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"A 'Handy' Identification of Artists in the Chocholá Style Ceramic Corpus"

Maya potters working around 700 CE in what is now the Yucatán Peninsula in modern-day Mexico created unique, deeply carved ceramics (IMAGE). First named the Chocholá style by Michael Coe in 1973, this ceramic group typically lacks provenience—almost all published Chocholá specimens come from unauthorized excavations. At present, the only major examples of published work dealing with Chocholá style ceramics are Coe's definition of the style, Carolyn Tate's and Traci Ardren's discussion of representative iconography and Nikolai Grube's, Jose Miguel García Campillo's (1992) and Eric Boot's considerations of the hieroglyphic texts. Each of these brief publications leaves unanswered many questions about the style.

The style itself was clearly reserved for elite consumption. The hieroglyphic texts found on Chocholá pots refer to important, historical individuals whose names also appear in the monumental record (García 1992). Furthermore, significant titles like *sajal* and *bakab* are ubiquitous in the style, as is the deep carving used for rendering imagery (IMAGE). The depth of carving (IMAGE) mimics that associated with monumental stone sculpture throughout the entire Maya region (cf. Tate 1985; Ardren 1995).

Ameliorating the style's historical lack of context, new excavations securely anchor Chocholá ceramics in the North and suggest several spheres of production (IMAGE). Based on epigraphic and archaeological evidence, the clearest identification pinpoints Oxkintok and its surroundings, in the heart of the Puuc or hilly region of the Yucatán Peninsula. The Xcalumkin

area bordering the Puuc region may also have acted as main area of production for the style . Chocholá ceramics have reportedly been found at both locations during recent excavations, which further solidifies the connection with production (Schmidt 2001; Dominique Michelet 2007, personal communication). Other areas of manufacture may very well have existed outside the Puuc region, however, as is implied by one Chocholá reference to Ti-ho (or modern Mérida), an area where excavations also unearthed an unusual variation of the style . Now that production sites can be identified, more specific techniques of manufacture can also be explored through the analysis of individual hieroglyphic texts. A single artist responsible for producing multiple ceramics will be identified and technological aspects of ceramic creation will also be considered.

Chocholá vessels, like most elite Maya ceramics, included writing in the form of dedicatory formulae, or Primary Standard Sequences. Such dedicatory formulae usually incorporate several different sections. In the most complete Chocholá examples (IMAGE), a poorly understood hieroglyph opens the dedicatory phrase, followed by a reference to the way the text was created—i.e., through carving. An explicit reference to the vessel itself opens the next section, and is followed by another text string that again mentions the vessel and further identifies its intended contents (cf. Grube 1990). Additional hieroglyphs are often included and reveal the name of the patron, the owner or the artist. While personal names occur repeatedly in the corpus of Chocholá ceramics, simple titles like *bakab* and *sajal* can also stand by themselves (cf. Grube 1990 and Boot 2006).

Several characteristics separate Chocholá style dedicatory formulae from more standard examples, however (IMAGE). First, the text itself may be reversed, either in the orientation of individual hieroglyphs or in the overarching reading order (García 1992: 188). Chocholá texts also frequently incorporate a reference to the carving of the vessel and certain syllables are given full form—the **k'i** syllable, for example, is almost always rendered as a bird wing, while in the

Chocholá corpus, it can appear either as a bird wing or as the entire bird itself (García 1992: 188). While these traits clearly distinguish the Chocholá style from other Maya ceramics, they are not evident in every Chocholá example. Chocholá texts can, for instance, follow more standard dedicatory forms. Even in these examples, however, a predilection for certain glyphic types and styles can be seen (IMAGE). In fact, it is the consistency of Chocholá dedicatory formulae that allows for the inclusion of a stylistic subset of ceramics that do not contain imagery .

Consistent glyphic forms occur repeatedly in the current corpus. While it is not the purpose of this paper to develop an in-depth understanding of such repetitions, a few general comments are warranted. The **u** syllable, as a third person pronoun, is one of the most used syllables in ancient Maya hieroglyphic writing (IMAGE). For this reason, it can take the widest variety of forms. In the Chocholá record, however, only two main versions of the **u** syllable occur . The first, and most common, is composed of two vertically arranged circles with visual details inserted between them (IMAGE). The other is created by an oblong, vertically arranged set of two parallel, curved lines in a comb-like shape. Another typical inclusion can be seen in the reference to the carving of the vessel—the famous **lu**-bat collocation followed by *y-uk'ib'* (IMAGE). In this case, as has already been noted, the **k'i** syllable often takes the form of a full-figured bird. The other diagnostic characteristic here, though, is the use of the knot form of the **yu** syllable. While not as common (or as varied in form) as potential **u** syllables, the **yu** syllable could have been rendered differently. The repetition that occurs within Chocholá dedicatory formulae is also unusual. Ancient Maya artists frequently used different variations of the same syllabic sign when it appears multiple times in a single inscription. Chocholá artists, on the other hand, seemed to prefer the visual parallels such repetition offered. When **yu** or **lu** syllables are used multiple times in the Chocholá corpus, for example, they almost always take the same form.

Thus, the Chocholá style is an example of a highly systematized pattern of ceramic production.

While Chocholá ceramics were made at a number of different locations, they seem to have been created over a fairly short period of time. In fact, based on both epigraphic analysis and depositional information, the production of the style seems to be limited to the eighth century, and might be further restricted to the first half of that one hundred year period. Such evidence indicates that only one or, at the most, two or three generations of artists could have been responsible for creating the style. While the vast array of ancient Maya monuments and art objects have long been credited to a small number of scribes and artists, little effort has been made to identify specific craftsmen or their production techniques. Chocholá texts and imagery provide a unique opportunity for identifying artistic hands and examining production techniques.

While the same artist can be connected with several ceramics in the larger Chocholá corpus, due to time constraints only two examples will be considered here. The first (IMAGE) has been recognized as Chocholá since the style was so named by Michael Coe in 1973 (cf. Coe 1973: cat. 55). The second vessel, however, has long resided in private collections and has not been published before now. Happily, it was recently donated to the University of Texas, Austin under the care of Dr. Steve Bourget and can now be included within the larger Chocholá grouping.

Even a cursory perusal of the texts on each ceramic indicates their striking similarity (IMAGE). Not only does each text say exactly the same thing, both do so by using precisely the same combination of hieroglyphs. The two texts can be read as follows: **u-ja-yi yu-k'i-b'i ti-tzi-hi li ca-ca-wa** for *ujaay y-uk'ib' ti tzihil cacaw* referring to the vessel as a drinking pot for fresh cacaw, a chocolaty drink frequently referred to in standard dedicatory formulae when a liquid is named. The texts themselves are not at all unusual in the wider scope of Maya dedicatory formulae. In fact, they display none of the characteristics that, as mentioned above, serve to

separate the Chocholá style from more typical renditions of the dedicatory formulae. It is the exact replication of the textual string, which is otherwise completely normal, that makes these two examples interesting.

The similarity exhibited by these two ceramics goes further than just using the same words to create the highly formulaic dedicatory text. The inclusions within each glyphic sign replicate one another exactly across these two ceramics. Simply consider the first term, *ujaay*. As already stated, the **u** is one of the most used syllables in the ancient Maya hieroglyphic record and occurs in two basic forms in the Chocholá corpus. The two ceramics under consideration here both use the **u** syllable composed of two vertically arranged circles. While the two circles are standard, the central visual element can take a number of different forms, as this illustration indicates. The two Chocholá pots considered here, however, contain exactly the same series of horizontal, parallel lines in contrast to other options. The rest of the two texts bear the same consistent rendition of the glyphic shapes and their constituent elements. Small deviations in the representation of the **k'i** syllable are the only exception to this duplication, although the wing form is used in each case instead of the full-figure bird.

The marked similarity of these two text strings indicates that they were created by the same hand. The individual glyphs do reflect minute differences—one seems to be more curvilinear, for example, while the other has a kind of vertical stretching of the glyph block. In comparison with other signs from typical Chocholá pots, however, the level of similarity between these two examples is unique and therefore particularly striking. In fact, one would expect the slight variation evident in these two instances; simply consider the slight differences in a person's signature across multiple examples. In this case, in addition to the duplication of glyphic forms, similarities in details caused by the specific motor skills of the artist in question support this identification. The glyphs from each pot tend to look like they've been pulled

slightly up and to the right, a pattern that is especially noticeable in the first three glyphs, with their rounded-square forms. This idiosyncratic feature reflects exactly the kind of subconscious process and individualized development of motor skills that allows for the identification of artists' hands.

The major difference between these two vessels is found in the constituent imagery (IMAGE). Even though the texts are identical and the iconographic themes are similar—both depict young lords—the images themselves are markedly different. Perhaps, then, when the image becomes a major focus, the text can be standardized.¹ This specific example, together with the recognition that other individual artists' hands can be similarly identified (and eventually, it is hoped, linked with multiple production sites) has important implications for Maya ceramic production. First, it is evident that individual, identifiable craftsmen created multiple elite ceramics in the same style over a short period of time. Second, such consistency, in both the work of individual artists and across groups of artists, seems to indicate that there was a coherent understanding of the way in which Chocholá ceramics should be produced that was articulated across space. This, in turn, implies a much greater sense of artistic community than has previously been suggested.

When the UT ceramic is examined further, the manner in which the glyphs were carved contains some intriguing information (IMAGE). The first three glyphs seem to be carved using a fine, though not sharp, point. It has previously been assumed that Chocholá vessels were carved during the leather-hard stage, when the clay would have been partially dried (cf. Ardren 1995). In this instance, however, the softness of the line in all cases (i.e. the lack of hard edges) seems to indicate that the hieroglyphs were carved during the wet stage. The last hieroglyph is particularly interesting. The deep impressions that can be seen on both the left and right sides

¹ There are several exceptions to this general rule even within the Chocholá corpus, but then, the Chocholá corpus, as already noted, is surprisingly consistent.

contrast markedly with the carefully incised lines evident in the same glyph from the other ceramic. Furthermore, there is a variation in the thickness of line that does not occur in any of the other glyphs from the other ceramic nor in any preceding this final glyph from the UT ceramic (IMAGE). Both of these hieroglyphs end the dedicatory sequences in each case and, in doing so, curve around the bottom of the vessel form. The varying depths and line thicknesses in the UT ceramic, especially in the last glyph, may indicate that the ancient artist used individual stamps to create each incised hieroglyphic block. Thus, the use of a stamp on the curved surface of the UT vessel would require a rocking movement to impress all edges of the stamp into the wet clay. This, in turn, explains the deeper impressions found in isolated areas of the hieroglyph.

Thus, a single artist has been identified as the creator of at least two Chocholá ceramics (IMAGE). The identical texts found on the two vessels considered here have larger connotations regarding ceramic manufacture among the ancient Maya. Certain potters, for example, seem to have specialized in certain elite ceramic types. Furthermore, the replication of some elements, like the dedicatory formulae, was not eschewed. On a related issue, the wide distribution of the Chocholá style, combined with the consideration of multiple pots from single artists, seems to indicate larger artistic and scribal schools that, in this case, covered the northern Yucatan Peninsula. Additionally, the way in which the hieroglyphs in the UT ceramic were created provides interesting implications regarding technical modes of production—if stamps were indeed used in the UT example, then important evidence now exists for a way of producing hieroglyphic sequences on ceramics that has not been recognized until now. Was this a function of greater mechanization? Were some vessels stamped first, before they were carved with imagery? In this case, then, if a problem occurs in the process of creating the image, only the image is lost as the text string could be replicated easily. Or were the image and text both added in the wet stage? In such a scenario, the artist might be tempted to develop stamps so that he or

she would be free to spend more time on the actual image creation and less on the repetitious and exacting carving of the dedicatory formula. There are some indications that stamps were used on other Chocholá dedicatory sequences, but how do the ceramics that contain no imagery yet may reflect stamped hieroglyphic strings work into this continuum? These are some of the questions that the present research raises and more work must be done on the Chocholá style before further conclusions can be reached.