

THE SEQUENCE IN THE CERAMIC TRADITION OF EL PERÚ-WAKA', PETÉN

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The size and geographic localization of El Perú-*Waka'* suggest that it was a remarkably important political and economical center of the Maya world, a fact that is confirmed by the hieroglyphic texts that narrate the interactions between the royal house of *Waka'* and the dominant capitals of the Maya Lowlands. Currently, through the investigations carried out by the El Perú-*Wakah'* Project, efforts are being made for demonstrating the veracity and utility of the epigraphic data by comparing them with the archaeological works of excavation, surface collection and laboratory analysis, as well as through other disciplines that contribute substantially to the knowledge of the community that inhabited that center (Freidel and Escobedo 2003:2).

In the course of the investigations conducted during the 2003 field season, 33 archaeological excavation units were opened, which yielded a substantial amount of artifacts. Most of them consisted of sherds originated in a large variety of contexts (Eppich 2004:369). The preliminary analysis of that ceramic produced a variety of data that contributed to the orientation of the 2004 excavations, and particularly to the achievement of an overall idea about the chronological occupation sequence of the archaeological site of El Perú-*Wakah'*.

ANALYSIS OF THE MATERIAL COLLECTED

The sample recovered in 2003, in addition to varied artifacts recovered in the excavations, consisted approximately of 130,000 sherds. The majority of them came from Operation 1 (Figure 1), specifically from that which was considered as a ritual deposit of termination. It is estimated that ceramics in this operation comprised nearly 60% of all the material recovered by the project, that is to say, around 80,000 sherds (Eppich 2004:369). As the long term objective is aimed at defining the particular typology of the site, initial works basically consisted in identifying the ceramic groups, to which purpose the Type-Variety system was used and the material compared with a number of ceramic monographs from other nearby sites.

As a work tool, a card was created to record the individual information of the sherds, including several data that would contribute with the identification of specific forms and parts of the vessels and the presence or absence of slip, together with any other decoration technique that could be present. This allowed for establishing the function of the vessels, to gain knowledge on the frequency of the ceramic groups, and to have a better idea of the occupational periods in some activity areas of the site. The individual analysis of the materials proved appropriate to direct the investigation particularly in regard to the deposits, as their degree of complexity called for a thorough system of analysis. Anyway, and for this initial stage of the study, only the ceramic groups and types usually known were identified, and it is expected that all these traits may be more accurately defined in not too long a time.

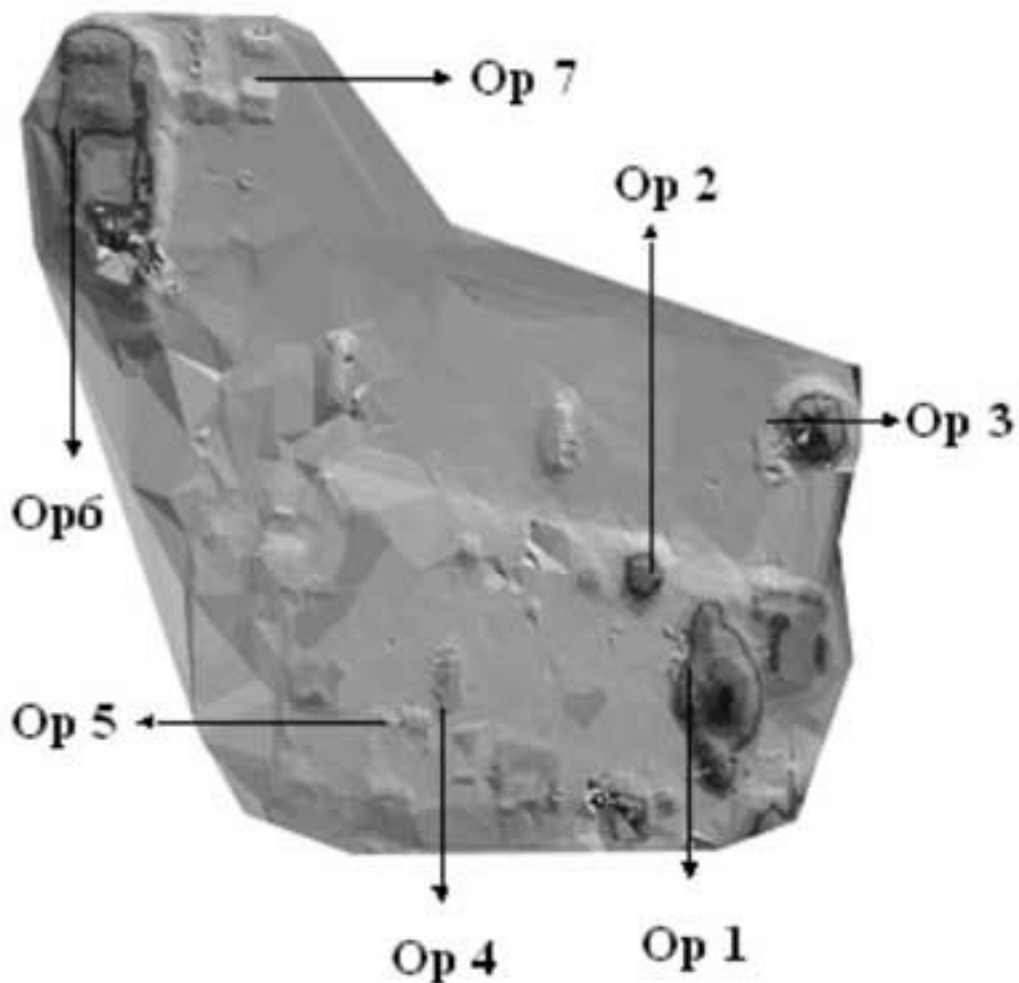


Figure 1. Localization of the intervened operations in the nuclear area of El Perú-Wakah'.

The size of the sample must be taken into consideration at the time of evaluating the conclusions and merits of this paper, assuming that as the project continues with the process and analysis of the materials recovered, some of the hypothesis advanced here will have to be subjected to substantial revision. However, it is also possible that the preliminary ceramic sequence used to establish dates may prove quite accurate.

With the purpose of learning about the occupational stages of El Perú-Wakah', several test units were opened in the area known as Plaza 1, together with a program of salvage and consolidation in one of the looting tunnels of Structure M12-32. Even though the material recovered from the rubble of the looting tunnel was abundant and presented alterations, at first sight it was possible to observe ceramic examples of the Early Classic and Late Classic Periods (Figure 2), which somehow were consistent with the stratigraphic evidence inside the tunnel where more than one construction stage was made evident.

The intensive excavations conducted at the Plaza led to the identification of pottery that dated back to the end of the Preclassic Period, such as the Sierra Red, Polvero Black, Flor Cream and Sacluc Black on Orange types. For what it seems, the occupation during the Early Classic Period was somewhat more extended, because of the amount of examples found of the Quintal Unslipped, Aguila Orange, Triunfo Fluted, Dos Arroyos Orange Polychrome and Balanza Black types.

Apparently, it was during the Late Classic Period that the occupation was intensified, revealing a greater concentration of materials corresponding to that period. Thus, among the more frequent types, Cambio Unslipped, Encanto Fluted, Tinaja Red, Azote Orange and several polychromes of the Saxche-Palmar group were present, among others.

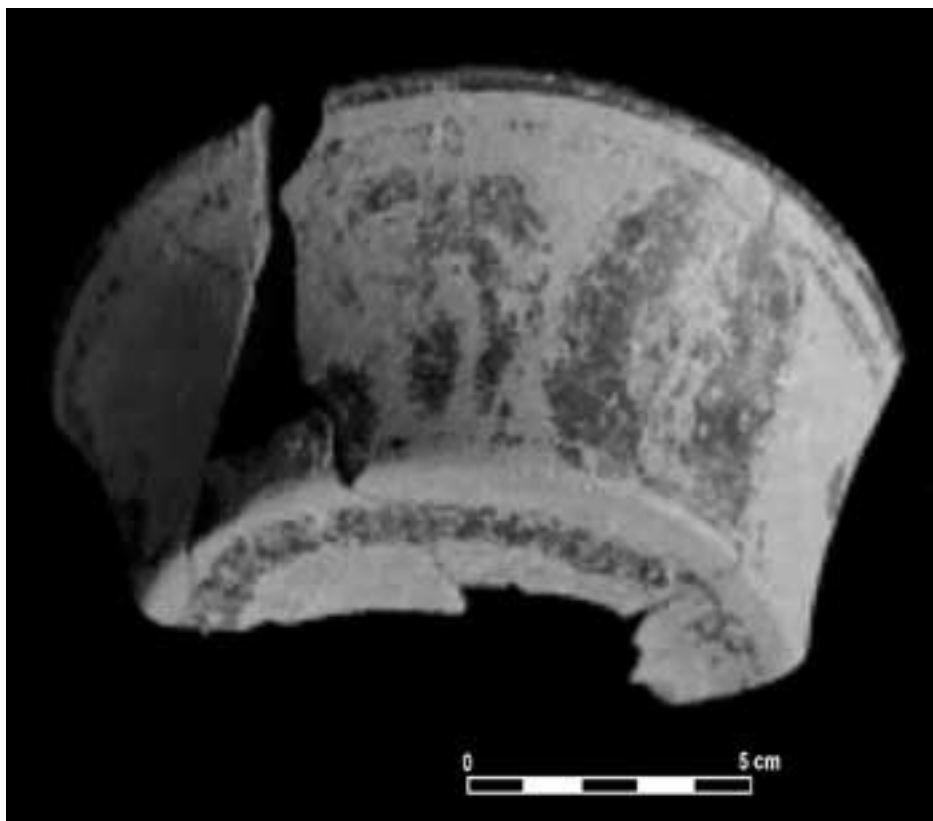


Figure 2. Late Classic polychrome ceramic.

As to forms and decoration, the termination deposit was characterized by a high frequency of large bowls with a reinforced outer rim, in addition to a decorative fillet digitally impressed and other impression techniques. Included in this form, several examples were found with a hook-shaped inner rim. The pitchers with curved-divergent necks, straight rims and outer bracing are also very frequent, while bowls with a composite wall, dishes and vases were observed in lesser amounts.

The Late-Terminal Classic material recovered in two of the structures of Plaza 3 shows a large and varied collection corresponding to the last occupation of the city, as the pottery of that period was found in the upper levels of the operations and represents a pure sample of the ceramic tradition that unfolded within that timeframe.

Structure L13-22 is directly associated with Stela 15, the earliest one of the site; however, excavations established that this structure was built in the Terminal Classic, long after Stela 15 was created, and that apparently, its fragments were reassembled at a later time. The pottery found in those excavations confirmed such hypothesis, especially due to the presence of a garbage pit deposited directly on top of the last floor of Plaza 2. This garbage pit consisted mainly of multiple ceramic fragments of the Encanto Fluted, Azote Orange and Tinaja Red types, one semi-complete vessel of the Pabellon Molded-Carved type (Figure 4), Fine Gray pottery, polychromes, and the peculiar presence of red sherds with a waxy finish, very similar to the Sierra Red pottery of the Preclassic Period.

Although some of the structures of Plaza 3 seem to have had an occupation during the Early Classic period, the material is somewhat poor and is also present in several sectors of the Plaza, especially in Structure L13-17, which seems to have had a residential function.

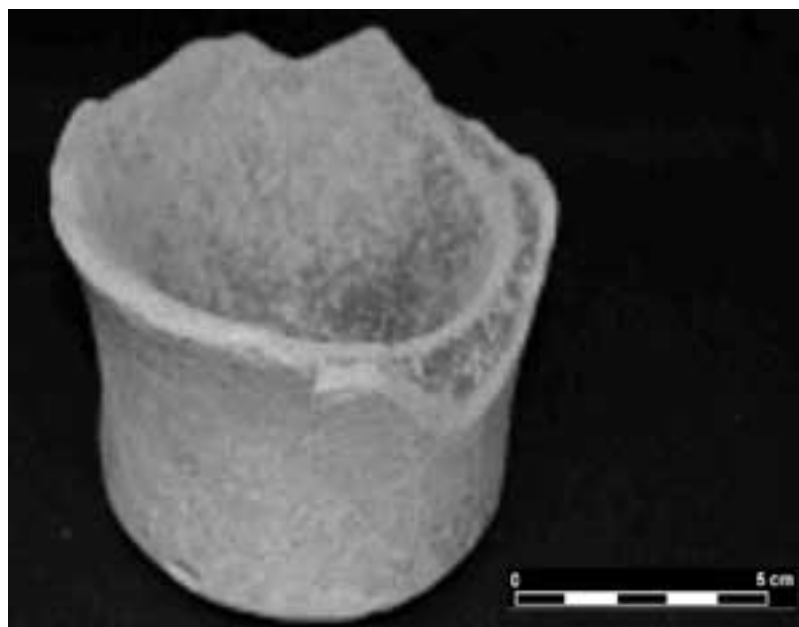


Figure 3. Semi-complete vessel of the Late Classic period

At the northwest of the site there is Plaza 4. This combines a major group of structures, with the Ballgame and the Palace Complex among them. In the Plaza area, the ceramic recovered from a test pit suggests an Early Classic and Late Classic occupation, with a remarkable difference existing between both periods, as the last stage is represented by just a few fragments recovered in the upper level.



Figure 4. Altar Group, Pabellon Molded-Carved.

Deep excavations made it possible to recover pottery from sealed contexts in the Ballgame. On the surface, one fragment of Pabellon Molded-Carved was found, as well as others from the Altar group, together with additional samples of the Late Classic period. In the inner levels there was a large and complicated concentration of material initially considered a dumpster, but the presence of very fine and fragmented vessels, and of a jaguar bone, led us to designate it as a ritual deposit. Right under the jaguar bone there was a cache with two almost identical vessels deposited lip against lip (Freidel and Escobedo 2003:12), corresponding to the Aguila Orange type. In a frequency order, the Triunfo Fluted, Aguila Orange, Balanza Black, and the Quintal Unslipped types were represented, and in smaller quantities, the Dos Arroyos Orange Polychrome type; in other words, there was a ceramic sequence that extended from the Early Classic to the Late Classic periods.

The excavation works conducted at the Northwest Palace, perhaps the main royal residency of *Waka'* during the Late Classic period (Freidel and Escobedo 2003:10), and modified during the Terminal Classic, revealed a heavy occupation during this final stage. Thus, among the types identified, Cambio Unslipped, Encanto Fluted,

Tinaja Red, Altar, Maquina Brown, Azote Orange and Infierno Black can be mentioned, among others. The polychromes of the Saxche-Palmar group were also present, although with a lesser frequency.

“The center of El Perú-Wakah’ is divided into two monumental public places: the Western Palace Center, where most of the excavations were conducted during the first season, and the Mirador Acropolis towards east. The latter architectural complex is a large elevation that was modified in ancient times to form the core of an Acropolis that supports three truncated pyramids” (Freidel and Escobedo 2003:12).

During the first field season, no deep excavations were conducted in this area; only surface excavations were carried out and therefore, only Late Classic and Late-Terminal Classic materials were recovered.

At east of the Western Center of the site, a residential group was discovered on a natural elevation, which was archaeologically intervened by means of approximation probes and test pits. The ceramic recovered was dated to the Early Classic and the Late-Terminal Classic periods, with a high frequency of the Tinaja Red and Balanza Black types.

At the beginning of the 2003 season, a satellite center of El Perú-Wakah’ was discovered and given the name of Chakah. The center of this secondary site consists of a large plaza located on a wide section of the scarp (Freidel and Escobedo 2003:15-16). Through test pits opened along the plaza, it was possible to define the presence of ceramic groups that went from the Late-Terminal Preclassic through the Late Classic periods. The pottery features much varied and interesting assemblages that outline the significance of this center, among them, a bowl of the Saxche-Palmar group with a hieroglyphic band that refers to the site of El Zotz. Just like in the case of El Perú-Wakah’, it is possible that the peak of this site was verified during the Late Classic period, or at least, this is what the test pits and the amount of material recovered are reflecting so far.

PRELIMINARY CERAMIC SEQUENCE

The archaeological evidence recovered in the field operations shows that there was a pottery tradition in the ancient city of El Perú-Wakah’, at least twelve centuries old. The community itself, very probably, was occupied throughout this period that comprised the entire extent of Maya history. The dates commonly accepted for these periods place, for the time being, the occupation of the site from 200 BC to 1000 AD. It is still probable that earlier deposits may still be found at the site, yielding Late Preclassic and maybe Middle Preclassic pottery, like in El Mirador and La Joyanca (Eppich 2004:372). No doubt, the earlier ceramic must also be present elsewhere at the site.

From a ceramic point of view, the Late-Terminal Preclassic remains may be defined as a period that overlaps the ancient ceramic tradition of the Late Preclassic with the technological and stylistic developments of Classic times, joining together collections

of the Sierra Red and Polvero Black types, as well as Dos Arroyos Orange Polychrome, of the Aguila Orange type –though in a small quantity- Sacluc Black on Orange, and of a group of red and orange sherds with black dots, identified as corresponding to the Dos Hermanos type. The stratigraphic levels where the Early Classic sherds occur are the same than those of the Late Preclassic, and not necessarily should they be interpreted as an unfortunate disturbance of the archaeological record; on the contrary, they may represent an entire transitional stage between two well defined periods.

The Early Classic examples reveal a wide sample of monochrome, bathrobe and polychrome top quality ceramics. These deposits, together with the materials represented, clearly reflect the changes occurred in the manufacturing technology similar in nature to those verified in other contemporary societies, as well as the complexity achieved in everyday objects, specifically the vessels. Perhaps something of this sort happened as well in their social circle, to the point of promoting a favorable development for the events that were to unfold in the Late Classic period.

The Late-Terminal Classic period represents the final and densest occupation of the ancient city, and it probably dates to the IX and X centuries. All operations yielded a substantial amount of material from this period. At least as far as ceramics is concerned, the increase in the density of the material could represent the occupational peak of El Perú-Wakah', defined by those collections that included ceramic types of the Fine Orange class (Altar, Balancan or Pabellon Molded-Carved), some of the Fine Gray types (Chablekal, Tres Naciones or Chikxulub Incised), of Tinaja Red, unslipped vessels, unidentified reds or waxy blacks, and the orange polychromes of the Saxche-Palmar group (Eppich 2004:376).

The unidentified waxy monochromes represent a pottery tradition very poorly defined even for the Late-Terminal Classic periods. These types feature an amazing resemblance with some Terminal Classic ones from La Joyanca, as despite featuring the same waxy texture than the Sierra Red types, they can be differentiated by their color, in general much darker and light, as well as by the differences in their shapes, rather typical of this period. On the other hand, the waxy black monochromes are still less frequent. A more accurate description of these monochromes must await the elaboration of a global typology for this site.

This preliminary analysis must not disregard the possibility that other deposits are found, prolonging the occupation of the site to the Early Postclassic period, although such a thing is considered rather improbable. During the reconnaissance works this year, some sherds were found that are not far from corroborating this hypothesis.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering that this is the first stage of analysis of the ceramic material and that field investigations still continue, it is premature to advance any definite conclusion regarding the ceramic sequence. Inferences merely constitute an outline that will be enhanced with a greater detail in the future.

The occurrence of Late-Terminal Preclassic material in the Plaza areas of the Western Center in association with monumental platforms, suggest that it was in this period that El Perú-Wakah' emerged as a major center. Regional historic events, such as the collapse of the Late Preclassic state at the El Mirador basin, may have played a role in the foundation of El Perú-Wakah', on a defensive scarp and in a favorable position to control exchange through the San Pedro River.

It is during the Terminal Classic when the major modifications of the plazas took place, as suggested by the large amount of ceramic corresponding to this time space obtained in test excavations, as well as the strata associated with the structures and the respective construction stages.

The red waxy ceramic found in a number of Late-Terminal Classic deposits, might probably represent a return to a technology nearly 900 years old, although the quality of manufactures did not measure up to the Preclassic production; the reasons and the careful elaboration involved, obviously were not the same.

The large part of the ceramic sequence of the city has not been explored so far, and many of these ceramic types lack a specific point or departure or an end. Until additional evidence is found, the dates for the definition of ceramic complexes will not be assigned. Eventually, a volumetric measure could be used, and the relative frequency of the ceramic types throughout time would contribute to define a formal chapter regarding seriation.

The pottery tradition of El Perú-Wakah' extended at least throughout a millennium, and it was wide, varied and complex in nature, while in turn, it had repercussions in many of the cultural, social, economical and political changes of the Maya past. To conclude, the current development of the ceramic analysis reveals that El Perú-Wakah' was an important Maya center that functioned from the Late Preclassic to the Terminal Classic periods.

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Figure 1 Localization of the operations intervened in the nuclear area of El Perú-Waka'

Figure 2 Late Classic polychrome ceramic

Figure 3 Semi-complete vessel of the Late Classic period

Figure 4 Altar Group, Molded-Carved Pavilion