A1027. DIS-AM,C- Costa Rica-Nicoya Culture-Figurine-Female-Ritual Specialist-Ceramic-800-1000 CE



Fig. 1. Costa Rica, Guanacaste­-Nicoya Culture, Seated Female, Ritual Specialist (?)

**Case No.:** 14

**Formal Label:** Costa Rica-Nicoya Culture, Seated Female, Ritual Specialist

**Display Description:** This Nicoya Culture polychrome female figure (800–1000 CE) has linear and geometric body art and tattoos covering her shoulders and chest. She is posed seated suggesting an elevated social rank, and with her eyes closed as if in a trance this suggests that she is one of the ritual specialists with shamanistic powers. Perhaps, as signs of her office she wears an elaborate headdress and an openly displayed loincloth.

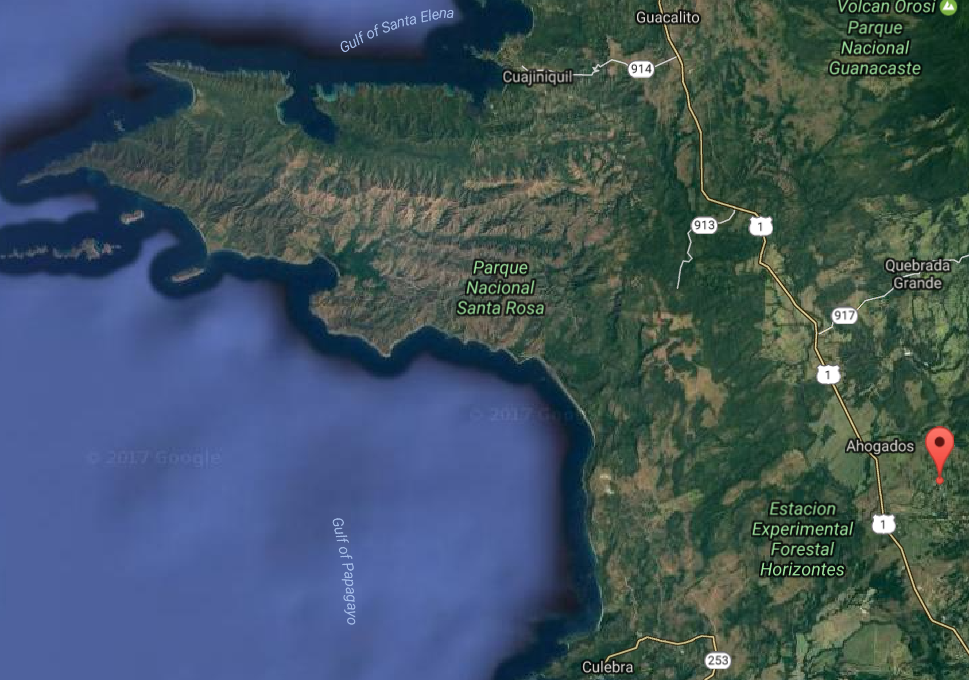
**Accession Number:** A1027.

**LC Classification:** F1545.3.A7

**Date or Time Horizon:** 800–1000 AD/CE

**Geographical Area:** Linea Vieja area, Costa Rica

**Map, GPS:** 10.741681, -85.481599, after https://www.google.com/maps/



**Cultural Affiliation:** Guanacaste­-Nicoya

**Media:** terracotta, clay slip, red and black pigment.

**Dimensions:**

**Weight:**

**Condition: Original.** Some spalling on the surface shows the effects of moisture in the grave,

**Provenance:** Original.

Discussion:

This elaborately-painted, burnished and carefully hand-modeled seated female nude ceramic figure is portrayed with polychrome brown-on-cream-colored linear and geometric body art and tattoos covering her shoulders and chest. She is posed seated (suggesting an elevated social rank) with arms akimbo, hands resting on her torso with legs extended. She appears to be in a trance state with her eyes closed. There are five vent-holes; two at the nose, two at the femurs and one at the cervical base of the neck. Two suspension holes made this an amulet.

Guanacaste-Nicoya archaeological periods follow the periodization of Lower-Central America (Lange 1996) in six periods that spanned 12,000 BCE-1550 CE/AD. This polychrome ceramic comes from **Period V** (CE/AD 500-1000) in which there was a return to exploitation of marine resources, expanding habitations, and the development of Guanacaste-Nicoya polychrome ceramics of which this is an example in the Papagayo style: a cream-colored ceramic with polychrome motifs, which was widespread after 700 CE/AD. This ceramic with the figure’s eyes closed as if in a trance suggests she is one of the ritual specialists with shamanistic powers. It was probably placed in a grave in the Linea Vieja region where juxtaposed graves have stone-lined rectangular walls and floors that have preserved many ceramics in good to excellent condition (Stone 1972: 27).

**References:**

Abel-Vidor Suzanne, Dirk Bakker, Detroit Institute of Arts, Jay I. Kislak. 198. *B****etween continents/between seas: Pre-Columbian art of Costa Ri*ca.** New York: H.N. Abrams; [Detroit]: Detroit Institute of Arts.

Evans Toby, Susan and David Webster, eds. 2001. *Archaeology of Ancient Mexico and Central America: an Encyclopedia*. New York: Garland Publishing.

Lange, Frederick W., ed. 1996. *Paths to Central American Prehistory*. Boulder: University of Colorado Press.

Stone, Doris. 1972. *Pre-Columbian man finds Central America: the archaeological bridge*. Cambridge: Peabody Museum.

The eminent Costa Rican historian [Carlos Meléndez](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carlos_Mel%C3%A9ndez_Chaverri) took note of the unusual location of the *templo colonial* in the urban core of the city and, based on Oviedo's brief description of the indigenous community, hypothesized that the church had been built atop the indigenous sacrificial mound. Meléndez's hypothesis fits the known Spanish pattern of direct superimposition of Catholic politico-religious structures on indigenous structures such as [pyramids](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyramids) in Mesoamerica and Andean South America, or [kiva](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiva) structures in the U.S. Southwest. In short, Meléndez argued that the location of the colonial church is not merely an aberration from the common Iberian pattern of facing the plaza but is coincident with the location of the sacrificial mound in the northeastern corner of the plaza of indigenous Nicoya as described by Oviedo in 1529.[[8]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicoya#cite_note-8)

Archaeological excavations were conducted in and around the city of Nicoya in the early 1990s to test these theories and to better understand how the indigenous community was transformed into a colonial town.[[9]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicoya#cite_note-9) Excavations in the center of Nicoya failed to produce any evidence of a substantial pre-Columbian presence in the city's center. Investigations into the surrounding valley failed to identify unequivocally a single site as the probable home to Nicoya. However, several large (5–10 hectare/12–24 acre) archaeological sites were in similar ecological niches throughout the valley. They are situated along river and stream banks at the point where streams leave the hills that surround the valley and cross the undulating valley floor.



This [Pataky](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pataky) ceramic (late Period VI, AD 1000-1350) portrays a seated [shaman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shaman) transformed into a [jaguar spirit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaguars_in_Mesoamerican_cultures) companion form.

At least two of these sites are considered likely candidates for protohistoric Nicoya. One is just outside contemporary Nicoya along the banks of the [Rio Chipanzé](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Rio_Chipanz%C3%A9&action=edit&redlink=1). The other is in the hamlet of [Sabana Grande](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sabana_Grande,_Costa_Rica&action=edit&redlink=1), six kilometers north of Nicoya. This site appears to be larger than the rest; it exhibits low [earthen mounds](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mound) and is particularly prized by local looters for its high-quality [polychrome](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polychrome) pottery and gold artifacts. Apparently a much greater quantity of high-quality artifacts have been removed from the vicinity of Sabana Grande than from Nicoya or anywhere else in the valley. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the colonial [*ejido*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ejido) (lands held in common by the indigenous community) of the Indian community of Nicoya was in Sabana Grande, not Nicoya.[[10]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicoya#cite_note-10)

It is only possible to consider either of these sites as protohistoic Nicoya if we discard the notion that it was a single community of over more than 6,000. Neither site is near the size necessary to hold that number of people if we accept even as an approximate Newson's (1987:87) estimates of 0.045 to 0.06 persons/hectare for Pacific Nicaragua at Spanish contact, and as little as 0.02 persons/hectare for Nicoya. A closer reading of the ethnohistoric material in conjunction with the archaeological information is necessary to form a more realistic picture of Nicoya on the eve of conquest. It is worthwhile returning to Andrés de Cereceda, treasurer of Gil Gonzalez Dávila's 1522 expedition, and review his own words in regard to Nicoya:

"The chief Nicoya is five leagues further on, inland: they baptized 6,603 souls; he gave 13,442 pesos in gold, with a little more that the chief Mateo gave".[[11]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicoya#cite_note-11)

Cereceda's figure of 6,603 is typically taken to represent the number of inhabitants of the *cacique*, Nicoya's town, but Cereceda never makes that assertion, only that the expedition baptized that number of people. Furthermore, he refers to a second chief, Mateo, whose residence was never specified.

An alternative interpretation of Cereceda's figures would understand them as representing the inhabitants of several settlements politically affiliated with Nicoya but not the members of one massive community. The *cacique* Nicoya may not have had tributary villages under his direct control. But it is not unlikely that there were several villages within his orbit of influence that he could persuade to treat with the Spanish. A model of dispersed settlement of politically affiliated villages rather than one large nucleated town better fits the archaeological and ethnohistoric information. Oviedo, who visited Nicoya in 1529 and recorded aspects of the town's layout, never remarked on the great size of the settlement. Oviedo was in Nicoya before precipitous population decline had taken its effect, and one would expect some remark from this astute observer had Nicoya been such a populous and highly nucleated center.

If the above hypothesis is true, what does modern-day Nicoya represent historically? Among other tools of colonial administration, the Spanish crown created a policy called *congregación*, or the forced resettlement of native peoples into nucleated settlements to more closely watch and control their charges. The evidence leads one to further hypothesize that the present-day Nicoya is the product of Spanish colonial *congregación*, formed by the forced amalgamation of people from the pre-Hispanic settlements dispersed throughout the region. When this may have been done, and under what circumstances, are unknown. As mentioned above, the historical documents, which would have recorded such an event, would have been lost in the 1783 fire that completely destroyed the colonial archives in Nicoya. Further research in other repositories may yet provide confirmation for this interpretation.