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Cultural Continuity and Adaptation in 19th century Ceramics in Atlixco, Mexico

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INTRODUCTION

The Hacienda Acocotla is located in the Valley of Atlixco in the western portion of the modern day state of Puebla. The hacienda's ruins sit at the edge of the valley floor approximately 1,800 m above sea level. When Spaniards began to settle the area in the mid-sixteenth century, they found that conditions were ideal for the production of wheat, and in the 30 years following its 1577 establishment, the Hacienda San Miguel Acocotla would become one of more than 90 small haciendas producing grain. After an informal regional survey, we chose the Hacienda Acocotla as the site for a multi-year, interdisciplinary project because it was in no way extraordinary for the region. Throughout its history, Acocotla was a mid-sized hacienda valued in the mid-range of its neighbors; its owners were neither richer nor poorer, more famous nor less than any of their neighbors (Newman 2014a, b; Romano Soriano 2005). Acocotla's *casco* comprised both living and working areas contained in just over 14,500 m. The living areas would have housed anywhere from a few dozen to more than 130 of the hacienda's workers, as well as the hacienda's manager and, on the occasional weekend or holiday, the hacienda's owner. The work areas would have provided storage for harvests of wheat (in storage sheds along the *casco*'s eastern wall) and agricultural tools, as well as housing for livestock such as cows, oxen, horses, goats, and sheep.

Though it was historically unexceptional, Acocotla's ruined but identifiable architecture and its situation 2 km north of a small community inhabited today by descendants of the hacienda's workers made it ideal for study. In 2003, Dr. Harold Juli began a four-year ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological project exploring patterns of daily life and memories of

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hacienda labor (Juli 2003). Concurrently, we conducted historical research in national, state, and local archives. The documents we found left us with few surprises; the Hacienda San Miguel Acocotla's 25 owners were well-documented, and the hacienda's workers, ranging in number anywhere from 10 to 121, were fleetingly visible (Newman 2014a; Romano Soriano 2005). The best information about the workers came from irregular censuses taken during the latter half of the nineteenth century, but these data offered only the barest demographic sketch of life in the worker's quarters or *calpanería* (Newman 2014a).

Archaeological research would offer new insights into the day-to-day experiences of Acocotla's indigenous workers, and so we carried out two seasons of archaeological excavations and an intensive architectural study at Acocotla in 2005 and 2007 (Juli, et al. 2006; Newman 2008, 2014a, b). Excavations focused on the *calpanería* and the field fronting the structure. The initial four-week study in 2005 included detailed architectural recording, surface survey, and test excavations. Over eight weeks in 2007, five randomly chosen rooms in the *calpanería* and an extensive midden were excavated, and excavations of a large, randomly chosen unit begun in 2005 were completed. Excavations were conducted in 10 cm arbitrary levels constrained by natural stratigraphic breaks, and soil was screened using 6.35 mm (1/4 inch) mesh. The survey and excavations resulted in the recovery of 87,142 artifacts and ecofacts. Dates derived from the artifacts place the majority of contexts in the second half of the nineteenth century, though a few contexts may date to as early as the end of the eighteenth century. A handful of prehispanic artifacts were also recovered, though these appear to be secondary deposits (Juli, et al. 2006; Newman 2008, 2010).

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THE CERAMIC ASSEMBLAGE

Few nineteenth century hacienda sites have been excavated in Mexico, making the analysis of ceramics especially complex. The study of colonial period ceramics, almost exclusively majolicas, has been steadily gaining ground over the course of the last 30 years (Blackman, et al. 2006; Charlton and Fournier 1993; Charlton, et al. 2002; Charlton and Katz 1979; Fournier 1990; Fournier and Charlton 1998; Fournier-Garcia 1997; Monroy-Guzman and Fournier 2003; Rodríguez-Alegría 2005; Rodríguez-Alegría, et al. 2003; Voss 2012).

Unfortunately, nineteenth century material culture, and ceramics especially, has been relatively understudied compared with the more numerous studies of the colonial period in central Mexico, though of course there are some notable exceptions to this (e.g. Fournier 2003; Jones 1981; Juli, et al. 2006; Newman 2014a; Seifert 1977; Velasquez Sánchez-Hidalgo 2012).

Eighteen specific vessel forms were identified at Acocotla. Some showed a clear Precolumbian heritage, while other forms had been introduced by Europeans post-conquest (Newman 2014a). Of these 18 forms, 14 could be specifically linked to the storage, preparation, distribution, and consumption of food. The most common form (forty-seven percent of all sherds) was the *comal*, which would have been used to prepare tortillas, as well as, perhaps, for activities such as toasting seeds and nuts. Amphorae would have been used to store foods and liquids, and *ollas* would have served both this function and as cooking pots. The majority of the remaining vessel forms, which included *cazuelas*, brimmed *platos*, *lebrillos*, and bowls, would have been ideal for preparing, serving, and consuming soups, stews, and salsas.

The materials used to make these vessels include coarse earthenwares, earthenwares, refined earthenwares, and porcelains. The last two types were the most rare. Only forty sherds of porcelain, less than one one-thousandth of a percent of the total ceramics, were recovered at

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Acocotla. Refined earthenwares (which were limited to whitewares at Acocotla) were slightly more common than the porcelain. With the exception of sherds from recently produced vessels found during the surface survey, most of those we recovered seem to have been imported from abroad. Porcelain and refined earthenwares are frequently linked to elite contexts (Burgos Villanueva 1995; Fournier-Garcia 1997; Meyers 2012; Sweitz 2012); the rarity of these ceramic types at Acocotla makes sense given the general dearth of elite materials found in the *calpanería*.

Many of the tablewares found in the *calpanería* and its associated midden were made from various nineteenth century majolicas, though a few late-colonial types were also identified. At Acocotla, we found slightly more than five thousand sherds of majolica. The majolica found at the Hacienda Acocotla were not the well-made, regulated elite wares of an earlier century but were “seconds” which would have been significantly less expensive than those produced during the earlier era. Some of the vessels must have been produced by inexperienced potters who seem to have been uncertain about how to throw a pot and were unsteady with a paintbrush. Other fragments showed mistakes in production such as pots that had stuck together during firing. It seems likely that these seconds were made by untrained potters and sold at prices lower than those of the more “professional” majolicas. Nineteenth century majolica is characterized by a proliferation of patterns, something that is reflected in the archaeological materials at Acocotla. The designs were often poorly executed in unexpected color combinations. The design found on Oaxaca Polychrome, for example, was described by one archaeologist as “splotchy efforts of an unknown nature in a variety of colors—blue, purple, green, and yellow—carelessly running over each other” (Goggin 1968:201). Interestingly, this pattern of poorly made ceramics is limited to the majolicas. Utilitarian wares were well-made, solid vessels. Not one of these locally produced vessels showed a single mistake in production.

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Of the ceramics recovered, the most numerous were the rest of the coarse earthenwares. Nearly thirty-nine thousand sherds were from simply decorated, lead-glazed redwares. Another twenty-two and a half thousand were unglazed and finished with burnishing or polishing in the traditional, pre-conquest style. Together, these two groups of ceramics account for nearly eighty-seven percent of all pottery recovered at Acocotla, and, though they made up the bulk of the ceramics recovered, they are the least well-understood types we found. Many of these ceramics were identical to ceramics used today, and some could easily be mistaken for ceramics recovered from pre-conquest contexts.

THIN ORANGE OR A LOCAL WARE?

As we puzzled through the identification of our unglazed pottery, we consulted experts in Mesoamerican ceramics. When confronted with one set of sherds, the experts immediately identified them as the Classic-period type "Coarse Thin Orange." This was understandable as the sherds exhibited typical characteristics of Coarse Thin Orange (Shepard 1946:198-199). The ceramic had a similar appearance in both paste and manufacturing technique, with numerous large white inclusions and a yellowish-red paste. The vessels appeared to be mold-made or hand-built with polishing or burnishing on the exterior and a rough interior surface. However, when we began reconstructing the vessels, we found the form of the vessels was less expected. When shown the reconstructed vessel, the same experts who had identified the very sherds with which the vessel was composed of either felt it was a new Classic-period form or insisted the ceramic looked nothing like Coarse Thin Orange and was simply a poorly-made post-conquest vessel.

This quest to identify a common and not terribly interesting looking bit of pottery brought us back to the old debate among Mesoamerican archaeologists about the origins of Thin Orange ceramics (Rattray 1990), and it made clear to us that the type's use as a diagnostic ware and a

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chronological marker is more complicated than one might think. Coarse Thin Orange has been defined as a ceramic useful for tracing possible trade routes and the contemporaneity of sites across the landscape. It has also been used to create stratigraphic sequences (Kidder, et al. 1946:197; Sotomayor and Castillo 1963:6). This type of pottery has been found in abundance in Teotihuacan and the basin of Mexico, and, geographically, its distribution extended as far northwest as Jalisco and to the south, Honduras. Although it can be found in both Pre-Classic and Post-Classic contexts, it is primarily associated with the Classic period (Kolb 1977; Plunket and Uruñuela 2005:534). Though there has been much debate about where Thin Orange ceramics come from, it is now generally accepted that the ceramic comes from the South of Puebla (Kolb 1977:535; Lackey 1982:143; Rattray 1990:185; Sotomayor and Castillo 1963:18). Studies revealed that all Thin Orange, whether regular or coarse belongs, to the same compositional group, and the source of raw materials would have been the gullies by Río Carnero (Rattray 1990:192). Most importantly, in the case of Thin Orange, the fact that wares made with similar raw materials are still made is often overlooked, perhaps because of its standing as a diagnostic type. Its evolution during Prehispanic times has received more attention than its continuity after the Contact period.

CONTINUITY AND ADAPTATION

The presence of a European vessel made in a paste that closely resembles Coarse Thin Orange is probably not surprising to historical archaeologists; it is an example of adaptation and continuity of ceramic technology. Indigenous potters would not have suddenly changed their techniques and stopped using known clay sources just because of the arrival of new kinds of pottery. In the valley of Guatemala, the clay sources used to produce whiteware ceramics in the Preclassic were used throughout the Prehispanic period, into Colonial times, and were still in use

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in the late 20th century (Rice 1977:222-223, 231). Ethnographic research in places such as Tonalá, Jalisco, Acatlán, Puebla, and Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca has shown that when traditional technologies are faced with the pressures of a changing market, artisans adapt their products to the current demand by making innovations in the design, while maintaining continuity in manufacturing methods (Lackey 1982:146). The fact that most of the changes occur in design makes sense given that form and appearance is largely determined by demand (Nicklin 1971:17).

Continuity is in large part the result of efficiency (Nicklin 1971:24-25). When the Spaniards arrived, a well-established ceramic tradition existed in Mexico. Indigenous potters already had favorite clay sources, and they knew how those clays behaved during production. There was no need to seek out alternative sources. These potters were experts in the use of local clays and their firing. Traditional pottery production continued in rural villages, even as glazed-ceramics workshops were established in the towns inhabited by Spaniards (Müller 1981:8, 10). In places like Ticul, Yucatán, it has been documented that while change in form and decoration occurs relatively fast, other aspects like the clay sources and composition, as well as the technology, take a longer time to change (Arnold 2008). Though the arrival of the Spaniards and the subsequent demographic collapse was certainly traumatic, the experience did not erase memories of quotidian technologies (Hernández Sánchez 2011:12).

Consumer preference also encourages the continuity of traditional technologies. Our ethnoarchaeological research in the community of La Soledad Morelos showed that even as recently as the last decade, women prefer traditional methods and tools for preparing food (Newman 2013, 2014). Households in the town all have a smoke kitchen even when there is also a modern kitchen in the domestic complex. Most women still own and use a metate. Ceramic cazuelas, ollas, and jars still represent a significant percentage of the total kitchen wares, and

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tortillas are still made on a ceramic comal. A trader still visits the town regularly to supply the town inhabitants with comales and other ceramic vessels. It has been observed that in many parts of the world, people believe that certain of their favorite foods are best prepared using pottery which guarantees the survival of such vessels even after they become technologically obsolete (Nicklin 1971: 18).

CONCLUSIONS

The pottery from Acocotla shows that care must be taken when using Thin Orange as a diagnostic ware and chronological marker. The vessel found in Acocotla, clearly an European shape, indicates that paste alone is not enough to identify Thin Orange pottery from the Prehispanic period, particularly when found during surface surveys. The shape of the vessel, at least, should also be taken in consideration, and when available the decoration as well.

Acocotla's pottery shows a high degree of continuity in the preference of certain wares and utilitarian vessels such as comales despite the emergence of new shapes and materials. Nothing we have said in this paper will be revolutionary for most people in this room. Historical archaeologists are well-aware that native peoples continued to exploit known sources of raw materials and continued to produce many of their needed everyday artifacts in ways they always had; however, our experience with the identification of the "Coarse Thin Orange that wasn't" highlights the contribution that historical archaeology can make to the study of prehistoric Mesoamerica. In the case of the Coarse Thin Orange ceramic we found, change came in the shape of vessel form, not in the clay source or manufacturing process. The adoption of European vessel forms with the maintenance of production technology illustrates that changes in vessel form may be more indicative of larger social change, while technological modifications are not as likely to follow.

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