

# The Chocholá Ceramic Style of Northern Yucatan: An Iconographic and Archaeological Study

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One could hardly describe the Chocholá style ceramics of Northern Yucatán as well understood. Only a handful of scholars would claim to understand the geographical or temporal placement of these pots, and fewer still would attempt to fit them within Maya ceramic chronology as a whole. Labeled as *unprovenanced* and hence *unusable*, this stunning group of ceramics has been sidestepped by many scholars. This is indeed unfortunate, for it detracts from the valuable role these pots have to play in answering timely questions about Maya funerary mythology, as well as Northern Lowland ceramic iconography and its articulation with the traditions of the Southern Lowlands. A study of Chocholá pottery also addresses the broader question facing Maya studies of how to productively analyze the tragic number of looted ceramics.

In 1973, the name Chocholá was first assigned to the waxy, chocolatey, bowls and cylinders, which due to their uniquely carved surfaces, stand out from the majority of ancient Maya ceramics. In *A Maya Scribe and His World*, Michael D. Coe published for the first time a significant body of these deeply carved pots (1973). Fifteen Chocholá pots appeared in *Maya Scribe*, and all shared the deep relief carving and light to dark chocolatey brown paste which were Coe's major characteristics for defining the style (1973:114). Coe named the style after a small village 30 kilometers southwest of Mérida, near the larger settlement of Maxcanu, from which he was told the ceramics originated (fig 1).

Since Coe's work, only one other scholar has attempted to refine the Chocholá style definition. In a brief treatment of Chocholá iconography, Carolyn Tate identified what appeared to be the major themes in the Chocholá carved style, as well as common vessel forms (Tate 1985). Tate's work focused heavily upon only eighteen pots that had been published when she did her study. Her conclusions are weakened by an all-too-common bias that views sophisticated iconographic images as the

hallmark of the Southern Lowlands, and somehow aberrant when found in the North. Tate's article emphasizes the incompatibility of the Chocholá pots with the known corpus of Yucatecan ceramics, a perspective which is unfounded in light of the data presented here.

It is useful to begin with a brief discussion of what the Chocholá-style pots are not. Chocholá pots are never incised, nor are they mold-made, two techniques of clay modeling that appear in the Maya Lowlands. In the Lowlands, incising is typically done with a sharp tool that makes grooves in the body of the pot, never more than 5 mm deep. Mold-made ceramics can be identified by the rounded nature of the sculpted images, a result of the technical necessity of removing malleable clay from a mold. Again, the relief of mold-made ceramics is never more than 5 mm in depth, since deep cutaways are technically impossible. Carving allows the deepest relief and the most control of the nuances of iconographic information.

The relief of Chocholá-style pots is the

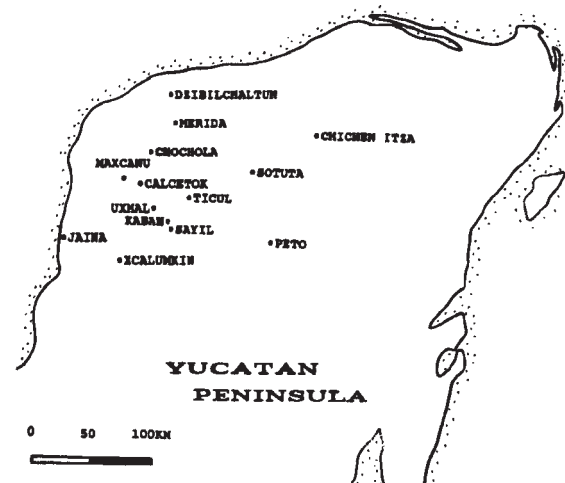


Fig. 1 Map of Northern Lowland Sites

deepest known for Maya ceramics, and resembles the carved lintels and stelae of sites like Yaxchilán and Piedras Negras. It is this technical comparison which has led some scholars to believe the Chocholá pots are the work of Southern Lowland artists, perhaps those who worked on stone stelae and lintels (Robicsek 1978; Tate 1985). Such an argument implies a restriction of a given technique to a single geographical area, an assumption for which no supporting evidence exists.

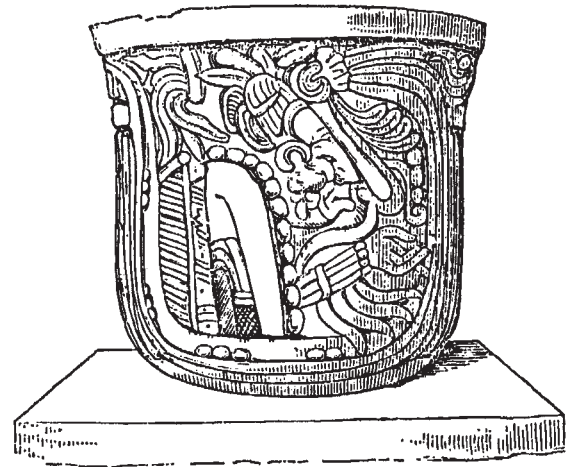
Vessel forms and materials are also diagnostic of Chocholá. Three vessel forms constitute the vast majority of known Chocholá pots: the *bowl* (often described as restricted orifice or hemispherical), the *beaker*, and the *cylinder* (occasionally split into tall and short varieties). All three of these forms are found in associated Northern Lowland ceramic traditions, while only the beaker and cylinder are found in the South. Over half of the 107 Chocholá-style pots I examined were hemispherical bowls. This form was the most common, yet exhibited the most variation in iconographic subject matter. Approximately one quarter were beakers, while cylinders made up only a little over 10 percent. The remaining vessels were fluted *bowls*, a form that is rare in the Chocholá style, but found in other Yucatecan ceramic traditions.

The material from which Chocholá pots are made is very homogeneous, although the resultant colors of the pots are not. All the Chocholá ceramics are made from a fine carbonate-tempered clay, which ranges from a beige to deep brown, and on occasion appeared greenish or reddish. This appears to be the same clay from which most Yucatecan elite wares are made. Yucatecan elite wares have been described by ceramicists as the Slateware tradition (Brainerd 1958; Smith 1971; Ball 1979).

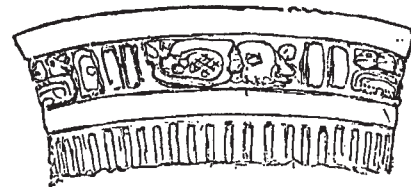
### The Slateware Tradition of Yucatan

Although similarities have been noted between the Chocholá style ceramics and the widely distributed Slateware vessels, a comprehensive comparison of Chocholá and Slateware vessel forms, wares, and decorative styles has never been published. The Slateware tradition is considered to be one of the most sophisticated ceramic traditions of Northern Yucatán, and encompasses a multitude of elite wares. Given the technical and artistic sophistication of the Chocholá style, the association is obvious, but because the Chocholá style has been perceived as atypical, such a logical line of inquiry has been ignored.

Brainerd's classic study of Yucatecan ceramics contained the original definition of the



Front of Ticul vase



Back of Ticul vase

Fig. 2 Ticul vase from Stephens 1843.

Slateware tradition and two of its types, Florescent Medium Slateware and Florescent Thin Slateware (1958:52-53). Both types are characterized by a slipped, waxy surface which ranges from oyster grey through browns, brownish reds, and purples (1958:52). The forms include jars, beakers, hemispherical bowls, and cylindrical vases (1958:53). The paste is tempered with fine calcite, and decoration consists of incising, trickle painting, and gesso coatings of white, rose, and green (Brainerd 1958:53). Brainerd believes the distinctive characteristics of waxy slip and trickle paint both go back



Fig. 3 Peto vase from Spinden 1913.

to the Formative (Preclassic) in Yucatán, but that these Slatewares developed with mosaic masonry in the Puuc-Chenes-Río Bec area, gradually incorporating regional Yucatecan styles, and emerging as a hybrid of the two regions in the Florescent (Late Classic) period (1958:76). Later ceramicists have re-named Brainerd's Florescent Medium and Florescent Thin slatewares, but the type descriptions have remained largely the same (Smith 1971; Robles 1990). Even Brainerd's chronological placement of these elite wares in the Late Classic period continues to be consistently upheld by recent studies (Robles 1990:39; Bey et al. 1992:11).

It is clear from the description of the Slateware style that this tradition is similar to the formal criteria of the Chocholá style outlined previously. The waxy slipped surfaces and trickle paint, the range of colors, and most importantly the diagnostic beakers and hemispherical bowls all point to a close association of the Chocholá style with the slatewares. Although the decoration and iconography of the Slateware tradition is more varied than that of the Chocholá style, it is significant that common artistic themes found on the Chocholá pots: God L, God K, and the seated male ruler, are also found on Slateware vessels and on the later Puuc period Fine Orange tradition vessels (Vaillant 1927:fig. 313; Brainerd 1958:figs. 59a, 61a, 103m). Thus it is apparent that primary iconographic themes of the Chocholá pots are found in both earlier and later Yucatecan ceramic styles.

In addition, preliminary paste composition analysis of the Chocholá pots by the Maya Polychrome Ceramic Project indicates a high carbonate paste similar to those of the slateware tradition (Dorie Reents-Budet 1989:personal communication). The chemical profiles of the twelve different Chocholá pots analyzed by this project were diverse enough to indicate a possibility of different sites of manufacture or a regional (rather than site specific) style (Dorie Reents-Budet 1989:personal communication).

### **Northern Lowland Derivation Data**

An oft heard refrain is that "there is no archaeological or scientific data" on the origin of Chocholá pots (Tate 1985:124). Although for most Chocholá pots no information survives about their original context, a significant body of archaeological information about these vessels has been long overlooked. Creative archaeologists cautiously utilize data from a variety of sources in addition to data from excavations. This is particularly appropriate in the Maya area where interest in

antiquities goes back to the early travelers of the nineteenth century. A careful examination of the plentiful travel accounts from Mesoamerica and the earliest ceramic inventories reveals a substantial amount of archaeological data concerning Chocholá pottery.

Chocholá-style pottery was published as early as 1843 when John L. Stephens published *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán*. While visiting the Hacienda San Francisco near the modern village of Ticul, Stephens personally witnessed a large number of excavations in the rapidly deteriorating ancient Maya structures. A vase found in these excavations was loaned to Stephens, and an engraving appears in his published account (fig. 2). It is surely a Chocholá-style vase, depicting one of the more common iconographic themes of a male torso within a cartouche (Stephens 1962:180). While Stephens did not himself pull this pot out of the ground, it seems unlikely that he would have reason to inaccurately record its location of discovery.

Early ceramic and art historical reports are also significant sources of information concerning the origin of Chocholá pieces. Spinden published the Peto Vase, probably the best known Chocholá vessel, in his early study of Maya art (1975:135) (fig. 3). Spinden says this carved bowl depicting a water-lily jaguar "was found near Peto" (ibid).

Spinden published two other Chocholá vessels, one with a male wearing a jaguar headdress from Calcehtok, the other of a seated God L from Isla Jaina (1975:136). Both of these sites are quite close to the tentative area of origin for the Chocholá style. Spinden's provenance of these pots is second-hand and it is clear that he is relying in most cases upon information from the collectors he visited. Yet these pots are not completely lacking in archaeological information. Because they bear such great resemblance to other vessels known to come from Northern Yucatán, and given that Spinden would have very little reason to be misleading about the supposed context of these pots, the majority of evidence argues for an actual Northern Yucatán origin, possibly even from the site of Calcehtok.

George Vaillant conducted a massive survey of Yucatecan ceramics as part of his Harvard Ph.D. dissertation (1927). Vaillant included seven pieces that fit the Chocholá stylistic criteria outlined above, including three that had been previously published by either Charnay or Spinden. Vaillant classified most of these pots as *carved Slate*, or a particular technical development within the Slateware tradition (1927:346). Of the four previously unpublished Chocholá-style pots included in

Vaillant's study, two were from Uxmal, and two were from Sotuta (Vaillant 1927:figs 288, 291, 310, 314). Although Vaillant relied upon second-hand information concerning the local origin of these pieces, just as Spinden had, many of the above comments concerning Spinden's reliability are also valid in relation to Vaillant's work. The vessels included by Vaillant appear to fit within the Chocholá-style criteria, appear to be authentic, and appear to him to fit within a Northern Yucatecan ceramic tradition.

Although Brainerd included only two Chocholá-style pots in his classic study *Archaeological Ceramics of Yucatán* (1958), one being the Peto Vase first published by Spinden, he makes some interesting statements about the nature of this style. Brainerd singles out the Chocholá-style pots as having a unique degree of technical excellence, but does not give these carved ceramics a separate type designation. Instead he classifies them within the Thin Slateware tradition, noting that the paste and slip of the Peto Vase is typical for this Puuc tradition ceramic style (1958:234).

A brief mention of a probable Chocholá pot found in tomb 2-38 of Copán was published by Longyear in his ceramic report for the site (1952). It is ironic that the first solid contextual evidence on a Chocholá vessel would come from so distant an area. Copán is one of the most thoroughly documented archaeological sites, and also one of the richest, with wide reaching trading connections in the Late Classic period. Longyear described the pot as "foreign-looking" and noted that it was the only one of its kind found at the site (Longyear 1952:65).

Through examination of the ceramic type collections in the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia-Centro Regional de Yucatán in Mérida, I was able to locate fragments of a Chocholá vessel in the materials from Dzibilchaltún. Although the final ceramic report from this project has not yet been published, a preliminary ceramic typology mentions finding these Chocholá sherds in structures 55 and 95 at Dzibilchaltún. While it is more likely that Chocholá pots were manufactured at a Puuc site, Dzibilchaltún is a logical location to find elite wares from throughout the Maya area.

### Iconographic Themes

The most fascinating aspect of Chocholá-style pottery is its extraordinarily beautiful iconography, portrayed in a detailed and consistent manner. Most frequently a single carved image appears, often within a cartouche of vegetation or

water lilies, on one side of the pot only. On the opposite side of the pot is a single diagonal band of glyphs, usually consisting of the Primary Standard Sequence. Almost a third of the pots included in this study had this simple band of diagonal glyphs. Occasionally glyphs can be found along the rim of the vessels. Some of the more complex scenes depicting figures also include glyphic captions between figures.

A few Chocholá pots have two distinct scenes, often separated by a block of large glyphs. However, there are never more than two scenic panels, nor do images cover the entire exterior surface of the pot. A section of plain surface is always retained, which highlights the deeply carved areas. Certain Chocholá pots clearly have the remains of stucco—or gesso as Brainerd called it—on the smooth exterior and interior surfaces. Often this stucco seems to frame the diagonal glyphs, which may not have been covered. Small traces of stucco have been found within the central cartouches and I postulate that the recessed background of Chocholá pots, often decorated with criss-cross hatching, was intended to be covered with stucco and then painted. On the better preserved Chocholá vessels, the central cartouche often retains traces of a red pigment, probably cinnabar, which has been rubbed into the carved area following the firing procedure.

A final decorative technique which is very common on Chocholá pottery is black "trickle" painting (Brainerd 1958:76). Various called post-fire paint, asphalt paint, and ink-blot paint, this decoration is always black, and always applied directly upon the surface of the pot. Often jaguar spots or God L's necklace have been blackened with this paint. Most frequently a simple abstract motif of three circles or a series of concentric circles is applied to the smooth exterior surface in black, accentuating the carved images.

The findings of the present iconographic study differ in many ways from those of Tate (1985). Tate relies heavily upon the Chocholá pots included in *Maya Scribe* (Coe 1973) for her iconographic study. The intention of *Maya Scribe* was not to publish representative pieces of the Chocholá tradition however, but to publish those truly spectacular vessels which Coe and others felt deserved serious academic study. Consequently, the Chocholá pots in *Maya Scribe* are not necessarily representative of the Chocholá style as a whole.

The definitions of major themes in the current study are based upon the frequency with which they appeared in the total corpus of Chocholá pots examined. This comprehensive perspective has

been useful in a number of ways: it has prevented bias in favor of the most spectacular or artistically stunning of the Chocholá pieces, and has aided in the identification of themes that cross-cut Chocholá and other Northern Yucatán ceramic traditions. Based upon an examination of 107 Chocholá pots, eight major iconographic themes of the Chocholá style can be identified: God L, male figures, rulers, single glyphs, God L with God K, vision serpents, palace scenes, and ballplayers. Clearly not all Chocholá pots fall into one of these eight themes, but well over half of the 107 pots examined do. Some of the most artistically complicated pots are not part of this pattern; many of these are one-of-a-kind, and are discussed below.

Clearly God L is the most common image on the Chocholá pots examined here, with 20 vessels portraying him alone (fig. 4). God L is often portrayed as an old man with a distinctly Roman nose, sometimes with wrinkled or sagging skin. He almost always wears a jaguar skin cape, and a necklace of beads which extends down his back like a counterweight. He often wears a sombrero-type hat with a very wide rim decorated with Moan owl feathers. On the Chocholá pots God L is often accompanied by his bird companion which sits perched in his headdress or close nearby. Taube describes God L as a ruler of the Underworld and of the powers of rain (Taube 1992:88). His power extended to the realm of merchants, and on Chocholá pots God L is often shown guarding a merchant bundle. He is also frequently portrayed in his rain god aspect, carrying a black pot that is spilling black droplets onto the ground.

On seven pots God L is paired with God K (fig. 5). In most instances, God L is carrying the head of God K on his back, and God K's snout curls away from God L toward the edge of the cartouche.

One pot has God L holding the head of God K in front of his body while another combines these themes and portrays God L holding the head of God K on his back and in front of his body. In these pairings of deities, only God K's head is shown, never his entire figure. Taube states that God L is responsible for spearing God K in a mythological sequence from the Dresden codex (Taube 1992:79). The Chocholá pots seem to illustrate a subsequent point in the same mythological narrative of God L and God K.

The second most frequent image carved on Chocholá pots is the upper body of a male figure seen in profile (fig. 6). If combined with the thematically similar image of a male ruler seated on a throne, these two very similar motifs are in fact more frequent than that of God L. However, it is useful to separate the male torso images from those of the seated male ruler as a preliminary step.

Of nineteen images of a male torso seen in profile, five depict a male figure wearing a jaguar headdress. Three of the images of male figures wearing jaguar headdresses are also carrying a long paddle-like object in front of their bodies. This paddle is marked with the glyph for wood, and may suggest an identification with one of the Paddlers who may have acted as guides within the Underworld (Khris Villela 1989:personal communication).

A closely related iconographic theme is found on ten pots that show a male ruler seated on a throne. In all instances we see the individual in a pose characteristic of rulership: the body is full on, while the torso is turned in three-quarter profile and the arms are bent at the elbows in a formal gesture. There is very little extra iconographic information to identify these figures as specific rulers, although it is possible that such detail might have been paint-

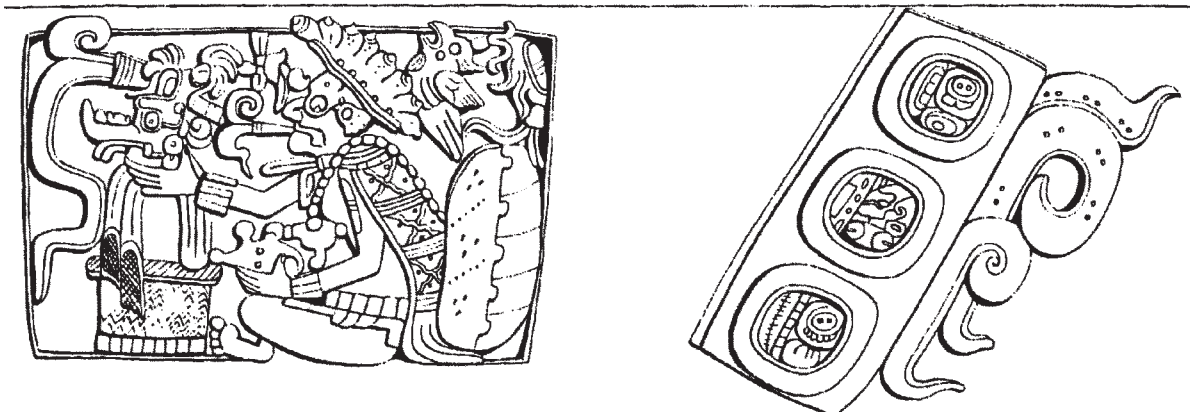


Fig. 4 Chocholá vase, God L seated. Reproduced with permission from Robicsek 1987.

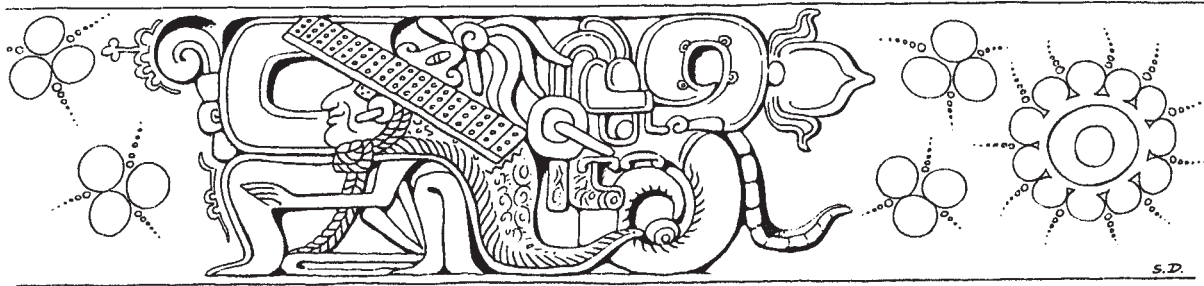


Fig. 5 Chocholá vase, God L with God K on back. (Reproduced with permission from Robicsek 1978.)

ed on a stuccoed exterior surface. It is also possible given the frequency of this image that the individuals portrayed were not meant to be specific representations of rulers, but a mythical or heroic male from Maya mythology.

The last three major iconographic themes all appear on five pots each: the vision serpent, the palace scenes, and the ballplayer. The figure emerging from a vision serpent image is found throughout the Maya area, and appears frequently in monumental art of palaces and courtyards, as well as quite regularly in certain ceramic traditions. It is a consistent image in Maya art, referring to communication with ancestors or other spirits. Usually a long curling serpent winds across the body of the pot, and from his gaping bearded mouth a human head and torso appear. As in most portrayals of *Cha-Na*, as Linda Schele has translated the name of this serpent, it is the serpent who is the focus of artistic attention (Schele 1989).

The ballplayer image, as found in the Chocholá style, is also remarkably uniform. Tate (1985) illustrates three such pots and the remaining two considered here are nearly identical. In all cases a male figure in traditional ballplayer equipment of leg and arm pads and thick cotton belt is kneeling on leg and elbow facing the ballcourt. The ballplayer headdresses are variable; one has a sombrero-like feather headdress, others have larger-than-life bird

heads for helmets. All of the ballplayer Chocholá pots have secondary glyphic texts, consisting of dates and titles, and may indicate that specific games or players are portrayed.

Finally, the palace scenes are perhaps the most variable. On three of the pots, two male rulers sit across from each other. In many cases there is a secondary text between the two characters, which appears to contain titles of rulership. One of the remaining two pots, very intricately and deeply carved, shows a seated ruler twisted around to receive an offering bowl from a figure kneeling behind his back. The final pot from this group is truly extraordinary: two figures, both portrayed in profile, are in the midst of a conversation (fig. 7). The figure on the right appears to be a Maya ruler or high elite, and is seated on a throne. A dwarf holds a mirror before him. The figure on the left is very obviously a foreigner, and is seated on the floor. This individual was incorrectly identified as a female when it was first published, but upon closer examination it is clear that this mustached individual with a hooked nose is dressed in the cotton or jade/shell armor and pillbox hat we have come to identify with the Putun or Gulf Coast Maya. This complex scene is unique in Chocholá art, and is part of a small group of images concerned with the interaction of the Classic Maya and other Mesoamericans.



Fig. 6 Chocholá vase, seated male figure in profile. Photograph © Justin Kerr 1981 (4463).

Of the remaining one quarter of the 107 Chocholá pots examined in this study, only a few have images that appear on more than one pot. There are two or more examples of the following scenes: the Water-lily Jaguar, God K, an unidentified Underwater god, and God B/G1.

The fact that there are only two examples of these images, and in the following list, only one, could be due to a number of factors. When dealing with a corpus of rare or perishable art, it is always a strong possibility that a vast number of objects will not survive in the archaeological record. However, given that we have at least 107 Chocholá pots to examine, and that certain themes do reoccur quite frequently, it is also a strong possibility that certain artistic subject matter was less frequently depicted. Perhaps artists chose to portray an image that was particularly meaningful to them, or more likely, were requested to produce an image of importance to an elite. Regardless of the cause, there are images in this group of unique Chocholá pots that are without parallel in the surviving corpus of Maya art.

The 17 Chocholá pots that have unique iconographic scenes are grouped by broad iconographic similarities only for ease of comparison. Unlike the major iconographic themes outlined above, they should not be assumed necessarily to bear direct relation to one another. Many of these unique pots are illustrated in Coe (1973) and Tate (1985).

#### Human Figures

3 figures, 2 facing each other  
standing male figure with fan



Fig. 7 Chocholá vase with palace scene.

male figure in scattering posture  
male figure applying paint to female  
male figure with dead deer, peccary with dead snake  
dwarf on water-lily pad

#### Deities

God L and monkey-scribe  
God L with deer, winged figure with God K on back  
Mosquito Man and God N  
God N in shell  
God of *pax*  
Aged Paddler God  
Hunahpu

#### Beasts

pierced serpent with God K  
two serpents, one with crustacean tail  
heron  
two harpy eagles

#### Glyphic Texts

On a significant number of Chocholá pots the decorative information is restricted to hieroglyphics, either the diagonal band described above, or a more elaborate combination of diagonal glyph bands, rim texts, or a single large Calendar Round date. Two bowls have identical large calendar round dates of 8 Ahau prefixed by a yet larger bar and dot numeral 8. One pot has a large central date of 6 Akbal, although the Akbal sign is unusual and shows elements of an Ahau sign. Finally a particularly interesting pot from the Grolier sequence combines the iconographic theme described above and calendrical information, by showing a male head as Ahau with a prefixed coefficient of 13 (Coe 1973).

Nikolai Grube recently published a study of the Primary Standard Sequence texts of the Chocholá ceramics (1990). The PSS accounts for the majority of hieroglyphic inscriptions on the Chocholá vessels, although not all Chocholá pots contain the PSS. Grube found that the structure of the PSS as found on the Chocholá pots was quite similar to the PSS of Southern Lowland ceramics, but there were a number of glyphic substitutions that bore more relationship to the glyphic texts of Chichén Itzá or Xcalumkin (1990:322). Based on epigraphic analysis, Grube suggests the Chocholá pots were manufactured in Northern Campeche (1990:327). He suggests the region of Xcalumkin, which is one of the largest Puuc sites in the vicinity of Maxcanu and Chocholá.

### Vessel Function

A brief note on the possible function of these highly decorated Chocholá ceramics is necessary. While it is impossible to ascertain the original context of these pots, given the location of the pot from Copán tomb 2-38, and the role of highly decorated ceramic wares in funeral contexts throughout the Maya area, it is a logical assumption that Chocholá pots were part of the Maya funerary complex. In Grube's study of the Chocholá PSS, he found the glyphs for atole and to a lesser extent, cacao in the glyph bands on a number of these pots (1990:324). The hemispherical bowl-shaped vessels had the atole glyph, while the cylindrical vessels were meant to hold cacao (1990:325). This name tagging recalls the painted cylindrical vessels excavated from Maya tombs that are painted with the glyph for cacao (Stuart 1988). This glyphic evidence, coupled with the high percentage of clearly mythological scenes on many Chocholá pots, lends credence to a supposed funerary function.

### Conclusions

The Chocholá style of carved ceramics appears to have originated during the Late Classic period in an area to the southwest of Mérida, perhaps from sites around the small villages of Chocholá and Maxcanu. As a ceramic corpus it exhibits what have been called Puuc style influences and clearly fits within the well-documented Slateware tradition. Chocholá vessels apparently may have functioned as elite ceremonial or funerary wares and consequently ended up widely traded throughout the Maya Lowlands.

Fundamentally, this study contributes to our understanding of the ways in which the Northern Lowlands shared notions of appropriate subject matter with the Southern Lowland ceramic schools. Many artistic themes overlap between the two areas, especially those of kingship and deity. Tate states in her introduction that the problem with accepting Northern Yucatán as the origin of the Chocholá vessels is that "their iconography...is not characteristic so much of known Yucatán ceramics as it is of Peten ceramic iconography" (1985:123). Yet the major iconographic themes described above of God L, rulers, and hieroglyphics are some of the most common images throughout the Maya region from Yucatán to Honduras, and certainly are not limited to Peten artwork. Since Tate's work was published, our understanding of the inter-relatedness of the entire Lowlands has grown, and what was previously considered a linguistic, artistic, or temporal distinction between Northern and South-

ern Lowlands is now predominantly seen as the geographical construct of modern anthropologists. This is not an argument for the complete homogeneity of Maya culture, yet an increasing body of knowledge concerning early occupation of Northern Maya centers, coupled with the glyphic inscriptions of the North, are leading scholars to believe that the similarities may outweigh the differences. When viewed from this perspective, the Chocholá tradition does not seem quite so mysterious or anomalous as has been previously described.

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