

## *The White Slip Ceramic Horizon of Early Postclassic Mexico and Central America*

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Twenty-five years ago McCafferty and John Hoopes began a collaboration to investigate the apparent relationship between central Mexico and the Greater Nicoya region of Central America. This theme is the impetus behind recent research in Pacific Nicaragua, and is also the foundation of longstanding interest in highland/lowland interaction during the Epiclassic and Early Postclassic of Cholula, Mexico. A material trait that links these two topics is the use of polychrome decoration painted over white-slipped serving wares, especially relating to periform vessels that were likely used for ritual chocolate consumption. In this paper we document where and when this complex appears, followed by consideration of possible cultural interactions.

In a recent publication, Leonardo López Luján (2013) recounts what he claims may be the first article published on Mesoamerican archaeology, dealing with the site of Isla de Sacrificios, Veracruz. The article included several lithographs of artifacts encountered, including several vessels of what has come to be called Isla de Sacrificios White on Cream (**Figure 1**). These feature curvilinear painted decorations in white (outlined in brown) on a cream background, with the decorations occasionally outlined with fine-line incising. Similar pottery has been found at other sites in the Gulf Coast region of Veracruz, including Cerro Montoso, and it is traditionally dated to the Early Postclassic period (A.D. 900-1200).



Figure 1: Isla de Sacrificios White on Cream from Veracruz, Mexico

McCafferty became interested in the Gulf Coast-style whitewares during his dissertation research at Cholula (Puebla, Mexico). Whereas many of the later Postclassic Cholula polychromes were painted on an orange slip, a large percentage of the polychromes from the Early Postclassic featured a white slip. These corresponded to the polychrome type originally

described by Eduardo Noguera (1954) as ‘policroma mate.’ As a result of the seriation analysis conducted during this research, it was discovered that the whiteware polychromes dated to the Early Postclassic period (local Middle/Late Tlachichualtepetl phase) (A.D. 900-1200). Two distinctive types were identified: Cuaxiloa Matte Polychrome and Ocotlan Red Rim: Cristina variety (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Cuaxiloa Matte Polychrome and Ocotlan Red Rim: Cristina subtype from Cholula

A secure dated context for these whiteware polychromes was found by Sergio Suárez Cruz in a sealed well from the urban area of San Pedro Cholula (McCafferty 1996). Mendable fragments of the Ocotlan: Cristina variety were found with mixed debris dating between A.D. 900 and 1000. These polychromes closely resemble those discussed by López Lújan for Isla de Sacrificios in terms of painted decoration, while others have Maya-like iconography but are made from local clay sources (Figure 3). Another context excavated was a platform of the Great Pyramid that included actual Gulf imports associated with the earliest polychromes in the sequence, supporting a suggestion originally made by H.B. Nicholson (1982) that the earliest polychromes were likely related to Gulf influences.



Figure 3: Ocotlan Red Rim: Cristina subtype with Gulf motifs

Imported Isla de Sacrificios whitewares are easily distinguished by their very fine paste composition, lacking obvious inclusions and having a white/cream color, in contrast to Cholula

paste that is a relatively coarse textured and light brown in color. Nevertheless, some of the painted decoration found on locally produced Ocotlan Cristina variety polychromes is clearly reminiscent of the Gulf style (**Figure 4**). Cholula variations, however, also include more diverse patterns, including realistic representations of birds, octopi, and at least one depicting a lord with an elaborate feathered headdress.



Figure 4: Ocotlan Red Rim: Cristina subtype

The second type of whiteware from Early Postclassic Cholula – Cuaxiloa Matte Polychrome – has a less glossy, more matte finish, and the patterns generally consist of a panel of geometric motifs (**Figure 5**). This type has a closer resemblance to the dominant Yanhuitlan Red-on-Cream polychrome type from the Mixteca Alta region of Oaxaca (**Figure 6**). Yanhuitlan Red-on-Cream also features a panel of geometric motifs over a cream slip, and first appears in the Early Postclassic and continues through the Late Postclassic period. Whereas minor stylistic variations may distinguish different Mixtec polities the overarching type is ubiquitous in the Mixteca Alta. It is not found in the adjoining Mixteca Baja or in the Valley of Oaxaca. Notably the famous ‘Mixtec polychrome’ is not introduced until the Late Postclassic period, so is not directly related to this Early Postclassic manifestation of the whiteware horizon.



Figure 5: Cuaxiloa Matte Polychrome



Figure 6: Yanhuitlan Red on Cream from the Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca

The whiteware horizon in central Mexico and the Gulf Coast remains enigmatic. It is linked to the Early Postclassic, with the best dated remains coming from Cholula. This is a time period associated with the Olmeca-Xicallanca occupation of the city, a group who are believed to have originated in the southern Gulf Coast region (McCafferty 2007). They may have been ethnically Maya, but this was a multi-ethnic area where several languages were spoken at the time of the Spanish conquest. Lowland/highland interaction may also relate to southern Gulf Maya incursions into the highlands beginning as early as A.D. 600. Whiteware polychromes are very limited in their use, and are not present in the more ‘Nahua’ parts of the central highlands such as the Basin of Mexico or Morelos. At Tula, a few examples of whitewares were initially identified as Nicoya polychromes from Central America (Healan 1988; **Figure 7**), but recently have been more accurately identified as belonging to the Honduran Las Vegas polychrome tradition (contemporary with Nicoya polychromes).



Figure 7: ‘Nicoya’ polychromes from Tula, Hidalgo in the Museo Nacional de Antropologia, Mexico City

Having demonstrated the development of whiteware ceramics in Mexico, we turn now to the other major manifestation of this whiteware horizon from the Greater Nicoya region of Central America. Greater Nicoya is comprised of Pacific Nicaragua and northwestern Costa Rica. It has long been considered as the southern frontier of greater Mesoamerica (McCafferty et al. 2012), especially during the Postclassic period. Early Colonial chroniclers recorded the dominant languages of the region as dialects of Nahuatl (Nicarao) and Oto-Manguean (Chorotega and Monimbo), and cultural traits as well as migration myths clearly linking the inhabitants with central and southern Mexico. In fact, these ‘mythstories’ identify Cholula as a point of origin for migrating groups, and that the identifying term Chorotega is actually a derivation of the term ‘Choluteca.’ We note, however, that these traditional connections may not be as clear as originally assumed. While it is absolutely reasonable to accept this linguistic argument, there are certain other factors that cannot be overlooked or ignored. For example, Chorotega was also the name of a dominant chief at the time of Spanish conquest, and that the term Choluteca has its strongest connections (linguistic, ethnic, and geographical) in western Honduras, just north of the Greater Nicoya region.

The Classic to Postclassic transition, locally known as the Bagaces to Sapoa transition, features a dramatic shift in ceramic types from the use of a well-burnished red surface to the innovative use of white slip with polychrome decoration. Recent excavations at the site of El Rayo provide a well-dated context for this transition, while an additional 20 radiocarbon dates provide a solid basis for a microchronology of whiteware ceramic development from A.D. 800 and 1250 along the Isthmus of Rivas. Numerous types and varieties of whiteware pottery have been identified based on surface treatment and decorative elements (**Figure 8**). Vallejo Polychrome is generally credited with being the most ‘Mexican’ in terms of symbolic elements, especially in the use of feathered serpent motifs (Manion and McCafferty 2013; **Figure 9**)

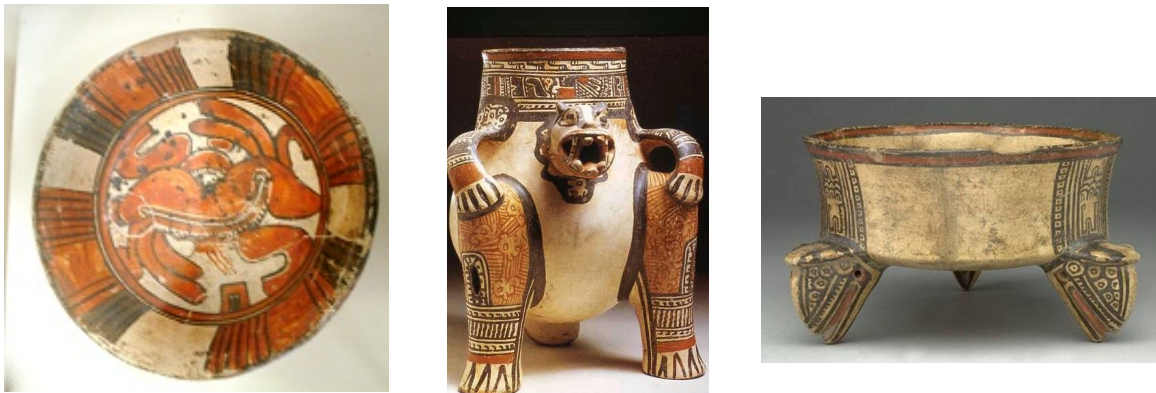


Figure 8: Greater Nicoya whiteware polychromes



Figure 9: Vallejo Polychromes with feathered serpent imagery

The association of Greater Nicoya whitewares with Mexican ceramics has long been recognized, dating back to Samuel Lothrop's (1926) two-volume *Ceramics of Costa Rica and Nicaragua*. Art historian Jane Day (1994) tied the Greater Nicoya polychromes to the somewhat ambiguous Mixteca-Puebla stylistic tradition, while noting that it may have begun earlier in Central America than in central Mexico.

Development of the whiteware tradition is typically viewed as the "arrival marker" of migrating foreign ethnic (Mexican) groups into Pacific Nicaragua. Because these whitewares have no antecedent in a mature form coming from Mexico, however, we are now more inclined to view this tradition as the end result of intensive ethnic mixing following (or during continuous) migration to the region. This physical human impact was likely coupled with the effects of protracted exchange and/or interaction between Greater Nicoya and the Mesoamerican southeast periphery (Honduras and/or El Salvador). The result appears to represent a "ceramogenesis" that accompanies a developing "Chorotega ethnogenesis" occurring between A.D. 600 and 800.

In northwest Costa Rica, the development of Galo Polychrome after A.D. 500 (the first true polychrome of the region) is directly linked to contemporaneous developments in the Ulua Valley of Honduras. The relationship between Ulua Polychrome: Nebla class, for example, and Galo: Jaguar and Lagarto varieties is undeniable; vessel forms, color palettes and overall presentation are inextricably linked (**Figure 10**). In fact, the resemblances go beyond emulation or copying, and are likely the result of craftsperson exchange and/or training; probably Greater Nicoya potters being trained in Honduras, because the iconographic content is truly 'indigenous' to Costa Rica. This argument for connectivity does not rest on ceramics alone. During this period we also witness the appearance of Classic period Maya iron ore mirrors and Ulua style marble vases (elite objects that are probably the result of peer gifting and alliance formation) in archaeological contexts in Costa Rica (Dennett and Blainey 2014; Dennett et al. 2008), as well as the height of post Olmec jade manufacture in Central America, with raw materials sources believed to be from the southeastern periphery.



Figure 10: Comparison of (a) Galo Polychrome from Costa Rica and (b) Ulua Polychrome from Honduras.

In Pacific Nicaragua, the relationship with Honduras continues, but in a very different fashion than we see in Costa Rica. Galo polychrome is being imitated here, rather than evolving alongside the Guanacaste/Nicoya-Honduras relationship seen so strongly in Costa Rica. The development of local polychrome traditions is underway in Pacific Nicaragua after A.D. 600, nonetheless, with both Belo and Momta Polychromes (**Figure 11**) being generated out of the Ayala site, just southwest of modern day Granada city (Salgado González 1996a, 1996b). Their connection (in form and decorative schemes), however, seems to be more aligned with contemporaneous (Classic to Terminal/Epiclassic period) developments in Copador wares from the Copán Valley area.



Figure 11: Comparison of Momta Polychrome from Nicaragua and Copador Polychrome from Honduras

While some of these changes were likely the result of developing ties between distant groups in a broad interaction sphere, we believe that these sudden changes, as well as the arrival of actual migrants rather than just ideas/technologies, was spurred on by a very punctuated natural event – the devastating eruption of Volcan Ilopango ca. A.D. 536. This massive eruption had apocalyptic impact in the local fallout region of El Salvador, with subsequent long-term environmental impacts directed toward the north. We cannot ignore the timing of all these events concurrently,

and must also consider the impact of other major events that followed in the next hundred years or so, including the elite-political dissolution of the Maya southern lowlands. Taken together, these events likely served as the impetus for a significant reconfiguration of existing trade/exchange routes, as well as the actual migration of human bodies out of the peripheral impact area.

Whatever the mechanisms, by A.D. 800 Chorotega groups occupied the Greater Nicoya region and had developed the local whiteware tradition. We currently have no evidence of whitewares anywhere in Central America (or Mesoamerica) at an earlier date. Interestingly, following on the heels of the "Papagayo revolution" is the appearance of Las Vegas polychromes in Honduras ca. A.D. 950. Support for this argument can also be found in disseminated technological knowledge from Honduras, specifically the production of mold-made figurines, which also marks the beginning of the Sapoá period in different manifestations.

The earliest Papagayo varieties, Culebra and Serpiente, show affiliation with Mesoamerican ceramics...and not necessarily those from Mexico (**Figure 12**). There is sufficient material and iconographic influence from Honduras and El Salvador to account for these first manifestations, especially with regard to serpent and human imagery. Both Culebra and Serpiente varieties are most closely tied to types such as Ulua Polychrome, Copador wares, and later Las Vegas Polychromes in the Terminal Classic. Feathery serpent imagery, in its earliest manifestation in Greater Nicoya appears more closely tied with the Maya Vision serpent and stylistic aspects of Copador wares, than the Postclassic idea of the feathered serpent as witnessed in later Vallejo Polychrome. This re-evaluation of early 'feathery' serpent imagery, and a refocusing toward the Maya vision serpent, is also taking place in central Mexican research (Jordan 2013).



Figure 12: (a) Papagayo Polychrome: Serpiente variety. (b) Drawing of a detail from Lintel 15 at the Classic Maya site of Yaxchilan showing a vision serpent (Wikimedia Commons, <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:YaxchilanDivineSerpent.jpg#filelinks>).

Developments most strongly considered to be "Mexican" in origin (Quetzalcoatl and Ehecatl) appear to have been introduced in the Early Postclassic period (ca. A.D. 1000), and likely fit quite seamlessly into the indigenous Chorotega iconographic structure. Similarities between



Cholula and Nicaraguan whitewares are extremely close in some cases, no doubt a significant factor in earlier attempts to relate the stylistic tradition (Day 1994; Lothrop 1926; McCafferty and Steinbrenner 2005). In fact, Mexican groups may have arrived as the result of a new domination of ancient trade routes in the absence of Classic Maya control or organization. What were they seeking? Likely cacao, quetzal feathers, gold, etc. How did they come? Likely via both the Pacific (water and land) and the Caribbean coasts (water).

A clue to this connection may be found in one of the diagnostic vessel forms of the whiteware tradition from throughout this pan-Mesoamerican region. Tall drinking vessels were among the whitewares found at Isla de Sacrificios, Cholula, Tula, and throughout the Greater Nicoya region (**Figure 13**). We believe these were used for ceremonial consumption of cacao – residue analysis of contents from perform vessels from the El Rayo cemetery is currently underway to test this hypothesis. If the overarching pattern of cacao consumption is tied to the whiteware ceramic tradition, then the regions associated with the mythistorical migration – Soconusco, El Salvador, and Greater Nicoya – are all prime cacao growing areas. Perhaps part of the impetus was the economic control of this valuable commodity.

The whiteware ceramic complex of Early Postclassic Mesoamerica and the Greater Nicoya region of Central America is just that: complex. As researchers continue to clarify the relative chronologies of these areas, and as detailed iconographic analysis explores the dynamic symbolic contents of the vessels, whiteware ceramics offer important insights into the cultural, ideological and exchange relations linking all of these regions across time.



Figure 13: Whiteware cacao vessels from the Gulf Coast, Cholula, Tula, and Nicaragua

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Figure 13: Whiteware cacao vessels from the Gulf Coast, Cholula, Tula, and Nicaragua