
The Painted Murals of Cholula: A Contextual Perspective

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The prehispanic city of Cholula was considered to be the principal sacred place dedicated to the god Quetzalcoatl, as indicated through numerous 16th century ethnohistorical sources. Identified by the title "Tollan," Cholula was a religious center of comparable importance to Tula, Teotihuacan, and Chichen Itza.

The archaeological site of Cholula is located 10 kms from the city of Puebla, in the state of the same name. The major focus of the ceremonial center is the Great Pyramid, Tlachihualtepetl, which is composed of a series of at least four superimposed buildings dating to the Classic and Early Postclassic periods. Surrounding the Great Pyramid are associated ceremonial plazas and platforms. The major area thus far exposed is the Patio of the Altars, located immediately south of the Pyramid, and which features a large plaza bounded by the Pyramid on the north and long platforms on the east and west. Associated with the final phase of Pyramid construction, the Patio of the Altars was certainly in use during the Epiclassic and Early Postclassic periods, ca. AD 600-1000. Since the Patio was built in a series of at least six successive stages, however, the date of the initial construction is unknown.

The mural paintings of Cholula are located in distinct buildings of the Great Pyramid and the Patio of the Altars. Isolated examples have survived the passage of time, but it is likely that the architectural facades of the prehispanic city were covered with mural decoration. At least eleven examples of mural painting are known from the archaeological zone. Within the Pyramid is the mural of the *Chapulines* ("grasshoppers")

associated with Stage 1B, as well as the "mural of the jaguars" and the "mural of the niches" associated with Stage 2. In the Patio of the Altars is the *Bebedores* ("drinkers") mural and seven stages of murals with stars imposed over polychrome diagonal bands, known as the *Estrellas* mural.

The objective of this essay is to present results of a petrographic analysis of the pigments from the *Chapulines*, *Bebedores*, and *Estrellas* murals. This analysis was conducted by Amy Jordan under the direction of Dr. Kathryn Reese-Taylor, then of the University of Wisconsin at La Crosse. The pigments were collected under permission of the Mexican National Institute of Anthropology and History by Citlalli Reynoso, then of the Puebla Regional Center. The principle research question was to determine if the mural technique changed through time, in relation to the iconography. Through microscopic analysis we also wanted to determine the composition of the colors used as well as the methods for creating the murals.

***Chapulines* Mural**

The *Chapulines* mural is located in Stage 1B of the Great Pyramid. Stage 1B represents a minor expansion of the original pyramid, which may have been built during the Late Formative period. The murals were painted on a *tablero* of approximately 60 cm in height by 64 m in length; each *tablero* has a protruding molding above and below the painted area. The mural depicts a series of skulls which Alfonso Caso interpreted as insects, although the skulls feature human elements. The skulls have a kind of knot ("*broche*") in the upper part as a possible headdress decoration, and four circles painted blue. The moldings beneath the skulls feature an element that looks like a bifid tongue. Extending out to the side from the skulls is a profile element that resembles a larval body. The skulls repeat along the length of the mural and vary mainly in the colors used in the eye sockets.

The motif of a frontal face associated with a profile body extending to the side has been compared with imagery on Teotihuacan's Temple of the Feathered

Serpent. Caso's identification of a "grasshopper" body with a skeletal head parallels an image in the Mixtec Codex Vienna used as a toponym, and might also relate to an image in the Mapas de Cuauhtinchan in which a grasshopper is decapitated in a ritual taking place at Cholula. However, since the *Chapulín* body is more larval than grasshopper-like, a better parallel is in iconography recently discussed by Karl Taube relating to the cyclical process of death and rebirth.

Colors employed in the *Chapulín* mural were red, blue, yellow, white, and black. Blue was used on the molding and on some eye sockets. Red was used as a background for the *tablero* and the molding, and also on some eye sockets. Yellow was used in some eye sockets. Black was used to delimit iconographic elements, especially parts of the skull. The skulls themselves were painted white, indicating a possible association with human rather than insect skulls.

***Bebedores* Mural**

The *Bebedores* mural is located on Structure 3-1a of the southwest platform of the Patio of the Altars. The chronological placement of this mural remains problematic: Florencia Muller placed it in the Early Classic based on the form of the ceramic drinking vessels, but McCafferty has recently suggested an Epiclassic date based on the context of the mural within the construction sequence of the Patio of the Altars.

The *Bebedores* mural is located on a *tablero* measuring 2.5 m in height and 60 m in length. The specific characteristics of the structure that bears the mural have not been explored, so it is not known if there were associated *taludes* or stairways. Despite its unknown elements, the *Bebedores* mural is one of the most important in Mesoamerica because of its unique style and theme (Figure 1).

The mural represents a series of 103 individuals seated in pairs, usually separated by a large vessel from which they dip and consume a beverage (usually assumed to be alcoholic *pulque*) in a

possible drinking ceremony. The individuals feature distinctive physical characteristics, especially in their hairstyle. They are depicted wearing simple loincloths, and are often seated in casual postures as if reclining in drunken abandon, in some cases with figures overlapping one over another. Some of the individuals wear animal masks, perhaps representing a theme of transformation into animal co-essences. The figures are painted in two panels, one above the other separated by a blue line. Above and below the panels of human figures are bordering panels that feature repeating elements of a diamond pattern with floral elements and hooks, and a large knot resembling knotted patterns found in the Mixtec codices.



Figure 1: Panel from *Bebedores* mural

The colors used in the mural were red, yellow, blue, brown, black, and white. Red is used in the background and also within the scenes. The liquid associated with the vessels was yellow and white. Black was used to delimit the figures and iconographic elements. The skin of the individuals was brown and yellow. Blue was used to separate the two levels of seated figures, and also in the rope that bordered the scene.

The *Bebedores* mural depicts a scene of ritual consumption that is unlike any other mural known from Mesoamerica. Muller identified a parallel with the *pulque* scenes from the Mixtec Codex

Vindobonensis, and ritual consumption is a theme portrayed in other Mixtec codices and also on Maya vases. The casual posture of the individuals is more comparable to scenes on Maya vases, and to some extent the Cacaxtla and Bonampak murals.

The *Bandas con Estrellas* Mural

The final group of murals to be discussed is located on subsequent stages of the Patio of the Altars, on Structures 3 and 4 comprising the east and west platforms that bound the Patio. The murals are painted on *tableros* that measured between 60-80 cm. Associated with the *tableros* are distinctive *taludes* which feature a stepped, or greca, frieze. This *talud-tablero* combination occurs on six successive stages of the Patio. Although the temporal range of these patio levels is unknown, a small pyramid-altar located about 3 m beneath the final Patio construction but in association with an earlier level contained pottery diagnostic of the Epiclassic period, so the sequence of Patio stages may span the Classic to Postclassic transition.

The mural decoration consists of a panel of diagonal bands painted in red, blue, yellow, and white. Within the diagonal bands are occasional 5-pointed stars with concentric circles in the center.

The architectural style of the painted *tablero* with the greca frieze *talud* carried a consistent symbolic significance since it was repeated in the different construction phases. An exact parallel to this pattern is unknown from other Mesoamerican murals. A mural from the Street of the Dead at Teotihuacan features a jaguar against a background of wavy diagonal bands. The Mixtec codices use multi-color diagonal bands as a symbol relating to "stone," appearing on mountains, caves, and supernatural "stone" men. The combination of a "stone" motif with stars may refer to cosmological principles associated with the Great Pyramid.

Petrographic Analysis

Using samples collected from these murals, a petrographic analysis was conducted to examine the

composition of the murals and the technique of mural construction. Ten samples were examined, revealing a strong similarity between the mineral composition of the *Bebedores* and *Estrellas* murals. While still very similar, the *Chapulines* mural varied in the specific minerals present. The surprising discovery in this process was that the murals were painted directly onto a surface consisting of prepared clay, without the use of plaster. The way that the paint is blended into the clay surface suggests that the pigments were applied while the surface was wet.

The creation of murals without a plaster surface is distinctly different from the process found at other sites such as Cacaxtla or Teotihuacan. Located in an alluvial valley where stone was not readily available, Cholula architecture is famous for its extensive use of adobe blocks. Cholula was also a major producer of ceramics using the natural *tepetate* mined throughout the site. With the scarcity of limestone for producing plaster but the abundance of good quality clay, it is not surprising that the architects of pre-Columbian Cholula used clay as a background for their murals.

Discussion and Conclusion

The murals of Cholula represent one of the most extensive pictorial programs from pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, yet they have received little scholarly attention due to their relative inaccessibility and minimal publication. The *Bebedores* murals in particular are badly faded and are in desperate need of conservation. The general confusion over the site chronology further obscures the context of the different murals in relation to the construction history of the Great Pyramid and contemporaneity with other sites.

The petrographic analysis sheds some light on the relationships between the different murals. First, the general similarity between the different murals suggests a shared practice that is distinct from other sites in the region. The strong similarity between the *Bebedores* and *Estrellas* murals supports the suggestion that they may have been temporally and

culturally close, while the relatively different mineral composition of the *Chapulines* mural suggests greater distance.

Stylistically the murals do not closely resemble others from Mesoamerica. The skeletal imagery on the *Chapulines* mural may relate to a pan-Mesoamerican concept of cyclical death and re-birth, and parallel imagery is found in pictorial manuscripts. The *Bebedores* mural depiction of ritual consumption has parallels in Maya vase painting, where the casual body postures are more comparable to the battle scenes from Cacaxtla and Bonampak murals. Finally, the geometric patterns of the *Estrellas* mural, including the stepped greca frieze on the *talud*, is known from natural and architectural scenes in the Mixtec codices. Taken together, the diversity of the Cholula murals contributes to the growing understanding of Mesoamerican iconography and is useful in further interpreting the religious significance of Cholula as one of the great ceremonial centers of ancient Mesoamerica.

Ceramics: Recent Book Reviews 2005-2006

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This 13th tabulation of recent reviews of books and monographs concerning ceramics and ceramic technology emphasizes those reviews published within the past year. Previous syntheses have appeared in *La Tinaja* 5(3):7-11 (September 1992), 6(2):5-8 (June 1993), 8(1):5-8 (January 1995), and 8(4.1):4-9 (September 1995), 9(3):6-10 (September 1996), 10(3):11-15 (September 1997), 11(3):3-9 (September 1998), 12(3):6-10 (September 1999), 13(1):9-13 (2000), 13(2):14-17 (2001), 14(2):10-15 (2003), and 16(1-2):21-31 (2005). The first ten tabulations were annual but the latter cover the periods 2001-2002 and 2003-2004, with the current listing covering 2005-2006.

Reviews frequently provide salient summaries and useful addenda, corrections, clarified citations, additional references, and updated materials as well as assessments about the contents and significance of books and monographs. I have undoubtedly overlooked some reviews which have been published in sources outside of the usual anthropological, archaeological, and ceramic journals (at least the ones to which I subscribe and those I read and review at the Library of Congress for The Getty Conservation Institute's *Art and Archaeology Technical Abstracts*). Therefore, I request that readers inform me of any additions or corrections; e-mail is preferable: ckolb@neh.gov. In addition, I wish to thank those colleagues from the United States and Great Britain who have taken the time to correspond and encourage the continuation of this summary and for their courtesy by reporting reviews significant to ceramic studies.

I have also included relevant book reviews and major "Book Notes" from the SAS [*Society for Archaeological Sciences*] *Bulletin* column on "Archaeological Ceramics". These contain mini-reviews of 750-2,500 words. Complete issues of the *Bulletin* may be downloaded free of charge as pdf files from the SAS website at <http://www.socarchsci.org/sasb.htm>.

The following citations are organized alphabetically by the name of the author of the book or monograph being reviewed, with the year of publication, publisher, and series information appended for further reference. Published and known "in press" reviews are tabulated within the entries. These citations include the name of the reviewer, journal title, volume and page numbers, year of publication, and any additional information or comments that would be of interest to the reader. If the book or monograph has been reviewed previously and those assessments were cited in earlier issues of *La Tinaja*, a notation appears (e.g., "See also *La Tinaja* 8(1):6 (1995)"), which refers to reviews already tabulated in those issues of *La Tinaja* cited above.

Arubas, Benny and Haim Goldfus (directors and editors)