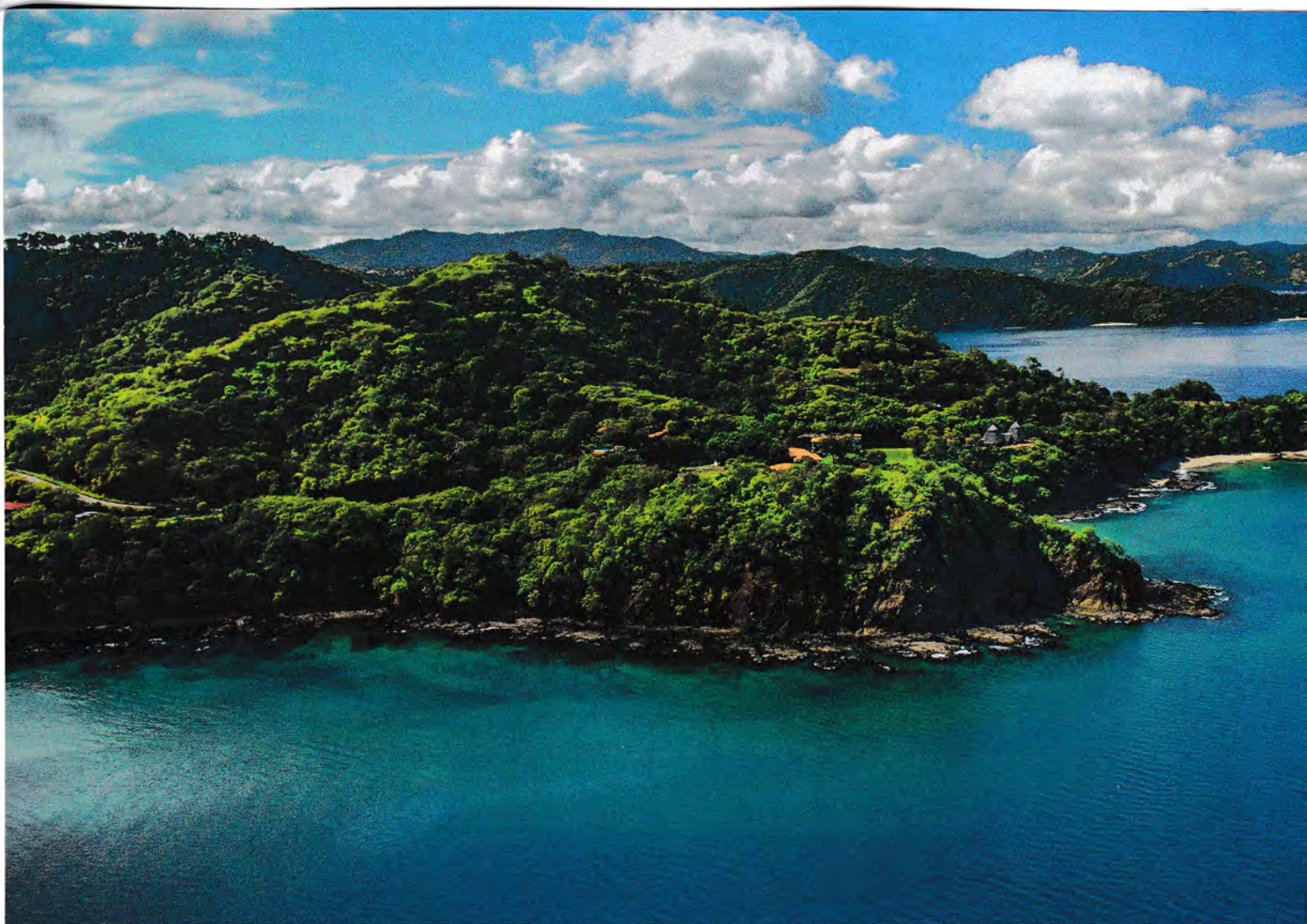




Pre-Hispanic Costa Rica: The Kingdom of Nicoya

The Chorotega people arrived in western Costa Rica from southern Mexico and created a society dominated by chieftains in which trade and the arts flourished.

The history of pre-Hispanic America involves many myths and legends that tell of long-distance migrations.

This is the story of the Chorotega people, who settled in the northwest of what is now the country of Costa Rica, mainly on the Nicoya Peninsula. The Spanish, arriving in the 1520s, noticed that the Chorotega spoke a language similar to that of the natives of Tenochtitlán. Decades later, the

chronicler Juan de Torquemada would collect and record the stories he was told by the Indigenous people about how they arrived there.

"According to what is said among the natives of this land, mainly the elders," wrote Torquemada, "the Indians of Nicoya (who are also known as *Mangues*) formerly lived in the uninhabited area of Xoconochco," which is now known as Soconusco, in southern Mexico. "A great army of people who

called themselves Olmecs came upon them . . . These Olmecs waged war, defeated and subjugated the natives, imposed heavy taxes on them, and kept them so subjugated that, among other things, they demanded a large number of young women to take as wives and to serve them." The Chorotega sought advice from their leaders, who, after consulting for eight days, urged them to flee in secret, assuring them that their gods would protect them. And so,



Papagayo Peninsula, in the Gulf of Papagayo, is an area settled by the Chorotega people in northwestern Costa Rica.

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GREAT NICOYA

THE TERM "GREAT NICOYA" refers to an archaeological region that bridges northwestern Costa Rica and western Nicaragua, where Mangué speakers (like the Chorotega) and Nahuatl-speaking peoples (such as the Pipil-Nicarao) settled. However, archaeologists believe that it was not a homogeneous cultural area, and that the Chibcha-speaking peoples who lived there previously were not expelled or eliminated. In 1522, an expedition headed by Gil González Dávila traced this Pacific coastline, resulting in the first contact between the Spanish and the Nicoya peoples.

they headed south on a journey that—according to legend—involved a series of conflicts. According to Torquemada, after one clash, “those who escaped fled to what is now called Nicoya.”

Although other northern ethnic groups had already arrived in the area, surviving myth echoes two great migrations. The first took place around the seventh century, when the Olmeca-Xicalanca peoples attacked and drove the Chorotega group south,

until they finally settled “near a freshwater lake, which overlooks an island with two round mountain ranges,” that is, on the Rivas Isthmus, next to Lake Nicaragua. The second migration, in the 11th and 12th centuries, was also due to pressure from invaders, who pushed the Pipil-Nicarao people southward, in turn displacing the Chorotega, who went on to settle on the Nicoya Peninsula.

Warrior Society

The Chorotega did not replicate the centralized social model of the Mexican highlands but instead created multiple chiefdoms of varying sizes and importance. When the Spanish arrived, the *cacique* (chieftain) of Nicoya was the most powerful of all, hence the name Great Kingdom of Nicoya. As this was a warrior society, the *cacique* was chosen from among the bravest nobles and would declare war, demand tribute, and

lead the community. But he ruled with the advice of the *monexico* (a council of elders), which acted as a court of justice and had the power to depose the *cacique* and even order his death.

The Nicoya religion had clear Mesoamerican roots. They believed that the world had been created and destroyed several times by disputes between the gods, including Tlaloc, the god of rain. They also introduced the sacrifice of slaves and prisoners of war to feed the gods and maintain cosmic order. Allegedly, they placed the heads of the sacrificed “on sticks in front of the altars and temples.” The Chorotega economy was based on agriculture, hunting, and fishing, but there was also a specialized craft industry that produced goods for export, including polychrome ceramics, ceremonial *metates* (mortars) and cotton textiles.

— Isabel Bueno



Vessel depicting a human figure painted with crocodile mouths and gold discs. 500–800 A.D. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
BRIDGEMAN/ACI

Art From the North

The presence of Mesoamerican peoples on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica dates back to the second century A.D. Their influence marked the art of the Nicoya area, notably ceremonial *metates* (mortars), jade work, and rich polychrome ceramics.



◀ **Ritual metate** Second-fifth centuries A.D. Ethnological Museum, Barcelona
CORDON PRESS

CEREMONIAL METATES

Metates (mortars used to grind corn), were an everyday item in pre-Hispanic cultures. In Nicoyan culture, they also became ceremonial objects and were included in burials. Metates were often decorated with bands or repeating shapes and zoomorphic figures, especially birds, which were believed to accompany the deceased into the afterlife.



◀ **Metate with one end shaped like a bird's beak.** Fourth-eighth centuries A.D. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
GETTY IMAGES



▶ **Ritual metate with a jaguar head,** made of volcanic stone. Sixth-ninth centuries A.D. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas
BRIDGEMAN/ACI



Necklace composed of jade and metal beads, with three axe-shaped pendants. A.D. 300–700. Art Institute of Chicago ALBUM

Vessel depicting a shaman transformed into a jaguar. 11th–14th centuries A.D.

BRIDGEMAN/ACI



NICOYAN CERAMICS

Ceramics are the most characteristic art form of the Nicoya cultural area. From the sixth century, these pieces can be distinguished by their polychrome decoration, which reached its peak in the Middle Polychrome period (ninth–13th centuries), when representations of animals, including turkeys (*chompipes*), jaguars, snakes, monkeys, and lizards, were abundant.

◀ Pear-shaped vessel with the head and wings of a turkey. 11th–16th centuries A.D. GETTY IMAGES



Ceramic ocarina decorated with the same motifs as polychrome vessels. 9th–12th centuries A.D. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York MET/ALBUM



◀ Jade pendant shaped like a bird, associated with fertility and the afterlife. Fourth–eighth centuries A.D. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York ALBUM



◀ Axe-shaped pendant made of jade and topped with a headdress. First–fifth centuries A.D. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK MET/ALBUM



◀ Gold bell, made by lost-wax casting. A.D. 500–1520. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York MET/ALBUM