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Pieces of the Past: Ceramics Analysis at San Bartolo, Guatemala

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Inhabiting all of Guatemala and Belize, southeastern Mexico, and northern Honduras and El Salvador, the Maya were remarkable in their development of intricate writing, an elaborate calendar system, and truly enormous architecture, among other milestones of cultural complexity. Ancient Maya civilization is generally considered to have reached its height during a time period lasting from 400 BC to 800 AD, making the Maya one of the oldest civilizations in the Western Hemisphere. Over the past five years, San Bartolo, a small archaeological site recently discovered in the lowlands of Guatemala by UNH’s own Dr. William Saturno, has witnessed several investigations bringing much to light about the Maya world in its earlier phase of civilization.

Whereas previous research and literature stated that ancient Maya society reached its climax during the so-called Classic period (roughly 200 to 800 AD), San Bartolo is remarkable in that it demonstrates a significant level of activity taking place at the site during the Late Preclassic period (about 100 BC to 200 AD), if not earlier. With discoveries at the site such as elaborately painted murals, hieroglyphic writing, and, most recently, a royal tomb, San Bartolo breaks the earlier paradigm of Maya scholarship which dictated that this level of activity would not have occurred until several hundred years later.

Until very recently, researchers at San Bartolo thought that the activity during the Late Preclassic period was the only remarkable activity at the site and, after the site was abandoned at the end of the Preclassic period, any evidence for Late Classic activity was the result of “squatters” and not of a significantly established community. While there has been evidence of Late Classic (550 AD to 800 AD) activity at San Bartolo, the extent of this occupation (i.e., its duration, population size, method of sustenance, scale of architectural and other types of specialized production) is yet unknown. My research sought to explore the occupation during the Late Classic period.
During the spring of 2005, I was lucky enough to participate in the UNH Anthropology department's “Discovery Guatemala: Archaeology Semester Abroad,” directed by Professor Saturno. During this combined study-abroad and archaeological field school experience, we were in both the colonial city of Antigua, Guatemala, where we spent the first month of our trip attending Spanish school, and at the remote archaeological Maya site of San Bartolo. As a field school student in San Bartolo, I learned about and participated in several different aspects of the archaeological process, such as excavating, surveying and mapping, and artifact conservation, all while living in a largely uninhabited area of the Petén jungle several hours from the closest village.

While at field school, I developed a special interest in the fragments of Maya pottery with which our excavations were inundated. As a civilization that did not work with metal or glass, the ancient Maya relied heavily on ceramic vessels for a variety of purposes, from the everyday to the elaborate. Ceramic materials provide vital information to archaeologists for establishing dates and context for Maya structures and sites because most ceramic types can be assigned to a specific time period of manufacture as well as to a specific function for which they were produced. I was lucky enough to receive special permission to spend one week learning about ceramics analysis in the field laboratory at San Bartolo; from there, I was hooked.

While in the field, I applied for a SURF grant that would allow me to stay in Guatemala for the summer working at the San Bartolo project lab in Antigua. I designed a project with the goal of examining materials from two particularly interesting areas of the site that, through ceramic analysis, had the potential to provide contextual information about ritual behavior at San Bartolo.

Setting the Scene

During the 2002 and 2003 work seasons at San Bartolo, archaeologist Jessica Craig excavated a small building, known as Structure 63, near the site’s ceremonial center. Within the context of this building, Craig discovered a large, carved-stone, pot-bellied figure known as a barrigon, around which was deposited a massive amount of broken pottery in a manner suggesting that ceremonial offerings had been made within the structure repeatedly over time (1). In addition to the presence of the barrigon and ceramic deposit, the discovery of three whole,
purposefully hidden vessels and a secondary burial of human remains within the structure suggests that the function of Structure 63 was primarily that of religious ritual and ceremony (1). On top of the fascinating insight that Structure 63 provided about ritual behavior at San Bartolo and in the Maya world in general, this context is of particular interest in that it is one of the few locations to be investigated that was used primarily during San Bartolo’s re-occupation in the Late Classic period.

Nearby to Structure 63 is Las Plumas, another structure at San Bartolo associated with the Late Classic occupation. Las Plumas (literally, “the feathers,” after the plumage of wild ocellated turkeys found in the area) was a residential compound inhabited by members of a wealthy, elite class that would have held positions of power in the Maya political system. This was evidenced by the sheer size of the structure and its elaborate architectural features as well as by the excavation of a room with a raised sleeping bench (1). Despite their proximity and apparently shared anomalous time period (both structures seem to have been used throughout the Late Classic period and possibly into the Maya civilization’s period of collapse around 900 AD), there has not yet been a connection established between these two buildings, their occupants, and their use. Theoretically, the ritual activities at Structure 63 could have been conducted by the residents of Las Plumas or by other contemporaneous occupants of San Bartolo. If there is, indeed, a connection between the two buildings, the Late Classic occupation of San Bartolo may be more extensive than currently thought. If, on the other hand, a distinctive lack of connection can be established, it is possible that San Bartolo was a location of pilgrimage for ceremonial purposes, indicating that the site held religious/ritualistic meaning to the Late Classic Maya.

In my work with the San Bartolo project, I tried to establish through ceramic analysis a connection (or lack thereof) between these two Late Classic structures. I hoped that a comparative analysis of the ceramic data from each building would provide some insight into the level and nature of Maya activity during this time period. The results of this analysis could serve not only to provide more general information about the Late Classic period at San Bartolo, for which there is not currently much data available, but also to provide further insight into the specifics of ancient Maya ritual behavior.

A Day in the Life

After spending three months in the jungle at San Bartolo, living in a tent with no running water or electricity in temperatures that sometimes crossed the 100 degree mark, returning to Antigua and civilization was definitely an adjustment. Antigua, which is located in the southern Highlands of Guatemala, is a town with the Old World feel of cobbled streets, tiled roofs, and cathedrals, combined with indigenous influences. While in the city, I shared a house with a handful of other international students, from which I could walk to the San Bartolo lab every morning to start work.

At the lab I worked with both Guatemalan archaeologists and graduate students from the United States who were completing various projects for their own research and for the San Bartolo project. In a typical day, I spent time with a given context of materials, performing analysis of the ceramic types, sometimes finding and
re-attaching pieces that fit together, and then cataloging and bagging the materials when I was finished. To say that learning the seemingly endless types and variations of Maya ceramics was challenging would be an understatement. Not surprisingly, after nearly two and a half months of working with pottery fragments, the process became a bit tedious. Nevertheless, the work was fascinating.

From the beginning, this research project consisted mainly of primary analysis of the ceramic material excavated from Structure 63. To perform this analysis I used the type-variety approach, which is the standard method used in Maya archaeology. Type-variety involves examining groups of attributes represented on the ceramic fragments and assigning them to predetermined ceramic types. The three major attributes to consider are A) surface treatment of the ceramic, B) the paste of the ceramic, and C) the form of the ceramic vessel.

First, I evaluated the surface treatment based upon whether the vessel was slipped or unslipped, that is, whether the surface had been treated with a mixture of clay and minerals and then burnished or smoothed to create a surface similar to modern glazes. I then examined the surface decoration for its color, design, texture, and degree of erosion. Paste is the composition of the clay from which a ceramic vessel is made. For my purposes, I evaluated it based on its texture, inclusions (such as pebbles or finely ground stone) and color. Finally, I looked at the form of the vessel, considering whether it was an open form (such as a plate or bowl) or closed form (such as a water jar with a restricted neck).

I analyzed the materials in the same chronological order in which they were originally excavated. Using the attributes described above, I assigned each ceramic fragment to a ceramic type. The majority of types used during this research were established from previous ceramic analysis performed at the site of Seibal, Guatemala (2). In addition to sorting ceramic material based on type, I further broke down the groupings into the parts of the vessel to which the fragments corresponded, such as the rim, body, base, or any combination thereof. After all categories present within a context were determined, I counted and weighed the fragments within each category before cataloging in order to record the context of the material most accurately.

Discovering the Possible Relationship between Structure 63 and Las Plumas

To solve my research question, I did a basic comparative analysis between the data from both locations. The material excavated at Las Plumas had undergone primary analysis and was cataloged based on the attributes listed above. As this comparative analysis was based on reviewing the catalog of materials rather than direct observation, I focused on looking for correlating types from both locations as well as quantities of said types in both Structure 63 and Las Plumas.

The sheer quantity of ceramic material excavated from Structure 63 made the task of analyzing the entire collection unfeasible during a limited research period. However, out of nearly 10,000 ceramic fragments, I finished approximately 80% of the analysis and feel that my analysis represents an accurate sample of ceramics from Structure 63.

Structure 63 underwent several phases of construction during its existence (1) and for this reason, depending on where in the structure the material is from, ceramic material from the excavations span several periods of Maya history. In the deepest area that was excavated, there is ceramic material present from as early as the Middle Preclassic period (400-100 BC.) This material was consistently in small fragments and low frequency, indicating that it was simply an incidental part of the construction. Meanwhile, in the latest phase of
construction, which housed the shrine and the ceramic offerings, the overwhelming majority of material is from
the Late Classic period (600-900 AD). This is consistent with the carbon dates that were taken from the
structure (1). The materials are of such size and frequency that they most definitely were placed deliberately. A
few interesting anomalies occurred in the form of several nearly whole or partial vessels dating from the Late
Preclassic period that were mixed in with the Late Classic offerings. Since these pots were relatively intact and
had been intentionally placed within the shrine, it is possible that they held the status of heirlooms, with
significant meaning to whoever deposited them there.

Many of the same ceramic types are found in the ceramic sequences of Structure 63 and Las Plumas. In fact,
out of the fifty-two separate types that are found at Structure 63, thirty of those types appear at Las Plumas as
well. When considering the ceramics associated with the Late Classic period specifically, thirteen of the twenty-
four ceramic types found at Structure 63 are also found at Las Plumas. The majority of types found at Structure
63 that do not make an appearance at Las Plumas are finely-made varieties or varieties of polychrome (multi-
color painted) pots that are considered ceremonial or especially valuable in nature. This may simply have to do
with the fact that Structure 63 was the scene of ceremonial activities whereas Las Plumas was a residence,
albeit an elite one. One must also take into account that the sample size from Las Plumas is far smaller than
that of Structure 63 and, therefore, hosts a smaller variety of ceramic types.

While the ceramic data from Structure 63 and Las Plumas has the potential to imply a connection between the
inhabitants of Las Plumas and the ritual activity that took place at Structure 63, I could not draw a conclusive
relationship. There is certainly a temporal association between the two structures, as both exhibit ceramic types
clearly indicative of Late Classic activity. Also, the overlapping presence of specific types within both structures
could indicate that they originated from a common source. However, considering that the Late Classic period
spanned over two hundred years, it is impossible to tell from this distinction alone whether the two structures
were used simultaneously.

As the Late Classic period is the least understood phase of San Bartolo occupation, it will be most helpful to
continue systematic excavations within the site that target this context. It is already apparent that San Bartolo
was a significant presence in the Preclassic period of Maya civilization, but only through further investigation,
including more advanced ceramic analysis, will we be able to understand its significance during the Late Classic
period as a revived political center, a place of religious pilgrimage, or perhaps a yet unimagined possibility.
While I would not hesitate to refer to my experiences in Guatemala as “once-in-a-lifetime,” I sincerely hope that won’t be the case. Living and working in a foreign country—especially having to get by day-to-day on my limited Spanish—was challenging, but I loved every minute of it. Being able to work, hands-on, with actual material from an ancient culture and knowing that I was contributing, in my own small way, to answering larger questions about the culture of the ancient Maya was not only eye-opening, but door-opening as well. And so, endless thanks to Dr. Bill Saturno, Jess Craig, Paty Rivera, and all the amazing people at the San Bartolo project; and to the kind folks at the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program, without whom this experience, and my anticipated future adventures in archaeology, would not have been possible.

References


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Author Bio

Caitlin Walker is a senior anthropology major at UNH. Her experience in the “Discovery Guatemala” study abroad/field experience program, offered through the anthropology department and directed by Dr. William Saturno, inspired her to secure a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) to continue her research abroad. In addition to the focus of her research—conducting ceramic analysis of San Bartolo—Caitlin really enjoyed her time in Guatemala, learning Spanish, living in a tent in the jungle, and releasing baby sea turtles into the wild. She aspires to be a professional archaeologist.

Mentor Bio

Dr. William Saturno has been an assistant professor of anthropology at UNH since August, 2003. He specializes in Mesoamerican archaeology, and is the director of the San Bartolo Regional Archaeology Project in Guatemala. Dr. Saturno taught Caitlin in several classes before she embarked on her field experience, and was happy to see her interest in ceramics culminate in this research project. “It was a pleasure to work with her,” he says, “and I plan to continue our collaborations in the future.” Although this was his first experience as a mentor, Dr. Saturno has already committed to sponsoring another student for a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship in 2006.