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A STRATIGRAPHIC TRENCH AT SITIO CONTE, PANAMA*

JOHN LADD

UNTIL recently Panamanian archaeology has been essentially descriptive with little attempt at chronological ordering. Outstanding monographs and writings of this nature are those by Holmes (1888), MacCurdy (1911), and Osgood (1935), on the Province of Chiriquí, and Linné (1929) on Darien. In the 1930's the Peabody Museum (Harvard) excavations at Sitio Conte in Coclé Province, central Panama, were devoted largely to the careful uncovering of graves and their contents; but analyses of these collections were not made with an eye to cultural sequence (Lothrop 1937, 1942). During the last 7 years field work has been directed to the problem of temporal relationships of prehistoric cultures in the Coclé and Parita Bay regions. These surveys and excavations have been carried out by the Smithsonian Institution (Stirling 1949, 1950; Willey 1951) and by the Peabody Museum (Willey and McGimsey 1952, 1954; Willey and Stoddard 1954). On the basis of these later investigations a tentative sequence has been worked out for central Panama, beginning with the shellmound Monagrillo culture on the shore of Parita Bay, and after a time gap, or major break in sequence, culminating in the Coclé-like ceramics found throughout the area and dating around the time of the conquest (Table 1).

The present study is concerned primarily with the more recent end of this sequence, in particular with the incidence of Santa María and related midsequence types at the late period Sitio Conte. Although Willey and Stoddard (1954) had noted the presence of Santa María types in Trench XI at Sitio Conte, in levels below Coclé sherds, more detailed study of the Trench XI collections was warranted, both to verify these casual observations and to develop any additional information.

Trench XI, Sitio Conte. Because of the extremely confused stratigraphic conditions at Sitio Conte, as described below, Lothrop believed that extensive stratigraphic treatment was unjustified and concentrated primarily on excavation of the graves and analysis of the

burial furniture and ceramics. However, he had Trench XI excavated “. . . in an effort to determine the nature of the stratification and collect samples of the pottery types occurring in each stratum.” (Lothrop 1937: 297). The trench, a 20 by 2 m. cut approximately 290 cm. deep runs east-west and lies in the extreme eastern portion of the site. Its eastern end is about 60 m. from the Rio de Coclé and the main area of excavation. Excavated in 1931 under the direction of L. L. Wedlock in 20 1 by 2 m. sections of varying depth, the material was stored at the Peabody Museum in Cambridge where a large portion of it was available for this study. This material has not previously been reported upon in the literature in a detailed manner and represents the only collection of stratigraphically excavated “utility” or midden ceramics from the site.

Stratigraphy. A physical stratigraphy, consisting mainly of 4 layers of clay or alluvium, each containing evidences of human habitation and each separated from the next by a narrow band of sterile sand or clay, was noted in some parts of the site. Such a stratification did not hold for the entire site area owing to the extensive disturbance of graves and caches. Although evident at the river's edge (Lothrop 1937, Fig. 21), this stratification was not present in Trench XI, and the trench was, therefore, excavated in arbitrary levels.

In interpreting the results of the present study it should be borne in mind that the material, about 2300 sherds in all, consists of “samples” of typical occurrences of pottery as observed in the field. Thus anything but gross inferences from the statistical distribution would be questionable. In addition, all sections of the trench are not represented; no material was available from the upper sections of the east end of the trench or the lower sections of the west end. Finally, the excavation levels in the various sections are not directly comparable in many cases. For example, a 115-cm. depth may be represented in the one section by a 90- to 125-cm. cut and in another by a 110- to 135-cm. cut.

In view of these considerations, the stratigraphic results are presented for the entire trench instead of by sections and the levels assigned for statistical analysis are somewhat

* The present study was undertaken during the summer of 1955 under the direction and encouragement of Gordon R. Willey

TABLE 1. CHART OF RELATIVE CHRONOLOGY FOR THE PARITA BAY REGION, PANAMA (after Willey and Stoddard 1954, Table 13).

A.D. 1500	Sitio Conte	Lower Santa María River	Parita Zone
	Late Coclé		
Early Coclé		El Hatillo	El Hatillo
1300	Santa María	Santa María	
(Presumed Time Gap or Major Break in Sequence)			
			Sarigua
		Monagrillo	Monagrillo

distorted in that they do not strictly follow those by which the trench was excavated. In assigning these statistical levels, the author attempted to maintain a correspondence with certain excavation levels as far as possible. In those few cases in which the former exactly halved the latter it was found that a distortion in other levels of the same section usually offered a basis for choice. For example, where it was found that the dividing line assigned at 100 cm. encountered an excavation level of 90 to 110 cm., the material was assigned either above the 100-cm. level or below it in such a way as to cancel out distortions which were present in higher or lower levels of that particular section.

Despite these qualifications and the necessarily gross interpretations to which one is restricted, it is believed that the material has yielded results of interest. They support the impressions of Willey and Stoddard (1954) that the bulk of the Santa María Polychrome occurs in levels lower than those containing the bulk of the Coclé sherds. However, the present study indicates a considerable overlap of the 2 styles which had not been previously demonstrated and, in addition, places the greatest concentration of Coclé at lower levels than

was believed to be the case. Finally, the El Hatillo ware, while overlapping Coclé styles as had been expected, is more heavily concentrated in the extreme upper levels than Coclé and thus appears to have reached its greatest popularity after that of Coclé had begun to decline. This finding indicates a slightly different sequence than that at the Girón site (Willey and Stoddard 1954) where the highest concentrations of Coclé and El Hatillo appeared in the same levels. Considering these 3 main painted wares alone (for figures on all types see Table 3), the breakdown is as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2. STRATIGRAPHIC OCCURRENCE OF PAINTED WARES AT SITIO CONTE, PANAMA

Level	Percentages			Total Sherds per Level
	Santa María	Coclé	El Hatillo	
0-50 cm.	7	29	64	28
50-100 cm.	11	53	36	55
100-150 cm.	27	58	15	128
150-205 cm.	85	10	5	138
205-235 cm.	100	0	0	113
235-290 cm.	96	4	0	28

Among the other types noted, Red Daub ware is of minor importance showing its greatest popularity in the lower levels: 4% of all types in the fifth level, 6% in the fourth, 3% in the third, and declining steadily toward the surface. Lothrop's Red Line ware demonstrates a preference for the middle levels, for although represented at all levels it is less than 1% of total sherds in each level except the third and fourth where it makes up respectively 5% and 6% of the total sherds. The 12 sherds of Lothrop's Black on Red were scattered, though four of them appeared in the third level and five in the fifth level. Brown ware with a total of 18 sherds was most heavily concentrated in the third and fourth levels; Black ware in the first level with a scattering in the third, fourth, and fifth levels. Red Slip ware shows a high percentage in all levels, never less than 39%, but its highest concentrations occur in the lowest 2 levels where it makes up approximately 60% of the sherds in each. Plain ware appears as less than 10% of all sherds for the lowest 3 levels, then increases steadily from 18% in the third level to 30% in the second and 44% in the surface layer, an apparent increase which may in part be due to the

heavily eroded condition of most of the upper level sherds. Buff ware seems relatively evenly distributed throughout with a slight preponderance in the third and fourth levels.

On the basis of the slipped wares and their frequencies as outlined above, the third and fourth levels, from 100 to 205 cm. in depth, seem to represent a transition in the stratigraphy of the site. During the period represented by these layers Santa María Polychrome and the associated Red Daub ware drop radically in popularity, while Coclé Polychrome and El Hatillo both appear for the first time in substantial numbers. Finally, the sherd counts of 3 wares, Buff, Red Line, and Brown appear to wax and wane with this transition period; this is particularly true of the latter 2 wares which are present almost exclusively in these levels.

In addition to the painted wares mentioned above, small amounts of incised and punctated ware, similar to those outlined by Willey and Stoddard (1954), were found. Grooved Lip, the grooves usually broad and round bottomed,

was the most common of these, represented as it is by 13 sherds. It occurred exclusively below 150 cm. thereby coinciding roughly with the Santa María Polychrome concentration. The Reed Punctated element (6 sherds), characterized by circular incisions, presumably made with the end of a reed, was occasionally found on the Grooved Lip sherds, but appears in heavier concentrations in the middle and upper levels. Rough Scored (9 sherds) also is concentrated in the middle and upper layers. The 4 sherds of Shell Marked were confined to the middle levels; Notched Ridged (4 sherds) occurred in both middle and upper levels. The one example of Fluted decoration found occurred in the very lowest level; the single example of Slash Punctated appeared in the upper levels.

With one exception, handles or legs of either the strap or lug variety were found in levels above 175 cm. with the highest concentration appearing above 100 cm. The exception is the occurrence of a medium sized lug, possibly a leg support, in the 235- to 265-cm. level. One

TABLE 3. SITIO CONTE, TRENCH XI. PRINCIPAL POTTERY TYPES
(by number of sherds and percentages from each level).

Levels	Santa María		Coclé		El Hatillo		Red Slip		Red Daub		Black on Red		Totals
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
1. 0-50	2	0.5	8	1.9	18	4.2	167	39.4	1	0.2	0	0	196
2. 50-100	6	1.8	29	8.5	20	5.9	150	44.1	7	2.1	1	0.3	213
3. 100-150	35	6.8	74	14.4	19	3.7	203	39.6	13	2.5	4	0.8	348
4. 150-205	117	25.1	14	3	7	1.5	202	43.2	27	5.8	1	0.2	368
5. 205-235	113	25.4	0	0	0	0	265	59.5	18	4.1	5	1.1	401
6. 235-290	<u>27</u>	18.4	<u>1</u>	0.7	<u>0</u>	0	<u>89</u>	60.5	<u>0</u>	0	<u>1.</u>	0.7	<u>118</u>
	300		126		64		1076		66		12		1644

Levels	Red Line		Plain		Buff		Brown		Black		Unclassified		Totals
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
1. 0-50	2	0.5	186	43.9	12	2.8	1	0.2	11	2.6	16	3.8	228
2. 50-100	3	0.9	102	29.9	7	2.1	0	0	0	0	15	4.4	127
3. 100-150	23	4.5	90	17.5	18	3.5	10	2	1	0.2	23	4.5	165
4. 150-205	27	5.8	30	6.4	15	3.2	6	1.3	4	0.9	17	3.6	99
5. 205-235	2	0.5	18	4.1	11	2.5	1	0.2	3	0.7	9	2	44
6. 235-290	<u>1</u>	0.7	<u>10</u>	6.8	<u>10</u>	6.8	<u>0</u>	0	<u>0</u>	0	<u>8</u>	5.4	<u>29</u>
	58		436		73		18		19		88		692

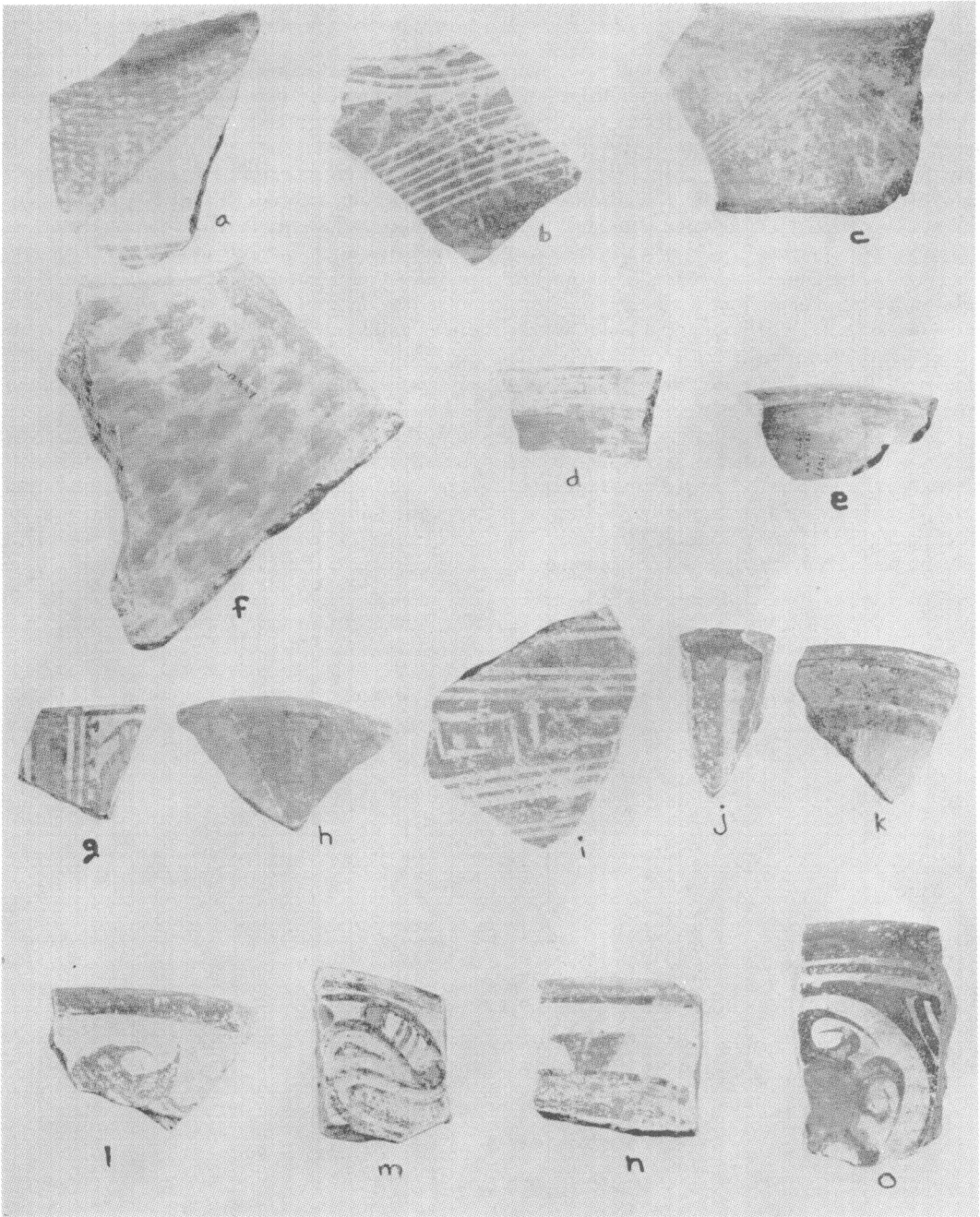


FIG. 1. Pottery from Trench XI, Sitio Conte, Panama. *a-d*, Santa María Polychrome; *f*, Red Daub; *g-k*, El Hatillo Polychrome; *l-o*, Coclé Polychrome.

strap handle very like the Alvina coastal type illustrated by Willey and McGimsey (1954) was recovered in the 85 to 120 cm. level. No loop handles, so typical of Delgado Red ware, were found. Pedestal bases, in some cases possibly sections of pot stands, appeared in all but the very lowest levels and without any period of marked concentration. Ring bases on the other hand were concentrated in the middle levels, none appearing below 200 cm., and only six out of the total of 32 ring base sherds appearing above 75 cm. The ring base, then, has a roughly similar distribution to the Red Line and Brown wares associated with the third and fourth or transition levels.

Before moving on to a description of the pottery types it should be noted that the stratigraphy of the trench was undoubtedly affected by the 4 graves and 3 caches discovered in it. Although this activity would not affect the main outlines of the sequence noted, it might very well be the main determinant in those cases where the numbers of sherds are very small, and may account in part for the overlap noted between the major decorated wares. On the other hand it is unlikely that a distribution of as large a number of sherds as were found in the third level (Santa María 35; Coclé 74; El Hatillo 19) can be explained mainly in terms of mechanical disturbance, and the implication of continuity of styles therefore remains.

Pottery Types. The main pottery type classifications followed in the study were those already defined by Willey and Stoddard for the El Hatillo and Santa María types, and by Lothrop for the Coclé types as set forth in the reference publications. Minor types were either recognizable on the basis of these works, such as the Red Daub (Willey and Stoddard) or were separated out of an earlier classification as was done with the Brown ware and the Black ware, both of which are listed by Lothrop as "Smoked Ware." This latter breakdown was undertaken largely in a provisional and experimental fashion in order to see if a significant pattern emerged. A brief recapitulation of the types encountered in the study is set forth below.

Santa María Wares (Willey and Stoddard 1954). The temper is of crushed quartz or purple rock, and occasional lumps of hard brown material which may be hematite also appear. Thickness varies greatly depending on the size and section of the vessel. The ground color

is buff of various shades from light to dark and has been achieved in some cases by the use of a light wash or slip. Red pigment applied over the buff may also vary from orange to deep red. Finally, dull black pigment is added. These 3 colors are arranged in various combinations, four of which have been outlined by Willey and Stoddard as follows:

One of these is a cross-hatched decorative motif which is invariably allied with a large globular, or subglobular, jar with an out-flared collar. The basal half of these vessels is solid red, and the collar or neck is painted in the same shade. The upper half of the body, which has been left buff, is crossed by hourglass shaped figures which have been filled with broad-line black cross hachure. A second subtype incorporates both collared jars and smaller bowls with incurved rims. Color is used in the same way with the main design elements being carried out in black-on-buff. These elements are bands of parallel horizontal or vertical lines, pendant triangles, and lozenge-shaped figures. A third subtype utilizes a complete exterior red slip over which the black designs are placed. Decorative elements and vessel forms are much the same as in the second subtype. Still another decorative variant is a wide solid black band encircling a bowl with an incurved rim. The base of the bowl is red, and a continuous zigzag or chevron design of parallel lines runs through the black encircling band.

In addition to the forms mentioned above, Willey and Stoddard also describe an open bowl of medium depth with thickened rim and wide flat lip. Most of the sherds found in Trench XI were too fragmentary to indicate form; however a number of rim types were noted which appeared associated with the various pottery types. The most common Santa María rim in Trench XI was that of the broad lip with a flat upper surface, the lip usually extending horizontally beyond the vessel's exterior, but quite commonly slanted outwards and upwards. A variation of this horizontal type was noted with an interior overhang in addition to that of the exterior. A different type also associated with the open bowl consisted of an unmodified rim except for a slight thickening at the lip. Finally large jars with high collar rims, some vertical but more commonly with a slight flare were common. Since the high collar rim is normally if not always of red slip with no polychrome decoration above the shoulder of the vessel, most of these were recorded as Red Slip type. In the fourth level a few plate sherds with a flattened and thickened lip were found.

Red Daub. A variation of Santa María ware, Red Daub may appear on a vessel decorated in other areas with Santa María Polychrome. In these cases the Red Daub usually appears in the interior. As defined by Willey and Stoddard, the decoration consists of irregular daubs, smears, and occasionally a tear drop decoration of light red pigment. In so far as these red markings are regular and clearly defined, as the tear drop elements occasionally are, the sherd may be similar to Lothrop's Red Line ware. The shapes are those of Santa María Polychrome, and Red Daub has been found on large jars or ollas with high flared collars, bowls and ollas with short everted rims, and shallow bowls and plates. Trench XI revealed no plates of Red Daub however, and the rim type most commonly associated with it was the flat horizontal lip with exterior overhang. In addi-

tion, fragments of shallow bowls with a thickened and flattened lip were found.

El Hatillo. The El Hatillo complex defined by Willey and Stoddard includes El Hatillo Polychrome and Delgado Red. The ware is slightly harder surfaced, slightly thinner, and a bit sandier than the Santa María types. Paste ranges from light to dark brown while the ground color is a tan or brownish slip. Occasionally a tan-orange or rose-orange shade may be encountered. Black, both dull and glossy, and occasionally purple are added to make the polychrome. Designs are often complex, utilizing highly stylized animal or demon concepts. Broad scroll elements are common as are rectangular or trapezoid panels filled with serried diamond elements of red or purple.

Typical forms cited are plates with thickened margins, shallow open bowls, ollas or jars with short collars and horizontally everted rims, subglobular ollas with constricted orifices, and effigy jars and bowls. Those examples found in Trench XI demonstrated a moderately flared rim with a slightly thickened lip. No horizontal everted rims were noted, and no bases were found.

In the present study no attempt was made to distinguish between Delgado Red and other red-slipped types, primarily because the sherds in most cases were too fragmentary to allow determination of form, the main criterion for distinguishing Delgado Red from Santa María Red. A number of pedestal bases in Red Slip were found which would suggest the presence of Delgado were it not for the wide distribution of these well down into the middle levels. Five red-slipped, unmodified, constricted orifice rim sherds were found, another diagnostic of Delgado Red, three in the upper levels and thus associated with El Hatillo, and two in the deep levels. No loop handles of the Delgado type were found.

Coclé. No attempt will be made here to summarize Lothrop's exhaustive study of Coclé ceramics; suffice it to say that those sherds with white or near white ground slip having red, black, or purple designs typical of Coclé Polychrome or a combination of the three were classified as Coclé. Of the 126 sherds so classified, 103 were found between 50 and 150 cm.; only one Coclé sherd was found below 205 cm. Among the forms commonly found were plates with the "drooping lip" rim, an Early Coclé type, and others with the unmodified or slightly modified rim type. Small bowls normally had a slightly flattened lip, but invariably were without the pronounced extension beyond the body of the vessel so characteristic of Santa María wares. The rim base was more common than the pedestal.

Red Slip. In this particular study Red Slip was used as more or less of a "catchall" category in which were placed all sherds with plain red slip. No attempt was made to distinguish between Santa María Red Slip, Delgado Red, or the red wares noted by Lothrop as occurring in association with Coclé wares. On this basis Red Slip is the most popular ware at all levels except the surface and appears in a variety of forms and rim types. Included in these are typical Santa María rims in the lower levels and the "drooping lip" of the Early

Coclé period in the upper middle levels. A few sherds of a unique rim type occurring only with Red Slip plates and primarily in the middle levels were noted. These were characterized by a thickened lip section as if the edge of the lip had been rolled in on the upper surface of the vessel toward the center. Both pedestal and rim bases were common.

Black on Red. The 13 sherds of this type found in Trench XI were all portions of plates with red ground slip and black bands encircling the vessel interior near the rim. In one case buff was present as ground color in addition to red, suggesting that the type may be related to Santa María Polychrome. In this connection it may be significant that though the vertical incidence of the sherds was fairly even, they do appear in the lowest levels in a slightly higher concentration than elsewhere. Both early and late rim types were associated with the ware.

Red Line. The sherds so classified in the present study invariably had a white or off-white ground color, often highly polished and a regular well-defined red decoration, usually a band, or portion of a circle. They were distinguished from Red Daub on the basis of the white slip and the regularity of red design. Most sherds were rim fragments with red slip running around the lip of the rim, the remainder of the neck being white. No plates were noted and rim types were predominantly of the short everted or flare type associated with a subglobular bowl. As noted earlier, the distribution of the ware is heavily concentrated in the middle levels.

Smoked Ware. This was broken down into Brown ware and Black ware partly as an experiment and partly because of an apparent difference in ware qualities, the Brown ware tending to be more highly finished with a finer temper.

Brown Ware. This ware is normally chocolate brown with fine temper, often having a polished finish and characterized in Trench XI by small vessels, bowls, or cups. Rims and lips were most often of the type illustrated by Lothrop as Early Coclé, that is a square lip on a straight collar or bowl side. Both ring and pedestal bases were found. The distribution, as noted, was concentrated in the middle layers, continuing with less frequency into the upper layers.

Black Ware. The finish is a dull black occasionally verging on deep brown. Temper is normally coarser and the ware gives an appearance of cruder workmanship than the Brown ware. A unique rim type restricted to Black ware was noted on 3 sherds on which the lip was thickened on the outside in alternate areas so as to give a wavy appearance and had a single groove in the upper surface running around the lip. A few unmodified rims were also found, but rim sherds were rare. Although heavily concentrated in the 0 to 50 cm. level, occasional sherds were found down to 235 cm.

Conclusions. (1) Santa María Polychrome and its associated Red Slip and Red Daub types were clearly popular at Sitio Conte during the

earlier stages of habitation, and were only gradually replaced by Coclé Polychrome and associated types. This gradual process is indicated by the overlap of significant percentages of the 2 main complexes in the third and fourth levels of the stratigraphic trench. (2) Following the popularity of Coclé wares in the second and third levels, the El Hatillo complex became the common type. Although related to Coclé type in design and rim type, and developing along with it, the El Hatillo style reached its greatest popularity at Sitio Conte after the Coclé types had begun to decline numerically. (3) There appears to have been a period of transition represented in the third and fourth layers when Santa María types were dropping out and Coclé types coming in. In this same period 3 minor wares, Buff, Brown, and Red Line had their greatest popularity only to die out later. This period is also marked by the occurrence of plate lip types in both Santa María and Coclé wares which later disappear.

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