

CUI ORANGE POLYCHROME:

A LATE CLASSIC FUNERARY TYPE FROM CENTRAL CAMPECHE, MEXICO

Joseph W. Ball

One of the most frequently encountered polychrome ceramic styles of the Chenes and northwestern Yucatan peninsula regions is typified by red and black on orange tripod plates bearing aviamorphic central designs, generally identified as representations of the Moan bird (figure 1). Other fully or semi-naturalistic to highly conventionalized designs, most notably deer, dogs, and warriors, occasionally appear on these plates as well, however, the stylized aviamorphic patterns vastly outnumber them. The plates occur in considerably quantities among private and institutional collections in Europe, the United States, and Mexico; and I have observed as many as a dozen examples in more than one Meridano's private assemblage. There is a general consensus among Merida and Campeche City dealers and collectors that the finest examples derive from looted graves in the Chenes region of central Campeche; however, I have seen a substantial number of pieces among the materials deriving from mortuary contexts at Yaxcopoil, Yucatan (Cervera Collection, Merida 1973; personal observation), and Islas Jaina, Piedras, and Guaymil in Campeche (typological collections, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Merida 1973; personal observation). A large percentage of the Late Classic (Early Period II) polychrome sherds recovered at Dzibilchaltun, Yucatan also pertain to this type (Ball and Andrews 1973). George W. Brainerd's survey collections from Santa Rosa Xtampak and Dzibilnohac, both large Chenes sites, contain a good representation of Cui Orange Polychrome sherds. By contrast, five seasons of surface collection and extensive excavation at sites in the Rio Bec region failed to produce so much as one sherd of this type (Ball 1973). It would seem reasonably certain, therefore, that Cui Orange Polychrome had its center of origin somewhere north and west of the Rio Bec region and a sphere of distribution which encompassed the western halves of Yucatan and Campeche but did not extend south of the Chenes zone.

Chronologically, the type is at the moment best placed on the basis of its stratigraphic associations at Dzibilchaltun (Ball and Andrews 1973). There it occurs together with polychrome sherds of Rio Bec and Peten origin for which approximate temporal values have been established. The Dzibilchaltun data suggests that Cui Orange Polychrome most probably falls within the range of ca. 9.8.0.0.0. (A.D. 593; G-M-T correlation) to ca. 9.15.0.0.0. (A.D. 731; G-M-T correlation). This is in reasonably good accord with data from the Chenes which indicate the presence at Becanchen in that region of a stylistically anticipatory polychrome type on the basal-flanged bowl, Tzakol horizon (Plate 1).

The general association of Cui Orange Polychrome with mortuary contexts in the Chenes, on the off-shore Campeche islands, and at Yaxcopoil together with the common association of Late Classic polychrome tripod plates and funerary contexts

throughout the southern Maya lowlands (Culbert, quoted in Sharer and Sedat 1971: 34) strongly suggests that the type most probably represents a ceramic category produced specifically for funerary purposes. Such an ascription requires a re-evaluation of the supposed iconographic nature of these plates' central figures.

The proper mythological associations of the Moan bird are rain and clouds rather than ill omen (Thompson 1960: 114-115). Thompson (1960: 115) indicates that the general misconception that the Moan bird is a symbol of death originated with Schellhas, who mistakenly identified a death-connotative glyph with this bird (Beyer 1929). The Moan bird, therefore, was a celestial deity symbolic of the cloud-filled heavens rather than a portent of death.

The bird depicted on Cui Orange Polychrome plates, however, is very closely associated with death. In the first place, a conventionalized percentage sign, an attribute of the death gods, is invariably present in one or more representations as head, chest, or waist adornments of the painted birds. In figure 1, it occurs three times: twice as a head adornment and once as a throat or chest medallion. Figure 2 shows at least two representations of this sign; one at the rear of the head and one at the juncture of body and legs. The association of this sign with the Cui Orange Polychrome birds indicates their association with death. Further suggestions that the birds are linked with the death gods are present in the occasional presence of fleshless skulls on some plates. These may occur as secondary border designs, as in figure 1, or, more rarely, may actually replace the bird as the central theme of the plate (figure 3). Finally, the very contexts of those plates recorded in situ suggest an association of the type with death and the afterlife. I believe, then, that it is more reasonable to see the bird so repetitiously portrayed as one of the Maya death deities rather than as the celestial Moan.

Identification of the actual bird represented is surprisingly easy. The frequently repeated percentage sign often serves as the symbolic form of the day glyph for Cimi; the personified glyph form for the same day is the fleshless skull (Thompson 1960: 76). Cimi, the day presided over by the god of death, derives its name from the same root as the Yucatec word cimil: "death," "to die" (Thompson 1960: 75). The day's augural animal is the cui owl, a bird which the Maya believe is a portent of ill omen and death (Thompson 1960: 75, 115; A. Barrera Vasquez 1972: personal communication). There seems little reason for doubt, therefore, that the being portrayed on the Campeche plates is, in fact, the cui owl of the Yucatec: augury of death.

As to the actual biological species involved, there appears to be a general consensus of opinion that the Moan bird is most probably to be identified with the Vermiculated Screech-Owl (Otus guatemalae) (Thompson 1960: 113; Blake 1953: 213-214; Smithe 1966: 81, 84). The cui is very possibly the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (Glaucidium brasilianum) (Blake 1953: 216-217), skeletal remains of which have been found in burials and caches at Tikal, Guatemala (Smithe 1966: 84) and Chicanna, Campeche.

Having discussed the known distribution, probably age, and iconographic aspects of Cui Orange Polychrome, I will now proceed to present a formal typological description of it, establishing it as a recognized ceramic type. The following description is based upon some 300 sherds and 43 whole vessels from several sites in Campeche and Yucatan. Their general consistency in form, decorative style, and technological attributes strongly suggests that a single variety is involved.

* * * *

Cui Orange Polychrome: Cui Variety

Established as a type and/or variety: present study

Ceramic group: unspecified

Ceramic ware: unspecified

Ceramic sphere association: Copo sphere

Chronological position: ca. 9.8.0.0.0. (A.D. 593) to ca. 9.15.0.0.0. (A.D. 731).

Areal distribution: Presently known from Santa Rosa Xtampak and Dzibilnohac in the Chenes (typological collections, I.N.A.H., Merida 1973: personal observation); Islas Jaina, Piedras, and Guaymil (typological collections, I.N.A.H., Merida 1973: personal observation); Acanceh (typological collections, I.N.A.H., Merida 1973: personal observation), Yaxcopoil (Cervera Collection, Merida 1973: personal observation), and Dzibilchaltun (Ball and Andrews 1973) in Yucatan.

Description: Medium textured, light red (Munsell 2.5YR6/8) or red (2.5YR5/8) to light gray (10YR7/2) paste. Volcanic ash temper. Interior surfaces and lips are slipped glossy orange (reddish yellow 5YR6/8). Exterior surfaces, including plate bottoms, walls, and supports, are unslipped but smoothed. Their color varies from pale brown (10YR6/3) to pinkish gray (7.5YR6/2). Decoration consists of naturalistic and conventionalized designs on plate floors and interior walls and bands of geometric designs on plate rims. The designs are executed in red (10R4/8) and very dark gray (10YR3/1) to black (10YR2/1).

Form: Basal angle tripod plates with everted or direct (rare) rims, convex or flat (rare) bottoms, and hollow or solid (rare) supports. Lip diameter: 25 - 40 cms., average 33 cms.; height (excluding supports: 4.5 - 7 cms., average 6 cms.; wall thickness: 0.7 - 1.0 cms., average 0.7 cms.

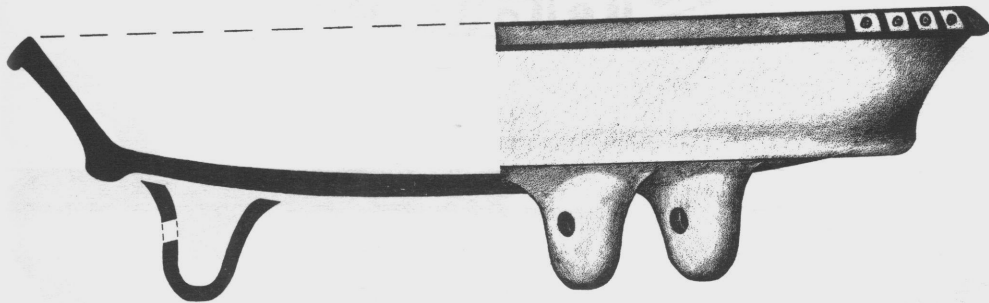


Figure 1: Cui Orange Polychrome plate from Dzibilnohac. Central design shows a cui owl.



Figure 2: Cui Orange Polychrome plate from Dzibilnohac. Central design shows a cui owl.



Figure 3: Cui Orange Polychrome plate from Dzibilnohac. Central design shows a stylized skull.



Plate 1: Basal-flanged, annular-based bowl from Becanchen. Central design probably depicts a cormorant.

REFERENCES

- Ball, Joseph W.
1973 Ceramic Sequence at Becan, Campeche, Mexico. MS, doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison.
- Ball, Joseph W. and E. Wyllys Andrews, V
1975 The Polychrome Pottery of Dzibilchaltun, Yucatan, Mexico: Typology and Archaeological Context. Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, Pub. 31, No. 8.
- Beyer, H.
1929 The Supposed Maya Hieroglyph of the Screech Owl. American Anthropologist, Vol. 31, pp. 34-59. Menasha.
- Blake, Emmet R.
1953 Birds of Mexico. The University of Chicago Press.
- Sharer, Robert J. and David W. Sedat
1971 Late Classic Lowland Maya Vessels from El Porvenir, El Salvador. Ceramica de Cultura Maya, No. 7, pp. 31-38. Philadelphia.
- Smithe, Frank B.
1966 The Birds of Tikal. The Natural History Press. Garden City.
- Thompson, J. Eric S.
1960 Maya Hieroglyphic Writing. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.