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STAMP-BOTTOM BOWLS OF CHOLULA, MEXICO

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Stamp-bottom bowls are characterized by mold-impressed patterns on the interior base of subhemispherical, tripod vessels (Figure 1). They have been found over a wide geographic range in central Mexico, including the Gulf Coast, Mixteca Alta, Tehuacan Valley, Morelos, the Valley of Mexico, and Tula, where they are generally associated with the Early Postclassic period, ca. 900-1200 CE. While stamp-bottom bowls are regularly mentioned in site reports, and are occasionally illustrated, they are only minimally described and no comprehensive attempt to organize this disparate information has been made.

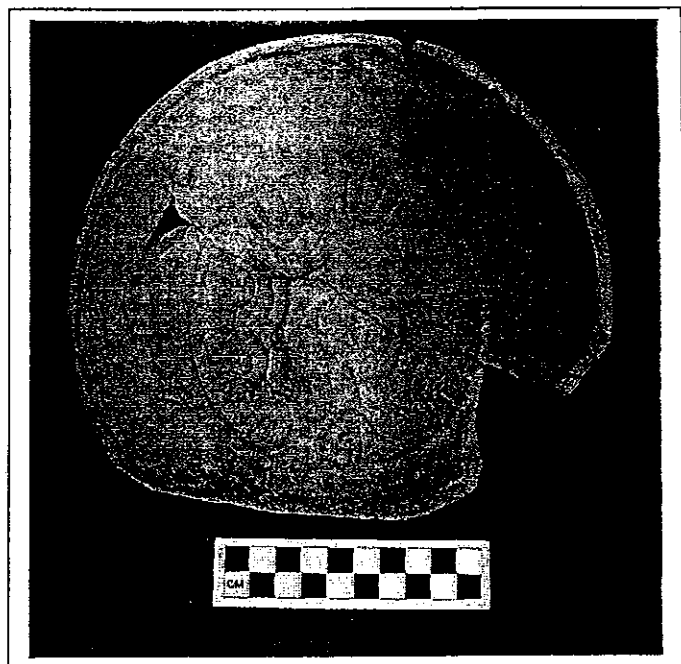


Figure 1
Xicalli Plain stamp-bottom bowl

Stamp-bottom bowls from Cholula have been described by Müller (1978), Noguera (1954), McCafferty (1992, in press), and Suárez Cruz (1995) in their discussions of Cholula ceramics. Cholula is an urban center in the Puebla Valley of highland Mexico (Figure 2), with a long history of religious and economic importance (McCafferty 1996a,b). Noguera identified *fondos sellados* (“stamp bases”) in his excavations at the Patio of the Carved Skulls (1954:226), and recent investigations at the site have clarified the Epiclassic, or Early Tlachiualtepetl (700-900 CE), phase assemblage in which these early examples appear (McCafferty and Suárez 1995; McCafferty 1996a). Stamp-bottom bowls also appear in the Early Postclassic, or Middle and Late Tlachiualtepetl phase (900-1200 CE), UA-1 household (McCafferty 1992). They are rare, however, in Late Postclassic (Cholollan phase; 1200-1520 CE) collections. Based on Cholula's culture historical sequence, derived in part from ethnohistorical accounts, stamp-bottom bowls seem to be linked with the arrival and subsequent occupation of the city by members of the Olmeca-Xicallanca ethnic group during the Epiclassic period, ca. 700 CE (McCafferty 1996a, 2000). It is notable that functional parallels for these

vessels do not appear in either earlier or later periods, suggesting a specific and distinctive relationship to cultural foodways.

A sample of 140 complete or nearly complete stamp-bottom bowls were among excavated materials collected from the Proyecto Cholula of the 1960s and 1970s. This paper summarizes interpretations of wear patterns and design motifs (see also McCafferty, Spencer, and Suárez Cruz 1998). One conclusion of the study is that stamp-bottom bowls provide a pre-polychrome window on the origins of the Mixteca-Puebla stylistic tradition at Cholula.

Stamp-bottom bowls from the Proyecto Cholula assemblage represent three distinct ceramic types (McCafferty 1992, in press): Xicalli Burnished, Ocotlan Red Rim, and Momoxpan Metallic Orange (single examples of Cocoyotla Black on Natural and San Pedro Polished Red were also noted).

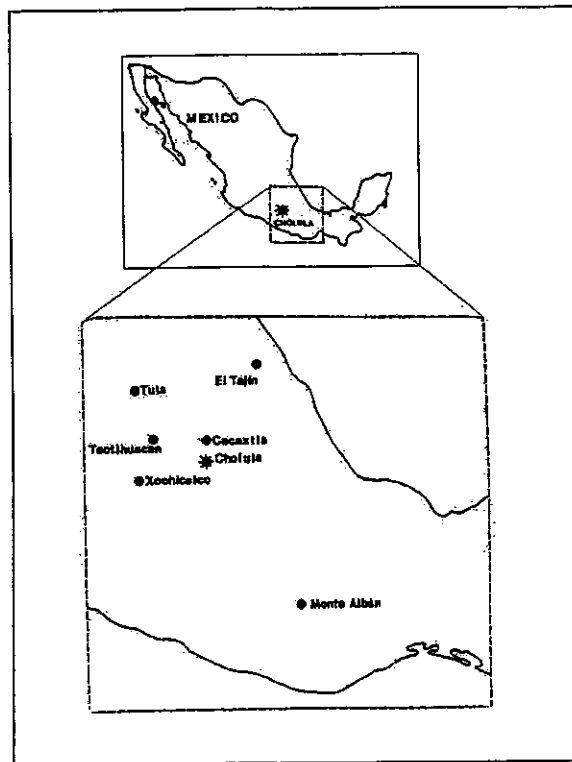


Figure 2
Map indicating location of Cholula within central Mexico

Xicalli Burnished was the most common stamp-bottom type found in the Proyecto Cholula assemblage (65%, n=91). It is a plain ware with a light brown color and moderate burnishing.

Xicalli is the most abundant serving ware of the Middle and Late Tlachihualtepetl phase (900-1200 CE; McCafferty 1992, 1996a, in press), and is also present in the transitional Early Tlachihualtepetl phase. Stamp-bottom bowls from the Patio of the Carved Skulls were of this ceramic type. Xicalli stamp-bottom bowls average 18.0 cm in diameter (range 15-22 cm), and 6.1 cm in height (range 4-9 cm; including supports).

Stamp-bottom designs appear on Ocotlan Red Rim vessels 16% (n=23) of the time. This type [also known as *cerámica lisa* by Suárez Cruz (1995)] features a well-burnished orange slip over a white base coat, with a characteristic red-painted rim that extends about 1 cm down from the rim. Other variations of Ocotlan include the earliest polychrome designs, including patterns that are closely linked to Isla de Sacrificios pottery from the Gulf Coast. It first appears in the Middle Tlachihualtepetl phase (900-1050 CE) and continues into the Early Cholollan phase (1200-1400 CE) in reduced frequency. Ocotlan stamp-bottom bowls average 22.4 cm in diameter (range 21-24 cm), and 9.4 cm in height (range 8.5-10 cm; including supports).

Momoxpan Metallic Orange also features an orange surface, but it is usually darker in color and often features a highly burnished surface with fire-clouds that take on an almost metallic luster. Comales are the predominant vessel form for Momoxpan, and they first appear during the Early Tlachihualtepetl phase. Momoxpan serving wares, especially subhemispherical and conical bowls, appear in significant amounts during the Late Tlachihualtepetl phase but become even more abundant during the subsequent Cholollan period. Momoxpan stamp-bottom bowls average 19.8 cm in diameter (range 18.5-22 cm), and 8.8 cm in height (range 5-11.5 cm; including supports), and comprise another 16% (n=24) of the sample.

In addition to these full size vessels, miniature stamp bottom bowls occasionally occur representing each of the main types. They are slightly over half the average diameter of their full-size counterparts, but of comparable vessel height. All of the miniatures feature significant wear, indicating that they were not simple effigies but were also used as functional grinding surfaces.

All stamp-bottom bowls have tripod supports. This seems reasonable since round-bottom vessels would have a tendency to spin when in use for grinding. Leg forms for the different types are distinctive (Figure 3). Xicalli Burnished supports are solid, and are usually short and stubby, resulting in the relatively low vessel height of the bowls. Ocotlan Red Rim supports are hollow and bulbous; they often feature clay nodules within the support that causes it to rattle. Momoxpan Metallic Orange supports are also hollow, but can be zoomorphic or more commonly stepped.

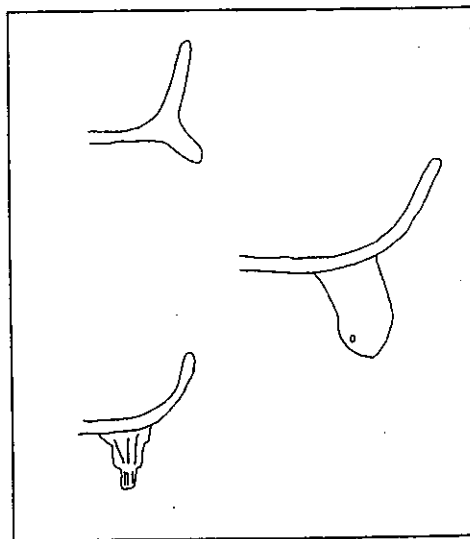


Figure 3
Variation in support form; Xicalli Burnished (a), Ocotlán Red Rim (b), Momoxpan Metallic Orange (c)

Wear patterns were estimated based on a standardized scale ranging from 1 to 4, in which 1 represented virtually no wear and 4 indicated severe wear with the design nearly obliterated. The degree of wear remains relatively similar between the different ceramic types, averaging

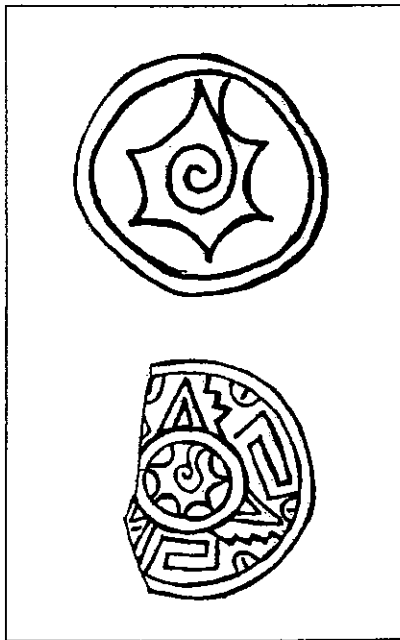


Figure 4
Variations on cut shell motif

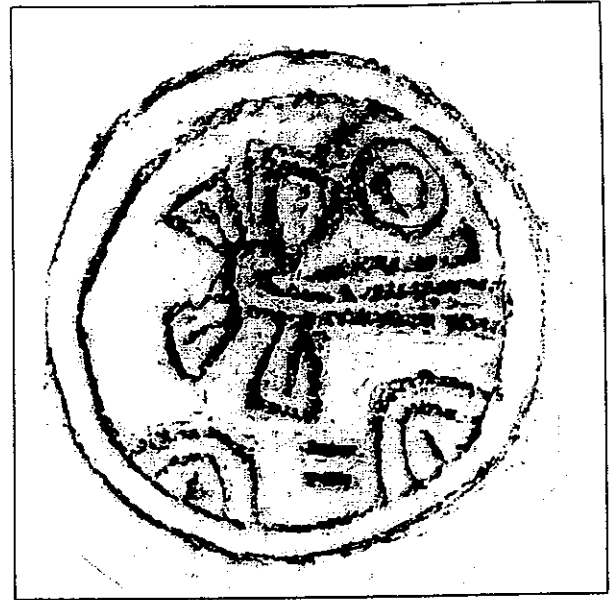


Figure 5
Stylized Ehecatl head with buccal mask

between 2.8 to 3.0. In general, wear is concentrated in the center of the vessel base, with a diminishing degree of wear towards the vessel walls. In some cases the wear extends 1 to 2 cm up the vessel walls. It has traditionally been suggested that stamp-bottom bowls were used as chile graters, comparable to *molcajetes* still sold in indigenous markets that are made of clay but with a deeply scored base, usually in cross-hatched or concentric circle patterns. This explanation is not completely satisfying, however, since stamp-bottom bowls would not provide a sharp grater surface, especially after the initial use period was past. Many of the vessels were worn down to an extent where the stamped impression was barely discernable.

The molded designs consist of geometric, naturalistic, and "codex-style" representational motifs. Simple geometric motifs include such patterns as cross-hatched and wavy lines, and scalloped semi-circles around the edge of the base. More complex geometric patterns combine elements such as zigzags, concentric chevrons, and xicalcolihqui frets, and these designs frequently appear in quadripartite patterns. "Eccentric" geometric motifs combine elements in non-repeating, asymmetrical associations.

Naturalistic designs can include floral, zoomorphic, and anthropomorphic patterns. Floral patterns often feature "petal" motifs radiating out from a central element. Zoomorphic designs feature geometric shell motifs, insects, birds, and mammals. Anthropomorphic designs include human heads, a "robot-like" figure, and also skulls and crossed-bones.

As more detailed analyses of these patterns develop the meaning content of the patterns is beginning to emerge, to the extent that some of the symbolism can now be "read." For example, the cut shell motif is similar to cut shells associated with the wind god Ehecatl in Late Postclassic iconography (Figure 4a). The same pattern appears in the center of complex geometric motifs (Figure 4b), and with additional elements including frets, zigzags, and chevrons, all appear together on the shield of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl in the *Primeros Memoriales* (Sahagún 1993), further suggesting that these may be iconic elements. Another vessel features a stylized face with the buccal mask of Ehecatl (Figure 5). Finally, Figure 6 features a split image of cross-hatching and a half sun/star, which may be representative of Quetzalcoatl as the god of the dawn, or Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli.

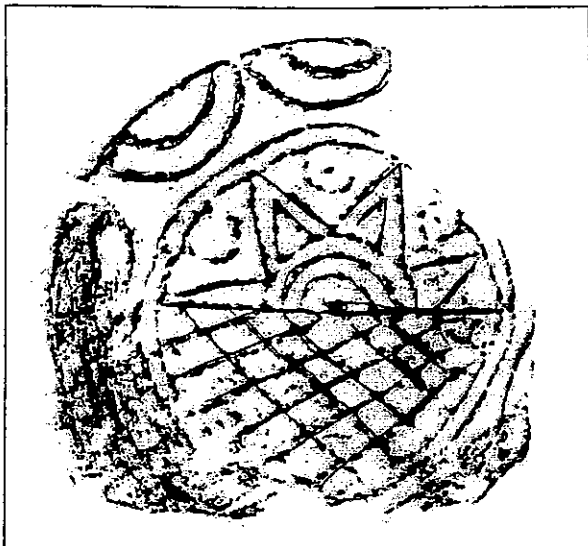


Figure 6
Split image of cross-hatching and half star,
perhaps representing Quetzalcoatl as
morning star, Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli



Figure 7
Variations on codex-style iconography

Other patterns are clearly related to codex-style symbols (Figure 7), including a composite bird/crocodile, an eagle with speech scroll, a bird with skeletal head, a skull, and crossed bones. An example of a Mixtec-style place glyph is even found (Figure 8), in which a flower sits atop a hill sign, providing a toponym for "hill of the flower."

The iconographic information available from the Proyecto Cholula stamp-bottom bowls provides important information for interpreting the development of the Mixteca-Puebla stylistic tradition at Cholula. The Mixteca-Puebla style has long been associated with Cholula because of the abundance and diversity of codex-style imagery on polychrome ceramics (McCafferty 1994; Nicholson 1960, 1982; Nicholson and Quiñones Keber 1994), as well as the strong possibility that codices of the Borgia-group were produced at the site (Nicholson 1966). Since stamp-bottom bowls were found at the Patio of the Carved Skulls dating to levels before polychrome pottery was in use, and since the motifs are not incompatible with those found in the Proyecto Cholula corpus, it can be inferred that the Mixteca-Puebla iconographic vocabulary was already being developed during the Epiclassic, or Early Tlachiualtepetl, phase (700-900 CE).

Stamp-bottom bowls found by the Proyecto Cholula provide a unique window onto the Classic/Postclassic transition. They were a utilitarian vessel form, probably used for grinding chiles and herbs in a manner similar to modern *molcajetes*. Stamp-bottom bowls first appear in the Epiclassic period, along with a number of other innovative ceramic types and vessel forms, suggesting important changes in the cultural composition of the city (McCafferty 2000). Since foodways are often one of the best methods for recognizing ethnic identity in the archaeological record, changes in utilitarian pottery are important clues to understanding these processes.

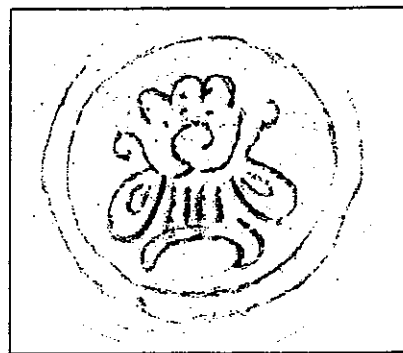


Figure 8
Mixtec style hill glyph with flower motif

Iconography impressed on these vessels provides a substantial corpus of visual imagery relating to the symbolic system of this demographic change. Patterns correspond to the Mixteca-Puebla stylistic tradition, even though stamp-bottom bowls pre-date polychrome pottery, and therefore indicate that a codex-style symbolic vocabulary was already being developed during the Epiclassic period, contemporary with the muralists of Cacaxtla (McVicker 1985). A strong presence of iconography relating to Ehecatl indicates a religious organization that matches that of the Olmeca-Xicallanca, according to ethnohistoric accounts (McCafferty 2001). In sum, evidence from stamp-bottom bowls supports the propositions of Jiménez Moreno, Noguera and H.B. Nicholson that Cholula was a primary crucible for the creation of the Mixteca-Puebla style, and that the Olmeca-Xicallanca with their roots on the Gulf Coast were important agents in that creation.

Acknowledgements

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Illustrations of the stamp motifs were done as rubbings of the raised surfaces, using wax crayon on thin tracing paper. These were then scanned and enhanced using facilities at Salve Regina University, Newport, RI.

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