

**IDAEH'S CERAMIC COLLECTION:  
NEW CHALLENGES IN SUPPORT OF  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS IN GUATEMALA**

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Ceramic analysis is, for the archaeological investigation of Guatemala, of the utmost importance as a resource to establish reliable chronological frames for the understanding of the varied social, economical and cultural processes undergone by the different human groups that have coexisted throughout time; consequently, the adequate organization of that material is crucial. This is why the need arises to create representative samplers of the different regions of the country adequate to be consulted by all the specialists interested in the archaeology of a specific place, site or region, who would then be able to use them as a major reference tool.

Several decades ago, the creation of samplers of ceramic materials, originally stored in the facilities of the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, was initiated. The *Ceramoteca* (Ceramic collection), intended to facilitate consults and research, was created with the purpose of augmenting and protecting the ceramic samples resulting from national and international archaeological projects involving research, salvage and rescues that have taken place in the country, adequately organized for study and analysis by researchers devoted to the ceramic field, thus providing valuable support to the overall archaeological investigation.



Figure 1. View of the *Ceramoteca* section.

## BACKGROUNDS

Since it was founded in 1948, the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology was established as the place of destination of all those archaeological pieces that were the product of archaeological investigation works conducted in the country, including a fair amount of ceramic and lithic materials. It was around 1965 when Stephan de Borhegyi developed a project intended to have all samples organized in wooden cabinets identified according to provenience and with a correlative code that went from number one to number 110 (Carlos Navarrete, personal communication 2004). The collection of archaeological pieces at the museum was enhanced with time, and in turn, this gradually reduced the physical space available for the consultation of the samplers.

In 1998, and as a solution to this problem, the *Ceramoteca* was created, aimed at functioning as a center for consultation and ceramic investigation, together with other archaeological materials (Figure 1). Nonetheless, and in order to fulfill this task, the design of an adequate organization and functioning became indispensable; consequently, several researchers expressed their interest to collaborate in this work with their contributions and ideas, in the course of two meetings held in 1999.

Currently, among the staff members involved in the *Ceramoteca*, there is concern about succeeding in meeting the goals for which this was created, which has led to

the planning and development of a number of different activities that shall be presented below.



**Figure 2. View of the *Ceramoteca* section.**

## **MOVING OF CABINETS**

The point of departure for the functioning of the *Ceramoteca* consisted in adequately housing all representative ceramic samplers from the whole country; therefore, the collection was initiated with the samples of Río Azul and Petexbatun that at that time were in the store room for archaeological materials at the Department of Prehispanic and Colonial Monuments (DEMOPRE).

Then, and in coordination with the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, the moving of the cabinets with samplers from the store room was completed, carefully watching that the materials transferred were nothing but the ceramic samples. The year 2003 was the most successful one, as we were able to move a very large number of pieces of furniture (around 100 cabinets), and complete the transfer (Figure 2).

On the other hand, the collection became gradually enhanced by the contributions of different projects of archaeological investigation recently concluded, such as those at Motul de San José, Piedras Negras and El Ujuxte among others, as well as by other ongoing ones, like the Cancuen sampler, all of which has made it possible for us to

gather, to this day, a collection of 216 cabinets with ceramic samplers, further to two others corresponding to Mexico, one to Central America, and one to Europe and Africa, with additional samplers of different sites that are stored in crates of different sizes.

## SPACE ORGANIZATION

The amount of samplers housed in the *Ceramoteca* points to the imperative establishment of an adequate organization, aimed at facilitating an agile access to the samples consulted by researchers. Therefore, and with the purpose of optimizing the available physical space, the cabinets were arranged following a geographical type of criterion, or in other words, by departments (Figure 3).



**Figure 3. View of the *Ceramoteca* section.**

In this way, the first level received two major groupings: the first comprises the Lowlands, subsequently subdivided in the regions of central, northern, northwestern and southern Peten, and Petexbatun; the second comprises the Highlands, subdivided in the departments of Guatemala (including Kaminaljuyu, with the most important sample of the Highlands), Sacatepequez, Chimaltenango, Huehuetenango, both Verapaces, and Quiche.

The second level grouped the ceramic samplers of the South Coast, subdivided in South Central Coast (department of Escuintla), South Eastern Coast (departments of

Santa Rosa and Jutiapa), and South Western Coast (departments of San Marcos and south of Quetzaltenango); Western Highlands (departments of Quetzaltenango, Solola and Totonicapan); the eastern portion of the country (departments of Zacapa, Chiquimula, Izabal and Jalapa); and finally, four cabinets with samples from abroad.

In this sense, the design established allows for including additional samplers, and in our view, given the fact that the cabinet moving from the Museum of archaeology is now completed, and considering the present rhythm of cabinets delivered, the physical capacity will not be affected for about five years.

For the adequate consultation of samplers and analysis of materials, three independent work areas were established in the first level of the *Ceramoteca*, together with three working tables that were placed in the upper section. Nonetheless, there are other tables available and room to place, if need be, other two tables, in a way that it would be possible to take care of up to eight projects simultaneously (Figure 4).



**Figure 4. View of the *Ceramoteca* section.**

Another crucial angle involves the availability of bibliographical materials, in concordance with the archaeological materials. To this purpose, a small library was gathered, with publications on archaeology and technical reports of the different projects of archaeological investigation, with a total of 312 volumes, a number we shall hopefully increase in the days to come.

## **CODIFICATION AND PRESENTATION OF SAMPLERS**

Like we already explained, the cabinets with ceramic samplers were organized following a geographical criterion. For making the localization of the samples easier, the aisles were identified with labels placed in their upper section. In addition, the identification of each cabinet and drawer will soon be completed through a system with characteristics that will allow for the future aggregation of other samplers to the *Ceramoteca*, without affecting the order or the arrangement thereof. The label will be standardized to replace the old ones, though these will be preserved in the original cabinets. The original code will be respected and included in addition to the internal control code, all of which will hopefully allow for a better control of the materials stored.

Recently, and as a consequence of factors of an institutional nature, all the materials, pieces of furniture and equipment involved in the Lithic Collection were transferred to the *Ceramoteca*, which had to assume its corresponding functions. This situation, despite tending to narrow the physical space available, presented the advantage of having at hand the basic equipment for conducting obsidian hydration tests, thus providing valuable support to all those specialists interested not only in the analysis of lithic samples, but also in the completion of different types of possible tests using that equipment with the archaeological materials.

## **DATABASE PROJECT: INVENTORY OF SAMPLES PER REGION**

Upon completion of the stages of sample transferring and spatial organization of the cabinets and activity areas, a second phase is now underway, which consists in the preparation of a general sample inventory that will represent the point of departure for the design and creation of a general database. For now, 27 cabinets of the South Coast have been revised with a yield of 44.000 samples, around 82% of which correspond to ceramic, and 18% to other archaeological materials. Based on this piece of information, it is estimated that total ceramic samples add up to some 300.000 pieces, further to lithic materials and others.

## **ATTENTION TO RESEARCHERS**

The organizational efforts being carried out at the *Ceramoteca* are particularly aimed at researchers working on different national and international projects of archaeological investigation, as well as at Archaeology students; therefore, we have been particularly committed in providing all of them a personalized attention. In total, and so far, in the current year we have assisted researchers and students of eight projects of archaeological investigation, facilitating working areas to all of them as well as available equipments, so as to help them carry out their work in the best possible way.

Besides, we have received occasional visiting students from the middle and upper levels, and the visit of other persons, who were toured around the facilities of the *Ceramoteca* and shown samples of materials connected with the history and development of the different human groups that inhabited our territory throughout time.

## **CERAMICISTS' MEETINGS**

As stated previously, two ceramicists meetings took place in 1999. In 2003, we saw the need to reassume these sessions, and the initiative to organize a new meeting was undertaken, in view of the improvements made through the organization and scopes of the *Ceramoteca* in benefit of the archaeological community. Therefore, and with the valuable logistic support of researcher Sonia Medrano, a call was issued for a group of national and international researchers involved in different projects. This activity proved highly successful as a consequence of the participation of these scholars, and provided us with the opportunity to show the achievements and progresses made by the *Ceramoteca*, up to the past year.

Taking the 2003 meeting as a starting point, it was anticipated that follow-up meetings with a periodical frequency were to be held from then on, with the purpose of discussing specific issues on ceramic materials and to further establish a link that would make it possible to unify analysis and classification criteria. Thus, the first meeting was held in May, 2004, and the subject of discussion had to do with Postclassic ceramics in the Lowlands and their relationship with the other regions of the country.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In order to succeed in creating a fully functional *Ceramoteca* projected to the archaeological community, intense work is necessary, and several years will probably elapse until this is finally developed in full. The efforts now in process represent the beginning of that significant project, while the staff members of this work center are most willing and prepared to pursue the established goals (Figure 5).



**Figure 5. View of the *Ceramoteca* section.**

Thus, the *Ceramoteca* will hopefully become the largest and most complete laboratory of archaeological materials in our country, with facilities and equipments fit to provide a sound support to national and international researchers, so that they may continue with their valuable work in the most efficient possible way.

Figure 1 View of the *Ceramoteca* section.

Figure 2 View of the *Ceramoteca* section.

Figure 3 View of the *Ceramoteca* section.

Figure 4 View of the *Ceramoteca* section.

Figure 5 View of the *Ceramoteca* section.