

Oral presentation

Subsistence patterns and local plant use among prehispanic populations in western Panama

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Introduction. Recent investigations have shown that people living in humid pre-montane forests of Chiriquí province, western Panama, were using introduced domesticated plants by 7400 cal BP (Dickau et al. 2007). However, they also processed and consumed numerous local resources throughout the preceramic period (8000-3000 cal BP).

Objectives. To identify local plant resources used by ancient peoples living in western Panama between 8000 and 3000 years ago, and investigate the role of these resources in subsistence patterns.

Methods. Carbonized macrobotanical remains from three archaeological sites were analyzed and identified, and integrated with previous research (Smith 1980). Ground and flaked stone tools from the sites were sampled for starch grain residues through a process of sonication and heavy liquid flotation. The extracted starch grains were taxonomically identified using comparative material.

Results. Macrobotanical remains indicated that tree resources (palms like *Acrocomia aculeata* [Jacq.] Lodd. ex Mart. and *Attalea butyracea* [Mutis ex. L.f.] Wess. Boer, and tree fruits such as *Hymenaea courbaril* L. and *Byrsonima crassifolia* [L.] HBK) formed part of the diet throughout the preceramic period. Starch analysis showed that people also consumed several tuberous species, including *Calathea* sp., *Dioscorea* spp., and *Zamia* sp.

Conclusion. In western Panama, locally available plant resources were important contributions to overall diet breadth throughout the preceramic period, even after the adoption of domesticated species. The variability of resources used suggests that ancient populations exploited a range of environments in the surrounding landscape.

Keywords: archaeobotany, resource use, starch grains, macroremains

Selected References

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