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Figure 1. Location of Cihuatan and related sites in the lower Acelhuate-Chalchigüe Valley of El Salvador (Drawn by Alice F. Woods).
TWO EARLY POSTCLASSIC CACHES
FROM EL SALVADOR

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Formal caches of ceramic and other materials have been found associated with ceremonial and domestic architecture throughout Mesoamerica. Their contents, and presumably their purposes, differ widely, but there seems to be some overall continuity in form and location, especially within a given cultural area. Although caches were apparently made for various reasons, not all of which are clear, they offer special insight into religious beliefs and the changes in those beliefs that cannot be observed elsewhere.

The southernmost extension of Maya civilization or Maya influence during the Classic is found in the modern republic of El Salvador. Caches similar to those from the core Maya area have been found in a number of Maya or Maya related sites. Few caches have been located and fewer still reported formally, however, of Postclassic date. Most of the known caches of this late period appear to have been from ceremonial contexts, and they were associated with the public architecture of ceremonial centers. In 1977, during excavations at the Early Postclassic site of Cihuatán in north-central El Salvador, two caches were uncovered in residential structures.

The ruins of Cihuatán are located in the Department of San Salvador some 37 km northwest of the city of that name (Fig. 1). The two main ceremonial centers occupy the north end of a low volcanic ridge in the center of the lower valley of the Acelhuate and Chalchigüe rivers. These rivers join about 7 km north of Cihuatán and then flow into the Lempa near the Puente Colima some 5 km farther northwest.

Cihuatán was first reported more than a century ago (Habel 1879) and has received sporadic attention from archaeologists since then. Most of this attention has focused on the Western Ceremonial Center, a large, roughly rectangular, walled area containing various public structures built in a style reminiscent of structures of similar date in central Mexico. In the 1950s, clearing of the forest for agriculture and pasture land revealed a second ceremonial center directly east of the Western
Ceremonial Center and a large area of habitation surrounding these two centers. Since 1975 I have been directing a study of this residential zone. Approximately 75 hectares of the site have been mapped, and ten structures outside the ceremonial precincts have been excavated (as of September, 1978). In two of these structures caches were found.

Although Cihuatan has been described as a Late Postclassic site, the residential exploration project and recent excavations in the Western Ceremonial Center under the Administración del Patrimonio Cultural of El Salvador have indicated that this traditional dating is in error. The ceramic complex associated with both ceremonial and residential structures includes abundant Tohil Plumbate, some fine paste wares, and a series of other wares whose closest relationships are with terminal Classic and Early Postclassic ceramic complexes of Guatemala, Honduras, and central Mexico, especially Vera Cruz and Puebla (Bruhns 1979). The three radiocarbon determinations available so far from Cihuatan indicate a dating in the late tenth or early eleventh centuries A.D. The homogeneity of the ceramic complex throughout the site and the fact that most structures excavated so far have had virtually sterile fill indicate that the main portion of the Early Postclassic settlement was built on unoccupied or lightly occupied ground, and that it was abandoned after a relatively short period of use. The area was apparently depopulated either before, or shortly after, the Spanish Conquest in 1524; reoccupation of this area of the valley only seriously began in the twentieth century (Barón Castro 1942; Lardé y Larín 1957). The fact that Cihuatán is apparently a single component site makes it extremely useful for defining the Early Postclassic on the southern periphery of Mesoamerica.

The first cache encountered was in a low house platform located south of the Western Ceremonial Center. This structure, designated SS-53 on the map published in 1976 (Bruhns 1976), is a low, rectangular platform of stone and earth, badly disturbed by plowing. The platform is typical of Cihuatan domestic structures; it is about 50 cm in height and approximately 7 m north-south by 5-6 m east-west. It forms one of a cluster of similar structures grouped around a small plaza, with a somewhat higher, perhaps ceremonial, platform on the north end (Fig. 2). Because SS-53 was badly damaged, it was not excavated completely. An L-shaped trench, 1 m wide and 5 m long (in total), was placed into the
Figure 2. Plan of plazuela group containing SS-53 and SS-54. The dotted platform has been destroyed by modern wall buildings. A wall base of shaped large stones bisects the center of the plaza. (Drawn by T. W. Weller.)

crown of the platform. Ceramic material found on the surface and in the upper few cm of earth included abundant fragments of red and tan domestic wares and a single large sherd of Tohil Plumbate. Slightly north of the center of the platform a great many small sherds from a single vessel occurred about 5 cm below the surface. Their compact distribution, indicated they apparently were from a vessel that had been broken by plowing. At a depth of 9 cm in the middle of this sherd concentration, the base of the vessel appeared firmly imbedded in the clay fill of the platform. It was associated with a single slab of talpuja (compacted volcanic ash) of the kind commonly used for architectural facing and paving. Part of the lower bowl of the vessel was attached to the base, and within this was a small trapezoidal piece of polished light green jadeite. Excavation of the surrounding area showed that the vessel probably has been buried just below the cobble subfloor in the center of the house. Cihuatán houses were usually floored by a layer of closely packed cobble on top of the platform fill and then surfaced with hard-packed clay. Although the floor had been disturbed, enough remained in place to show the original position of the vessel with respect to the superstructure.
The vessel, after partial restoration, proved to be a small cup with a hemispherical bowl, a basal flange, and pedestal base (Fig. 3). The paste of the cup showed it was of nonlocal origin. Local ceramic pastes are distinctive, with volcanic grit, riverine sand, and biotite temper, whereas the paste of the cup is a fine laminar orange clay. The cup is slipped inside and out with a dark red pigment and the exterior is painted with a continuous design in white, black, gray, and bright orange. The pattern, although not totally reconstructable, includes Ahau faces, "cotton balls," and feathers executed in a manner typical of several of the Mixteca-Puebla, or Mixteca-Puebla inspired, polychromes of southern Mesoamerica. Fragments of similar pottery have been found by us in domestic contexts, and Cihuatán itself seems to have produced a different local variety of Mixteca-Puebla Polychrome, the so-called Bandera Polychrome. Whether the cup was cached at the time of construction or somewhat later was not determined. Its location, however, is rather typical of southern Mesoamerican domestic caches, and we postulate

Figure 3. Cup from cache in SS-53; a piece of jadeite was found in its hemispherical base. The decoration suggests a relationship with Mixteca-Puebla Polychrome. (Drawn from photograph and slide by Carol Britton, about life-size.)
that the cache dates from the construction of the platform. The vessel is now in the Museo Nacional "David J. Guzman."

The second cache was of a completely different type. Because of doubts concerning the contemporaneity of the platforms in the group we were excavating, we placed a test pit in structure SS-54, located on the east side of the small plaza around which these buildings were arranged. The platform had been badly damaged by agricultural activities and by clandestine excavations. Its surface was covered with a heavy layer of cobbles, apparently the remains of collapsed fieldstone walls of the now vanished superstructure. The visible east wall of the platform extended north-south about 4 m. As the fallen cobbles was cleared and excavation began, many fragments of burned earth appeared, mixed with surface dirt covering the platform. At 10 to 12 cm below surface, sherd concentrations appeared partly mixed with and partly overlain by, closely packed cobbles typical of subflooring. Although these cobbles were somewhat disturbed (there were several trees on the platform), they apparently had been placed above the sherd concentrations, crushing the vessels beneath. The burned clay fragments in the upper soil levels probably were remains of clay once packed on top of these cobbles.

Under the cobbles layer were several broken vessels. One was a tan unslipped flaring-walled bowl with large tubular feet, decorated with an appliqué "piecrust" band on the exterior rim and now-faded black, organic resist stripes (Fig. 4). From the position of the sherds it appears that the bowl had been situated upright and broken in place. During breakage the bowl fell to the south causing a large pebble of stream-polished green stone to roll out of it. Next to this bowl was a similarly broken small orange olla. As the excavation was extended south, other vessels began to appear. Two more contained unusual (nonlocal) but unmodified stones: an unslipped flaring-walled bowl with a scalloped appliqué rim decoration contained five small pieces of white chalky stone, and a medium-sized jar contained two pieces of crystalline material, apparently fragments of a geode.

The total number of vessels represented is at least sixteen, all of coarse domestic wares. Although we attempted to excavate and to bag the vessels separately, mixing made it difficult to do so. A minimal inventory is presented in Table 1. In all likelihood, not all the vessels
Figure 4. Tripod bowl from SS-54 cache. Faded resist stripes, about 1 cm. wide, run vertically from the piecrust rim to the bottom of the side wall; these have not been depicted in the illustration. (Drawn from a photograph by Carol Britton, 1/3 scale.)

were whole at the time of breakage. The large open gray olla consists of the entire rim, broken in two pieces, and only part of the upper body; several other vessels were similarly fragmentary. Mixed with the vessels were various obsidian tools and ground stone implements, including a mano and a coarse stone pestle. An oval metate apparently had been dropped on several adjacent vessels, crushing them (Fig. 5). Also noted were evidences of burning in the form of discoloration of the vessels and patches of fired clay floor. From the location of the floor pieces and the marks on the vessels, we can reconstruct that the vessels had been placed on the floor, a metate and other grinding implements were dropped on them, and the superstructure set afire. Following this sequence of events a new floor was built over the deposited vessels, crushing them more in the process, and a new house was constructed. Little remained of this second house except its cobble subflooring and its fallen exterior lower walls but it, too, had been burned.

Excavations in 1978 both corroborated our reconstruction of these events and amplified some of the information gained from the excavations in SS-54. In 1978 we excavated a house cluster and its patios on the northwest side of the Western Ceremonial Center that apparently had been hastily abandoned when the buildings caught fire. On the floor of these
Table 1. Materials in SS-54 Cache.

3 medium-sized orange ollas with everted necks and horizontal strap handles
1 small burnished orange olla with a vertical neck
1 orange olla/jar
3 large red jars
1 large red jar with brushed exterior and horizontal strap handles
1 small red jar
2 dark red flaring-walled bowls
2 unslipped tripod flaring-walled bowls with appliqued piecrust rim
1 open red vessel with rounded vertical walls
1 large gray olla (incomplete)
1 pestle
2 metates
1 mano
1 large river-polished green stone pebble
5 pieces chalklike material
2 pieces geode

structures were the remains of the stone tools and ceramics used in everyday life. The five groups of materials recovered reinforced our assessment that the vessels of SS-54 formed a set of ordinary kitchen equipment lacking only the few more elaborately decorated vessels each household probably owned. One of the flaring-walled bowls smashed by a collapsing wall in the northwest group contained a large stream-polished green stone. Other exotic stones, including another polished green stone and piece of white chalklike material, were found in excavations in P-16, a large structure on what was probably the main market place of Cihuatán. Evidently special stones were an ordinary part of household equipment, although we do not know their use at this time. All the structures excavated at Cihuatán were destroyed by burning, apparently at the same time as was the Western Ceremonial Center.

The unusual sequence of events observed at SS-54 (i.e., placing whole or nearly whole vessels on the floor of a house, smashing them, burning the structure, and constructing a new building in the same place) suggests some unusual circumstances. Other structures excavated at Cihuatán contain (usually in fragmentary condition) the same ceramics; and the sherd material associated with the second structure of SS-54 is virtually identical to that represented by the smashed vessels. This suggests that little time elapsed between destruction and reconstruction, and that similarly little time then elapsed between the use of the
second structure and the destruction and abandonment of the site.

It is possible that the events represented by the SS-54 cache reflect beliefs associated with the death of either a house owner or occupant or with the widespread series of beliefs and practices connected with the end of a 52-year cycle. In either instance, however, we should have found other examples of this type of cache. Although Cihuatan probably was not occupied for much more than a century or a century and a half, one would expect that other deaths had occurred or that other families similarly celebrated the end of a cycle. Again, however, it may be that, because our total sample from the residential sector of Cihuatán is so small, we are dealing with sampling error. There is some reason to believe that Cihuatán was a multi-ethnic community, and the existence of this one peculiar deposit may simply be evidence of beliefs

Figure 5. Cache SS-54, showing metate (lower right) on top of several crushed pottery vessels. (Photograph by the author).
and practices associated with one segment of the community.

While the first cache has analogies with caching practices in the rest of Mesoamerica, the second is unusual. The closest analogue is the destruction attendant at the end of a 52-year cycle, but there is no reason as yet to definitely identify it with such practices. In any event these two caches enlarge our picture of ritual behavior during the early Postclassic on this frontier area of Mesoamerica.

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