Early Postclassic Figurines from El Salvador

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The Early Postclassic cultural tradition known as the Guazapa Phase marks both continuity and significant breaks with the previous, Maya-oriented, cultures of western El Salvador. This is especially marked in non-domestic ceramics, architecture, and in the introduction of urbanism in the form of two large urban centers: Cihuatan in the valley of the rio Acelhuate and Las Marias, in the upper Zapotitán Valley (Figure 1). Of these two sites, Cihuatan has received the most archaeological attention, having been subjected to various investigations from 1929 onwards. Las Marias is known mainly from a number of rescue operations carried out by FUNDAR and, of course, from pieces looted for local and US markets. Cihuatan dates to the late 10th and early 11th centuries A.D. Las Marias may be slightly later. Both urban centers and, indeed, every Guazapa Phase site investigated, was burned and abandoned well before the Late Postclassic. In every site known, the Guazapa Phase occupation is the terminal one, suggesting that traditional identification of these sites with the historic Pipil is erroneous.

Among the many changes in material culture seen in the Guazapa phase, one of the most marked is in ceramic figurines. Figurines are not particularly abundant in Guazapa Phase sites, but most excavations or surface surveys in living areas do yield the remains of a few. Kelley (1988: 176-178 and Table 17) tabulates all the figurines known from the three (then) most recent excavations at Cihuatán: her own in the northerly San Dieguito sector of the site, Bruhns in the neighborhoods to the south and west of the two ceremonial centers, and Fowler’s in the Southeast Patios group within the Western Ceremonial Center and at a series of surface collected quads around and about the site center (Bruhns 1989; Fowler 1981, 1991). She arrives at a grand total of 34 solid heads and 75 fragments of other body parts (including benches from seated figurines). Of these only those of Kelley and Bruhns have locale, structure, or level provenience.

Occasionally figurines are placed in caches or burials as well, although none of these has been recovered by archaeologists and our knowledge of these contexts is based upon statements from farmers and looters. However, enough figurines have been recovered in excavations that it is possible to describe the most common sorts. Guazapa Phase figurines include Mazapan figurines (Bruhns and Amaroli 2006; Haberland 1989), wheeled figurines (Boggs 1972), small modeled musical instruments such as whistles, ocarinas, and flutes (Boggs 1974), large hollow animals (Sol 1929), and large, hollow figurines (up to near life-sized) of Mexican deities, among whom Xipe Totec is the most prominent (Bruhns and Amaroli 2003; Boggs 1944, 1945; Casasola 1975). Here we describe the small human figurines found in midden deposits.
Guazapa Phase figurines are highly distinctive. They have a solid, mold-made, head and a handmade body. Owing to their thin and often quite long necks, perhaps an artifact of joining a heavy, half-dry, head to the body, most figurines are broken at this point. The bodies, being hollow with applied decoration, do not survive as well as the heads and are usually very fragmentary.

Cihuatán ceramics are, in general, quite low fired (save for imported wares such as Tohil Plumbate) and the figurines are especially soft, friable, and easily eroded. The local clay fires to a pale buff. It generally has a sand temper, which often contains small percentages of biotite, giving the clay body a slight sparkle. We do not know if the Cihuatecos used kilns or fired in patios. Jane Kelley located an “oven” in the San Dieguito sector of Cihuatán, but it turned out to be an historical still (1988: 35-38) and no other firing places have been located at Guazapa Phase sites. The fact that all known Guazapa Phase sites were burned at the moment of abandonment might, however, make the identification of firing spots quite difficult.

Guazapa Phase figurines are put by Fowler into his unwieldy Las Lajas ceramic group, a group which includes domestic vessels, incense burners, architectural decorations, funerary urns/dying/fermentation vats, musical instruments, plus figurines of all sizes and types, including lifesized statues (Fowler 1981). It is evident that this group badly needs subdividing to have any analytical utility, and we would simply prefer to describe the figurines and not put them into any of the ceramic classifications currently proposed for Cihuatán. The Guazapa Phase is almost entirely defined on the basis of characteristics of settlement, architecture, and artifacts found at Cihuatán. No other Guazapa Phase site has been rigorously investigated, although Carranza, Las Marías, and Santa María have seen varying amounts of rescue investigation.

The small human figurines of Cihuatán are, however, very similar to those found at other Guazapa Phase sites and, given the homogeneity of the ceramic complex found at the various Guazapa Phase sites, we are probably not too much in error using them as the basis for our initial description. These figurines are generally less than 20-30 cm in height; most seem to have ranged between ca. 12-20 cm high, with heads of ca. 5 cm or even less. The figurines have solid, heavy heads made in a one-piece mold. Usually the back of the head is not
finished, but shows where the clay was pushed into
the mold (Figure 2). This mold-made head was
then attached to a hand-made body, sometimes with
some hand finishing of the headdress on the back or
the back of the head, although more often not. The
occasional use of a two-piece mold is attested by
the very rare figurine whose head is finished in the
full round. This is far more common on wheeled
and animal figurines than it is on human ones.

We do not know the sequence of construction.
Was the head put off to dry a bit and then inserted
into a ready made body? Was the head let to dry a
bit and then rather carefully held while the body
was built up onto its neck? Was some combination
of these two methods used? Although the necks are
broken at differing spots, the soft paste and amount
of erosion on excavated examples make any
determination of the details of joining head to body
difficult.

The figurine bodies are formed in various ways.
Many are hollow and were apparently made by
patting out pieces of clay into roughly the form
desired for the body and then joining the flat pieces,
adding solid arms and legs. Clothing and other
details were then added by appliqué onto the base
figure. Alternatively, figurines could be made with
a solid coil for a body as well as the limbs. These
were generally smaller, because of firing
considerations, although it must be noted that the
Guazapa Phase potters regularly fired extremely
large vessels and very large figures, many of which
had enormous, solid feet and hands (cf. Bruhns and
Amaroli 2006). The figurines once formed were
sometimes smoothed a bit, generally slipped with a
self-slip, but not burnished nor slip painted. Rather,
one dried and fired, some were painted. The
pigments are very fragile and only tiny bits remain,
if any are preserved. Enough pieces do have bits
left to show that the figurine was often painted with
a matte white paint and then with turquoise blue,
red, yellow, and black. Unlike contemporary Toltec
figurines, the Guazapa Phase figurines do not
appear to have details outlined in black over the
post-fire paint. It is also apparent that many
figurines probably had only a tiny bit of painting, if
any. Kelley has noted that a few figurines are self-
slipped, although not burnished, and that one arm
and torso fragment she encountered had a heavy red
slip upon it (1988: 100). This indicates that there
was some variation in decoration. Whether this was
owing to personal idiosyncrasies of the potter or to
different functions or values placed upon different
figurines, we do not know.

The subjects of these figurines are various. Although deity depictions, such as Tlaloc and
Mictlantecuhtli, are known in large figures and in
vessels such as bottles and modeled incensarios, the
smaller, human figurines generally seem to depict
ordinary people, not deities. Male figurines are
much more common than female ones. Male and
female figurines are also very different, as far as we
can see. It is, of course, somewhat difficult to say if
the heads which had lost their bodies are male or
female. Several have been found with vaguely
female headdresses, that is headdresses which
approximate those on female figurines elsewhere.
However, bodies which wear female clothing
(huipil/quechquemelt and skirt of some sort) have
not been identified among the small, modeled
fragments which are usually what is left of these
figurines’ bodies (strangely enough, the feet
preserve quite well; Bruhns [1980] excavated 19
feet, but was able to recognize only five torso
fragments). Fragments of figurine with elements of
distinctly male clothing are relatively common.
Guazapa Phase males, at least in art, wore a
loincloth with a rectangular flap hanging in front.
Many also wore a mantle. Some figurines show
details such as bead collars, pectorals, or other
jewelry. Very commonly male figures have arm
and knee decorations formed by an appliqué band
with a bow or a disk ornament (Figure 3). The feet
are usually solid and often have sandals (Figure 4).
Finger and toenails are often shown in detail. The
commonest form of a male statue (from our,
admittedly, limited sample) is a man seated on a
simple bench (Figure 3).

Owing to the better preservation of the heads, we
can see that a range of headdresses was worn
(Figures 2, 5, and 6). Usually the headdress extends
across the forehead and down the sides. Ear spools are often worn. Headdresses include simple headbands and what may be near shoulder length hanging hair, a “beret” sort of thing on the top of the head, or occasionally a headband with some top ornaments and a chin strap somewhat similar to those illustrated by Scott, dating to the Early Classic at Teotihuacán (Scott 2001: plates 51, 99, 101-102, 104-105; cf. Kelley 1988: plate 21 a and b). Caps and turbans are also seen. A single, possibly-female

head has an outline like a Mazapan headdress with a forehead band with side rosettes (and earspools) (Figure 7), although Salvadoran Mazapan figurines do not have the side rosettes common in Central Mexico. As we have previously remarked (Bruhns and Amaroli 2006), Salvadoran-style Mazapan figurines are all very simple and virtually identical. All are female, with long skirts and handmade headdress “flanges” attached to the mold-made figurine.
Females in non-Mazapan figurines in the Guazapa Phase tend to be very different from the male figures. Several examples are well enough preserved to be certain that they were female (Figures 8 and 9). These figurines have solid, mold-made heads, like the male figures, but their hollow bodies are nude, with the breasts carefully delineated (Figure 8). Arms and feet are solid. The head in our example that has its head has a simple headdress that suggests that a fair number of the mold-made heads found without bodies were originally on female figurines. Another rare example has a solid, cylindrical, body with the breast carefully shown (Figure 9). Neither shows signs of paint or of burnishing. It is possible that these figurines were meant to have been dressed in perishable costumes.

Although Guazapa Phase figurines have a distinctively Mexican flavor, they are not identical to any Mexican style. Since El Salvador had participated in the greater Mesoamerican cultural sphere since Paleoindian times, it is not unusual to see new technologies and subjects appearing, especially in a time of such accelerated cultural change as the Early Postclassic Guazapa Phase. Yet the figurines are not carbon copies of Mexican ones. The distinction between the unclad, female figurines and the elaborately clad, often seated, male ones is interesting, as is the general lack of deities. Many or most of the characteristics of Postclassic figurines from central and southern Mexico are missing: the bodies are hand made, not mold made; indeed, headdresses and other ornaments upon the simple, mold-made head are often attached by hand. There are no jointed figurines (although there were in the Preclassic and Classic, cf. Boggs 1991 and Haberland 1960), and they shown few signs of any elaborate post-fired painting, although Kelley did find a figurine fragment with red slip (1988). In sum, the Guazapa Phase corpus of small human figurines, as known, while definitely related to the figurine complexes of the rest of contemporary Mesoamerica, is, in fact, strikingly different from them in major aspects. These aspects are doubtless related to the specifics of ritual and belief among the local population and are one more indication that the Early Postclassic Guazapa Phase, while evidently closely related to events in contemporary Mexico, was not a slavish copy of Mexican styles and ideas.

Endnote

Excavations in structures deemed "ceremonial" have not yielded any of these figurines (cf. Amaroli, Amador y Bruhns 2003; Bruhns and Amaroli n.d; Hernández 1975; Lubensky 2005), suggesting that they are indeed domestic in function.
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Reviews frequently provide salient summaries and useful addenda, corrections, clarified citations, additional references, and updated materials as well as assessments about the contents and significance of the books and monographs. I have undoubtedly overlooked some reviews which have been published in sources outside of the usual anthropological, archaeological, and ceramic journals (at least the ones to which I subscribe and those I read and review at the Library of Congress for The Getty Conservation Institute's Art and Archaeology Technical Abstracts). Therefore, I request that readers inform me of any additions or corrections; e-mail is preferable: CKolb@neh.gov. In addition, I wish to thank colleagues who have taken the time to correspond and encourage the continuation of this summary and for their courtesy by reporting reviews significant to ceramic studies.

I have also included relevant book reviews and major “Book Notes” from the SAS [Society for Archaeological Sciences] Bulletin column on “Archaeological Ceramics.” These contain mini-reviews of 750-2,500 words. Complete issues of the Bulletin may be downloaded free of charge as pdf files from the SAS website at http://www.socarchsci.org/sasb.htm.

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