributing goods that were emblems of power" (Sánchez and Cooke 2000: 7). This socio-economic exchange includes the majority of social groups in the Parita Bay and established, in essence, a Cubitá Interaction Zone (Haller 2018a).

Based on areological visibility, power and prestige were expressed primarily through mortuary activity and starting in AD 500, burials were centralized in formal cemeteries serving the ritual needs of local and perhaps more regional populations (Lothrop 1954; Sánchez and Cooke 2000). These macroregional cemeteries continue into subsequent eras, but over time there is a shift in geographic location and access to sacred space becomes increasingly restricted to adult males (Menzies and Haller 2012b). Mortuary rituals and expressions of social identity reveal two contrasting and complementary patterns: one emphasizing group integration; and the other focused more on social distinction. It is not clear if these macroregional cemeteries served the ritual needs of individuals from different social groups in independent territories or if they represent large socially integrated areas. To address this, I investigate the nature of these macro-regional cemeteries to determine their role in socioeconomic integration and/or exclusion within their respective complex societies and focusing on how this differed for elite-male and commoner mortuary contexts. In other words, I will determine if macro-regional cemeteries actually existed and, if so, examine if these necropolises functioned as high-status cemeteries of a single unified complex society or for elites from different polities of the Central Region.

II. MORTUARY TRADITIONS IN THE CENTRAL REGION OF PANAMA

Based on ethnohistoric accounts and elaborate burials (*i.e.*, Sitio Conte and El Caño; Figure 1), scholars agree that Panamanian chiefdoms were individually centered with intense status rivalry (Cooke 1993; Cooke et al. 2003a; Drennan 1991; Haller 2008; Helms 1979, 1994; Isaza 2013; Linares 1977; Mayo et al. 2010; Mayo et al. 2016a; Redmond 1994b; Roosevelt 1979). In fact, characterizations of Panamanian chiefdoms have exerted considerable influence over scholars' interpretations of chiefdoms within the Neotropics (Creamer and Haas 1985; Drennan 1991; Earle 1987, 1997; Feinman 2001: 158; Helms 1979; Linares 1977; Marcus and Flannery 1996: 100; Redmond 1994a, 1994b; Roosevelt 1979) and in other areas of the Americas (Blitz 1993: 15, 19; Emerson 1997: 4; Pauketat 1997: 45; Welch 1991: 12, 14). Thus, understanding sociopolitical organization from the Central

Region of Panama is important to fully evaluate scholars' ideas and claims about chiefdoms and midrange societies in the archaeological literature.

There is little indication of what would be considered wealthy children or women from the Central Region (cf. Mayo et al. 2016a) suggesting that wealth was not inherited; status, on the other hand, appears to have been ascribed (Cooke 2004: 272; Cooke et al. 2003a: 136). This situation accords with the "classic" definitions of chiefdom and ranked society. Service (1962: 159) noted that rank in chiefdoms was based on social and political conditions, not economic. Likewise, Fried (1967: 109–110) assigns sumptuary goods of a ranked society a social role based on status and rank, not to be treated as wealth. The relative absence of "wealthy" infant burials most likely reflects the degree of politicking and achievement that is necessary for many elites in obtaining and maintaining their position (Drennan 1991: 280). The presence of females and infants associated with high status symbols and artifacts at El Caño (Mayo et al. 2016 a, 2016a: 41) clouds this issue, but reflects the variation present in the mortuary record for the Central Region of Panama and different administrative and political organization principles (Mayo et al. 2016b).

The ethnohistoric record for Panama describes Indigenous societies as being quite diverse ranging from small settlements with little disparity in wealth to loosely integrated macro-regional polities (Andagoya 1994; Espinosa 1994; Oviedo 1944, 1995). The Spanish described societies from central Panama as politically and economically well organized with hereditary leaders that had a preoccupation for internecine conflict and the acquisition of gold. Ethnohistorically documented chiefdoms along the Parita Bay included within their boundaries uplands, fertile river valleys, and coastlines; chiefdoms located farther inland (*e.g.*, Urracá and Quema) lacked direct access to the coast (Cooke 1993; Espinosa 1994: 65–67; Helms 1979: 10). The most populated chiefdoms were those located in areas with direct access to fertile soils and estuarine and coastal resources (Andagoya 1994: 33). For example, Espinosa (1994: 65) describes the Parita and La Villa floodplains as having great fecundity for the cultivation of maize and yuca. The most successful chiefly territories, thus, appear to have been able to exploit different ecological zones (Linares 1977: 73) where inland resources (basalt and andesite for polished stone axes and legged metates) might have been bartered to chiefdoms with access to the coast for their local resources.

Early sixteenth-century documents identify five "chiefdoms" around the Parita Bay and provide some detail about the territories each one occupied. Spanish accounts note that "regional chiefs" (*caciques, principales, señores*) in central Panama controlled "territories" (*provincias*), some of which extended from the coast to the uplands centered along major rivers (Cooke 1993: 114; Espinosa 1994: 65–67; Helms 1994: 57). Chief Natá's territory did in fact reach the cordillera; however, the upland areas adjacent to the territory of Chiefs Parita and Escoria (Río Santa María) were controlled by other chiefs (*Usagaña* and *Quema* [Cooke 1993; Helms 1979: 59–60]). Ethnohistory suggests that each chiefly territory had a "main town" (*bohío*) where the "regional chief" (*quevi*) would reside, separated 6 to 8 leagues (28–38 km) apart, but with his entourages would move from settlement to settlement within his chiefdom (Helms 1979: 53).

Only four archaeology sites in Panama (Barriles, Sitio Conte, El Caño and He-4; Figures 1, 2) have ritual or ceremonial architecture that are considered special sites (Cooke *et al.* 2003b: 10). This is not what one would expect, based on ethnohistoric descriptions. If, at the time of contact, there were many chiefdoms with developed social hierarchies (Cooke 1993; Helms 1979), one would expect to find a corresponding hierarchy in settlement patterns and mortuary ritual (*e.g.*, Steponaitis 1978). Since the site of Sitio Conte combined with El Caño is more complex than anything else discovered archaeologically, scholars (Cooke *et al.* 2000: 172, 2003a: 127–128, 134, 136–137; Linares 1977: 76–77) have suggested Sitio Conte represented the apex of a larger social unit, or else a necropolis, that

included all of the Central Region-not just a single valley as described in the ethnohistorical documents.

Cooke *et al.* (2000: 172, 2003a: 126–127) propose that whether or not the territories controlled by Chiefs, such as Natá or Parita, were chiefdoms in the anthropological sense, there was a larger social unit to which all of these chiefdoms, or confederations of culturally and genealogically related villages, belonged. Powerful elites from all over the Central Region ended up at El Caño/Sitio Conte the cultural and ritual epicenter of the chiefdoms ensconced in the rivers that flow into the Parita Bay (Cooke *et al.* 2003a: 127). Other cemeteries in the Central Region (*i.e.*, Cerro Juan Díaz [Díaz 1999: 68]), on the other hand, would have been primarily used by commoners. Cooke *et al.* (2000: 172, 2003a: 127–128, 134, 136–137) and Linares (1977: 76–77) claim that Sitio Conte combined with El Caño was a macro-regional necropolis serving the needs of high-status males from different communities from the Central Region. While the burial mounds at He-4 are in regular use, high status mortuary activity ceases at Sitio Conte (~ A.D. 950), which has led Cooke *et al.* (2000: 172) to hypothesize that Sitio Conte/El Caño's role as a macro-regional necropolis for elites was transferred to He-4 during the Macaracas phase—the only two areas that contain what would be called high-status burials in the Central Region.

Much of our information concerning social inequality in Ancient Panama comes from burial contexts and emphasizes the increasing wealth and power of adult male elites. This is not to say that elite females did not have high social status, but the ethnohistoric and archaeological records suggest a strong patriarchal social organization. Generally speaking, there are two mortuary patterns for the Central Region of Panama, before AD 700 social status is reflected by differences in age, gender and occupation where higher status burials at this time appear to have been shamans or healers reflecting their elevated status founded on a social contract emphasizing integration over inequality. Cemeteries at this time appear to be more community oriented and inclusive of individuals despite differences in age, gender and occupation (Díaz 1999). Group cemeteries were important vehicles for social cohesion and reducing social stress created by increased inequality (Haller 2017). The role of ritual at these community cemeteries would have been an important tool to resist and negotiate power from the hereditary inequalities that emerge after AD 700 in places like Sitio Conte and El Caño (Haller 2013, 2017). The social relationships suggested by the interments at these elite cemeteries are an elaboration of previous social differences, but now are focused on male-oriented activities that emphasize individual accomplishments, usually violent, within a rigid hierarchy.

The majority of the identified Sitio Conte burials were adult males, and many were associated with hoards of weapons, giving support to the idea that these were warriors whose grave offerings represented their military rank in life (Briggs 1989: 75; Cooke *et al.* 2000; Linares 1977). Contrary to the age profiles of other cemeteries in the Central Region, Cooke *et al.* (2000: 168, 2003a:124) note that, of the 156 burials recovered by Lothrop (1937, 1942) at Sitio Conte, only one was a child. The primary interment in most elaborate graves was a seated adult male with gold objects and other individuals (in one case 23 other males; Briggs 1989: 199–203; Cooke *et al.* 2003a: 122; Mason 1941: 263). The main occupants of these graves (Briggs' cluster 1) were covered in golden costume components very similar to those described for Chief Parita's funerary attire observed by the Spanish in 1519 (Espinosa 1994: 63–64; Lothrop 1937: 46).

Briggs' (1989: 138) cluster analysis demonstrates that the distribution of graves in terms of quantity and diversity of grave goods follows a pyramidal structure where social ranking was expressed as an additive process. The highest social rank will have the same types of grave goods as the social ranks below with the addition of objects restricted to the highest rank. Thus, the individual who had the highest rank possessed the most identity relationships with more segments of society (Briggs 1989:

138). This manner of indicating rank appears to be similar to that found at Moundville, Alabama, where copper artifacts were found with the three highest ranks, but copper axes only in the most elaborate burials of adult males at the apex of the social hierarchy (Peebles and Kus 1977). Mortuary goods from the Moundville burials, however, do not suggest that an additive process of determining rank was utilized and most likely reflects a major difference in how separate social segments were integrated within these two societies.

Recent excavations at El Caño (Mayo *et al.* 2010; Mayo *et al.* 2016a, 2016b; Owens 2011; Williams 2012, 2013), located only 2 km away from Sitio Conte, have uncovered extremely elaborate burials. (Mayo *et al.* 2016b) conducted a similar cluster analysis to that of Briggs' (1989) study and reconstructed mortuary patterns that parallel that found at Sitio Conte as several clusters of internments (Area 1) centered on elite-male warriors. The investigations at El Caño, however, found other burial patterns not present at Sitio Conte that include female and infant elites and claim this as support for inherited social status at El Caño, but not present at Sitio Conte (Mayo *et al.* 2016a: 42; Mayo *et al.* 2016b). Another key line of evidence for this difference is that lower-status tombs with simple grave goods were found at both sites, but at El Caño they were clearly separated spatially whereas at Sitio Conte that El Caño was a stratified society whereas burials at Sitio Conte represent more fluid social ranking. Many of the burials from Tomb T7 contained multiple individuals that reflect that there is not just one burial pattern present with those interred at the site, but that many different roles and identities are represented. That being said, they argue that these various individuals must be interpreted in relation to the principle occupant of the burial (Mayo *et al.* 2016a: 41).

Before the discovery of high-status burials at El Caño, Cooke *et al.*'s (2000: 172; 2003a: 126–127; Stirling 1949: 516–517) claimed that Sitio Conte and El Caño, together, possibly formed the principal ritual center for the Central Region, with El Caño housing the ceremonial precinct and Sitio Conte being the locale where the high-status burials were interred between AD 750 and 950. This claim suggests that instead of each valley having its own high-status cemetery, elites from all over the Central Region were interred at a common necropolis at Sitio Conte, whereas other sites, such as Cerro Juan Díaz, served the mortuary ritual needs of commoners (Díaz 1999: 68). Mayo *et al.* (2016b; Mayo and Mayo 2013), however, argue that the mortuary patterns at El Caño and Sitio Conte are quite distinct and represent two separate social groups organized along different administrative and political principles. That being said, Mayo *et al.* (2016a: 31) also state that the Rio Grand Chiefdom comprising Sitio Conte and El Caño rose around AD 750 and quickly dissolved in AD 1020. It is not clear how these two mortuary centers would relate to each other, but would have had at least some interaction being only 2 km apart.

Outside of the Rio Grande valley, the only other site in the Central Region of Panama that has anything similar to the type of elaborate burials seen at Sitio Conte and El Caño is He-4 (El Hatillo) located in the Parita river valley (Figure 1, 2). Although the large site of He-4 lacks some of the features found at Sitio Conte and El Caño, it appears to be another "special" site (Menzies 2013). The core area of He-4 is around 20 ha with dense pockets of adjacent settlement and at the site's center is a group of low burial mounds most likely arranged around a central plaza (Bull 1965; Ladd 1964). Professional and amateur archaeologists have excavated at the site and recovered mortuary data that supports the existence of social ranking (Bull 1965, 1968; Dade 1972; Ladd 1964; Mitchell and Acker 1961). Philip Dade, for example, recovered 30 gold objects from a 6 m deep grave containing 23 individuals (Biese 1967; Dade 1972). Other amateurs who investigated the site (Bull 1965, 1968; Mitchell and Acker 1961) reported similar finds of gold, fine pottery, and carved manatee-bone batons—the latter being one of the salient artifacts for identifying the highest social class at Sitio Conte (Briggs 1989: 137).

Spanning the Cubitá to El Hatillo phases, 44 burials, comprising 96 individuals, were excavated from the mound area at He-4 (Bull 1965, 1968; Dade 1972; Ladd 1964; Mitchell and Acker 1961), but the majority of the elaborate burials only appear after Sitio Conte and El Caño cease to be used as a cemetery ca. AD 1020 (Haller 2008; Menzies and Haller 2012b). Of the 96 individuals recovered from the mound area at He-4, 50 were identified to age and the majority, 88%, of the recovered and identified remains were adults, 8% sub-adults, and 2% infants. Only 17 individuals could be sexed, all of which were adult males. These identifications are similar to the age and sex profiles from Sitio Conte (Briggs 1989: 75), but differ substantially from those reported from Cerro Juan Díaz (Cooke and Sánchez 1997; Cooke et al. 2000, 2003; Díaz 1999). Following the ideas of Cooke et al. (2000: 172, 2003a: 127-128, 134, 136-137) and Linares (1977: 76-77), evidence from the Parita river survey supports the hypothesis that if Sitio Conte/El Caño was a macro-regional necropolis for the high status and wealthy, it was replaced by He-4 during the Macaracas phase. The He-4 burials are not as rich as those from Sitio Conte, but the published information does support the claim that some graves at He-4 were indeed wealthy (Cooke 2004; Dade 1972) and contained artifacts (gold pendants, helmets, and manatee bone batons) that are salient features of social ranking as identified at Sitio Conte (Briggs 1989: 137).

Locascio (2010, 2013) excavated several middens in He-4 adjacent to the mortuary mounds and the ritual space associated with high status households. These middens had a higher percentage of better quality fauna and serving pottery that led Locascio (2010: 120) to suggest that the elites sponsored community feasts during mortuary rituals. The proximity of these households to the ritual space and the participation of the elites in these communal activities would have helped legitimize their social status and provided a way to strengthen their social position. Locascio (2010: 121) believes that the participation of the elites in community feasts and ritual activities was an opportunity to unite the inhabitants of the Parita River Valley in an integrated community and demonstrate the ability of the elites to mobilize manual labour. Although group integration could have been a result of commoner involvement in mortuary ritual, I argue (Haller 2017) that with time mortuary ritual focused more on the social segregation and on the establishment of an elite social identity. The results of the intense site survey of He-4 (Menzies 2009) supported the demographic patterns of regional assent recognition (Haller 2008). Both the regional survey of the Parita river valley and the investigations of domestic units at He-4 have shown that with the regular use of the mound complex (850-1522 AD), there was a large residential occupation (approximately 17.8 ha) with several hundred people (Haller 2008; Menzies 2009). At first, He-4 was only one of a few small sites and it was not until the time of the Cubitá style that it stood at the apex of a regional settlement hierarchy in the Parita River valley and a nucleation focus of the population continuously during almost a thousand years (Haller 2008).

Each site in the Parita valley appears to have had a designated sacred space used to create social identity and, later, negotiate social power from emerging elites at He-4. The longest continuously used sacred space in the valley are the cemeteries He-4 and He-2, which were first used during the Cubitá phase and extend into the Parita/El Hatillo phases (AD 500 to 1521). The inhabitants of He-2's would have had a complex relationship with elites from He-4 as being less than 2 km away, the site would have been a direct competitor early on and later incorporated into the expanding polity centered at He-4 (Haller 2008). The relationship was most likely complex involving leaders from He-2 being incorporated into He-4's power hierarchy. At the same time, the group cemetery at He-2 would have been a tool for resisting He-4's influence and asserting He-2's autonomy. As the cemetery at He-2 was in use for more than 1,000 years suggests that funeral rituals were also an important activity for

residents of smaller sites and indicates that sacred space was a key element in the organization of this community (Haller 2013, 2017). These cemeteries allow us to observe the variability of mortuary rituals in the Parita river valley and suggest, along with the socio-economic autonomy of the smaller sites, that there was much more negotiation in the social relations between the communities than direct control (see Spencer 2013). The lack of strong differences in social status suggests that the mortuary rituals in this cemetery emphasized group integration similar to the late mortuary phase of Cerro Juan Díaz instead of social segregation as seen in He-4 (Haller 2017, 2018a, 2018b).

III. DISCUSSION

As mentioned above, if we take the ethnohistoric accounts at face value, we would expect to have found many sites with similar mortuary patterns to Sitio Conte and El Caño (Cooke *et al.* 2003a: 127), which we have not. It is possible that a lack of systematic investigation in the Central Region has failed to identify other high-status cemeteries; however, the lack of information of other high-status cemeteries suggests that Sitio Conte (Cooke *et al.* 2003a: 127; Stirling 1949: 516–517), El Caño (Mayo *et al.* 2016a, 2016b, 2016c), and He-4 (Haller 2008, 2013, 2018a) are special mortuary sites. What is not clear if these sites were macro-regional necropolises and, if so, how did they function.

Based on archaeological evidence and mortuary ritual, it appears that these necropolises could have important in integrating communities within the entire Central Region of Panama. As well, the lack of high-status burials in other river valleys in Panama might suggest that the Río Grande and the Parita chiefdoms, at different times, held some degree of paramountcy over the Central Region as a whole. This would contradict the ethnohistoric descriptions of independent local chiefdoms found throughout Panama. Andagoya (1994) and Espinosa (1994) note, however, that Chief Parita, at the time of contact, headed a loose confederation of regional polities that could be considered a paramount chiefdom. Nevertheless, Cooke and Ranere (1992: 297) claim that macro-regional polities in the Central Region of Panama would have been difficult to maintain and would not have lasted more than a single generation. Archaeological and ethnohistorical information, therefore, appears to offer conflicting ideas of how Indigenous societies were integrated at the macro-regional scale.

Menzies and Haller (2012b: 463) claim that differences in the mortuary pattern in Sitio Conte / El Caño and He-4 are best explained as a result of the growth of a supreme chiefdom in Coclé during the Conte style era, comprising Sitio Conte and El Caño, and its subsequent rapid collapse (~ AD 1020; Mayo *et al.* 2016a: 31), resulting in the consolidation of at least one minor and less influential chiefdom during the following Macaracas style in the Parita River valley. If this was the case of the mortuary change starting at the end of the Cubitá style pottery production period, then chiefly cycling in the Central Region of Panama has had a long history and should be considered a normal expression of sociopolitical organization instead of something unexpected.

The earliest elite burials in the mound group at He-4 were interred around AD 900 during a time of considerable socio-political disruption as Sitio Conte was abandoned as a high-ranking cemetery (Cooke *et al.* 2000: 155). This was accompanied by the abandonment of numerous residential sites in Coclé, most notably the large residential site of Cerrezuela (Cooke 1972: 118, 438). These circumstances point to the dramatic breakdown of a large chiefdom based in Coclé province, approximately 60 km to the east of the Río Parita valley, that is best explained as the result of a macro-regional process of "chiefly cycling" (Anderson 1996a, 1996b; Redmond et al. 1999). During this period of dramatic decline in Coclé, there is an increase in regional integration in the Parita valley with He-4 occupying the head of a regional settlement hierarchy (Haller 2008:89) and the initial construction of burial mounds with several wealthy graves. Within this macro-regional context, the

importance of elite sponsored feasting and the display of decorated serving vessels at He-4 suggest a competitive political context as local elites consolidated their position. As pointed out by Costin (2001: 300–301) this is the kind of competitive socio-political context when we might expect changes in craft activities to occur. It is conceivable that the shift in craft activities in elite households at He-4 was prompted by these macro-regional socio-political fluctuations (Menzies and Haller 2012a). The "embedding" production within elite households would have ensured access to status-reinforcing goods in the face of potential competition or increased factionalism (Anderson 1996a).

Despite being only 2 km apart in the same river valley, Mayo *et al.* (2016b; Mayo and Mayo 2013) argue that the mortuary patterns at El Caño and Sitio Conte are quite distinct and represent two separate social groups organized along different administrative and political principles. This is the same distance between He-4 and He-2 in the Parita valley where there all indications from settlement or household data that they were integrated into the same regional polity (Haller 2008; 2013). This is not to say that there could have been some level of autonomy between Sitio Conte and El Caño as I argue for between He-4 and He-2 (Haller 2013, 2017), but it is unclear how this would have been manifested in such a politically competitive environment with no evidence of defensive structures. Nevertheless, the Rio Grande valley presents the most compelling evidence of high-status and wealth in the Central Region of Panama.

As regional societies, these chiefdoms should be studied within a regional framework in order to address how the political economy of Ancient Panama emerged and developed through investigations of long temporal sequences at the regional scale (Drennan 1995: 309; Chifeng 2003: 100). Although survey information exists for the Natá/El Caño/Sitio Conte region (Cooke 1972; Breece 1997; Cooke *et al.* 2003b; Mayo *et al.* 2007), a systematic regional survey of this territory is necessary to evaluate the macro-regional necropolis hypothesis by examining how changes in mortuary practices manifest on the regional level. The two critical times for social change in this area would be during the Conte phase when high-status burials first appear at Sitio Conte and El Caño, and the latter part of the Macaracas phase when the necropolis ceases to be used for elites (Cooke *et al.* 2000: 172). A better understanding of the residential occupation at Sitio Conte is also needed to demonstrate that what we are talking about are not vacant necropolises, but macro-regional cemeteries within the boundaries of existing chiefdoms. Sitio Conte, in fact, had residential occupation, but it was less intense during the period the high-status cemetery was in use (Linares 1977: 34, 58).

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Mortuary rituals and expressions of social identity reveal two contrasting and complementary burial patterns: one emphasizing group integration; and the other focused more on social distinction. It still is not clear if these macroregional cemeteries existed and, if they did, how they served the ritual needs of individuals from different social groups in independent territories or only within large socially integrated areas. If, in fact, we do have something similar in the Parita river valley to what is described for Sitio Conte/El Caño, and quite different from other river valleys, it would have a significant impact on how chiefdoms in the Central Region of Panama are thought to have been sociopolitically organized. If elites from one chiefdom were interred at cemeteries within the territory of different elites, without the other trappings of political control, this would be quite different from what has been interpreted for other necropolises in the chiefdom literature (*e.g.*, Moundville [Knight and Steponaitis 1998; Peebles and Kus 1977; Steponaitis 1978, 1991]).

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FIGURES

FIGURE 1. CENTRAL REGION OF PANAMA WITH ARCHAEOLOGY SITES MENTIONED IN THE TEXT

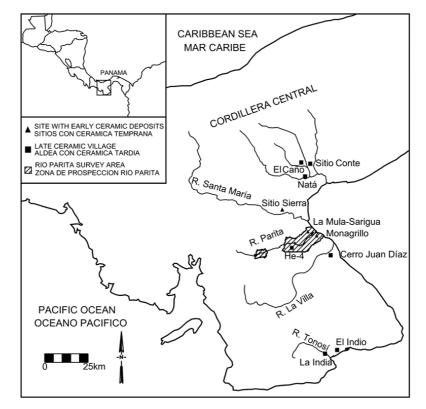


FIGURE 2. PARITA RIVER REGIONAL SURVEY BOUNDARIES WITH PHYSIOGRAPHIC ZONES AND ARCHAEOLOGY SITES

