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The Late Classic Palace Polychromes of Cahal Pech, Belize: Documentation and Analysis



Research Year: 1996

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Late Classic

Location: Belize River Valley, Belize

Sites: Cahal Pech and Buenavista del Cayo

The research effort undertaken with the support of FAMSI grant number 95083 has three broad objectives. These are: (1) the full descriptive and comparative documentation of the Late Classic royal court polychrome pottery vessels from the hilltop palace-center, Cahal Pech; (2) analysis of the social and other cultural roles performed by this pottery within the context of Classic Maya civilization; (3) initial documentation and analysis of the overall distribution of such pottery among the functionally distinct and status-differentiated sites of the upper Belize Valley. Documentation and analysis is to be based on the extensive excavations carried out over the last 15+ years by San Diego State University, Trent University, the Belize Department of Archaeology, and other institutions. To implement the stated ends we envisioned three final products: first, a complete, annotated catalogue of all whole and restorable Late Classic polychrome vessels from the Cahal Pech palace illustrated at full-scale in both full color and black-and-white in rollout format (see table below for color illustrations). As indicated in our original proposal, the severe erosion of virtually all recovered Cahal Pech ceramics renders their photographic documentation infeasible, and artists' renderings in colored pencil will serve in place of these. Each Cahal Pech specimen will be complemented by analogous, similar, or identical counterparts from the Buenavista del Cayo royal palace to document the extent of interaction and/or intensity of relationships between the two palace populations (see examples shown below). We believe the number, nature, and closeness of identities and similarities among palace polychromes to be an excellent index of the social "closeness" of the court communities represented by them. The catalogue will also

serve as a major data resource for ourselves and others examining the spatial and social distribution of Late Classic polychrome vessels and styles throughout the greater Belize Valley region and beyond.

Second, we will ultimately produce an analytical monograph discussing the social distribution, uses, and significance of palace polychromes throughout Maya civilization as a whole as well as within the immediate Cahal Pech-Buenavista zone. Finally, we will provide a shorter, derivative article based on the two foregoing studies for general dissemination via some appropriate venue such as *Ancient Mesoamerica*.

To date, we have completed the cleaning, segregation, sorting into formal ceramic groups and types, typological identification, non-proportionate quantification, and preliminary physical descriptions of all available polychrome ceramic materials from the Cahal Pech palace. In addition, approximately one-third of the whole or restorable vessels have been illustrated together with Buenavista counterparts (see examples). The total collection has been determined to include 42 whole and restorable vessels representing five established ceramic groups and fifteen distinct ceramic types. Of these, ten of the types are local in origin while five are foreign to the Belize Valley. Over the coming year, we will complete and formalize the descriptive treatments, develop the analytical and interpretive portions of the study, and complete all remaining illustrations. Final descriptive, analytical, and, graphic work is expected to be completed by late 1997. Both the annotated catalogue and the planned derivative article will also be completed by that time. Incorporating, as it will, the substantially larger, more diverse, and more elaborate palace polychrome collections from Buenavista del Cayo, the planned interpretive monograph will be somewhat longer in preparation.

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Joseph W. Ball, Ph.D. and Jennifer T. Taschek, Ph.D.

Department of Anthropology

San Diego State University



Figure 1. Cahal Pech. Baja midden.



Figure 1a. Cahal Pech. The Gap on HH/Transcon/on floor inside west doorway. R121 MSBU 41.

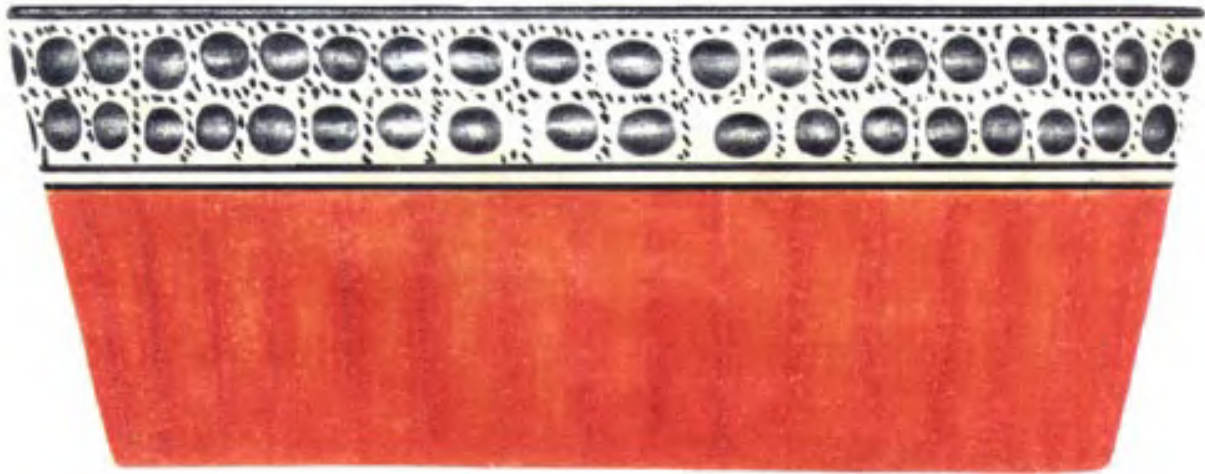


Figure 2. Buenavista. Tecpan Annex/HUT 14, 63.



Figure 3. Buenavista. Tecpan Annex/HUT 14, 63.



Cahal Pech
The Gap in HH/Transcon midden

Figure 4. Cahal Pech. The Gap on HH/Transcon midden.



Figure 5. Buenavista. Tecpan Annex/HUT 14, 63.

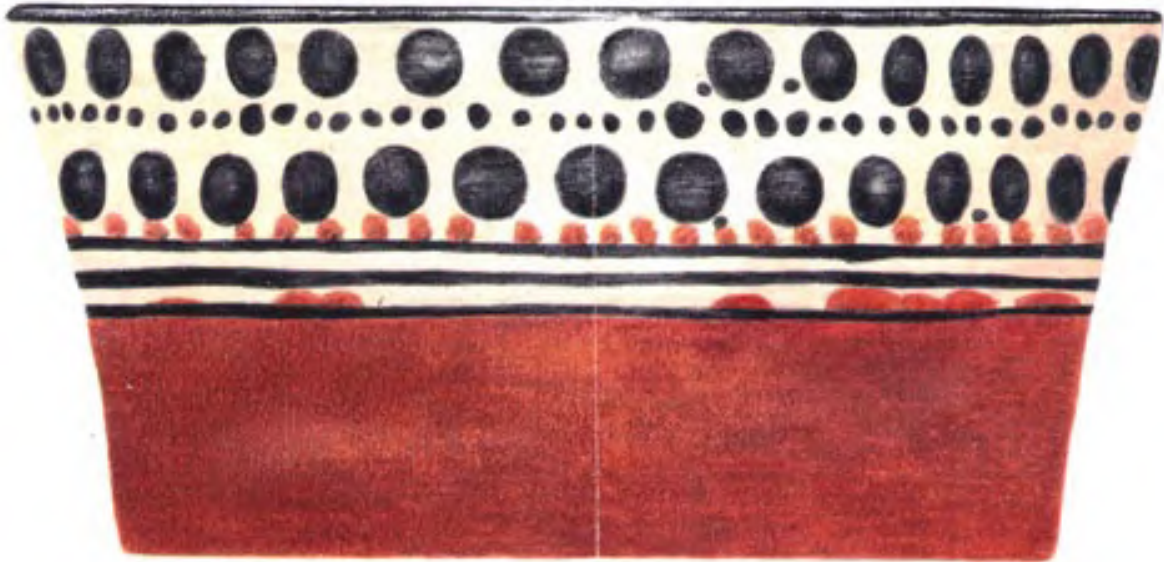


Figure 6. Buenavista. Tecpan Annex/HUT 14, 63.



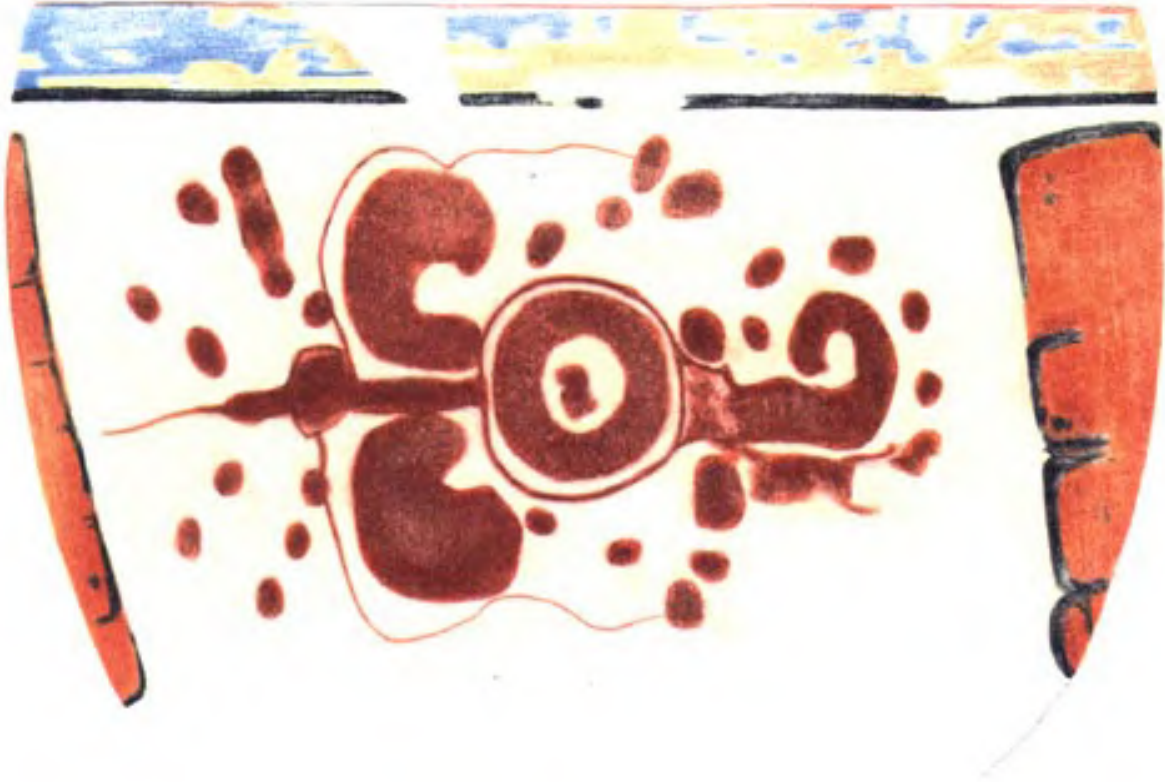
Cahal Pech
The Gap on HH/Transcon midden

Figure 7. Cahal Pech. The Gap on HH/Transcon midden.



Cahal Pech
West Baja slot/basal midden

Figure 8. Cahal Pech. West Baja Slot/basal midden.



Cahal Pech
The Gap on HH/Transcon midden
R13 MSBU31

Figure 9. Cahal Pech. The Gap on HH/Transcon midden. R13 MSBU31.



Figure 10. Cahal Pech. WWII/Core of Patton bench.



Figure 11. Cahal Pech. Baja midden. R123 MSB048.



Buenavista
Tecpan/Tea Passage

Figure 12. Buenavista. Tecpan/Tea Passage.



Cahal Pech

Figure 13. Cahal Pech.



Buenavista
Tecpan/Dues west

Figure 14. Buenavista. Tecpan/Dues west.



Buenavista.
Tecpan/Tea Passage/2-4m/70-50cm above floor.

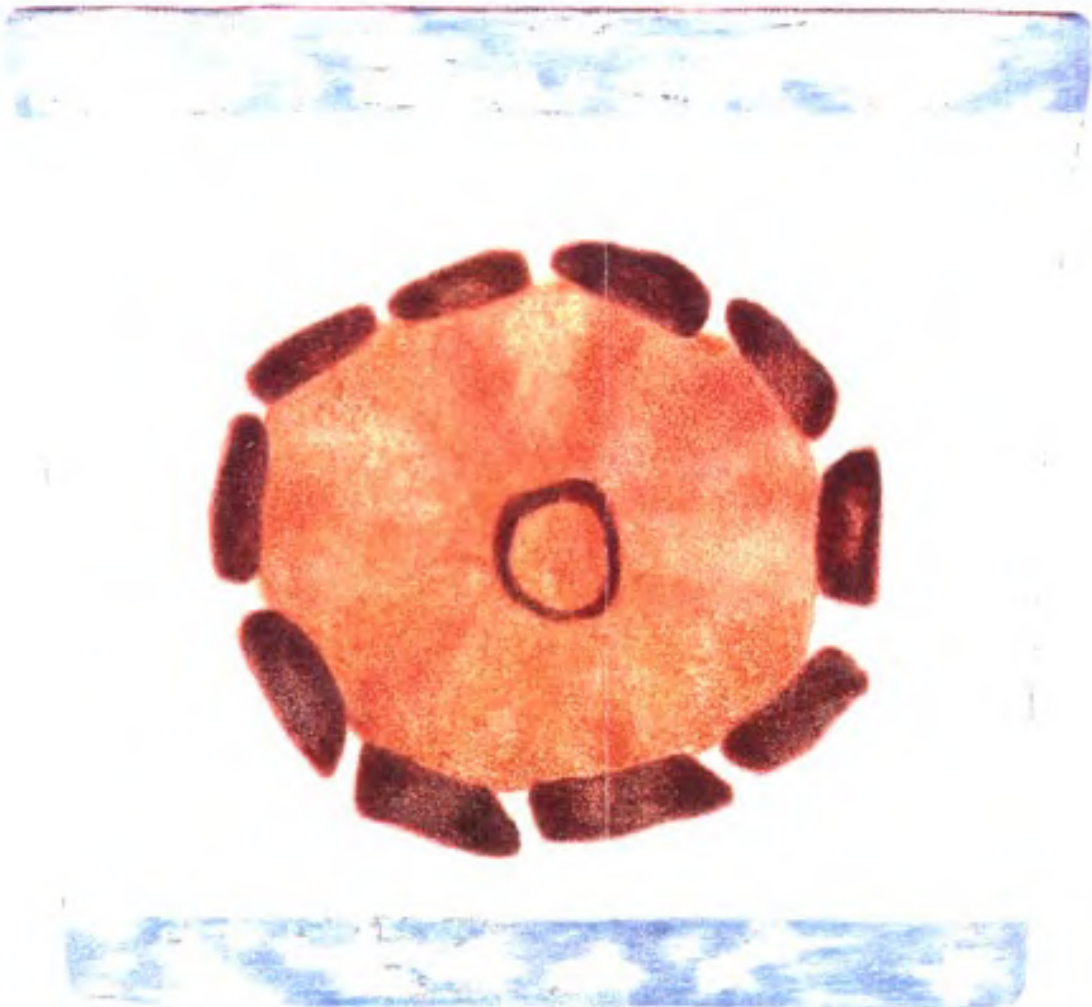
Figure 15. Buenavista. Tecpan/Tea Passage/2-4m/70-50cm above floor.



Figure 16. Cahal Pech.



Figure 17. Cahal Pech. Baja midden.



Cahal Pech
West Baja slot/grey midden

Figure 18. Cahal Pech. West Baja slot/grey midden.



Figure 18a. Cahal Pech. Carson/GroundRoom/North end, on floor.