Prehistoric Sitio Drago, Bocas del Toro, Panama

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Figure 1. The Bocas del Toro Archipelago, Western Caribbean Panamá.

A recently discovered large (15 ha) pre-Columbian archaeological site in north-western Panamá shows great potential for understanding the past social organisation and cultural history in an area that appears to be of far greater significance than formerly thought (Haberland 1984; Linares 1977, 1980). Sitio Drago is located on the north shore of Isla Colon in Bocas del Toro province, Panamá (Figures 1, 2, and 3). The site consists of a minimum of 15 low earthen mounds scattered over 500 m of well-developed midden on a stabilized beach ridge sandwiched between dense tropical forest and a fringing coral reef. The first Europeans to pass through Boca del Drago included Cristobál Colón and his son Hernán on Columbus' fourth voyage to the New World in 1502. Evidence recovered during 2002 surface collections and 2003 test excavations suggests strong links with the Pacific coastal regions of western Panama and Costa Rica (Chiriquí & Diquís), and south-east Costa Rica. Eight radiometric age determinations place occupation of the site to AD 900-1150 (Table 1).



Figure 2. *Sitio Drago, Bocas del Toro, Panamá; numbered ovals represent mounds*

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Figure 3. The beach at Boca del Drago.

Sample Number	RYBP	Calibrated Age[1]	Stratum	Material
Beta-182651	1050 +/- 60	AD 874 - 1071	IIA	Carbonised *Raphia* nut
Beta-182652	1020 +/- 60	AD 894 - 1160	IIA	Carbonised *Raphia* nut
Beta-182653	950 +/- 40	AD 1017 - 1164	III	Carbonised Wood
Beta-182654	1040 +/- 70	AD 860 - 1163	IIB	Carbonised Wood
Beta-182655	1070 +/- 70	AD 779 - 1058	IIB	Carbonised Wood
Beta-182657	990 +/- 90	AD 886 - 1251	III	Carbonised Wood
Beta-182658	720 +/- 80	AD 1159 - 1411	III	Carbonised Wood
Beta-182658	950 +/- 40	AD 1017 - 1188	III	Carbonised Wood

Table 1: Radiocarbon dates from Sitio Drago, Mound 6

[1]Greatest relative area under 2 sigma probability distribution (Stuiver et al. 1998)



Figure 4. Feline Effigy Metate Fragments from Sitio Drago (eye diameter approximately 2.5 cm).

Bocas del Toro has been considered a "backwater" with a low level of socio-political organisation (Linares 1977:311, 1980:67; Stirling & Stirling 1962). However, this assumption has a weak empirical basis. Haberland (1984:253) suggests "more investigations [in Bocas del Toro] have to be conducted before we can completely understand this area and link it with others." The primary goals of the Proyecto Arqueológico Sitio Drago (PASD) are to examine several different areas of the site in order to determine its occupational history and internal structure, and the external connections, subsistence economy, and socio-political organisation of the site's past occupants.

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Figure 5. Modelled human applique figurine, Sitio Drago, Mound 6, Unit 1.

The Pacific Chiriquí (Panamá) and Diquís (Costa Rica) regions constitute the Greater Chiriquí interaction sphere as currently defined (Haberland 1976, 1984). It is possible, but remains unproven, that the Bocas del Toro Archipelago, including Sitio Drago and Cerro Brujo (Linares & Ranere 1980), together with Pacific Chiriqui and Diquís may constitute a greater Chiriqui interaction sphere (see Haberland 1984). The 2002 surface collections and 2003 test excavations at Drago illustrate the presence of prestige goods, as well as a wider variety of general artefact types, and a greater diversity of ceramics than seen at Cerro Brujo (Kudarauskas *et al.* 1980; Linares 1980). Sitio Drago is much larger and appears more internally complex than the loosely organised farming hamlets such as Cerro Brujo, suggesting a large population and significant inter-regional contact.

Artefacts recovered from Sitio Drago include carved stone effigy metate (Figure 4) and sculpture fragments, basalt prismatic and tanged blades, stone celts of various sizes, shell and clay beads, ceramic appliqué figurines of humans (Figure 5), marine invertebrates (Figure 6), and possibly felines (Figure 7), and various ceramic sherds (Figures 8 and 9). Preservation at the site is excellent, as indicated by the recovery of over 6000 diagnostic bone specimens, large numbers of mollusc remains, and a great deal of carbonised plant material.

Goods imported from Pacific Chiriquí suggest Sitio Drago may lie within a broader "Greater Chiriqui" interaction sphere. The presence of ceramic wares (Figure 8) potentially imported from Pacific Chiriquí (Linarte Zoned Red Line, Linares 1968a, 1968b) and several as yet undescribed ceramic wares (Figure 9) with affinity to other Greater Chiriquian types supports the idea of trans-ithsmian connections (Linares 1977, 1980; Lothrop 1963; MacCurdy 1911). The broken jaguar effigy metates and sculpture fragments suggest the presence of prestige goods and social ranking (Graham 1992:176; Snarskis 1984:210).



Figure 6. Modelled crab applique figurine handle, Sitio Drago, Mound 6, Unit 1.

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Figure 7. Modelled feline applique figurine, Sitio Drago, Mound 6, Unit 1.



Figure 8. Probable Linarte Zoned Red Line sherds, Sitio Drago, Mound 6, Unit 1.



Figure 9. Undescribed pre-firing zoned incised sherds, Sitio Drago, Mound 6, Unit 1.

This project also seeks to determine whether the subsistence system proposed for Cerro Brujo operated at Drago. Linares (1976, 1977) proposed a local agricultural system focusing on swidden root and tree cropping supported by "garden hunting" and fishing. The presence at Sitio Drago of basin millingstones, carbonised remains of tree crops, a diverse array of terrestrial forest reptiles and mammals and a variety of reef, mangrove, and offshore fish generally supports Linares' (1976, 1980) contention. However, the presence of flat milling stones may suggest a more mixed seed/root/tree cropping focus. We plan to return to Sitio Drago in the summer of 2004 under the auspices of the Institute for Tropical Ecology and Conservation (ITEC: www.itec-edu.org) to excavate more test pits. We plan to use 3mm screens and an intensive soil sampling and flotation recovery protocol.

Sitio Drago stands out as a completely different type of site than any other studied in the region. The site appears particularly well suited for the examination of the development of social organisation in a tropical forest environment. Investigation at Drago is supported by the local community and by the Panamanian archaeological establishment. Once more work has been done at Drago and its constituents analysed, comparisons can be made to other sites in Greater Chiriquí, Panamá and Costa Rica, and chiefdoms throughout the Americas. This project will ultimately address the level of socio-political organisation at the site, daily activity at Drago and its place within a regional settlement system. Sitio Drago stands to provide a

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great deal of new information concerning lower Central American interaction spheres, trans-isthmian exchange, and development of chiefdom level societies in the "intermediate area."

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