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ANCIENT PERUVIAN POTTERS' MARKS AND THEIR INTERPRETATION THROUGH ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALOGY

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ABSTRACT

Pre-fire incised marks can be observed on many of the plain cooking and storage ceramic vessels of the Moche style, which flourished on the north coast of Peru from approximately 100 B.C. to A.D. 800. A possible explanation of these marks is suggested on the basis of an ethnographic analogy to the present-day practices of potters in the central sierra of Peru. It is suggested that the marks were made to facilitate the identification of the pots of each potter during production and prior to the actual marketing of the pots.

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

The Moche style was dominant on the north coast of Peru from approximately A.D. 100 to 800. This style is well known for its highly developed artistic expression which is manifested primarily in elaborate ceramic vessels. The elaborate vessels almost invariably are made of clay with fine grained sand temper, show no signs of having been used over a fire, and carry some artistic elaboration in the form of realistic modeling and/or a bichrome slip painted decoration. In addition to the elaborate vessels, the Moche people had a variety of plain utility vessels which were apparently used for cooking and storing food. These are made of clay with coarse sand temper, are not modeled or slip painted, and frequently show signs of having been used over a fire.

In 1966, the author conducted a systematic site survey of the lower Santa Valley (Fig. 1) in an effort to locate Moche sites. Of the 85
Moche sites that were located, 8 were subsequently excavated, and surface collections were made from 18 others. The excavations and surface collections yielded numerous fragments of Moche ceramic vessels. A detailed study of the plain ware fragments revealed that many of them had been incised with curious marks prior to firing. These marks occurred on all forms of the plain utility ware, having been applied to about 10% of the vessels, while the remainder were without marks. Forty examples of these incised marks were noted in the collection of
pottery from the Moche sites in the Santa Valley.

The incised marks have a considerable variation in form. They consist of from 1-6 elements, including lines (generally slightly curved) or dots, or combinations of lines and dots (Figs. 2a,b; 3a-k). No marks extend over an area more than 6 cm in diameter. Almost all of

Fig. 2. a, b, Moche vessels with potters' marks from the Santa Valley; c, d, Moche vessels with potters' marks from the Trujillo Valley; e, modern vessel with potters' marks from the Quihuay.
Fig. 3. *a*-k, potters' marks from Moche vessels found in the Santa Valley; *l*-s, potters' marks from the Moche vessels found in the Trujillo Valley.
the specimens had marks which were unique in the sample. In 2 instances, however, there were 2 vessels of similar form, paste, and surface treatment which shared nearly identical marks. In each case, the 2 vessels were from different sites, and in one case the sites were more than 10 km from one another.

It is apparent that the incised marks were deliberate. They consist of shallow lines (less than 1 mm deep) generally made while the clay was still quite moist. The instrument used was generally blunt, and in many instances seems to have been the tip of a finger since a wide shallow incision is paralleled by a deeper one—the latter presumably made by a fingernail (Figs. 2a, b; 3a, c, d). Some of the marks were obviously produced by a sharp instrument (Fig. 3e).

The incised marks are consistently located on the neck of the vessel. They are generally near the middle of the neck, although they can be near the lip, or near the base of the neck where it joins the chamber. They are applied as a single unit, and are on 1 side only. In no instances are the marks incised on opposite sides of the vessel, or evenly distributed around the rim. On vessels which have tall necks, the marks are found on the outside of the neck. On vessels with short flaring necks, they are almost invariably found on the inside of the neck.

Clearly, the incised marks are not decorative features. They are found only on crude utility vessels which show no signs of bichrome slip painting, organic black paint, or decoration in relief modeling. Furthermore, the shallow, irregular incisions are generally unnoticeable unless one is deliberately looking for them. Finally, their placement on only 1 side of the neck, rather than on opposite sides or evenly distributed around the circumference, is uncommon in Moche design layouts, which almost invariably exhibit bilateral or radial symmetry.

Recent excavations at the site of Huanchaco, located in the Trujillo Valley, have shown that the Moche cooking and storage vessels from this valley have the same type of marks (Figs. 2c, d; 3l-s), occurring with about the same frequency, as the Moche vessels from the Santa Valley. In some instances, marks from the Trujillo Valley are almost identical to those from the Santa Valley (Figs. 2d; 3d, m).

Incised marks have not yet been reported on the plain vessels of other ceramic styles from the Andean area. Cursory examination of small collections of plain pottery corresponding to the Salinar, Gallinazo, and Chimú styles did not reveal any incised specimens. Thus, the known occurrence of these incisions is presently limited to the Moche style. It should be noted, however, that the elaborate vessels of most of the precolombian ceramic styles have been the subject of extensive study, while the plain utility wares corresponding to these styles have been largely ignored. A more thorough study of the utility wares may indicate that the practice of using incised marks was quite widespread in ancient times.

ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALOGY

An ethnographic analogy to the incised marks on Moche vessels can be seen in the modern ceramic industry of the central sierra of Peru. In this area today, there are many isolated houses and small communities which still primarily use ceramic rather than metal vessels for cooking and storage. People living in these communities generally obtain their ceramic vessels in 1 of 2 ways. They can purchase the vessels at market centers where potters bring their finished wares to sell. Or, as generally happens in the more remote areas, they can purchase vessels from traveling potters who haul unfired clay with them on their journeys and who make pots at the request of customers they encounter along the way. Both of these alternatives can, and frequently do, involve marks being incised on the ceramic vessels, although slightly different reasons are involved in each case. Since these distinctions have interesting implications for our understanding of the practices of ancient potters, they will be dealt with in some detail and explained in terms of specific examples.

Pottery Manufacture for a Market Center

At the present time, one of the most important pottery-making communities in the central Peruvian sierra is the village of Tarićá, located approximately 12 km north of Huaráz. This community has long been known as a center of ceramic production and at the present time, supplies most of the ceramic vessels for the market centers in the Callejón de Huaylas. In Tarićá, all aspects of ceramic production,
from quarrying the clay to marketing the finished product, are generally carried out by the members of a single family all of whom comprise a single economic unit. In such cases, the ceramic vessels which are produced are without any incised marks. In some instances, however, all of the people involved in producing a given lot of pots are not part of a single economic unit. This can result from a variety of circumstances: a potter outside the family unit working with the family, with the understanding that he will be paid according to his production; potters from 2 different families firing their pots together to conserve fuel; 2 or more potters working independently, but working in the same working area or storing unfired and/or fired pots in the same shed. In these instances, 1 or more of the parties involved will incise a distinctive mark on his pots. These marks will then serve to distinguish the pots produced by each of the various parties until the pots are marketed.

Pottery Manufacture by Traveling Potters

Quihuay is a small isolated community in central Peru which is rather remote from any sizeable market center. It is located on a small quebrada which intersects with the Santa Valley at a place called Shacsha, a small station on the railroad between Chimbote and Huallanca. The people living in Quihuay commonly use ceramic vessels for cooking and for storage. These vessels are generally made by potters who come from the Callejón de Huaylas by train, usually bringing dry, prepared clay with them rather than finished pots. In March, April, and May of each year, the potters travel from their home communities to Huallanca by truck then by railroad down the Santa Valley from Huallanca to the small station at Shacsha. They then begin the long trek up the quebrada to Quihuay transporting their clay in large sacks strapped to the backs of burros. Once they reach the vicinity of Quihuay, they go from house to house taking orders for any vessels the local people need. When they have a number of orders, they set about making the requested pots. Generally, all the potters belong to a single family or economic unit, in which case none of the pots will have incised marks. At times, however, several independent potters (representing distinct economic units) will be traveling together. In this case, although each potter makes his pots separately, the pots of 2 or more potters are usually fired together—thus bringing about a substantial savings in fuel. When the pots are to be fired communally, each potter puts his own distinctive mark on each of his pots so that it can be identified easily when it is retrieved from the ashes after firing.

Potters who bring their clay with them to Quihuay are said to come from a number of different communities in the Callejón de Huaylas. One of the most frequently mentioned is Taricá. Many of the same Taricá potters who produce vessels for the local markets also travel to distant communities annually. They take finished pots or prepared clay or both and generally trade for wool, wheat, corn, or fruits. The trips are planned to coincide with the harvest or shearing seasons of the communities the potters wish to visit. Prepared clay is hauled to these distant communities because the areas do not have local sources of good clay for making ceramic vessels. Finished vessels are seldom transported to these distant communities because of the excessive bulk and the possibility of breakage in shipment.

In talking with the potters of Taricá, it was learned that a potter's incised mark is referred to as a "signal." The term "signal" is not normally found in a Spanish dictionary, although the word "signar" is listed as a transitive verb meaning to sign or mark with a seal. The term "signal" may well be derived from this verb.

The form of the signáles used by the potters producing for a market center are essentially the same as those used by the potters while traveling in remote areas and making pots as they go. The form of a signál used by a given potter normally has no special significance to him. On the contrary, its form seems to be rather unimportant, and potters often change their signál from time to time. The marks cannot be used by strangers to identify the product of a given potter, and do not carry with them any connotation of quality. The function of the incised marks seems to be simply to prevent confusing the pots of 1 potter with those of another during manufacturing, and prior to marketing.

It is interesting to note that some of the cooking vessels being used in Peru today have marks made in the same manner as the marks on Moche pots. In some instances, the modern incised marks strikingly resembled some of the marks found on Moche specimens (Fig. 2d, e).
Moreover, when the potters were shown ancient marks on fragments of Moche cooking vessels, they invariably identified them as signáles, and showed little or no surprise when they were told that the specimens were more than 1200 yr old. It is also interesting to note that the present practice of making potters’ marks results in only a small percentage of pots being marked. As noted above, potters’ marks are found on only about 10% of the plain Moche vessels, while the remainder are left unmarked.

Studies made of the ancient and modern ceramic technology in the Andean area suggest that most of the techniques used by potters today represent a continuing cultural tradition from very early times (Hébert 1902; Tello 1938; Linné 1925; Donnan 1965). Foster, in his study of peasant pottery manufacture, has clearly shown the extreme conservatism of potters and their reluctance to innovate—thus resulting in ceramic technologies being maintained over long periods of time without significant change (Foster 1965). It is, of course, impossible to say if the practice of incising marks on plain cooking and storage vessels in Peru today represents a continuing cultural tradition from ancient times. If it does, it would still be difficult to determine whether the ancient pots were made to be marketed in major market centers, or if the potters might have traveled to distant communities carrying prepared clays with them, presumably on the backs of llamas. Nevertheless, the ethnographic analogy does offer a possible explanation for the marks on cooking and storage vessels in the Moche style, and provides an interesting hypothesis which could be tested when more data are made available.

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**DIFFERENTIAL BONE DESTRUCTION: SOME COMMENTS**

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**ABSTRACT**

The role of scavengers, especially dogs, with reference to archaeological faunal remains is not always clear. While distortion admittedly results from the activities of these animals, total destruction of all such evidence is questioned. Emphasis is placed upon fish remains in the examples and both ethnographic and archaeological data are used. It is argued that a more thorough knowledge of the nature of the food items themselves will greatly aid in assessing both their potential archaeological visibility and the information they may yield.

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The recent article by Patricia Lyon (1970) entitled “Differential bone destruction: an ethnographic example” served well to point up the role played by scavengers and their potential effect upon archaeological faunal remains.

Based upon ethnographic observations in eastern Peru, Lyon states that “medium-sized dogs may totally devour the bone of small animals and destroy identifiable portions of the bone of medium-sized animals, leaving only the remains of large animals in condition for identification” (Lyon 1970:214). It is further stated that “The dogs totally demolished all small bone. That is, fish bone, small bird bone, and the bones of smaller mammals, with the occasional exception of ribs” (Lyon 1970:214; italics mine). These observations are then used to support the suggestions that “domesticated