Mazapan Style Figurines in El Salvador

Karen Olsen Bruhns
San Francisco State University
kbruhns@sfsu.edu

Paul E. Amaroli
Fundación Nacional de Arqueología de El Salvador
pamaroli@yahoo.com

Mazapan style figurines, relatively simple, low relief figurines made in a one piece mold, are characteristic of many Early Postclassic Mesoamerican cultures. First identified by Sigvald Linné at Teotihuacán, the name was later extended by Jorge Acosta to cover the quite different style of press molded figurines he encountered in Tula, Hidalgo (Acosta 1940; Linné 2003 [1934]) and then, by habit, to similar press molded Early Postclassic figurines in other parts of Mesoamerica. Here we report on a local style of Mazapan figurine, which we are calling Guazapa Mazapan, found in western El Salvador.

Salvadoran Mazapan figurines have been known for some time. In 1989 Wolfgang Haberland reported on 22 Mazapan style figurines, all reportedly from a single cache found in the vicinity of Suchitoto. He said he had not seen this kind of figurine in El Salvador before and both he (and following him, William R. Fowler) thought that they were rare and might have been imported (Fowler 1991: 46; Haberland 1989: 87). However, we can state that Guazapa Mazapan figurines are not extremely rare, but are one of the characteristic artifacts of the Guazapa Phase, an Early Postclassic western Salvadoran cultural tradition with many mainstream Mesoamerican cultural traits (Bruhns 2005; Bruhns and Amaroli n.d.). While not extremely abundant (other contemporary styles of figurines, including...
wheeled figurines, are also not extremely abundant), they are found with some frequency and were obviously wide-spread in this epoch. All Guazapa Mazapan figurines known to date are from western El Salvador, and all with site provenience come from Guazapa Phase sites. The group reported on by Haberland probably came from one of the many Guazapa Phase sites around Suchitoto, although there is no way of ascertaining their exact provenience.

Our sample of Guazapa Mazapan figurines, consists of four excavated at Cihuatan, four found at Las Marias, a large urban Guazapa Phase site in the Zapotitán Valley, one from Tacachico, the hacienda adjacent to Las Marias, and 14 from private collections. The site provenience for some of these is known, and the others apparently come from western El Salvador. Added to Haberland's 22, all supposedly from a single context, we have a total sample of 45 figurines, all virtually identical. We also have a fragment of a Mazapan figurine mold from Sitio Edith, a tiny site on a spur overlooking the Carretera Troncal del Norte between Apopa and Guazapa (Figure 1). The mold, as well as the distinctive paste of the figurines, indicates that all were made locally (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Locations of main Guazapa Phase sites. Map: Tom Weller.

Guazapa Mazapan figurines are smoothed, but rarely burnished. Many are very crudely made and untrimmed when taken from the mold (e.g. Figure 6). We have two examples, a set of three (Figure 6) and a set of two which are definitely from the same mold and may have been found together. The Guazapa Mazapan figures we have seen so far range in size from about 15 to slightly over 30 cm with most being over 18 cm in height.

Figure 2. Fragment of a Guazapa Mazapan figurine mold. Sitio Edith, Dept. of San Salvador. All photographs by Paul E. Amaroli.

Guazapa Mazapan figurines as known are all representations of females (Figures 3-6). The figures have a double ridge around the face (which Haberland called a "hair ridge;" 1989: 83), and the wide "wings" of the hair or headdress were modeled and applied by hand. This very plain headdress treatment differs from that of Toltec Mazapan figurines, which often have a central medallion and which can be very elaborate in shape. Guazapa Mazapan figurine headdresses are simply two flat curved pieces of clay which end above the ears. Rare examples have three raised disks above the forehead (n=2). The face has the "typical" Mazapan pointed chin, raised nose, eyes with a ridge around them and an open or closed mouth. The only jewelry worn are large circular earspools with a central raised disk. Sometimes the "hair" comes down to the top of the earspools, but it is commonly quite a bit shorter. The arms and hands are bent at the elbow and are held across the torso at a 45° angle, exactly as described by Haberland. In some examples the knob or dish shaped hands touch, but more often they do not. A triangular quechquemextl, sometimes with a low ridge marking...
Figure 3. Mazapan figurine from Tacachico, Municipio de Quezaltepeque. This piece shows the short hair flanges.

Figure 4. Mazapan figurine, Private collection, provenience unknown, San Salvador.

Figure 5. Guazapa Mazapan figurine excavated from the Burned Palace, Acropolis, Cihuatán. CH05-165, Unidad N42 W 23, Nivel 1.

Figure 6. Three identical Guazapa Mazapan figurines from the same mold. The lack of smoothing and the untrimmed edges are not uncommon. These figurines almost certainly were looted at Las Marias. Private collection, San Salvador.
its edge, and a long skirt without decoration complete the costume. Bare feet extend from the bottom of the skirt. The figures are often so poorly molded that the arms and hands are virtually invisible (Figure 6). Although Haberland surmised that bits of white paint on one of his examples might indicate that these figurines were painted (as are the central Mexican examples), none of the Guazapa Mazapan figurines which we have seen have any indication of post-fired paint, even though this does often survive in archaeological contexts in El Salvador. Some have a red wash or a red slip, but there is no indication of further embellishment.

The figurines have been found in different types of contexts, indicating that they had a number of uses. We found the remains of two figurines in our first excavations in the Burned Palace of the Acropolis at Cihuatan (Figure 5). They had apparently been destroyed when the palace was burned and abandoned. William Fowler reports two figurines from buildings in a residential area some 500m north of the Western Ceremonial Center at Cihuatan, without any closer indication of their context (1991: 45-46). We surmise, in fact, that one reason for the supposed rareness of these figurines is simply the paucity of excavations in domestic contexts in El Salvador.

At Las Marías local people report finding the figurines in a variety of contexts. Some have appeared in the course of agricultural activities and these probably were in houses or household refuse. Other Guazapa Mazapan figurines have been found in burials. Guazapa Phase burials at Las Marías are commonly cremation burials in large ceramic urns. Up to three figurines have been found in a single burial. A third context is offerings, apparently all offerings to Tlaloc. These offerings at Las Marías/Tlacachico consist of one or more bottles with appliqué or molded Tlaloc features, ceramic toads with their tongues hanging out, and the figurines. Haberland's group of 22 figurines were said to have been found in a single deposit, probably an offering, and another offering of 12 Guazapa Mazapan figurines, all headless, was reported to Bruhns in 1978 by local workmen. It was taken out of an area to the south of the ceremonial centers of Cihuatan. The workmen were sure they were Guazapa Mazapan figurines (locally called "galletas" ,"cookies"), but they had been so altered and no one knew who had them.

Guazapa Mazapan figurines are closely related style to figurines of the same date found in the northern part of the Basin of Mexico (Cynthia Otis Charleton, personal communication, May 17, 2006). We have not seen any, however, that are made from a non-local paste and they differ in that no more elaborate ones are known, there are no male figurines, and none seem to have been painted after firing. Mazapan figurines, in general, are simple enough that one could make a mold from one and then make your own or, since ceramic molds were well known in El Salvador, make a new mold. The latter is probably the case, since Guazapa Mazapan figurines tend to be larger than those from the Basin of Mexico.

We are assuming that Mazapan figurines appeared in the Guazapa Phase as part of the "Early Postclassic package" of new architectural styles, new architectural forms (multi-roomed palace structures, small "adoratorios" with four stairs, sweat baths), Tohil Plumbate and Nicoya Polychrome pottery, and Mexican deities such as Tlaloc and Xipe Totec, as well as a number of other traits found in other Early Postclassic cultures of Mesoamerica. We do not know exactly from where this group of traits appeared. This part of El Salvador does not seem to have suffered any population loss in the abandonment of the Late Classic Maya-related centers. We have no real indication of any substantial in-migration of Mexican groups or, perhaps, more "Mexicanized" peoples from Guatemala or Honduras. Domestic architecture, ceramics, and food preparation remain much the same as before. The Guazapa Phase peoples, most tellingly, did not eat tortillas, the staple food of central Mexican groups since the Preclassic. However, there is good evidence from numbers of sites that El Salvador had had contact with Mexican cultures since the Middle Preclassic, especially with peoples from the Gulf Coast. They
also had close relations with the coastal/Pacific piedmont Guatemalan cultures from much the same time. The fact that among this group of “foreign” artifacts appears a purely local version of Mixteca-Puebla Polychrome (Banderas Polychrome) might suggest that contact, whatever form or forms it took, came across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and then down Pacific coast. The Toltec might have been involved, but the situation actually appears to be far more complex than one group arriving and taking over.

Whoever was involved and however the Guazapa Phase was imposed, it was short-lived. The urban sites of Cihuatan and Las Marías show only a single period of occupation, as do many of the sites on Guazapa Volcano, around Lake Guija, and on the Balsam Coast. In all sites investigated the Guazapa Phase is the terminal occupation and ends with the burning and abandonment of the site. Some centuries later the Pipil arrived.

References


Ceramics at the Society for American Archaeology Annual Meeting 2006

Charles C. Kolb
National Endowment for the Humanities
CKolb@neh.gov

The 71st Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology was held in San Juan, Puerto Rico from 26-30 April 2006. Most sessions were held at the Puerto Rico Convention Center which opened in November 2005, others were at the Caribe Hilton. The final registration was just over 5,000 (including paid guests, exhibitors, and vendors). Approximately 3500 oral papers and poster presentations were given during this meeting; at least 122 were on ceramic materials (98 papers and 24 posters). Because some sessions were scheduled simultaneously during the same time periods or were given in scattered locations, it was not possible to visit all of these, but at least seven were not presented (4 papers and 3 posters). The following is a tabulation of the culture area/geographical or topical areas represented by these contributions to ceramic studies: