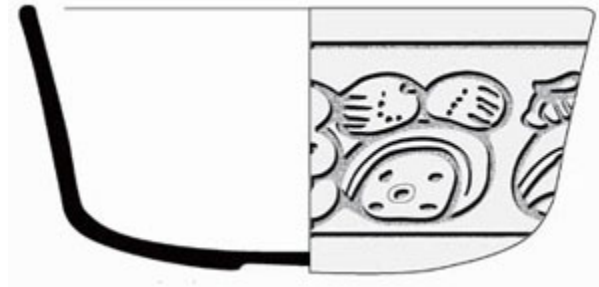


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Ceramics at Piedras Negras, Guatemala



Research Year: 2001

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Middle Pre-Classic to Late Classic

Location: Lowlands Guatemala

Site: Piedras Negras

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Current Ceramic Research at Piedras Negras

The majority of recent ceramic research at Piedras Negras has been chronological and typological. Because of problems related to the idiosyncratic collection procedures employed by the Pennsylvania project, the previous ceramic seriation (Holley 1983) under-represents the variety, variability and time depth of the Piedras Negras ceramic sequence. The recent excavations have resulted in a very large and well provenanced ceramic sample and have allowed us to address these issues. The time depth of the

sequence has been increased to reflect the presence of a Middle and Late Preclassic occupation at the site and, in addition, the larger ceramic sample has allowed a better accounting of variability within types. This has resulted in an expanded ceramic catalog and more accurate type descriptions (Muñoz and Fitzsimmons 1998; Muñoz 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2000, 2001). This more accurate understanding of ceramic variability has allowed us to make several inferences regarding the probable organization of ceramic production at Piedras Negras and processes of technological innovation in the ceramics of that site.

See also: "[The Ceramic Sequence of Piedras Negras, Guatemala: Type and Varieties](#)" by Arturo René Muñoz (Grant #02055), submitted to FAMSI in March of 2004. In most regards, these two reports are complementary. In cases where these reports appear contradictory, the data presented in this later report should be taken as correct.

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Chronology

The Pre-Classic

The ceramic chronology of Piedras Negras extends from approximately 650 B.C. to A.D. 850 and is divided into six ceramic complexes ([Figure 1](#)). The earliest definable ceramic complexes at Piedras Negras, Hol and Abal, are typologically equivalent to Late Middle Preclassic and Late Preclassic assemblages recovered from other Maya sites. The high typological similarity between these complexes and other equivalent complexes in the Maya Lowlands indicates that the residents of Piedras Negras and the surrounding area did participate in the Mamón and Chicanel ceramic spheres. A few sherds bearing some typological similarity to Xe phase ceramics from Altar de Sacrificios have been found at Piedras Negras, suggesting a greater time depth for settlement along this part of the Usumacinta than indicated by the Hol complex assemblage. Unfortunately, these materials are too rare and too widely scattered to allow the definition of a ceramic complex for this period.

The great majority of all Preclassic ceramics from Piedras Negras have been recovered from the South Group Court and South Group Plaza, and the associated structures. There is no noticeable difference in the distribution of late and middle Preclassic ceramics. Most Preclassic materials are recovered from mixed construction fill, the great majority related to the initial construction of low platforms that eventually supported many of the Early Classic monumental structures dominating both the South Group Court and South Group Plaza. Preclassic ceramics have also been recovered from a

number of secondary sites in the immediate vicinity of Piedras Negras including El Cayo and El Porvenir (Webster and Kirker 1998; Lee and Hayden 1988). Taken together these data suggest the Preclassic occupation of the area was light and was restricted, in most cases, to areas immediately adjacent to the river.

	UAXACTUN	TIKAL	PIEDRAS NEGRAS	ALTAR DE SACRIFICIOS	SEIBAL	PALENQUE
1000			?			
900		KABAN	?	JIMBA		
875	TEPEU 3	EZNAB	KUMCHE	BOCA LATE EARLY	BAYAL	
850						
825						
800	TEPEU 2	IMIX	CHACALHAZ LATE EARLY	FASION LATE EARLY	TEPEJILOTE	HUIPALE
775						
750						
725						
700						
675	TEPEU 1	IK	YAXCHE LATE EARLY	PACION		MURCIELAGOS
650						
625						
600	TZAKOL 3		BALCHE	CHIXOY		
575						
550						
525	TZAKOL 2	MANIK	NABA LATE EARLY	VEREHOS	JUNCO	CASCADA
500						
475						
450						
425						
400	TZAKOL 1	MANIK 17	?	SALINAS		MOTIEPA
375						
350						
325						
300						
275	CHICANEL	CIMI			CANTUTSE	PICOTA
250						
225						
200						
175						
150	CHICANEL	CHUEN	ABAL LATE EARLY	PLANCHA LATE EARLY		MISOLHA
125						
100						
A.D -1- B.C.						
100	MAMOH	CAUAC				
150						
200						
250						
300						
350	MAMOH	TZEC	HOL	SAN FELIX LATE EARLY	ECCOBA	
400						
450						
500	MAMOH	EB		XE	REAL	
600						

Figure 1. Chronological Chart.

Monochrome reds dominate Hol and Abal assemblages. Black and cream monochromes are also represented in these assemblages but in far lower frequencies. The current sample of diagnostic Hol ceramic material is small and rather fragmented. For this reason it is difficult to describe with great confidence the complete range of forms represented in this collection. The most common form appears to be thick walled bowls or plates with everted or out-curving rims. Other forms positively identified include small, slipped jars with short, nearly vertical necks, and large mouthed "cuspidors" similar to those known from Preclassic collections elsewhere. Surface penetration decoration such as incising, fluting, and gadrooning are the most common decorative modes and are found on all monochrome types. Resist decoration and bichrome painting are also known from Hol complex assemblages but are infrequent and make up a minority of types represented.

Abal complex assemblages are, in most respects, comparable to Late Preclassic assemblages recovered elsewhere in the Petén. Waxy monochrome red slips dominate Abal period assemblages. Monochrome blacks and creams are also in assemblages dating to this time, but in much lower frequency. Fire clouding and crazing are common and are most frequently observed on cream slipped vessels dating to this period. Bowls and plates with wide, everted rims are the most common forms. Other common forms include deep bowls with bolstered rims ([Figure 2](#)) and shallow dishes with direct or unmodified rims.



Figure 2. Flor Cream Bowl.

The most common decorative modes include parallel incised lines on everted rims. Other kinds of surface penetration decoration such as fluting or gadrooning are also known from assemblages dating to this period, but are found in lower frequency than in

the assemblages belonging to the preceding phase. Usulután like decoration, i.e. parallel rows of positive-painted wavy lines, is also known from this period and are typically found decorating the interiors of shallow plates with hooked and grooved rims. The presence of types decorated using this technique, as well as the stratigraphic position of lots containing this material suggests that it may be possible to facet Abal into late and early periods, with the later facet containing the Usulután materials. In comparative terms, late facet assemblages are roughly equivalent to Protoclassic I assemblages known from elsewhere.

The period of time following the Abal ceramic phase is still poorly understood. The period is distinguished primarily through stratigraphic placement and the presence of a limited number of diagnostic modes. These modes include Usulután like decoration, mammiform supports, the occasional presence of Aguila like orange slips and other early Tzakol diagnostics. In comparative terms, this period closely resembles Cimi and Salinas complex materials known from Tikal and Altar, respectively. It is important to point out, however, that one of the most diagnostic modes of this period from both of these sites, z-angle bowls or plates, are almost completely absent from the Piedras Negras collection. Holley (1983) notes the possibility of a pre-Naba ceramic complex at Piedras Negras but neither had sufficient materials in the Pennsylvania collection to adequately define a ceramic complex for this period. The extensive testing of the southern sector of Piedras Negras between 1997 and 2001 by the current project has lent credence to this idea, but a definition precise enough to merit full complex designation remains elusive.

The Early Classic

A single Early Classic complex, Naba, is recognized at Piedras Negras. Comparative research as well as carbon dates derived from a termination event on the Acropolis indicate this complex is roughly equivalent in time and typological content to Tzakol 2 and Tzakol 3 assemblages known from elsewhere in the Petén. This conclusion is supported by the high degree of typological similarity evident between Piedras Negras Naba complex materials and Ayn complex ceramics from Altar de Sacrificios stored in the Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Guatemala City. This resemblance is so strong that many of the Piedras Negras monochromes, particularly monochrome blacks, could easily be lost within an Ayn assemblage.

In contrast to the Preclassic ceramics, Naba complex materials are much more common and are known from almost every sector of the site. Naba assemblages are, in general, dominated by orange monochromes. Black and brown monochromes are not uncommon, but are weakly represented. Zoned fluting and fine line incising are the most common decorative modes. Fluting is generally restricted to the exteriors of flaring wall bowls with modeled rims, though occasionally zoned fluting appears on the interiors of monochrome basal flange dishes. The most common incised design is a band of hatched, pendant triangles applied just below the rim of hemispherical bowls ([Figure 3](#)). Other, less common, decorative modes for Naba monochromes include the use of

carved or gouged panels decorating the exteriors of hemispherical and flaring wall bowls. The designs are typically iconographic and are occasionally rubbed with specular hematite. In overall execution, vessels decorated in this way strongly resemble Urita Gouged-Incised and related types.



Figure 3. Lucha Incised.

The major Tzakol 3 diagnostic, the basal flange dish, is almost completely unknown at Piedras Negras. A few sherds representative in this form have been found, but in frequencies far below those common at other Petén sites. Instead, the most common polychrome forms are shallow basal flange dishes with hollow tripod supports. While this form is diagnostic of Tepeu 1 assemblages elsewhere in the Petén, good stratigraphic and contextual data suggest that a Tzakol 2-3 placement is appropriate for the Piedras Negras examples. Exterior decoration on these vessels is uncommon and, when present, is usually limited to simple red and black circumferential bands. Occasionally the flanges are decorated with red or black semi-circles. Interior decoration usually consist of either circumferential bands of pendant loops executed in black and framed by red lines, or polychrome birds placed just below the rim and on opposite sides of the vessel.

Resist decoration is also present in Naba assemblages, but is very infrequent. Resist decorated vessels belong to this period are generally decorated with abstract geometric motifs consisting of bands of linked circles or triangles executed in light gray and set on a cream or orange field. In overall design organization and execution they are very similar to Early Classic resist-decorated ceramics from the Guatemalan Highlands. It seems quite possible that this technology may be the precursor to the much more elaborate resists that dominate the Late Classic polychrome tradition at Piedras Negras.

The Late Classic

The Balche ceramic phase marks the transition from Early to Late Classic at Piedras Negras. Balche is coeval with the Veremos and Chixoy phases at Altar de Sacrificios, and late Junco at Seibal. Like these complexes, the definition of Balche originally suffered from a poor definition of types and limited representation. At Seibal this was probably the result of depopulation related to some site-wide trauma. At Altar there appeared to be no break in population and problems related to defining this complex were likely the result of the short period of time involved and a confounding "interfingering of types" (Adams 1971:85). This also appears to be the case at Piedras Negras where Balche, like Veremos at Altar de Sacrificios, is characterized by rapid changes in ceramic modes. At Piedras Negras this appears to be the result of diversification of vessel form and decorative modes as influence from the Central Petén wanes and Piedras Negras begins to develop into the primary site and major political power for the region.

Holley (1983) notes that unmixed Balche assemblages were poorly represented in the sample available to him and that, as a result, the greater part of that complex was defined by sorting out those materials from mixed contexts that were clearly affiliated with earlier or later complexes. In the course of excavations the current project encountered unmixed deposits of Balche complex ceramics in a minimum of 27 operations across the site and in secure stratigraphic contexts. The great quantity of Balche complex deposits encountered has significantly advanced our understanding of this critical period in the history of the site. Balche ceramics are associated with the initial construction of a number of structures on the Acropolis as well as with the modification of residential groups all across the site. In addition, Balche ceramics are also associated with the initial construction of a number of major structures at Piedras Negras including monumental sweatbath P-7.

Diagnostic modes for Balche include the frequent use of specular hematite, a reduction in the size and change in the orientation of basal flanges, a reduction in size and frequency of hollow supports, and use of bichrome and polychrome-resist. Common forms in use at this time include deep, hemispherical bowls, shallow bowls with composite walls, and shallow dishes with slightly everted lips. Other diagnostic modes include the use of slightly bolstered and grooved rims on unslipped utility vessels and unslipped exteriors on shallow dishes with hollow tripod supports. This vessel form is also common in later, Yaxche phase assemblages, but is frequently slipped on the exterior.

Orange monochromes dominate most Balche assemblages, though monochrome blacks become increasingly frequent and monochrome reds appear for the first time. Positive-painting remains the dominant polychrome mode, though bichrome and polychrome-resists become increasingly frequent. At this time, two resist types, Mataculebra Cream Polychrome and Moro Orange Polychrome, both known from other Lowland sites appear at Piedras Negras. The appearance of these polychrome-resists marks the beginning of a tradition that will dominate the manufacture of polychrome pottery at Piedras Negras for the next 200 years.

Yaxche is the first fully Late Classic ceramic complex at Piedras Negras and perhaps represents the pinnacle of the potter's art at Piedras Negras. Yaxche ceramics have been found in large quantities in all areas of the site, in sealed contexts, below inarguably later (Chacalhaaz) materials, and in association with dated monuments. While many forms reminiscent of those common in the Central Petén are in use during the Yaxche ceramic phase, surface decorations are becoming increasingly differentiated in terms of palette, motif, and technology. During this period, resist-decorated ceramics become the predominant polychrome mode. Of the resist-decorated types, Santa Rosa Cream Polychrome is the most common type and is found in almost every Yaxche lot.

The emphases on resist-decoration, the near absence of positive-painted decoration, and the use of distinctive vessel forms give the early Late Classic ceramics of Piedras Negras a distinctive quality. In general, there seems to be limited typological correspondences between Piedras Negras and the great majority of Petén sites for which comparative data is available. Given that the basis of sphere affiliation is defined as, "a high content level at the typological level" (Willey *et al.* 1967:306) it seems likely that Piedras Negras participated in an as yet undefined ceramic sphere encompassing portions of the Western Lowlands, and existing apart from the more central Tepeu Sphere.

On the basis of form and decoration it is possible to facet Yaxche. Early facet forms include hemispherical bowls with direct rims, shallow plates with direct rim, and cylinders. Polychrome-resist decoration incorporated into abstract design appears for the first time in great quantity. The early facet is also marked by the infrequent appearance of a number of positive-painted polychrome types including Yaxche Orange Polychrome. On occasion, these polychrome types may contain decorations executed in specular red hematite. The use of this material also serves to distinguish early facet Yaxche.

The late facet of the Yaxche ceramic phase is marked by the appearance of bowls with flaring walls and direct rims, the increased frequency of bowls with out-curving walls, the absence of hemispherical bowls, the increased frequency of shallow, everted-rim dishes, and the occasional appearance of Chablekal Fine Grays. This facet is also marked by a significant reduction in the quantity of positive-painted ceramics, the use of resist-decoration in combination with black line figural or iconographic painting, and the disappearance of hematite decoration. Late facet Yaxche ceramics are known from all areas of the site, including residential complexes far outside the site core.

The Chacalhaaz ceramic phase follows Yaxche, beginning at about A.D. 740 and ending at around A.D. 850. Throughout this time, Piedras Negras seemed to maintain itself as a ceramic entity independent of more general Tepeu developments, though there are stronger links, particularly with regard to vessel form, than in the previous phase. Chacalhaaz ceramics are found throughout the site, both in construction fill and in middens. Several large middens of Chacalhaaz material are known from the Acropolis, and from the C-Group, a large residential complex at the northern edge of the site core. Rather than being deposited between or behind buildings, these middens are

found filling room spaces. On the Acropolis, this includes several rooms of vaulted structure J-2 and monumental sweatbath J-17. The deposits found in these rooms all date to the latter half of the Chacalhaaz phase and suggests that by approximately 800 A.D., Piedras Negras was suffering gradual abandonment.

Chacalhaaz is defined by the frequent appearance of Chablekal Fine Gray, a number of changes in vessel form and decorative motif, and an increasing reliance on positive painting as the primary means of polychrome decoration. Important changes in vessel form include the appearance of basins with heavily bolstered rims and thickened rims, shallow dishes with large, hollow tripod supports, tall bowls with out-curving walls, and very shallow plates resembling comales. In addition, vessel size seems to increase dramatically during this time. Vessels are, generally, larger and much more heavily built than those common in the preceding complex. Monkeys, typically seated with a single arm outstretched and palm upturned, becomes a common motif on both painted and incised vessels ([Figure 4](#)). This motif is likely related to decorations found on the Chablekal Fine Gray vessels common at the site at about this time. In general Chacalhaaz ceramics, particularly utility forms, are more similar to those found at other sites for which good comparative data is available than during the preceding phase.

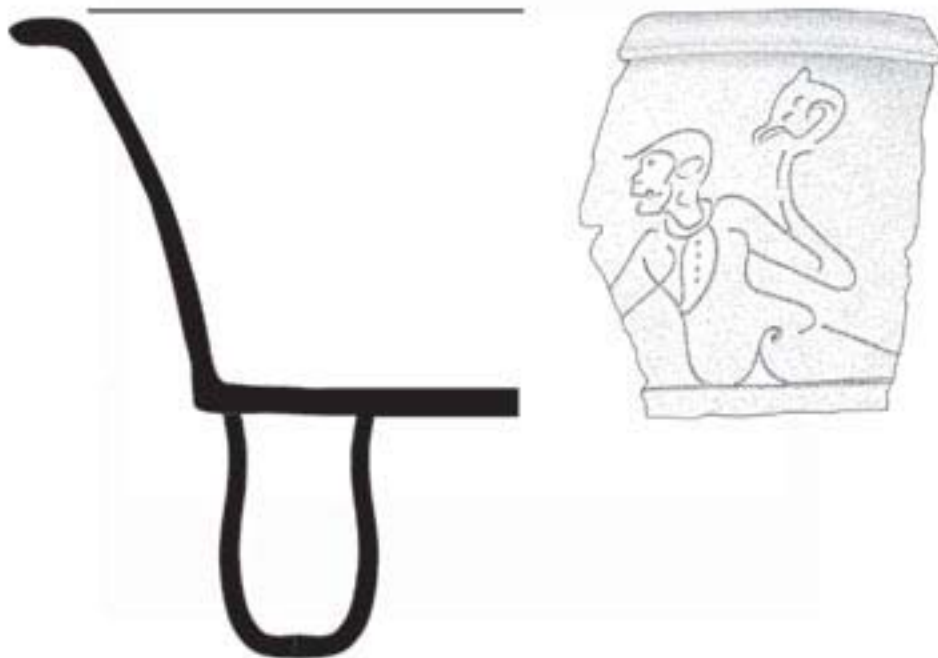


Figure 4. Hutzijan Incised.

The disappearances of resist-reserve decoration and Chablekal Fine Grays allow us to define a late facet Chacalhaaz. The late facet is marked by the probable destruction of

the Acropolis by forces acting at the behest of Yaxchilán in A.D. 808 (Stuart 1998). Evidence from several sealed deposits that, stratigraphically, must post-date this event and do not contain resist-reserve ceramics, Chablekal Fine Gray or true Fine Orange ceramics. The absence of fine grays and fine oranges indicates that for a short period of the following Piedras Negras' defeat very little imported ceramic was entering the site. This period marks the chronological span of late facet Chacalhaaz. Fine orange ceramics appear in the Pasión region no earlier than about 830 A.D. and quite likely before 850 A.D. The introduction of fine orange ceramics into Piedras Negras marks the end of the Chacalhaaz ceramic phase.

Kumche is the final ceramic complex at Piedras Negras and marks the abandonment of the site. The beginning of the Kumche ceramic phase is marked principally by the introduction of Tres Naciones and related fine orange types into the site between about A.D. 840 and A.D. 850. Kumche ceramics are not widely distributed at Piedras Negras. The frequency and distribution of these materials in this area is strongly reminiscent of Preclassic settlement patterns at Piedras Negras. In contrast to Preclassic settlement, however, Kumche ceramics have been found in surface contexts in a number of residential groups outside the site core. In addition, a large midden of Kumche materials were found filling a room in the residential group at the northern edge of the site core. This has allowed us to define the typological and formal content of this complex with a high degree of certainty, avoiding the problems typically related to defining terminal ceramic complexes.

While the appearance of Tres Naciones Fine Gray and related fine orange types provide the most certain diagnostics of this complex, it is important to note that Kumche is also marked by the appearance of a number of decorative modes diagnostic of the Terminal Classic elsewhere in the Petén. These modes include the use of hollow, zoomorphic supports and/or notched basal ridges on shallow plates, everted and grooved rims on unslipped utility forms, and vertical or bulging necks on both slipped and unslipped jars. In addition, ceramic pastes manufactured at this time appear to be, in general, finer than pastes used in other complexes. Though still relying heavily on carbonate temper, it appears as if local potters are trying to emulate some imported ceramic styles. The use of crystalline carbonate temper declines dramatically, and non-crystalline carbonate tempers appears to be more finely ground before use.

Because the Post Classic is so weakly represented at Piedras Negras, because there is no clear construction at Piedras Negras during Kumche, and because there is, as a result, no clear Terminal Classic to Post Classic stratigraphy at Piedras Negras, it is impossible to say with any precision when Kumche ends. Based on the quantity of material present at Piedras Negras that is inarguably dated to this period, we estimate that this phase lasted no more than 50 to 60 years. We are also to describe with any precision the nature of the Late Classic to Post Classic transition at Piedras Negras, though it seems that at least some of the major ritual structures remained in use through this period—a mixed midden containing Kumche materials was found behind the temple of Structure O-13.

Most of the Post Classic materials recovered from Piedras Negras were found by the University of Pennsylvania Project working there in the 1930's. The great majority of this material consisted of "Lacandon" anthropomorphic censers recovered from the interiors of the temples in the South Group Court. The only possibly Post Classic material recovered by the current project was a pair of bichrome plates cached beneath a collapsed wall in sweatbath structure P-7 (Child and Child 2002). These vessels are clearly of non-local origin, and were almost certainly cached after a portion of the wall had collapsed. This, in addition to the censers recovered by the Pennsylvania Project, suggest that Piedras Negras may have been a pilgrimage center long after the final occupants had left the city.

Ceramic Production and Technological Innovation

While the chronological and typological research presented here is important, it is the expected result whenever excavations are reinitiated at a previously explored site like Piedras Negras. The benefit of this research comes when the expanded type catalog is placed against the remarkable historic record available for Piedras Negras. Beginning in A.D. 639 with the accession of Ruler 2, monuments were erected at Piedras Negras, on average, every six years for the next 123 years (Martin and Grube 2000; Proskouriakoff 1960). This historical record allows us to date the ceramic complexes at Piedras Negras with a rare degree of precision. When the provenience data for resist-reserve ceramics is placed against the chronological and historical data available for Piedras Negras, a remarkable pattern results.

The period between 580 and 650 A.D. was a period of rapid change at Piedras Negras. After suffering a defeat by forces sent from Pomoná, México, around 554 A.D., the city quickly rebounded, becoming the primary political and economic power for the region. This period of reorganization and growth is evidenced in numerous ways, including the destruction of the Early Classic palace (whose remains are interred beneath the West Group Court) (Garrido 1998, 1999), the construction of numerous monumental structures on the Acropolis and elsewhere, the destruction of Early Classic monuments, and the settlement of all areas that would be the focus of continued construction and occupation. In short, by the end of the end of the Balche ceramic phase, Piedras Negras had achieved the basic form that it would maintain for the next 200 years.

This same period was also a time of rapid social and political change in the Usumacinta Basin and elsewhere in the Lowlands. Throughout the Lowlands, this period was characterized by the escalating pace and intensity of inter-polity and inter-elite competition. The escalating pace of competition is visible in a number of ways, including an increasing concern with warfare on carved inscriptions, as well as by a growth in the number of titles during the Late Classic, and the more frequent depictions of lesser nobility on monuments (Culbert 1991).

It seems very likely that the changes occurring in the ceramics of Piedras Negras at this time were intimately related to the architectural, social, and political changes affecting

the site and other sites elsewhere in the Lowlands. Beginning in about A.D. 580, the pottery at Piedras Negras begins to diverge dramatically from the pottery produced elsewhere in the Lowlands. At this time, the potters of Piedras Negras began to concentrate on the production of resist-decorated pottery. By 700 A.D., resist and resist-polychromes are the dominant decorative mode. At Piedras Negras, even the types most commonly associated with positive painting elsewhere, such as Palmar Orange Polychrome, have resist or resist-reserve elements incorporated into their decorative programs.

The ubiquity of resist and resist-reserve ceramics at Piedras Negras, combined with the excellent provenience data developed as a result of the recent excavation at that site have allowed us to track the development of this ceramic style with a great deal of precision. Resist decorated ceramics first appear in highly elite contexts, such as the Acropolis. These early examples are carefully decorated and well fired. Later, more crudely executed resist and resist-reserve pottery becomes common and is recovered from all levels of settlement and from all areas of the site. This pattern suggests that the earliest iterations of resist-decorated pottery were made under elite supervision, and for elite consumption, and only gradually became available to the wider population.

The pattern evident in the distribution of resist-decorated wares is best demonstrated by examining the timing and context of several terminations and special deposits in which these ceramics appear. It would seem to be no coincidence that the earliest occurrence of resist-decorated ceramics is in contexts ostensibly related to conspicuous displays of wealth. The earliest known resist-decorated ceramics, for example, are known from a late Early Classic (late facet Naba) termination found beneath a layer of burned clay in front of Structure J-20 in Court 3 of the Acropolis. The lack of other materials such as bone or obsidian, and the high number of reconstructable vessels recovered indicate that these materials were deposited purposefully, over a short period of time, and were intentionally smashed. In addition to the numerous orange polychrome and orange monochrome dishes recovered, a number of unique types were found, including sherds representing at least two resist-decorated vessels. The first was a cream slipped dish decorated with a smudge-resist design consisting of a series of linked triangles. The second was an orange slipped dish, again decorated with a resist-decoration, but this time consisting of a series of linked discs in a band near the vessel's rim. Vessels decorated with this technique are vanishingly rare at Piedras Negras. With the exception of these sherds and a few recovered from a possibly similar context elsewhere on the Acropolis they are known from nowhere else at the site.

Excavations in front of Structure F-2 sub 1 in the Northwest Group Plaza, yielded evidence of a very similar termination. Like the J-20 deposit, the F-2 termination consisted of well-preserved, predominantly polychrome ceramics sealed under a layer of burned clay and bajareque. The location of this deposit at the base of a new structure, the obvious indication of burning, the high concentration of fine pottery, and the relatively low number of vessels represented indicate that this deposit was most likely a building termination. Unlike the materials recovered from in front of J-20 these ceramics displayed: (1) an increase in Late Classic forms including barrels and bowls with out-curving walls, (2) an increase in specular hematite paint; and, (3) more

sophisticated resist-reserve decorative techniques. Given these differences, the materials clearly postdate those found in front of J-20, though possibly by as little as 50 years. In all likelihood, the materials in this deposit date to the Balche phase.

A minimum of 8 vessels decorated with resist-reserve decoration were found in this deposit. This decoration included both bichrome smudge-resist and some polychrome-resist similar to that found in later, Yaxche phase, deposits. It seems clear that the execution and designs are similar, though less sophisticated than forms appearing later. Vessel forms represented in this assemblage seem to show some links to Late Classic forms, though it is impossible not to notice the variety of unusual forms, i.e., forms that have no definite analogs in either the Early or Late Classic. It seems clear that during this time, potters are working with greater freedom than in the past and are producing a wider variety of pottery.

A final example of the process under discussion comes from a deposit from a small residential group located just south of the West Group Plaza. Excavations near Str. N-10 uncovered a possible midden containing a large amount of excellently preserved ceramic vessels and figurines. It is estimated that this deposit contained the remains of at least 30 partially reconstructable vessels (Arredondo 1998; Muñoz and Fitzsimmons 1998). In addition to the numerous resist-decorated vessels found, the remains of three hieroglyphic vessels were found here. All three of these vessels were shallow bowls incised with Ruler 2's name (Houston, personal communication 1998) ([Figure 5](#)). In addition to these hieroglyphic vessels, sherds of least two resist-incised vessels were found. The exact form of these vessels is not known, though they may have been cylinders. Close study suggests that the pattern of resist evident on these sherds could have been accomplished only by multiple firings, indicating that the artisan responsible for creating this vessel was a highly accomplished potter.

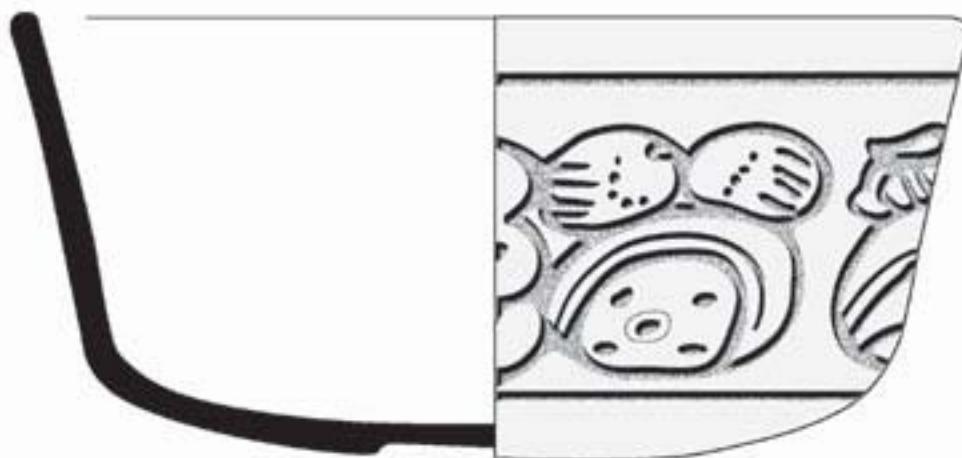


Figure 5. Paqual Incised.

The presence of Ruler 2's name on three of the vessels found in this midden indicates that an early facet Yaxche date is appropriate for this deposit. Ruler 2 ruled Piedras Negras from A.D. 639 to A.D. 689. The presence of specular hematite on a number of other vessels further indicates that an early facet dating is appropriate. Given the high quality of the ceramic material recovered from this deposit it is likely that this midden contains royal refuse and that the ceramics from this deposit were likely used by the highest members of Piedras Negras society. The precise nature of this deposit is not clear, however. There is little evidence for burning and the architectural associations of this deposit are not clear. It is possible that this deposit may represent the intentional destruction of ritual or otherwise highly symbolic materials.

Discussion

The need to demonstrate ownership of unique items of material culture as a means of distinguishing one from one's peers may have been a principle factor driving ceramic innovation at Piedras Negras at this time. This need developed out of the generalized socio-political disruptions affecting almost the whole of the Lowlands at this time. At Piedras Negras, this period of time corresponded with the development of the site as the primary center for the region, and the stabilization of the dynasty that would remain in power at Piedras Negras for the next two hundred years. It seems reasonable to conclude that the ceramic changes evident at Piedras Negras during this time were part of this much larger shift in material culture that included major changes in both architectural and monumental programs.

Looking at these deposits synchronically, we see that they have a number of things in common. First, all three of these deposits have a preponderance of well-made polychromes, many of which appear to be unique or have very limited distribution in contemporaneous deposits. This suggests that only a few potters or artists were responsible for the manufacture of these pieces and that they did not see wide distribution, at least not initially. In two of the three cases, the deposits are located in fairly restricted or specialized settings. This suggests attendance by an exclusive audience. This inference is supported by the presence of Ruler 2's name on several of the vessels found near Str. N-10. Taken together these facts suggest that the people participating in the terminations were probably the highest members of the Piedras Negras society. Given this, it seems likely that the vessels destroyed in these termination events were likely produced by artisans attached directly to the participant's households, and charged with producing distinctive works in a variety of mediums. This model for the organization of craft production agrees with archaeological and epigraphic research from elsewhere in the Maya area (Inomata and Stiver 1998; Inomata 2001; Reents 1994; Reents-Budet et al. 1987, 1995; Wallace and Carmack 1977).

Looking at the termination deposits diachronically, we can see the effects of the attached artisans decisions on the direction of ceramic technology at the site as a whole. The earliest smudge-resist vessels are found in the J-20 termination. Later, more sophisticated resist-decorated vessels are found in the F-2 termination assemblage.

Both smudge and polychrome resist-decorated vessels are found in this assemblage. This assemblage, however, marks one of the last appearances of smudge-resist at Piedras Negras. A few vessels of the same type are known from a similar, roughly contemporaneous deposit excavated in Court 4 of the Acropolis (Strs. J-24, 25, 26, see Golden and Quiroa 2002) but no examples have been found elsewhere at the site.

The earliest polychrome-resists at Piedras Negras are those found in the termination deposit excavated from in front of Str. F-2. These resists, while not as complex as those found in later contexts, are suggestive of the later materials. The first polychrome-resist easily relatable to the types that come to dominate the Late Classic polychrome tradition at Piedras Negras were found in the deposit located near Str. N-10. The high quality of the pottery found within this deposit as well as the presence of Ruler 2's name on several of the vessels found in this deposit indicate that this deposit represents an accumulation of royal refuse. The real significance of the materials in this deposit when we compare them to materials found elsewhere. The major resist-decorated polychrome type found in this deposit is Santa Rosa Cream Polychrome: Horqueta. This type is almost invariably found in elite contexts dated by the appearance of other, independent, modes to early facet Yaxche. This type is rare in contemporaneous non-elite contexts. After about A.D. 680, different varieties of Santa Rosa are found in a wide variety of contexts, and in all levels of settlement. Resist-reserve decoration becomes so popular, in fact, that it becomes the dominant polychrome mode at Piedras Negras for the next 100 years. The context of the earliest Santa Rosa and other resist-decorated polychromes suggest that it was the product of a limited number of artisans exclusively, or nearly so, for members of the royal court.

The decision by potters at Piedras Negras to focus on resist-decoration as the primary polychrome mode beginning in the early Late Classic had a lasting affect on the range of options available to Piedras Negras potters. Polychrome-resist and later, reserve, decorated vessels became the dominant polychrome mode at Piedras Negras. They become so common in fact, that the positive-painted figural or iconographic decoration so commonly associated with the Late Classic Maya are, in fact, minority types through most of Piedras Negras' Late Classic history. Because of the long life of resist-reserve ceramics at Piedras Negras, it is within this mode that are we are best able to observe the reflexive relationship between practice, habitus and style. Resist-reserve technology developed through program experimentation and was intended, consciously or not, as a partial solution to particular social, cultural and technical problems facing the elite at Piedras Negras at a critical juncture in their history. The locus of production and the status of the producers imbued the early resist-decorated ceramics with particular symbolic and ideological qualities. The diffusion of resist-reserve decoration across the site implies a process whereby the artistic and cultural value of ceramics produced under restricted conditions was downplayed in favor of the economic benefits gained by the production of a popular commodity (Kopytoff 1986). It is only after the introduction of fine gray ceramics from lower Usumacinta sources at around A.D. 730 that the potters of Piedras Negras begin producing wares that diverge significantly from those of their predecessors at the site, though this shift is not of the same magnitude as that apparent between the Early Classic and Late Classic.

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