

ICONOGRAPHIC STUDY OF TIQUISATE VESSELS WITH MOLDED DECORATION, SOUTH GUATEMALA COAST

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Ceramics can be examined from different points of view, be it in regard to pastes, style, iconography, hieroglyphic texts, and also to gain knowledge about aspects such as technology, chronology, and at times, even ideological issues. This research is limited to the iconographic characterization of the Tiquisate pottery with molded decoration, through an adequate documentation of its features.

The pottery of the Tiquisate Group that dates to the Classic period is among the most frequently found in the South Coast. It is recognized by a usually thick slip that varies from a cream to a yellowish orange tone, at times with different hues in a same vessel. The more frequent forms include bowls, pedestal dishes, vases, spindle whorls and figurines. The decoration techniques are varied, and include punching, incisions, fluting, stamping, molding, engraving and painting.

The Tiquisate type with molded decoration has not been iconographically studied in spite of making up an outstanding collection due to the wealth of its representations. It has been paid little attention compared to the interest generated by the iconography of the Early Classic pottery defined as corresponding to the Teotihuacan style (Hellmuth 1975: 1978; Berlo 1989: 147-165), which has been the origin of several research works that have yielded information about the coastal society.

The first report on the Tiquisate Molded ceramic was written by Erwin Dieseldorff (1933:fig. 26a and 26b), who referred to a vessel as originated in Chiquimula. Thompson (1948:46), when examining the style, attributed it to the South Coast and made a classification of the vessels as of their decoration, studied their style, and identified the motifs represented as human figures, birds, mythological monsters and geometric patterns. Later, Parsons (1967) referred to this ceramic and said that it corresponded to the Pacaya ceramic group. Recently, Frederick Bove and Sonia Medrano, of the South Coast Project, concentrated on the definition of this ceramic group, although their results have not been published so far. In addition to the studies mentioned, this type of pottery has been treated in an isolated manner in exhibition catalogues and other publications.

None of the authors mentioned has conducted a detailed iconographic study of the material. That is why we shall now make the attempt to treat the ceramic as a whole, to create a catalogue of representations and compare them with those of the Cotzumalguapa sculpture. The similarities of motifs or features in both

manifestations could provide some indication on the ideology present in the coastal art of the Late Classic period.

One of the problems we are facing is that the sample presented here is relatively limited, with 78 cases which include complete vessels, semi-complete vessels and vessel fragments, among which there are five cases of black ceramic that share decoration techniques, subjects and style. Unfortunately, in a good number of cases the place of provenience is unknown.

METHODOLOGY

The sample was obtained from bibliographic publications, photographic archives, and public and private collections. The consultation at the ceramic gallery of the IDAEH and of the materials from the Cotzumalguapa Archaeological Project has allowed us to define sites of provenience for the ceramics of this study. For recording the different cases, informative file cards were used, as well as photographs, lineal drawings, direct tracings on the vessel whenever it was possible, or based on photographs. Once the data of the sample were obtained, the analysis of the representations was undertaken, mainly through description and comparison with the sculptural art of Cotzumalguapa.

FINDINGS

It was possible to identify several sites with Tiquisate Molded ceramics. This ceramic has been found with a relative frequency in the nuclear zone of Cotzumalguapa, probably because more investigations were conducted there than in other sites of the South Coast. Hopefully, with further investigations in those sites will other samples will be recovered. Initially, a distribution map of the following sites may be outlined (Figure 1): El Baúl, El Castillo, Bilbao (Cotzumalguapa nuclear zone), Pantaleón, Finca San Cristóbal, Ixtepeque, Paraíso, Ticanlú, Bolivia (Escuintla); Flamenco, Abaj Takalik (Retalhuleu); Palo Gordo (Suchitepéquez); the Motagua area, and also Tulumaje and Guaytán (El Progreso).

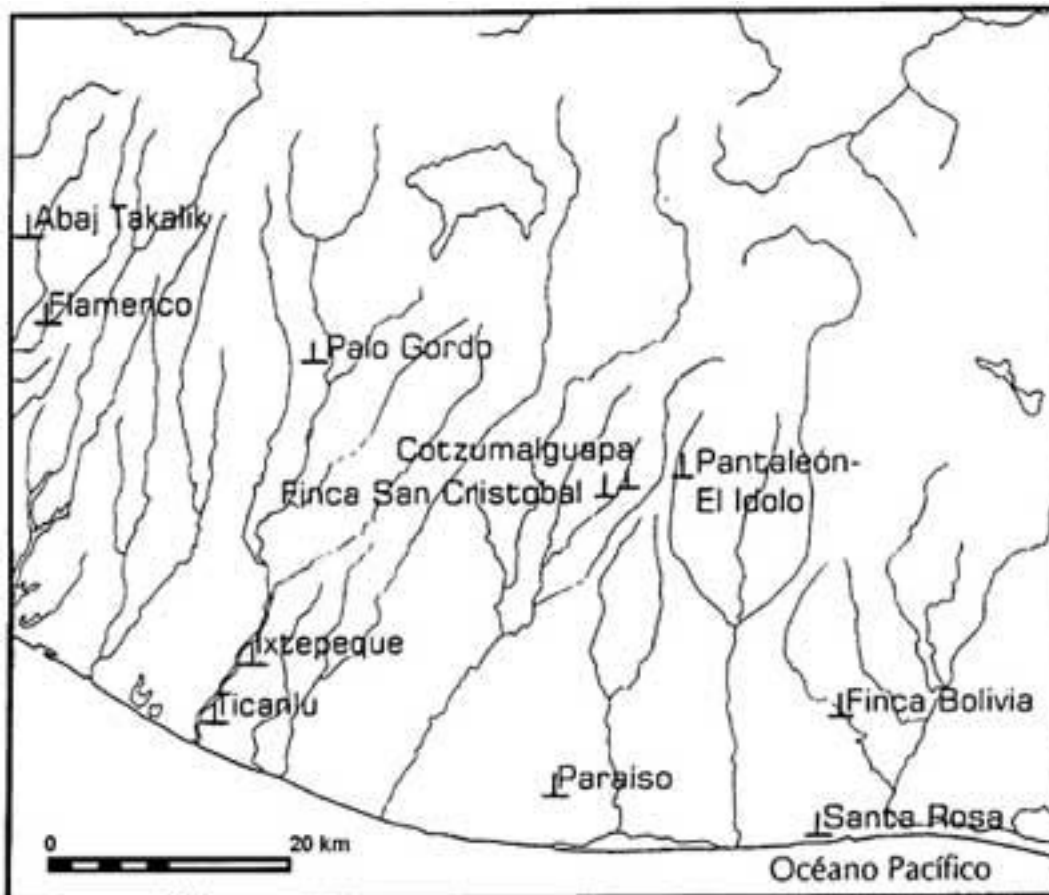


Figure 1. Map showing site distribution in the South Coast.

One significant fact is that the ceramic with a known provenience is consistent in designs with almost the totality of the specimens with an unknown provenience. At times, they seem to have been manufactured out of a same mold, or else they are very similar. That fact could provide some indication about the manufacturing place of the pottery without a context, although this could only be affirmed after a study is made with a larger sample. The specific contexts for this ceramic are the exception. There is information that the Bolivia case, which included a sample of a vessel with the representation of a bird that resembles a heron, was a part of a burial offering. This finding was made by a salvage Project conducted by IDAEH. Two sherds recovered during the excavations in 1978 of the Abaj Takalik Project in Finca Buenos Aires, show the image of a human being and of some kind of bird, and were recovered during the excavations accomplished near a stela in that area.

Regarding the temporality of the Tiquisate Group ceramics, it was towards the end of the Early Classic period (400-650 AC) when it was vastly manufactured in the coastal area of Guatemala. Several types of this group were developed during the second half of the Early Classic period and some have continued to exist up to the Late Classic period (650-900 AD; Medrano 1995:39). The Tiquisate Molded type, temporarily defined as such by the researchers of the South Coast Project, and in Bove's view, was specifically developed in the Late Classic period. For now, we are lacking a sufficient number of absolute dates. In excavations conducted in one sector of the site known as El Castillo, charcoal samples were retrieved. They came from a

dumpster that also contained fragments of the Tiquisate Molded ceramic. A first sample tested with the C14 method yielded a date for 659-974 AD, calibrated, while a second sample yielded a date for 675-1006 AD, calibrated (Chinchilla 1996:143). These dates associate the ceramic type with the Late Classic period. Besides, the vase form is frequent in the sample we are now examining, and it has been established that this form is diagnostic of the Late Classic period.

The finding of two molds in a private collection with representations similar to the ones contained in the sample was very interesting. The outer part of the mold is plain and shows depressions caused probably by the pressure exerted at the time of making the mold out of a solid matrix or out of a previously carved vessel. Molds were made with a coarse paste, they are heavy, and have walls approximately 1 cm thick. They have the form of a vase with straight walls, longitudinally cut at their half, and include the support. The decoration is located in the inner part. According to Carlos Chaclán, a restorer and ceramicist of the Popol Vuh Museum, the mold was probably applied to a new vessel while it was still in a semi-hardened condition, and then it was fired, a process during which the vessel dimensions were reduced. That is why the molds are taller and thicker than the vessels.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT STYLE

With the sample, preliminary observations were conducted in regard to style, as several differences in the execution of the design do exist:

- We have denominated “curved line style” (Figure 2), the style which uses this kind of lines in representations. It is present in almost every representation of human, mythical and animal beings. Frequently, the bottom part of the panels and other elements include a hatching in the form of a grid, at times diagonally set. The body proportions of human beings are unreal, as the head of the characters depicted is almost the same size than their torsos, and the rest of the body appears somehow diminished. Hands show fingers with an identical length, except for the thumb, which is shorter. In the case of animals, identical disproportions are observed.
- The second style may be denominated “straight line style” (Figure 3). The use of this kind of line in different traits, giving the representation a somewhat stiff appearance, is remarkable. The style is restricted to two thin and tall vases showing a human being with a deer. The grid of the other style is absent. The characters were granted a larger space for their bodies, they look more proportioned than those from the other style, and heads are one fourth to one fifth the height of the body. There is disproportion in arms and hands. One trait that is shared by these styles consists of double lines inside the speech scrolls, the headdresses, the faces and parts of the body, and is present in almost the totality of the features that accompany the human representations. These double lines are also observed in beasts and mythical beings.

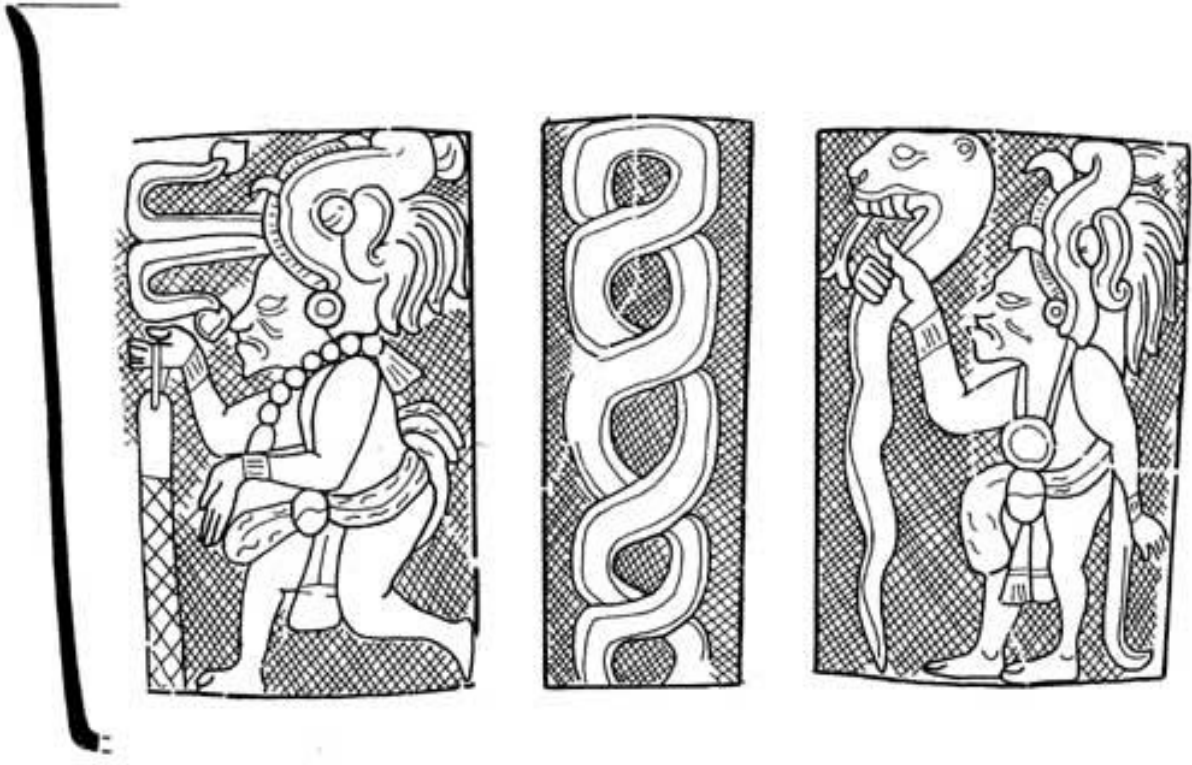


Figure 2. Example of the "curved line" style.



Figure 3. Example of the "straight line" style.

ICONOGRAPHY

This chapter presents the most relevant subjects observed in the sample. A division was made between human beings, beasts, and the mythical beings that compose the more frequent representations.

Human beings

Human figures are distinguished here. They are male characters, they are standing or seated, and they are shown in their left or right profile (Figures 4 and 5). Faces usually include delineation under the eye and over the mouth. The ornaments they wear consist of bracelets, bracelets made with rounded beads, necklaces made with bands or rounded beads, medallions, and circular or long ear flares. Costumes simply consist of a loincloth or some sort of short skirt. Some of the characters wear on their heads a feathered serpent ornament, which at times is adhered to a diadem. This headdress, locally called Serpentine Head with feathers (Figure 6), includes the following features: a supra-orbital plate, feathers adhered to the supra-orbital plate, a round eye, an upper maxillary bone, teeth emerging from the maxillary bone, one or more fangs in many cases, and some sort of a rather long bifid tongue, at times ending with possible phytomorphic features.

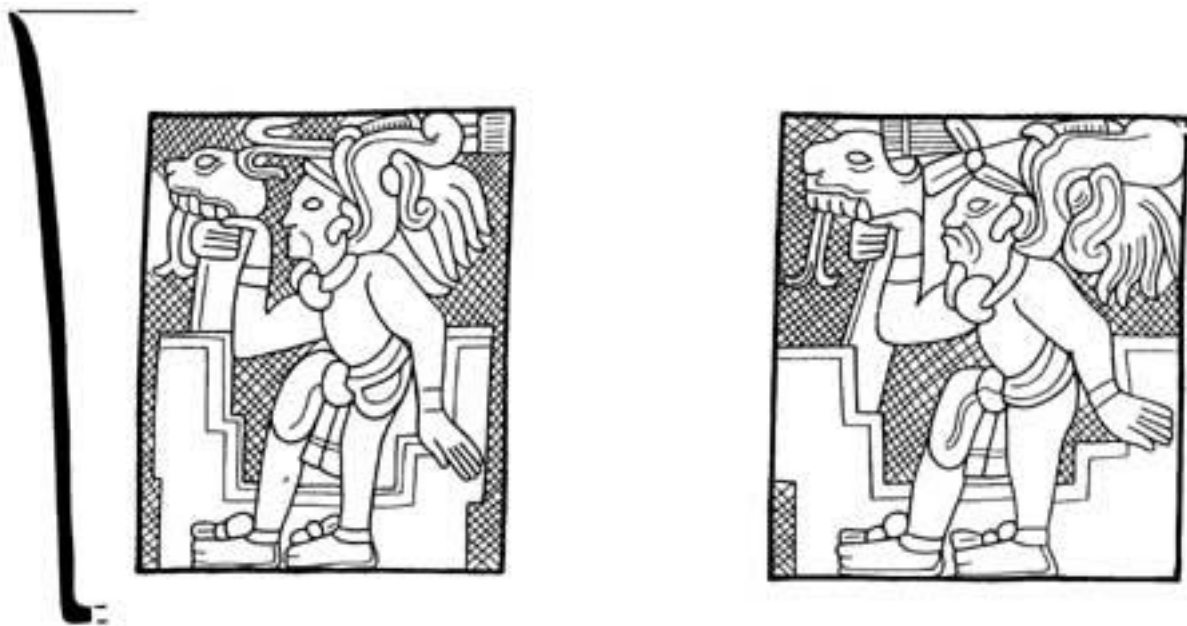


Figure 4. Designs with human representations.



Figure 5. Designs with human representations.

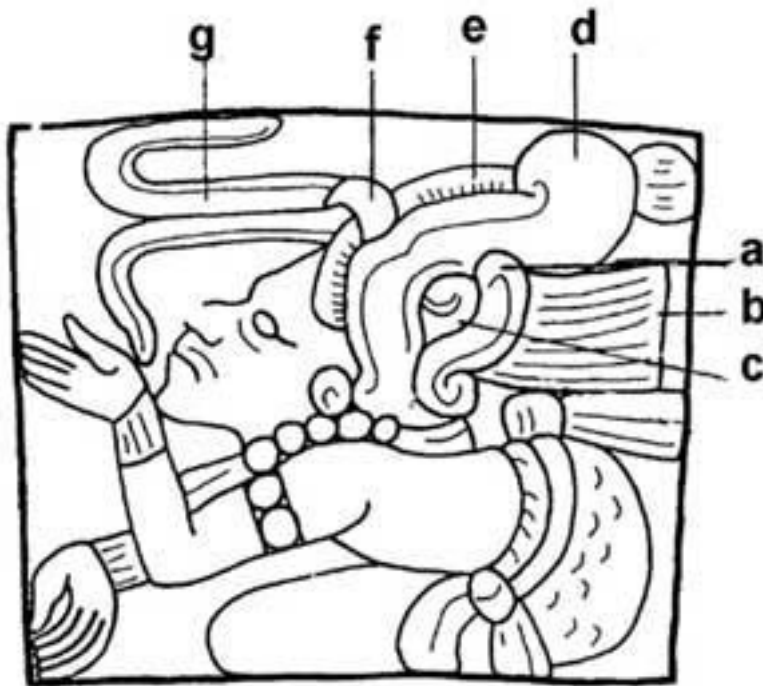


Figure 6. Designs with serpentine head.

- a) Supra-orbital plate
- b) Feathers
- c) Eye
- d) Upper maxillary bone
- e) Teeth
- f) Fangs
- g) Bifid tongue



Figure 7. Designs with phytomorphic features.

Other attributes of this headdress showing a lesser presence consist of a rounded feature on the front part of the upper maxillary in this serpentine head, part of the serpentine body, mandible, and one band that extends towards the forehead of the character and ends in a hook with feathers. Another frequently observed headdress is the one with phytomorphic features (Figure 7), composed of band with feather adornments that extends forward and tassels that hang from it, and one adornment in the rear part which could be some phytomorphic feature, though only one rounded form and feather-shaped features are visible. Bands that end in tassels hang from these features.

Among others, one of the characters holds in his hand some kind of bag or a snake. Some of the features found with a relative frequency in the sample, are mats and knots. Among the architectural features there are stepped truncated pyramids, and in one case, one Ballgame structure; the latter can be observed, in one case, behind the character (Figure 4).

Animal Representations: Jaguars

One of the vessels includes two panels with jaguars, whose representation has been accomplished with basic lines, without too much detail. It is recognized by the rounded ears, the robust body, the long tail, large hands. The beast is in a walking

attitude. There are some long features over and under the panels, formed by connected scrolls that leave an empty space at the center, similar to the shape of an eye.

Animal Representations: Deer

They may be represented in isolation, or either sharing the space with a human being. In one case, the deer presents more naturalistic features and has been identified as such because of its long and fine head, its long ears, a short tail, and its long legs with hoofs. The deer is carrying a probable vegetal element in its snout. It has been recognized as a male deer because it was represented with the genitals.

In a couple of cases (Figure 3), there is a deer represented with a rather long and thin head, turned towards the face of the character, with a half-opened snout showing his teeth in a threatening gesture, the long eye, long ears, some kind of horn that may be rounded or elongated, a slim body with thin, long legs and the typical hoofs. The only back leg of the deer gives the impression of being a cloak for the character. The deer has some sort of tail, though it is rather long and thick. This animal has small lines all over his body, believed to represent the spots of the animal.

Animal Representations: Monkeys

They are represented standing and in profile. The representation of these animals is very similar, in two cases. Dr. Dennis Guerra, of the Veterinarian School of the San Carlos University, identified the gender of these zoomorphs as females because of the presence of a clitoris, the extended feature near the tail. The females of the spider-monkeys have the particularity that their clitoris is larger than that of the females of other monkey species, although it is not so much exaggerated as the ones depicted in these cases. One peculiarity of the monkeys in this sample is that they are wearing necklaces that may correspond either to the band or the medallion type.

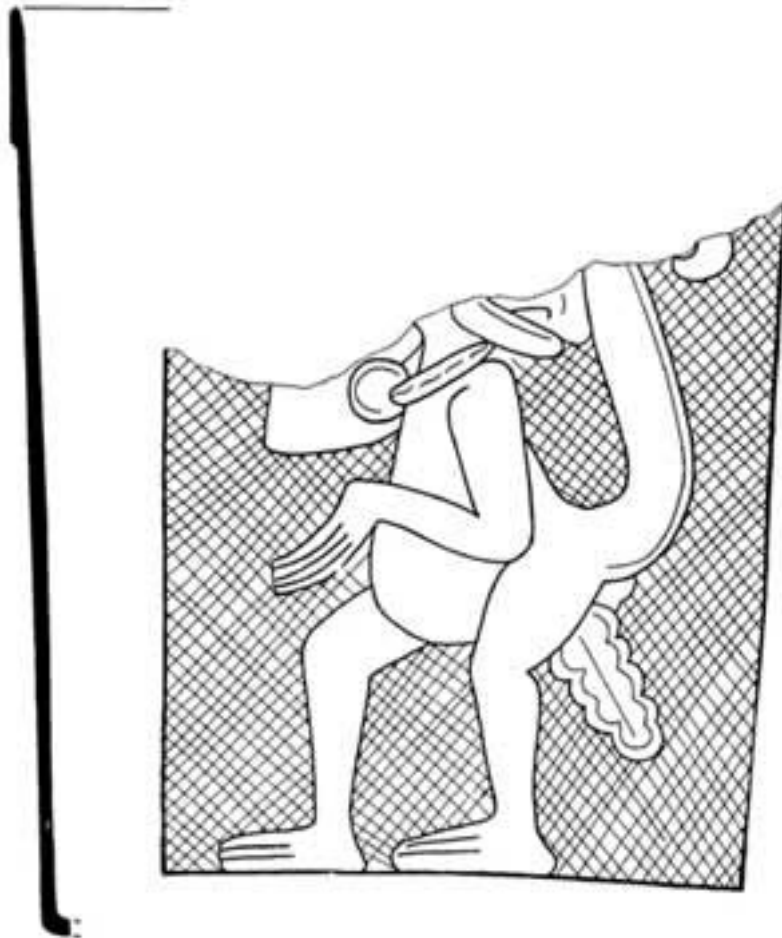


Figure 8. Animal representations: monkeys.

Animal Representations: Serpents (Figures 2 and 4)

They were represented in a more or less naturalistic way, although their proportions do not seem to be the real ones. In those cases where the serpent is present, it is being carried in one hand by a character that holds it by the neck. It is shown in a complete or semi-complete form, and always in a vertical position. The body is relatively thin and disproportioned when compared to the head, which is large. The face of the beast has a round eye with a line in the lower section; one small ear is visible, as well as a small nose, and from under the upper maxillary, the teeth, with sharp endings, protrude. In turn, a long bifid tongue emerges from the teeth.

Animal Representations: Birds

They have long beaks and necks, round eyes, long legs, and opened wings. Similar representations have been identified as pelicans and others as herons. Some birds were identified as ibis and others as cormorants (Dennis Guerra, personal communication 2004).

Mythical beings: Serpents with feathered headdresses (Figure 9)

They are fully or partially presented, and show the following features: supra-orbital plate, feathers adhered to the supra-orbital plate, one round eye, upper maxillary bone, teeth that emerge from the upper maxillary, fangs, tongue, and a body with the presence of scales and rattles.

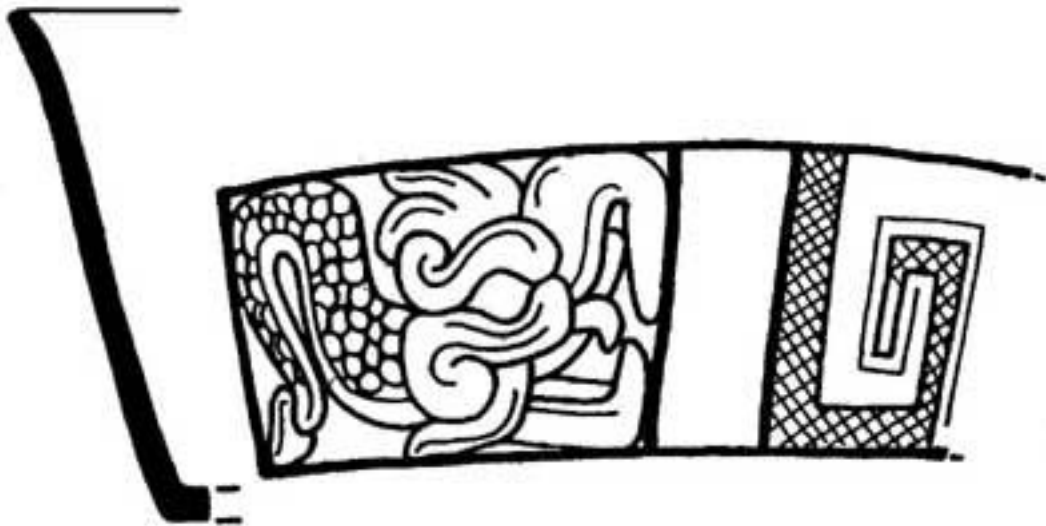


Figure 9. Mythical beings: Serpent with feathered headdress.

Mythical beings: Bird with serpentine head

This representation is a blend of bird and serpent traits. The head presents serpent characteristics, with a head similar to that of a serpent and with a feathered headdress. It has a bird-like body with extended wings, a tail with long feathers, and two visible legs.

Mythical beings: Bird with skull (Figure 10)

The body of this being is like that of a bird, with some sort of leg that ends with a claw, extended and up-lifted wings. The human cranium this bird has as a head is peculiar; its rear part shows a small circle that could represent the eye of the bird. In front of the skull and the mouth, an extended feature similar to a beak, comes out.

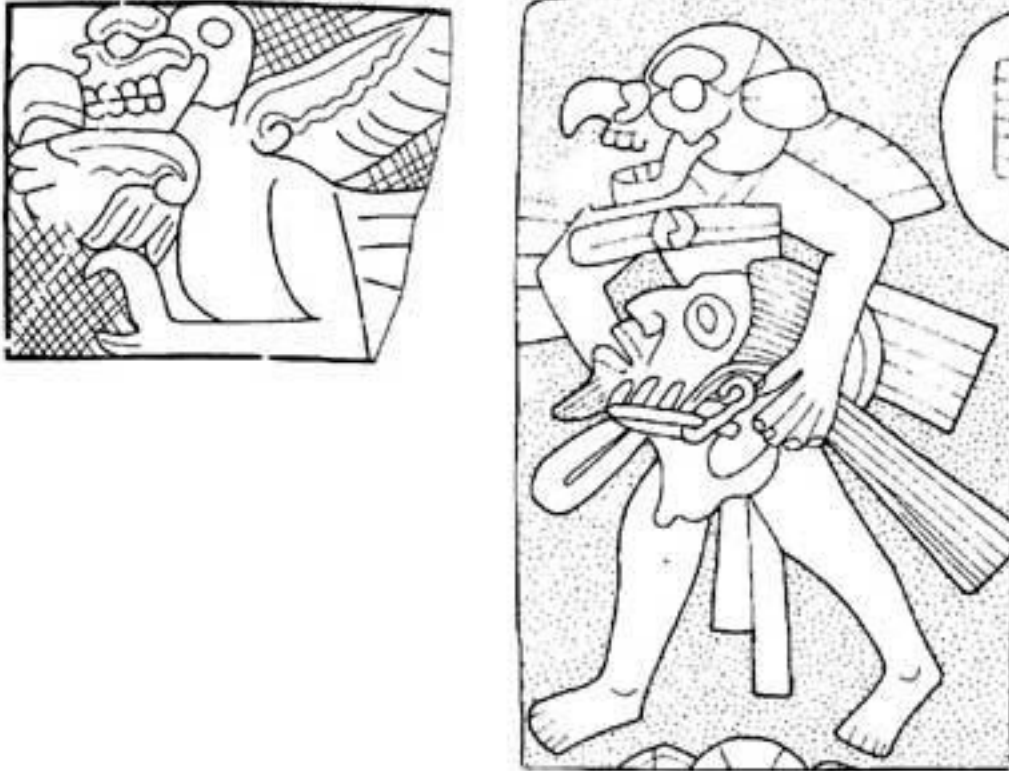


Figure 10. Mythical beings: Bird with skull. Detail of monument 1, Bilbao. Drawing by Oswaldo Chinchilla.

COMPARISONS

Outline of facial traits

One peculiarity in the face of humans in the Cotzumalguapa style is the double line over and under the eyes, as well as over the mouth. In turn, the faces depicted in the Tiquisate ceramic present lines under the eyes and over the mouth. Thus, it would seem to be persistency in the way of representing motifs in coastal art.

Speech scrolls

The sculptural art of Cotzumalguapa shows a remarkable presence of highly elaborated scrolls, which consist of ramifications with phytomorphic features that emerge from the mouth of the characters. The Tiquisate pottery has a number of cases where scrolls are seen coming out from the mouth of the characters and occasionally from the mouths of serpents, depicted as part of the headdresses of the human characters. The elaboration in this case is simpler, although it is still associated with a phytomorphic feature.

Ornaments

The belts exhibited by the characters represented in the Cotzumalguapa sculpture have knots and large bows. Annick Daneels (2001:1173) notes that the typical loincloth in this art includes that type of belt. It should be outlined that the characters of the Tiquisate ceramic wear a belt with very similar characteristics.

The serpent motif

The Cotzumalguapa sculpture is strongly associated with this motif. The ceramic sample evidences a strong presence of the motif, both in a natural and mythical way. In the mythic way, it is seen in the headdresses of the characters, and in the form of principal motif blended with bird traits. To exemplify the equivalence of motifs in the sculpture with those present in ceramics, we have the case of Monument 30 of El Baúl (Hatch 1987:fig. 11). This monument shows the individual at left with a headdress similar to the feathered serpent headdress seen in ceramics. There is similarity in the features that form the headdress. In the pottery, there is a trait that consists of intertwined bands with circles in the middle; this form resembles Monument 91 of Bilbao (Chinchilla 1996:fig. 6.7), and shows a very similar execution.

Necklaces worn by beasts

The monkeys observed in the pottery are wearing necklaces. It is frequent to find such characteristic in the animals of the Cotzumalguapa sculpture (Chinchilla 1996:262). The presence of this trait both in sculpture and ceramics is significant because it makes evident that there is consistency in the forms of representation.

Mythomorph: Bird and human cranium (Figure 10)

This subject present in molded ceramics is present as well in sculpture, specifically in Monument 1 of Bilbao. In the upper left corner of this stela there is a small character with a human body, wings in his rear part, a skull instead of a head, and in front of it, a feature which resembles a beak. There is a remarkable similarity with the ceramic representation.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The results presented here are part of an investigation which is still in process; therefore, the data may increase in future publications. Our intention is to attract more attention towards the iconography present in the Tiquisate ceramic of the South Coast, which up to now has not been fully considered as a source of knowledge in regard to the prehispanic coastal society. It is believed that this investigation constitutes an initial step that will contribute to such knowledge.

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Figure 1 Map showing site distribution in the South Coast

Figure 2 Example of the “curved line” style

Figure 3 Example of the “straight line” style

Figure 4 Designs with human representations

Figure 5 Designs with human representations

Figure 6 Designs with serpentine head

Figure 7 Designs with phytomorphic features

Figure 8 Animal representations: monkeys

Figure 9 Mythical beings: Serpent with a feathered headdress

Figure 10 Mythical beings: Bird with skull