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## MATERIAL SYMBOLICS IN PRE-COLUMBIAN HOUSEHOLDS: THE PAINTED POTTERY OF NACO, HONDURAS

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*This is a cultural and historical study of Nolasco Bichrome, a nonelite ceramic type characteristic of northwestern Honduras just prior to Spanish conquest. Stylistic and contextual considerations suggest the pottery conveyed to its users a complex mosaic of meaning, to which design, form, function, and proximate social setting all contributed. Nolasco Bichrome apparently originated in circumstances of social disruption as a reformulation of a local tradition that anciently assigned a similar congeries of signification to painted, domestic pottery. This analysis illustrates how some quotidian artifacts may offer a largely unsuspected and untapped resource for the study of nonelite cognitive systems in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. It indicates, more generally, the kind of information archaeologists can elicit from material symbolics in prehistory.*

PRIOR TO SPANISH CONQUEST, northwestern Honduras was called the Land of Ulua and the Great Province of Naco—a populous, wealthy center of commerce on the easternmost edge of Mesoamerica. Here, as so frequently happened in the moist tropical lowlands, the native population succumbed rapidly to the effects of military and pathogenic invasion from the Old World. No Spaniard or Indian chronicled the culture of these people, but a text of sorts has survived in the form of painted ceramics typical of the Late Postclassic preceding the Spanish presence (ca. A.D. 1200–1540).

Apparently a major expressive medium of its time and place, the pottery type Nolasco Bichrome constitutes a uniquely promising material through which to investigate pre-Columbian ceramic imagery. Recent archaeological research (including the excavation of some 2,400 Nolasco sherds from Naco and vicinity) has resulted in comparatively good control over the contexts in which the ceramics were used. We know also—primarily from examination of complete vessels in museums and private collections—what the ceramic decoration looked like in its entirety. A knowledge of complete design can be difficult to obtain

from the fragments normally encountered in excavations, although, in this instance, the sherds contributed to and fully confirmed this information. As it happens, the design format of Nolasco Bichrome is so consistently simple and tightly organized that definition of its patterning is a practicable enterprise. An analysis of this sort probably would not be feasible were the decoration more intricate and less structured. Finally, archaeological recovery of the local ceramic sequence has provided temporal depth to the contextual and stylistic perspectives. In the aggregate, these circumstances result in an unusually complete picture of a Middle American pottery.

This article is a case study of Nolasco Bichrome, essentially an archaeological inquiry into the form, content, and origin of a prehistoric symbolic material. In the first section, the pottery is treated as though it were timeless and without variation in order to describe its archaeological context and interpret its decorative characteristics. The thesis is that Nolasco Bichrome was quotidian and primarily nonelite pottery invested with complex affective and symbolic meaning. Probably it connoted fundamental group sentiment and sacred tradition; possibly it also possessed a correlate in myth. Its meaning, as I discern it, resided not solely in iconography but in the total configuration of its graphic and plastic design, form, use, and social setting.

In the second section, the temporal dimension of Nolasco Bichrome is examined: its local antecedents and the circumstances of its creation and subsequent development—particularly with reference to a second and later ceramic type at Naco. From this diachronic viewpoint, the pottery appears to have been “invented” during the rapid formation of the Naco polity, presumably under conditions of disruption and change in the social field. The pottery assumed its particular form and expressive associations, however, because local tradition had imbued painted domestic pottery with similar significance many centuries before the Late Postclassic.

A third section summarizes, then addresses several ambiguities in and implications of the preceding discussion. Here I elaborate the dimensions of the pottery claimed to be meaningful—Nolasco’s domestic locus and use and its format of visual metaphor perhaps connoting the mythic.<sup>1</sup>

### **NOLASCO BICHROME—SYNCHRONIC PERSPECTIVE**

The geographical focus of this study comprises the plain of Sula, extending some 100 km inland from the Caribbean coastline, and the much smaller Naco Valley directly to the west (Figures 1–2). This is one of the largest tracts of cultivable land in present-day Honduras and—since the Chamelecon and Ulua rivers deposit fresh soils drawn from the mountainous interior to the south—perhaps the most fertile.

Aboriginally the region was famous as a production center of cacao, a tree whose beans were valued as currency and for a beverage consumed by the elite. Maya lords of the balkanized Yucatán Peninsula eagerly traded for cacao from Ulua; several of them maintained enclaves or colonies of their own people

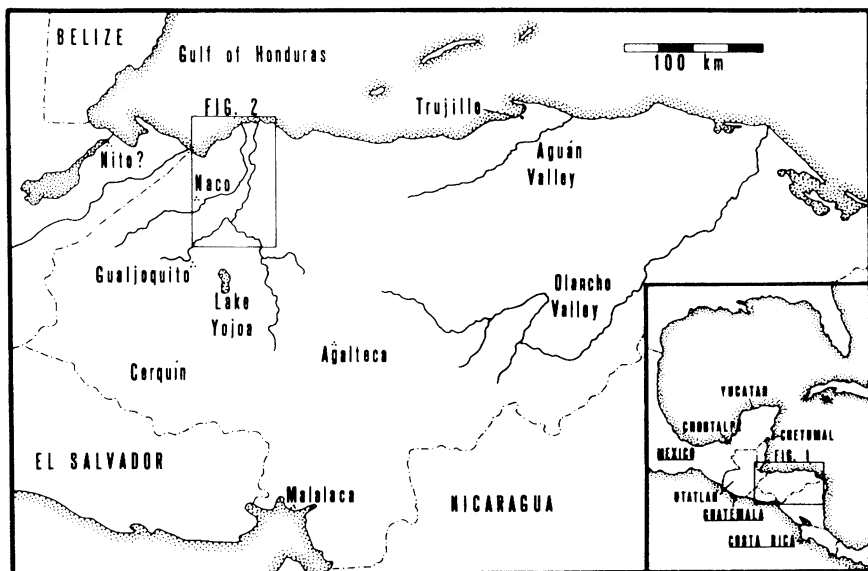


Figure 1. Honduras

somewhere in the Naco-Sula area to expedite this commerce (Herrera 1944, vol. 6:17; Oviedo y Valdés 1944, vol. 8:221; Scholes and Roys 1948:3, 17, 130; Tozzer 1941:39, 94–96).

But little of substantive value seems to have been recorded about the Land of Ulua. Spanish accounts (Las Casas 1967, vol. 1:278; Montejo 1864:228) speak of 200,000 inhabitants, of whom 10,000 resided at Naco—presumably meaning that the region appeared to be heavily populated and Naco looked like a very large town. The character and extent of Naco's domain were never specified, yet the town must have controlled at least the Naco Valley and possibly also the southern portion of the Sula Plain described some years after the conquest as “la gran provincia de Naco” (Ciudad Real 1976, vol. 1:215).

The inhabitants of the region probably included speakers of several languages: Maya (the Chol and possibly Chortí variants), Jicaque (possibly a member of the Hokan family, a tongue primarily associated with the Honduran north coast east of the Ulua), and Lenca (a language or group of languages of controversial affinity, distributed throughout western Honduras from south of Naco to the Pacific coast) (Campbell 1976; Chapman 1958; Scholes and Roys 1948:17). There is no direct evidence for the native language(s) spoken in Naco itself, although the most likely candidates would seem to be Lenca and Maya (Chapman 1978b; Henderson 1979; J.E.S. Thompson 1970:86, 91–92, 130).

Archaeological investigation of the Late Postclassic period in northwestern Honduras was initiated by a Smithsonian-Harvard expedition at Naco in 1936. Naco at that time was a small village consisting of a dozen Ladino houses surrounded by numerous prehispanic structures. Over the course of ten days,

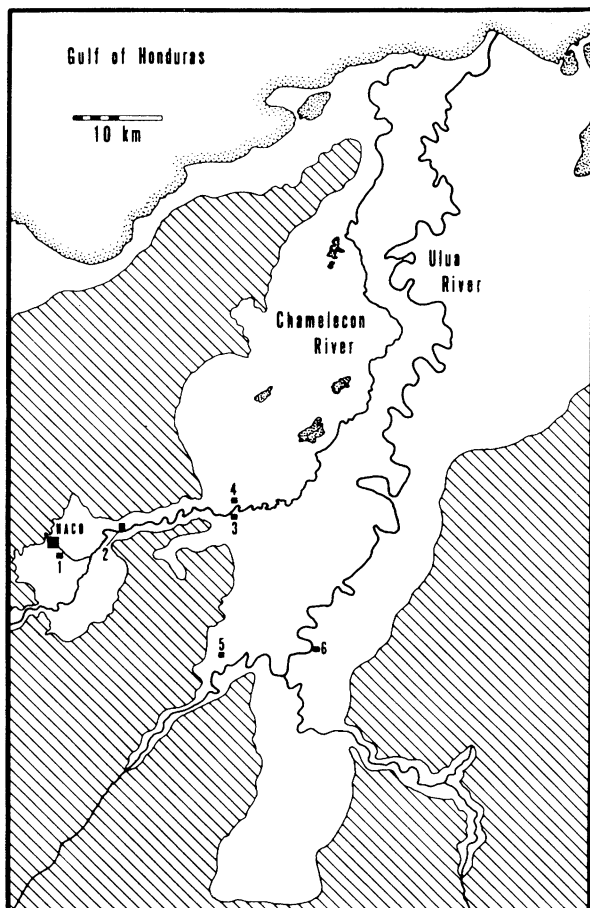


Figure 2. Late Postclassic Sites in the Naco Valley and Sula Plain

Area shaded with parallel lines is mountainous terrain above 200 m in elevation. Naco (labeled); (1) La Sequia; (2) San Lorenzo; (3) CR 260 (El Remolino); (4) CR 326; (5) CR 346 (Despoloncal); (6) YR 168.

W. Duncan Strong and A. V. Kidder II tested the “central complex” of the site—an area measuring about 100 by 250 m that contained the largest and most densely concentrated mounds as well as a ball court (Strong, Kidder, and Paul 1938:27–34).

Naco subsequently was investigated in 1975, 1977, and 1979 by a Cornell University project directed by J.S. Henderson. By then, contemporary Naco had become a town of about 1,000 people. Most of the pre-Columbian central complex defined in 1936 was still intact, but the greater portion of the area occupied during the Late Postclassic (estimated from surface collections to be about 160 ha) had been leveled by bulldozing and mechanized plowing or rendered inaccessible by modern structures (Henderson et al. 1979; Wonderley

1981). Naco has expanded considerably since 1979, and virtually nothing remains of the ancient architecture today.

In addition to Naco, six other Late Postclassic sites are now known in this region and three have been tested (see Figure 2). La Sequía, a site just south of Naco, was sampled in 1979. El Remolino and Despoloncal in the Sula Plain were excavated in 1982–83 under the auspices of the Proyecto Arqueológico Sula, also directed by Henderson (Wonderley 1984).

Nolasco Bichrome is a pottery type in which red designs are painted over a background slipped white. Its primary vessel form is a small bowl (diameter 17–22 cm) typically supported by three pseudo-effigy legs, each with three lateral projections (see Figure 7 below). Frequently a bulge or flange with circular punctations encircles the exterior wall of the tripod bowl (see Figures 4b; 7a, c–e), and the interior base may bear a stamp-impressed design (see Figures 5b, 9a). Other vessel forms are hemispherical bowls about 26 cm in diameter (see Figures 8, 10), ladle censers with long tubular handles pinched closed at their distal ends (see Figure 4a), and (rarely) jars, miniature vessels, and pot stands.

Most of the painted pottery Strong and Kidder encountered at Naco was of this type (Kidder 1936:9; Strong 1936:58–59), although the reports of the expedition defined “Naco Polychrome” as primarily a red-and-black-on-white ceramic (Strong, Kidder, and Paul 1938:33; Strong 1937:78). That description

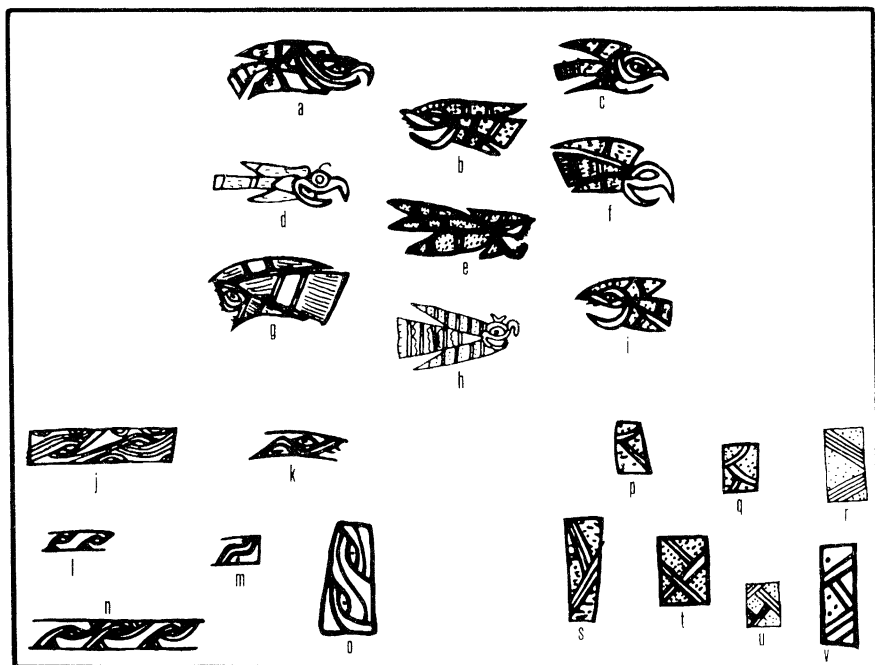


Figure 3. Lexicon of Motifs Characteristic of Nolasco Bichrome (a–i) Motif A; (j–o) Motif B; (p–v) Motif C. (h, r, u after Reyes Mazzoni 1976, fig. 10)

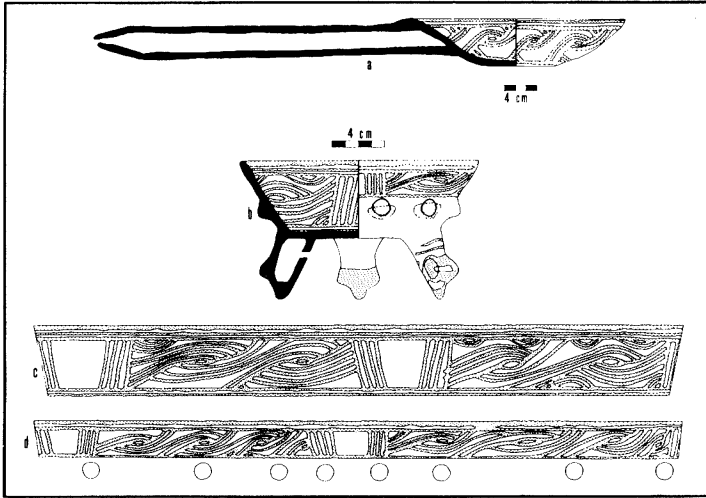


Figure 4. Ladle Censer and Tripod Bowl (Nolasco Bichrome)

These are technical drawings in which an interior and cross-sectional view is shown in left half, exterior in right half. Red painted design is indicated by bounded stippling. (a) reconstructed ladle censer (Naco); (b) tripod bowl with circular punctations on flange (Sula Plain); (c) interior rollout of painted design on above vessel; (d) exterior rollout from same vessel showing placement of circular punctations. (b–d courtesy of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation)

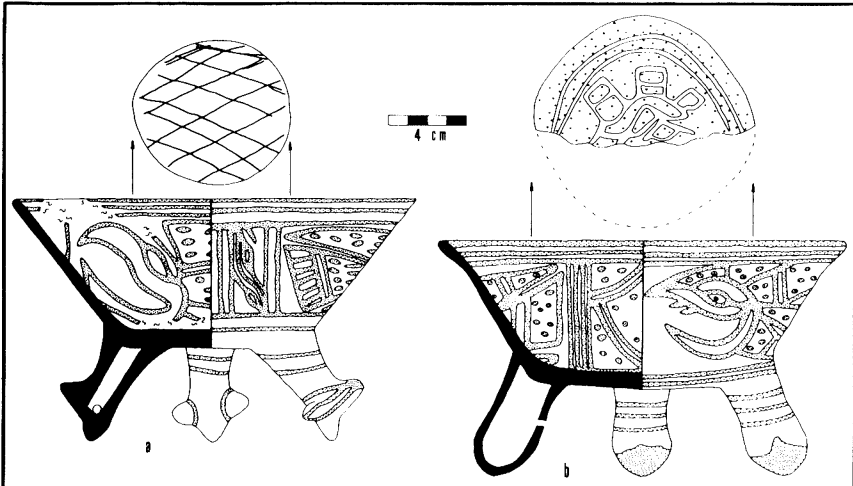


Figure 5. Tripod Bowls (Nolasco Bichrome)

S curves indicate areas of eroded paint. (a) vessel with scored surface on interior base (El Remolino, Sula Plain); (b) reconstructed vessel with stamp-impressed interior base (Despoloncal, Sula Plain). Basal plane beneath the raised stamp-impressed design is stippled.

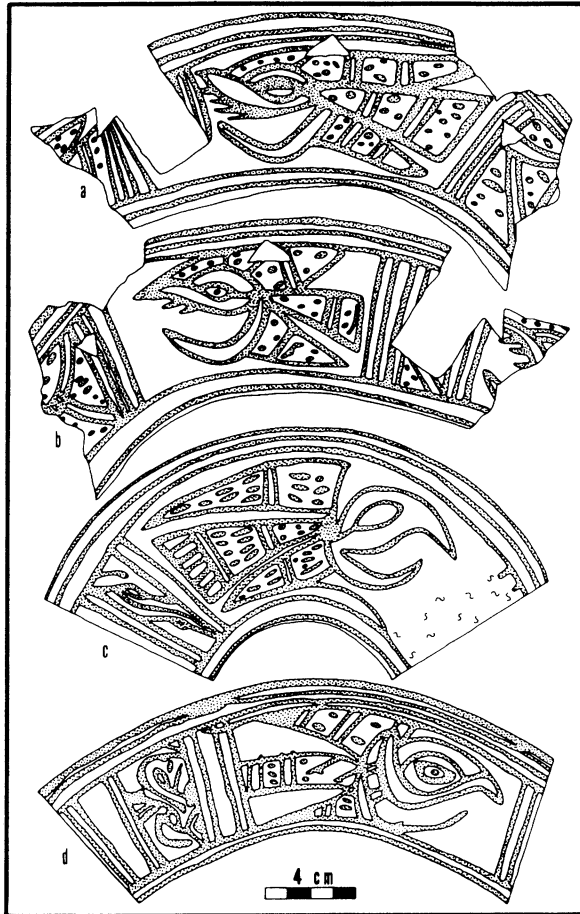


Figure 6. Partial Rollouts from Tripod Bowls (Nolasco Bichrome)  
 (a) interior of vessel shown in Fig. 5b; (b) exterior of vessel shown in Fig. 5b; (c)  
 exterior of vessel shown in Fig. 5a; (d) exterior of a vessel said to be from the Olancho  
 Valley (courtesy of the Banco Atlántida, Tegucigalpa, Hond.).



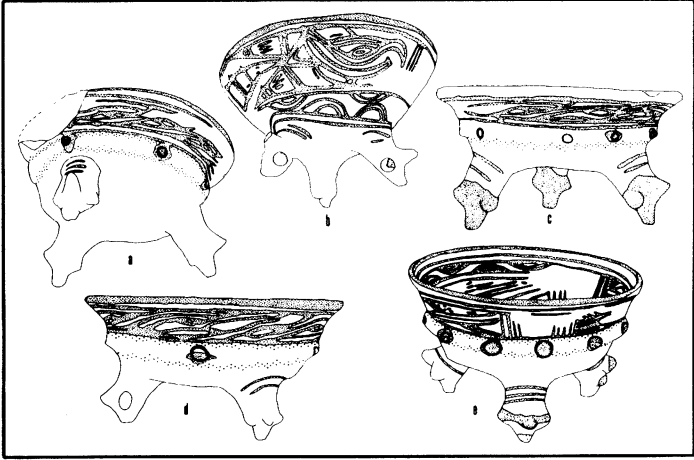


Figure 7. Tripod Bowls (Nolasco Bichrome)

These are drawn from photographs. Here areas of eroded paint (on a–c, e) have been left blank and the unbounded stippling (on a, c–e) indicates curvature of flange. (a) diameter 16.9 cm, height 10.4 cm (probably from Sula Plain); (b) diameter 21.5 cm, height 12.0 cm (Naco); (c) diameter 17.5 cm, height 8.5 cm (probably from Sula Plain); (d) diameter 17.0 cm, height 8.0 cm (probably from Sula Plain); (e) diameter 17.3 cm, height 11.1 cm (Sula Plain). (e courtesy of the Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University; b, A. Bonilla Gastel, San Pedro Sula, Hond.; a, c–d, Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia, Tegucigalpa, Hond.)

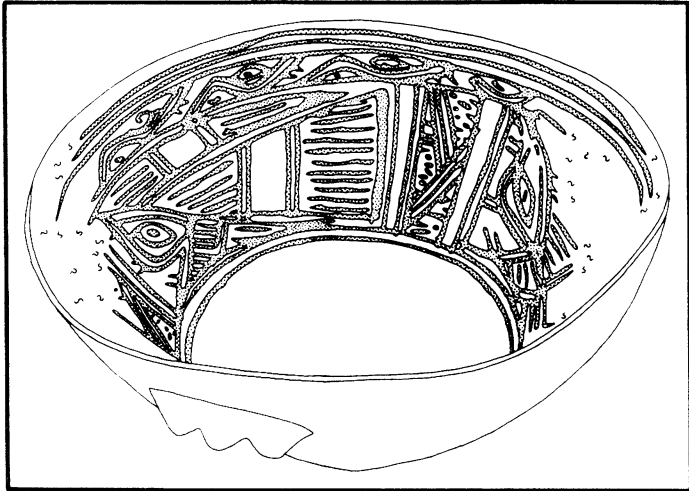


Figure 8. Hemispherical Bowl (Nolasco Bichrome)

This vessel, drawn from a photograph, has two opposed side lugs, one of which is visible in foreground. Its exterior is eroded and its provenience is unknown. Diameter 18.7 cm, height 11.5 cm (courtesy of Hotel Copantl Sula, San Pedro Sula, Hond.).

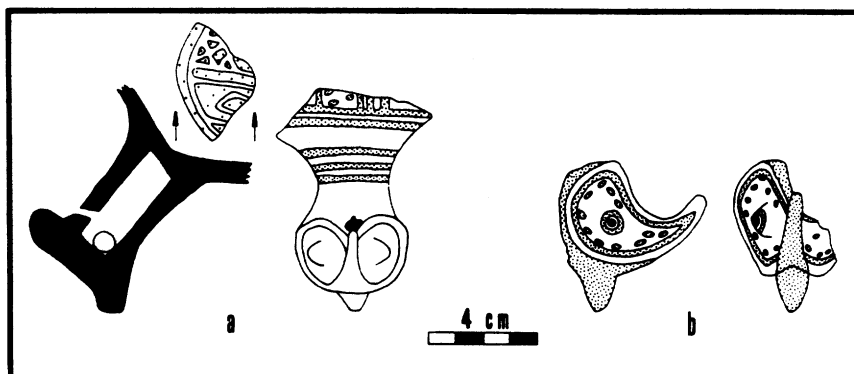


Figure 9. Type II Supports from Naco (Nolasco Bichrome)

(a) section (left), frontal view (right, paint partially eroded), and stamp-impressed basal surface (above); (b) side (left) and frontal views.

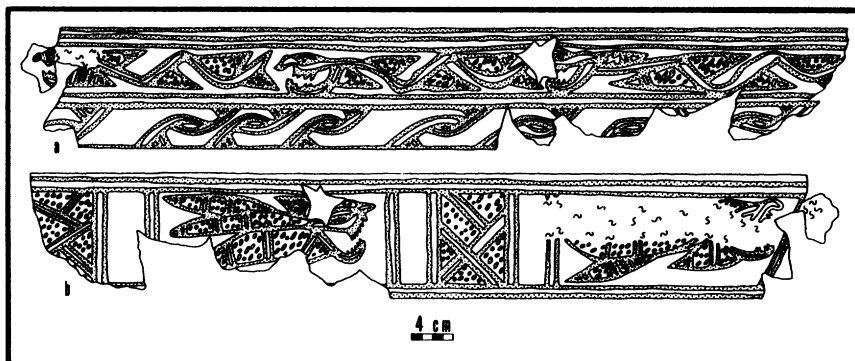


Figure 10. Rollouts from Hemispherical Bowl, Naco (Nolasco Bichrome)

(a) interior; (b) exterior.

lumps together several distinct types of pottery, some of them unrelated. It also obscures the relative abundance of the red-on-white pottery because Nolasco Bichrome outnumbers the other painted types at Naco on the order of fifteen-to-one and is far more widely distributed both within and beyond the Naco site.

The archaeologically documented distribution of Nolasco Bichrome currently consists only of the Naco Valley and southern Sula Plain. Whether the red-on-white ceramics were present west of this is unknown (see Figure 1). To the east, Nolasco Bichrome was not a component of the Postclassic Cocal phase characteristic of the region around Trujillo and the Bay Islands (Epstein 1957; Healy 1978), although several Nolasco vessels have been reported from the Aguán and Olancho valleys (Stone 1941:89; Baudez 1970, plate 91). Whether they were locally manufactured or imported from the Naco-Sula region is not clear. The bichrome type probably does not extend very far south of Naco

since it is absent from Late Postclassic assemblages in the Gualjoquito region (Schortman et al. 1985; Weeks and Black 1985), at Agalteca (Stone 1957:67–69) and Malalaca (Baudez 1966:320, 1976:16–17), as well as from a possibly late period collection from Lake Yojoa (Baudez and Becquelin 1973:66, 415 and figs. 133G–M, 149J).

Nolasco Bichrome occurs at all Late Postclassic sites tested in the Naco and Sula valleys, although it is far more common in the first area (20 percent of the total ceramic assemblage from Naco, as opposed to 4 percent in the Sula Plain). This type has been excavated in primary but nondomestic contexts on two occasions. In one instance, a burned building (probably a temple) in Naco's central complex sealed an occupational deposit consisting, in large measure, of ladle censers. In the other, a burial in the Sula Plain contained two nearly identical tripod bowls (see Figure 5a). It seems likely that most Nolasco vessels in private and museum collections derive from similar riverbank graves.

These rather specialized occurrences aside, primary deposits investigated at Naco and in the Sula Plain are domestic in character and invariably include Nolasco Bichrome. Middens composed of apparent household rubbish (i.e., concentrations of utilitarian ceramics, stone tools, and faunal remains) contain tripod bowls and ladle censers, the bowls outnumbering the censers by a ratio of about three-to-one. At Naco, residential debris also includes hemispherical bowls, particularly in the central complex. Overall, hemispherical bowls are about as common as ladle censers in such deposits.

Thus, Nolasco Bichrome was associated in a general sense with ceremonial and mortuary activities but, above all, was an integral component of the pre-Columbian household's domestic equipment. Presumably it served as the good china of the day, employed in the less mundane residential activities. It is fairly clear, for example, that ladle censers really were used in censuring because of interior carbon stains (possibly from the burning of copal, rubber, or blood-soaked paper) and because these vessels were historically described as such (see, e.g., Ross 1978:92). The tripod and hemispherical bowls also may have been used ceremonially, but it is likely that they were employed primarily as food-serving dishes (Lischka 1978:230; Reina and Hill 1978:246; R. Robertson 1983:127–31; R.E. Smith 1971:103–4; R.H. Thompson 1958:105–7; Wisdom 1940:99, 169). In a negative sense, Nolasco vessels were inappropriate for other functions such as food storage, and no evidence indicates they were employed in cooking (no carbon stains) or preparing food. Some bowls, it is true, have roughened interior surfaces similar to those called *molcajetes* or chile graters. On Nolasco vessels, however, these surfaces must have been decorative because they typically exhibit gently rounded patterns (stamp-impressed) raised no more than 2 mm above the surrounding basal plane (see Figures 5b, 9a).

A very few Nolasco vessels were hand-modeled (unusual forms such as miniature vessels and pot stands), some were coil-made (the occasional jar), and some were constructed around mushroom-shaped stamp-molds (tripod

bowls with stamp-impressed bottoms). Whatever the method of manufacture, the Nolasco Bichrome at Naco was composed of the local clay (sherds from the Sula Plain have not been studied petrographically).

Several lines of evidence suggest that Nolasco manufacture was a cottage industry. Little in the appearance of this pottery would imply professional or elite-sponsored craftsmanship: vessels tend to be asymmetrical in configuration because of uneven wall dimensions or unequal sizes of hand-modeled legs. Then too, it appears that many potters must have been engaged in Nolasco manufacture because the spacing and quality of painted and plastic decoration is strikingly variable. No evidence indicates that pottery production was localized or discontinuous in distribution. On the contrary, the mushroom-shaped molds used to form some Nolasco bowls occur in the same widely distributed, domestic contexts that have yielded the majority of Nolasco pottery.

Vessels of Nolasco Bichrome are painted a powdery white all over with most of the red painted designs applied on bowl walls (interior and exterior). Larger spaces within outlines of individual motifs tend to be filled with dots and ticks, but the effect is not busy or cluttered. Design balance is achieved by duplicating one motif or alternating two motifs within horizontal bands encircling the vessel.

Nolasco painted design is composed of three motifs. The first and most nearly naturalistic (Motif A) is a flying creature presented in what may be profile view (Figure 3a-i). In one instance it was incised on a red slipped vessel at Naco (Figure 3d), but otherwise it appears exclusively on painted pottery. Apparently the motif's orientation is unimportant, for the being may face to the viewer's left or right, and both directions may be depicted on different panels of the same vessel. What does seem to be important is the presence of three prominent caudal feathers springing directly from the head or, less frequently, attached to an extremely truncated torso. The creature's jaw structure may consist of a strongly hooked upper bill or a very unbirdlike mouth of exaggerated size with fangs. Sometimes hooked bill and fanged features are combined, suggesting that both are conventions meant to emphasize raptorial or carnivorous qualities. This motif would seem to be a mythical or supernatural being since its image is unlike any of the common birds of prey or more exotic tropical representatives of the parrot-macaw and trogon groups.

The second and easily the most common motif (B) resembles a simplified guilloche or braid (Figure 3j-o). It is a curvilinear element of varying complexity that may be presented singly or repetitively two to eight times in a row. Usually it is displayed between two horizontal lines, but vertical boundaries are fairly common also. The motif normally begins at the lower left and flows upward to the right when it is horizontally oriented, lower right to upper left when vertically oriented. Whether this tendency toward directionality is significant is unclear. My own belief, formed in the course of illustrating these designs, is that this happens to be the more natural drawing motion if one is right-handed. Apparently Motif B is the only painted element that regularly crosscuts another category of material culture, since the same design frequently is incised

on contemporaneous spindle whorls (objects of fired clay used in weaving). A variant of Motif B consists of nested semicircles hanging from and perched upon horizontal lines (Figures 4c, 7b).

The third and most angular motif (C) is composed of two to four sets of slanting, parallel lines (Figure 3p–v). Each set generally intersects at least one other forming an approximate right angle. Motif C tends to be a diagonal design reminiscent of a Saint Andrew's cross.

Design elements similar to Motifs B and C commonly were painted or incised on Late Postclassic pottery in many areas of Middle America. Motif A, however, probably is unique to the Naco area, as is, of course, the specific fashion in which all three motifs are combined in Nolasco Bichrome.

The motifs appear within one of three kinds of horizontal band configuration. First, a single circumferential band may be vertically subdivided (usually by borders composed of double lines) into a number of panels (usually four or six) (Figures 4c–d, 6, 10b). Second, a single horizontal band may encircle the vessel wall without panel subdivision (Figure 4a). This configuration could be partly a function of limited space, for it is generally found on smaller bowls. Third, there may be two contiguous bands or registers (Figures 7b, 8). This arrangement usually combines the first two kinds of bands so that one—the larger—is paneled, the other continuous.

Each band features one and only one of the motifs as its dominant theme. By this I mean a single motif is accorded visual prominence, either because its panels are considerably larger than the others or because it is the only motif to appear in the band. When present, Motif A invariably is primary. It is accompanied by smaller panels that may contain B or C or may be left blank as space breakers (Figures 6, 8, 10b). When Motif B is dominant, it is repeated to the exclusion of the other motifs. Blank panels may be present in such cases (Figure 4c–d), but, for the most part, horizontal bands displaying Motif B lack vertical subdivision (Figures 4a; 7a, c–d). Motif C, usually paired with Motif A, is rarely employed as the primary motif. Of eighteen complete or nearly whole Nolasco vessels known to me, seventeen have the A or B elements as primary motifs on their various bands. The bowl shown in Figure 7e displays the only instance in which Motif C apparently dominates within a band (I have seen this object only in a photograph). Whether one may speak of a motif dominating more than one band (two contiguous registers or an entire vessel) is uncertain.

Discounting vertical subdivisions and blank panels, the five basic combinations of Nolasco motifs arranged in bands may be represented schematically in this fashion (dominant motif underlined):

A B A B (single band)

A C A C (single band)

B B B B (single band)

B B B B (double band)  
A B A B

B B B B (double band)  
A C A C

Motif A is thus the principal image of this pictorial lexicon, never visually subordinate to B or C. In the absence of A, Motif B nearly always assumes prominence.

Aside from the fact that Motifs A and B mutually dominate (spatially and numerically) the horizontal design arrangements, they are intimately linked in another respect. B, or a very close approximation, is incorporated into A as the flying creature's eye socket (Figures 6, 7b, 10b). Motif B, for its part, can be visualized as an evocation of a portion or the entirety of A: the central, circular region and the lines curving up and away from it resemble A's avian eye and hooked bill; the lines flowing down and away from the center may convey fluidity and flight. Reason exists to suppose Motif B was perceived in this fashion, for, on many occasions, the central circle contains a dot that may have indicated an eye pupil. At least one Nolasco potter rendered this identity more explicit by adding fangs as well as an eye pupil to Motif B (Figures 3k, 8). Motif B, in other words, seems to have portrayed in curvilinearly abstract form the principal and more clearly representational Motif A.

So given what appears to be some form of iconographic equivalence between A and B, Nolasco painted design can be seen as a system largely devoted to alternating relatively naturalistic and abstract versions of the same thing. The image conversion is fairly straightforward where Motif A is juxtaposed to B, but presumably an allusion to the other image also operates implicitly where A or B stands alone or alternates with a blank panel. Whether obvious or implied, this is an extended visual metaphor redundantly presented (a) horizontally (bands composed of Motif B or A-B panels repeated in the same band), (b) vertically (two bands recapitulating all that has been said), and (c) on interior and exterior planes (vessel surfaces).

What of Motif C? Its usual contiguity and spatial subordination to A could indicate another condition or rendering of that avian creature, but this is problematic. Insufficient evidence exists within the apparent structure of graphic design to elicit the character of C or the nature of its relationship to the other motifs.

The plastic elements of Nolasco Bichrome design include reed-stamped flanges and graterlike basal surfaces, but little can be said about these. It is clear in the former case that considerable latitude was acceptable in the number and spacing of the circular depressions around the flanges (Figures 4d; 7a, c-e). The number of such circles on complete flanges ranges between five and eight, with variable distances between them. It is equally clear, in the latter case, that impressed patterns on bowl bases were diverse and fairly complex (Figure 9a). I have examined few large or complete graterlike surfaces with raised

relief decoration, but I think most incorporate versions of the painted motifs. The plastic design on the interior base of the vessel shown in Figure 5b, for example, may well be the head of the being depicted in painted form as Motif A.

The most common plastic element is the tripod bowl leg. These hollow supports frequently include one or two clay pellets as rattle balls (Figure 5a). All appear to be hand-modeled, so their dimensions are far from standardized. Their shapes, however, tend to be uniform. Two-thirds of the supports are pseudo-effigy (Type I) or effigy (Type II) forms.

The Type I leg invariably features three lateral projections and is easily the most common form of support, outnumbering the effigy Type II by about a twelve-to-one ratio. Type I is found throughout the Naco and southern Sula valleys and occurs also at Agalteca in south-central Honduras, where it apparently is not associated with the Nolasco Bichrome type of pottery (Stone 1957:67–69). The effigy Type II leg portrays what is evidently the head of a bird (Figure 9). This zoomorphic support, known so far only from Naco, always depicts eyes as laterally projecting stems and the beak as a third frontal protuberance.

Both forms of leg, therefore, are characterized by three lateral prongs, and, at Naco, Types I and II certainly are contemporaneous. These facts suggest that the two leg types comprise an homology in which Type I is a more abstract presentation of the relatively naturalistic image conveyed by Type II.

This transformational synonymy would be identical in principle to the proposed relationship between painted Motifs A and B—an analogy appropriate in another respect. In both graphic and plastic mediums of Nolasco, the apparently more abstract variant (Motif B, the Type I leg) physically constitutes (and perhaps derives from) some feature in, minimally, the face of its more naturalistic counterpart (at the least, the eye of Motif A, the eyes and beak of Type II supports).

The essential differences between graphic and plastic canons of presentation are that iconic conversion in plastic (leg) form is more limited and more specific. The relationship between the support types is allusive and implicit, inasmuch as forms I and II never occur together on the same vessel. This means, statistically, that the more abstract Type I repetitively substitutes for and makes reference to the Type II image, in much the same fashion that Motif B, when employed solely and redundantly, seems to imply Motif A.

Nolasco potters, therefore, seem to have expressed interchangeable and alternate aspects of one image in both painted design and modeled format. Graphically and plastically they glided repetitively back and forth between representational poles of (relative) abstraction and naturalism, and, in all probability, the tendencies discerned separately in the two mediums were aspects of the same iconic system. The central or most naturalistic image is in both cases an avian creature. Essential to the birdlike beast in both mediums is a triadic property inhering in the caudal feathers of Motif A and the spikes on

the vessel legs. And, of course, the graphic and plastic arrangements presumably are linked by their mutual occurrence on the vessel form of Nolasco Bichrome most common and widely distributed—the tripod bowl. On such vessels, the articulation of painted and modeled schemes of visual conversion would interpenetrate and intensify one another in multiple dimensions, planes, and surfaces. The Nolasco design system seems elegant in its simplicity, perverse in its intricate redundancy.

This analysis combines formal, stylistic, and iconographic features of Nolasco Bichrome in highly variable degrees. Of these categories, the least can be said of iconographic content. The avian being with triadic qualities, around whom so much of the visual imagery seems to revolve, presumably is symbolic. But the cultural meaning(s) of the conception and its associations cannot be reconstructed solely from the available context. Irretrievably lost also are possibly significant attributes such as the combination in Nolasco Bichrome of color (red and white) and sound (rattle balls in bowl supports).

In form and style, Nolasco Bichrome constitutes a tightly patterned decorative system apparently concerned with alternating, reiterating, and perhaps elaborating a bird image. I use a figure of speech (metaphor) to describe these relationships because they seem reminiscent of the manner in which formal speech in Middle America tends to be patterned. This is a comparison worth exploring, for it could clarify why Nolasco design is structured in this fashion and could open other dimensions of cultural significance to analysis (Hall 1977:500–501).

Ethnographic research in the Maya region has disclosed a strong tendency for formal oral expression to assume the form of a parallel couplet in which an idea is expressed in alternate fashion (semantically and/or syntactically) in sequent phrases (Bricker 1974; Burns 1983:28; Gossen 1978; Hunt 1977:282; B. Tedlock 1982:189). Formal expression is cast in other arrangements as well, of course, perhaps the most common variant consisting of statement in triplet form. Even with triplets, however, the third term may only extend the principle of the couplet simply by adding another connotation or by semantically encompassing the previous statements (D. Tedlock 1983:216–30, 1985:57). Couplet expression is by no means language-specific, for it is reported as a feature of Nahuatl and Otomí in central Mexico and of Cuna in Panama (Garibay K. 1953:19, 65–67; Léon-Portilla 1969:76–77; D. Tedlock 1985; Sherzer 1974). Its time depth probably is considerable and must extend well into the pre-Columbian epoch, since it is detectable in early colonial writing and possibly even in earlier hieroglyphic orthography (Edmonson 1971:xii, 1982:xiii–xiv; Lounsbury 1978:768).

The relational logic operative in this kind of oral expression is broadly similar to that of Nolasco Bichrome. That is, the visual relationship between Motif A-leg Type II and Motif B-leg Type I resembles the verbal association between the paired words or phrases of a couplet: “having the same reference but contributing different aspects of the meaning, where the second repeats the



essential content of the first while expressing it in a different or partially different manner" (Lounsbury 1980:107).

Pursued to a more specific level, the analogy may help to elucidate the affective significance of the Nolasco design scheme. Among the Maya of Chamula, Chiapas:

There is a device, the greater or lesser density of "stacking" of metaphoric couplets, which serves speakers and listeners as a measure of what in the narrative is judged to be important and what is trivial. Greater redundancy of an idea, in the form of metaphoric couplets, parallel syntax or longer semantic restatement, underlines the importance of the idea. (Gossen 1972:156)

Although couplet format is employed to a certain extent in much of Chamula verbal activity, its usage is most pronounced in the category of communication called "Ancient Words." These are utterances such as myth and ritual speech invoking venerable and fundamental propositions concerning the moral and social order. Ancient Words become even more formalized, repetitive, and limited in content when addressed to supernaturals in prayer and song, because "the greater the symbolic significance of a transaction, the more condensed and redundant will be the language used to describe it" (Gossen 1972:162). Similarly, Hanks (1984:139) observes in the Maya Lowlands how a "use of parallelism pervades all sacred language in Yucatec."

The complexity and spontaneity normal to verbal communication are so reduced to formulaic articulation at this point that direct comparison between Nolasco design and ritualized speech seems reasonable. Both are sited within a domain of active human interchange. Both, I suggest, are structured in this fashion because the specific presentational format dependent upon hypertrophic "metaphorical stacking" was appropriate to propositions of a highly sacred and symbolic sort—whether conveyed visually or verbally.

Another clue about how oral expression could have articulated with Nolasco design may be found in a story collected in the Lenca province of Cerquín some 100 km south of Naco (Chapman 1978b:21). This apparently was the only myth or legend recorded in Honduras in any detail near the time of Spanish conquest. It should be regarded as potentially relevant to Naco because the two regions probably shared elements of a broadly similar culture. Las Casas (1967, vol. 1:656), for example, stated that the same gods and religious notions characterized "the provinces of Honduras and Naco, and where the city of Gracias a Dios [in pre-Columbian Cerquín] was settled."

The context and meaning of the myth are lost, although some cultural significance may be inferred from its longevity. Stone (1948:216) says she encountered the story in the same region some 350 years later. If the native accounts were told in couplet form, the Spanish transcription preserves no trace of it. And, since nearly identical versions of the story were recounted

by Torquemada (quoted below) and Herrera (1944, vol. 6:18), it is not certain which of the two recorded the original late in the sixteenth century.

Two hundred years before, according to the old people, there came to Cerquín a lady white as a Castilian, whose name was Comizahual [Coamizagual according to Herrera], meaning “jaguar that flies,” so named because she was very wise and versed in supernatural arts. These Indians held the jaguar in high esteem. She made her abode in Cealcoquin [Herrera: Cesalcoquin], which was the most fertile land in the province. Here there were three stone lions which they worshipped, and a large three-pointed stone which had on each point three grotesque faces. Some said that Comizahual carried it through the air and by its virtue won battles, thus extending her realm. Some said that she had three supernaturally conceived sons, others said they were her brothers. When she grew old, she distributed her territories among them with advice concerning the good treatment of her subjects. She then commanded that her bed be taken out of the house. Lightning flashed and thunder roared. The people saw a beautiful bird flying across the sky and, as they never saw the lady again, they believed she was the bird and thus went to the sky. From then until the arrival of the Spaniards, they solemnly observed that day with a great feast. (Torquemada 1975, vol. 1:456–68)

The time and space separating the myth and the pottery render dubious any attempt to correlate personages and motifs, although the story does convey general properties of form and theme possibly apposite to Nolasco design. A striking characteristic of the Comizahual tale is its terse pictorial quality, which, when abstracted from the prose, could stand as a metaphorical description of a tripod vessel: the flying personage above a tripartite object, each point of which is further divided into three elements. This indicates the kind of verbal, mythic imagery that may have been associated with Nolasco Bichrome. Whether the story was reified in ceramic form in the Cerquín area is unknown, although the Type I bowl supports did exist to the east at Agalteca (Stone 1957:67–69).

At the heart of the Comizahual story is the lady's transformation to a flying jaguar. This is an example of *nagualism*—a belief in alter-ego spirits (*naguals*) usually involving specific animal counterparts. Throughout Middle America, it generally is believed that a person possessing a nagual can convert himself into the form of his animal companion. Quite apart from the myth of Comizahual, nagualism is one of the few aspects of the native belief system documented in conquest period and colonial Honduras (see, e.g., Herrera 1944, vol. 6:14–24). The Lenca, among whom Chapman worked in the former province of Cerquín during the 1960s, had preserved precisely this sense of the myth in their word *comicahual*—a generic term designating any animal companion spirit (Chapman 1978b:34). In view of the prominence of the belief, the possibility

exists that the content of Nolasco incorporated a theme concerned with nauticalism. What I perceive as a visual system convoking and converting aspects of the same image may have conveyed to native eyes the transformation of a mythical referent—a nagual—from one state to another.

Nolasco Bichrome, it would seem, fused together select aspects of behavior, situation, and thought into a physical whole (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1963:245–73). The particular associations of its properties—its metaphoric quality of sacredness, its symbolic character and hint of mythic connotations, its employment in certain activities within domestic settings—suggest that the pottery was bound up with sentiments so collectively fundamental as to be replicated in each household of the society. In all likelihood, Nolasco articulated elemental feelings of collective affiliation—primordial attachments based on some combination of common custom, kinship, language, religion, or locale and inculcated especially during the earliest stages of socialization in the family (Geertz 1973:259–63; Issacs 1974; Nagata 1981).

Of course it is one thing to observe that Nolasco Bichrome apparently existed at an interface of cognitive and social domains deemed worthy of reification, but quite another to specify the effects of such a conjunction on people who ate from these vessels 650 years ago. The strength of the archaeological data resides, rather, in their potential to demonstrate—even if only dimly and partially—how these features and associations came to be.

### NOLASCO BICHROME—DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVE

Patricia Urban's settlement survey in the Naco Valley demonstrates a fairly steady increase in the number of sites from sometime in the Middle Preclassic period (ca. 800–400 B.C.) to the end of the Terminal Classic, still insecurely dated to A.D. 950–1050 (Urban 1980; Urban and Schortman 1984:4). Settlement subsequently decreases to such an extent that little occupation is detectable anywhere in the valley between approximately 1100 and 1250. If absence of evidence indicates evidence of absence, the Naco Valley experienced a dramatic reduction in population during the waning years of the Early Postclassic.

Sometime about 1250, a date estimated from comparative considerations, Late Postclassic Naco arose apparently full-blown and fully developed. In part, of course, the quality of dramatic suddenness must be itself an artifact of an archaeological perspective incapable of discerning fine-grained temporal distinctions. The fact remains, however, that the emergence of Naco appears to have been rapid, even if its development occurred over a span of decades.

Two aspects of Naco's transmutation may be distinguished heuristically. First, this was an event or brief process of profound sociopolitical import. The enormously increased site zone after about 1250 probably testifies to an archaeologically sudden aggregation of population. The magnitude of the expansion may have evoked the new subsistence regime appearing at this time, one oriented in part toward riverine resources such as mollusks. Civic-ceremonial

architecture was erected in the center of Naco (the "central complex" encountered by the Smithsonian-Harvard Expedition in 1936). Those who lived in or very near this precinct enjoyed privileges apparently unavailable elsewhere in Naco, such as more elaborate domiciles with plaster features. An astronomical rise in obsidian consumption strongly implies the rapid development of an effective interregional system of commodity procurement. In short, what later sources describe as an important trade center and powerful community came into existence at this time.

Second (and closely linked in time with polity formation), this was an occasion marked by the appearance of a distinctive inventory of material culture. The post-1250 assemblage comprised an amalgam of some features previously present in the Naco area (primarily formal and typological characteristics of utilitarian pottery) with a host of innovations in every category of artifact. Here again, however, it is only the final product, the fact of the combination, that is visible. If the coalescence resulted from a process of gradual development, it remains archaeologically undetected.

Nolasco Bichrome exemplifies these qualities, for it displays an eclectic syncretism of new and previously present attributes. It is found throughout Naco and in the southern Sula Plain after 1250 in the apparently fully evolved state described above.

Features of Nolasco Bichrome for which no local antecedents can be identified include bowl flanges decorated with circular punctations, the effigy (Type II) and pseudo-effigy (Type I) forms of bowl support, and the raised relief designs on interior basal surfaces produced with mushroom-shaped stamp-molds. These may have diffused to Naco from elsewhere in Middle America; but, if so, the process cannot be elucidated in any detail, and no single source can account plausibly for this congeries of traits.

At least one of the diagnostic properties of Nolasco Bichrome, the red-on-white painting, probably appeared at Naco during the early facet of the Late Postclassic—a poorly known subphase just prior to the explosive development of Naco around 1250 (polity formation and its immediate aftermath comprise the middle facet). The precise character of the early facet painted decoration is unknown because the sherd surfaces are badly eroded. Also unclear is how or where this color scheme originated. In general terms, its occurrence at Naco may be simply a manifestation of a widespread preference for pottery with red-on-light-colored background evolving more or less simultaneously in several areas of the eastern Maya world (Haberland 1964; Navarrete 1962:15–16; Rice 1979:28–42; Sharer 1978 3:63–64; R.E. Smith 1971, fig. 53; Wetherington 1978:86).

Also detectable during the early facet and associated with the red-on-white painting are prototypes for the two vessel forms most common in later Nolasco Bichrome: tripod bowls and ladle censers. The bowl supports are hollow cylindrical legs open at their distal ends. Interior bases of the bowls bear very simple raised designs created by fusing ribbons of clay to the otherwise flat surfaces (i.e., additive or applied decoration quite distinct in technique from

the later stamp-impressions). The ladle censers sport unusually large bowls joined to hollow handles relatively short and squat in appearance. In their proportions, they more closely resemble censers locally present before (Late Classic) than they do the comparatively elongate and graceful censer forms characteristic of Naco after 1250.

And, in fact, many of the quintessential characteristics of Nolasco Bichrome were present in the Naco Valley long before the early facet. A local ceramic tradition nearly a millennium old in 1250 featured painted motifs similar to those of Nolasco on vessels probably functionally specific and symbolically meaningful in domestic contexts.

The pottery inventory of the Naco Valley during the Classic period (ca. A.D. 400–950, but possibly as late as 1050) included some Uluá and Bold Geometric Polychromes imported from (or very similar to those of) the Sula Plain and Comayagua areas of Honduras. Also present was material from Copán and the neighboring Motagua Valley to the west (Henderson et al. 1979; Urban 1986). These ceramics were comparatively exotic in the Naco setting, being primarily associated with the largest centers in the valley and a few smaller groups of mounds interpreted as elite residences (Urban and Schortman 1984:12).

The vast majority of the Classic ceramic assemblage is classified into three types. Jicaro Unslipped was a category composed mostly of very large, plain jars with flaring necks. Magdalena Red-on-Natural (12 percent of the total assemblage) consisted almost entirely of jars with vertical necks and everted rims. Over an unslipped buff background, their upper portions bore red painted designs organized into horizontal bands of geometric elements (usually with linear cross-hatching, oblique lines, triangles, dots) or, less frequently, zoomorphic elements (usually birds) (Figure 11f–i). The primary form of the third type, Chamelecon Orange-Slipped (10 percent of the total assemblage), was an unstricted bowl 20–30 cm in diameter, often with polychrome design (red-and-black-on-orange). Chamelecon graphic design featured an interior band divided into panels in which zoomorphic motifs (birds or crabs) alternated with vertical space breakers (Figure 11a) (Henderson et al. 1979:177, 187; Urban 1986, Chapter 4).

While related to larger regional traditions of the time, this particular mix of forms and designs was specific to the Naco area, where it constituted the basic domestic ware for at least six hundred years. How long these ceramics continued in use after the Classic period is unclear. The painted designs, at least, faded rapidly in popularity and probably disappeared altogether late in the Early Postclassic (perhaps 1100–1200). Precisely how this pottery was employed in households of the Classic is conjectural, although it seems likely that the uses to which the more elaborately decorated vessels (Magdalena jars, Chamelecon painted bowls) were put paralleled those of later Nolasco Bichrome. The polychrome bowls, for example, were appropriate in size and shape as food-serving vessels (cf. R. Robertson 1983:116–28).

Painted motifs of the Classic period which were probably ancestral to Nolasco design are the bird of polychrome bowls and the oblique and intersecting linear

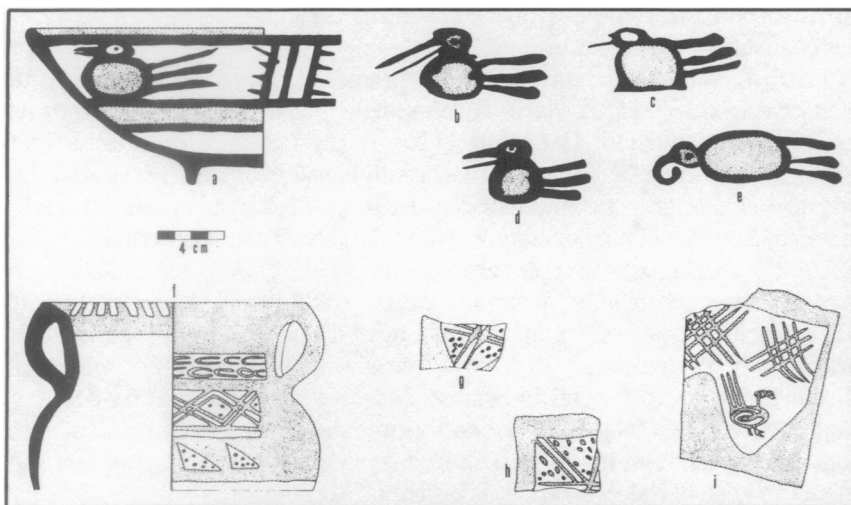


Figure 11. Painted Designs from the Classic Period of the Naco Valley (a) Chamelecon Orange-Slipped, Polychrome Variety bowl, section and partial interior rollout (red and black design on orange background); (b–e) bird motifs from similar bowls; (f) Magdalena Red-on-Natural jar, upper portion; (g–i) Magdalena sherds. (a, f after Henderson et al. 1979, fig. 15a, d)

elements of red painted jars. The characteristics of the avian creature depicted on Classic pottery vary considerably, so more than one bird or species of bird may have been intended. Most birds on Chamelecon and, occasionally, Magdalena vessels, however, were shown with three feathers like the later Motif A of Nolasco (Figure 11a–e, i). The cross-hatching and oblique lines found on Magdalena jars are similar to Motif C of Nolasco, and, in many cases, these X-shaped elements are indistinguishable from the Postclassic motif, even to the dots and ticks customarily added to background areas enclosed by the overall design (Figure 11g–h).

This background provides the basis for three observations about the inception of Nolasco Bichrome. First, Nolasco pottery probably originated at Naco or in the Naco Valley because, on present evidence, that is the only location providing even the vaguest hint of transitional development (early facet color scheme and vessel forms) as well as older antecedent elements.

Second, the creation of Nolasco Bichrome apparently involved a selective reconstitution of Classic period painted motifs, an integration of these with red-on-white tripod bowls and ladle censers of the early facet, and above all an overarching reformulation combining all of these and other characteristics into a distinctive new system of design and form. In its final fusion, Nolasco Bichrome also preserved the associations and connotations of an ancient pottery tradition. If Classic period pottery manifested symbolically meaningful decoration on certain vessels associated with food consumption in domestic settings,

then Nolasco Bichrome essentially resurrected and incorporated the ancient complex intact.

Third, the appearance of Nolasco Bichrome so closely coincided with the explosive development of Naco that the phenomena seem contemporary and must have been related. The nature of Naco's crystallization is consistent with ethnohistoric accounts alluding to apparently small bands of "Mexicans," foreigners, or folk claiming descent from such wandering about eastern Mesoamerica in search of employment as elites. "If forced out of one region," Roys (1972:59) concluded, "they sought another where they could dominate the autochthonous inhabitants, exact a moderate tribute, raid their neighbors for slaves, and, if possible, control commerce." These self-styled captains and lords seem to have enjoyed some success with their aspirations, typically accomplished by gathering together a dispersed population. "The people of Tetzal were never subject to anyone," as one description from Yucatán has it, "but each lived as he wished, scattered, until Napac Camal came, collected them, and established a town at Tixualhtun" (Roys 1957:76).

Can such hypothetical lords be identified in the archaeological record of middle facet Naco? Perhaps. A striking difference is evident in the spatial distribution of Nolasco Bichrome vessel forms. Compared to the rest of the site, Naco's central complex contains nearly twice as many hemispherical bowls but only one-tenth the number of Type I tripod bowl supports (relative to the number of Nolasco sherds from each area). This difference probably corresponds in some fashion to greater privilege or higher social standing associated with the central complex in other respects. The contrasting spatial emphases in Nolasco vessel form may reflect ideological differences to judge by the symbolic significance of the tripod bowls. A piece of evidence strengthening this interpretation is a hemispherical bowl from the central complex depicting, in addition to Motifs A through C, a feathered serpent (see Figure 10a). This seems to have been the most common icon in elite religion of Late Postclassic eastern Mesoamerica, and it is suggestive of a cultic orientation in the center of Naco distinct from what was otherwise characteristic of Nolasco decoration.

The archaeological evidence can tell us virtually nothing about how formation of the Naco polity was specifically accomplished or to what degree coercion or suasion may have been decisive. It is important to remember, however, that the event occurred against a regional backdrop of widespread violence and social dislocation. The rapid creation of a new social order must itself have been a phenomenon promoting anxiety, insecurity, and uncertainty.

The development of a differentiated polity (or of greater internal differentiation within such a polity) may and commonly does bring with it severe social dislocation and psychological tension. But it also brings with it conceptual confusion, as the established images of political order fade into irrelevance or are driven into disrepute. . . . It is a confluence of sociopsychological strain and an absence of cultural resources by means

of which to make sense of the strain, each exacerbating the other that sets the stage for the rise of systematic (political, moral, or economic) ideologies. (Geertz 1973:219–20)

The circumstances surrounding the appearance of Nolasco Bichrome suggest that it hypostatized and reflected something like a new ideological synthesis. The pottery embodied a systematic recodification of mythic or religious metaphors of the sort “crucially necessary when a culture or social group encounters phenomena that either elude or run afoul of normal expectations” (White 1976:122; cf. Wallace 1956).

As a material of cultural reformulation originating in circumstances of flux and transition, I think it becomes clearer why Nolasco Bichrome would have encapsulated a program of qualities strongly reminiscent of the older connotations and functions of domestic painted pottery in the Naco Valley. Co-option of traditional meaning would have greatly enhanced the capacity of the Late Postclassic pottery to convey a sense of hallowed righteousness. By appropriating the ancient idiom, novelty and upheaval could be expressed as a continuation of inherited custom. I am suggesting that Nolasco Bichrome assumed the general form that it did to ameliorate socioeconomic perturbation; it did so by affirming the persistence of tradition in the most socially irreducible setting possible—the individual household.

Sometime later in Naco’s prehispanic existence, perhaps around 1400–1450, an extensive building program emphasizing new forms and materials took place in the central complex. The most striking constructions of this late facet consisted of a small, circular temple and an I-shaped ball court of modest dimensions, neither obviously related in appearance or technique to earlier building conventions. The ball court and the round temple—the latter possibly dedicated to an aspect of the Mexican god Quetzalcóatl—instead seem reminiscent of central Mexican architectural concepts.

Almost certainly associated with the new canons of architecture, a type of painted pottery appeared at about the same time and was largely restricted in its distribution to the same central area. Vagando Polychrome features red and black painted designs over a white field. Its common elements or motifs include serrated serpentlike creatures (Figure 12g–i), *grecas* or stepped-frets (Figure 12j–k), fish (Figure 12a–c), circles (Figure 12a, c, j–m), S-hooks (Figure 12i, l), and butterflylike shapes (Figure 12l–n). Vessel forms of Vagando are tripod bowls with tubular legs open at the bottom and ladle censers with tubular handles capped or plugged at the distal end. This seems to be (we have no complete vessels) a modular and essentially geometric style in which the motifs usually are repeated in alternating colors (red and black) on two or three registers.

Vagando Polychrome was manufactured from the same clay characteristic of other Naco ceramics (including Nolasco Bichrome), although, unlike them, Vagando paste apparently contains a crushed potsherd temper. Painted designs



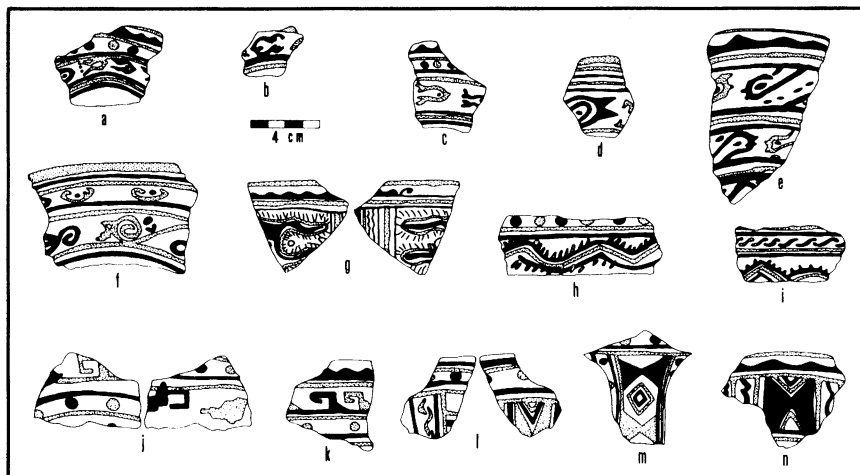


Figure 12. Vagando Polychrome Sherds from Northern Honduras (a–c, f–n) from Naco; (d) from Despoloncal, Sula Plain; (e) from Trujillo (courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History).

identical or very similar to those of Vagando Polychrome were, however, produced elsewhere. Several sherds from the central complex bear this painted decoration but are composed of paste foreign to Naco (Figure 12g, m). These pieces also tend to be idiosyncratic in silhouette or shape. One, for example, is from a thick-walled hemispherical bowl with a tapering, out-flaring lip—a form otherwise unknown at Naco. A few Vagando or Vagando-like sherds from a ladle censer were excavated at Despoloncal in the Sula Plain (Figure 12d). They probably were not imported from Naco, but, since they have not been studied petrographically, that is an opinion based more on the rustic quality of the decoration than on technological considerations. A single Vagando-like sherd was excavated some years ago by Junius Bird near Trujillo, Honduras, in a Late Postclassic (Late Cocal phase) context (Figure 12e). Epstein (1957:180) thought this might be a trade piece from Naco, but its paste and vessel shape (a large basin) are not characteristic of that site. My own impression (based on a rapid macroscopic perusal) is that its paste is indistinguishable from the other sherds with which it was recovered.

As in architecture, the affinities of the new pottery are generally to the west and with central Mexico. Vagando Polychrome is a variant of what has been perceived throughout Postclassic Mesoamerica as the Mixteca-Puebla horizon style (Nicholson 1977; D. Robertson 1970). More precisely, Vagando is one manifestation of what M.E. Smith and Heath-Smith (1980) distinguish as a largely ceramic facies of the Mixteca-Puebla phenomenon—the “Postclassic Religious Style.” By this they mean the appearance of a standardized set of symbols (most commonly the stepped-fret and feathered serpent) in many areas of late prehispanic Middle America, indicating, they argue, a uniformity

of religion among trade-oriented rulers. Local elites controlling long-distance trade "were probably the recipients and promoters of the new standardized religion and art style" (M.E. Smith and Heath-Smith 1980:31).

Their interpretation is broadly congruent with the situation in the eastern Maya region, where many rulers certainly claimed a foreign, frequently Mexican, heritage sometimes discernible in their material culture. Rice, for example, believes reptilian imagery visible on Postclassic pottery in the Petén signifies, in part, elite identification with this transcendent milieu.

The widely shared "international style" contains a corpus of elements, themes, and symbols (e.g., serpents, *grecas*) expressed within very regionalized elite substyles that probably reflect local or group-specific historical and idiosyncratic events. At the same time, these were displayed in readily visible ways (on pottery, murals, architectural embellishment) that would have acted as easily recognizable codes among elites participating in the associated commercial (and other) interactions. (Rice 1983:876)

Innovations in architecture and painted pottery characteristic of Naco's late facet both imply elitist associations by the fact that their spatial distribution is exclusively or primarily confined to the central complex. Both express an outward orientation, an ideological stance apparently foreign to Naco but indicative of identification with a pan-Mesoamerican elitist sphere of interaction (cf. Freidel 1979). These developments may reflect Naco's greater integration into the commercial network around the Yucatán Peninsula caused by more frequent dealings with representatives of Lowland Maya polities who resided in northwestern Honduras by at least this time. The lords of Naco may have also been concerned with interelite communication eastward along the Atlantic coastline to judge by the occurrence of Vagando-like pottery at Despoloncal and at Trujillo, where Nahua speakers ruled at conquest (Lara-Pinto 1980:70–76; Pagden 1971:417).

Within Naco, the cultural realignment evident in architecture and pottery could indicate either an intensification of internationalist sentiment on the part of the established rulers or the presence of an intrusive group capable of securing control of the ceremonial-civic center of that community. In either event, the polychrome pottery of Naco's privileged was modeled on Nolasco Bichrome's idiom of meaning associated with certain vessel forms. Vagando Polychrome occurs only in those shapes most common in Nolasco (tripod bowls, ladle censers). As most sherds of Vagando derive from architectural fill, there is virtually no information about the type from primary context. It is reasonable to suppose, however, that the bowls and censers of Vagando were employed in much the same fashion and setting as those of Nolasco. Conversely, Vagando-like pottery not manufactured at Naco-Despoloncal (i.e., the foreign sherds found at Naco and the one from Trujillo) assumed vessel forms unknown in

Nolasco Bichrome. Hence, Vagando Polychrome seems to have been highly variable in appearance throughout northern Honduras, with its form determined in large measure by local cultures and its particular manifestation at Naco defined by the Nolasco format of decorated vessels used in certain activities and settings.

Vagando Polychrome, of course, obviously differed from Nolasco in several respects. The possible presence of crushed potsherd temper could indicate a distinct manufacturing technique. The specific forms of bowl supports (tubular legs) and ladle handles (blocked ends) were not those of Nolasco. The Vagando lexicon of painted design looked nothing like the red-on-white decoration. And, while Nolasco Bichrome was affiliated with the canons of a locally ancient pottery tradition, Vagando evoked a world beyond Naco of upper-class and international affiliation. In essence, Vagando drew upon the contextual and formal properties of Nolasco to convey unambiguously that it was not Nolasco. These contrastive properties are of a piece with the archaeological picture of Vagando's distribution, heavily clustered in the central complex spatially distinct from most of Naco.

The qualities oppositional to Nolasco evident in Vagando suggest that the two pottery types were mobilized in the construction of social boundaries between groups emphasizing their ethnic distinctiveness. This could have been true earlier in time also, manifest in the differential distribution of Nolasco vessel forms during the middle facet, but the contrast is far sharper after the appearance of Vagando Polychrome. Why household pottery should have been employed as a social diacritic—a signal marking a *we/they* dichotomization—is reasonably clear from the foregoing remarks. It was available and condign. It was salient because Nolasco Bichrome was entrenched in family life and ritual as a medium trafficking in symbol and traditional sentiment (Cohen 1978; Keyes 1981).

As an emblem of ethnic identity, Vagando Polychrome may not have been particularly meaningful to distant rulers and visiting dignitaries, even though its iconography reflected a stance of elite internationalism. This is not to say that foreign lords necessarily were unappreciative of its stepped-frets and serpents, but rather to emphasize that Vagando's visual message primarily would affect people in Naco—those, that is, who understood the principles of Nolasco form, symbolism, and use. This would have been true even if the pottery more frequently remained sequestered in domiciles than publicly displayed (cf. Wobst 1977). Nolasco Bichrome and the earlier Classic period pottery probably always expressed local group sentiments, but in such a way that these were emphasized rather privately in the household.

The late facet of Naco may have been characterized by cleavages of socio-economic class falling out along ethnic lines. Certainly the clustered centralized provenience of Vagando Polychrome and its elitist iconography imply that ethnic boundaries corresponded to unequal apportionments of prestige and privilege to the groups associated with Vagando and Nolasco. But it is not clear precisely

how unequal the standings of these groups were or what the nature and degree of their interaction would have been.

The archaeological record does provide some indication that the Nolasco design system of the late facet had begun to deviate from the static, redundant, and tightly patterned mode of decoration described previously. Thus, a few sherds of Nolasco Bichrome bear motifs borrowed from Vagando Polychrome, though none of the Vagando sherds incorporate the red-on-white motifs. This implies that Nolasco potters perceived Vagando Polychrome as prestigious and worthy of emulation. Some evidence also exists that modes of surface treatment tended to combine late in time, crosscutting what had previously been firmly separate typological boundaries. During the middle facet, for example, monochrome red slip and painted design never co-occurred on the same vessel. During the late facet, in contrast, several vessels possessed one surface slipped red, the other with Nolasco Bichrome red-on-white design. Since this is a decorative concept of considerable time depth in the Petén, its appearance at Naco vaguely may reflect increased influence from the Lowland Maya region (Rice 1979:28–45). But most changes evident in late facet Nolasco Bichrome were of a more ambiguous sort not clearly attributable to outside sources. In many instances, black lines were added to the Nolasco red-on-white format resulting in a true polychrome type (Posas Polychrome). Also, the popularity of reed-stamped flanges and Type I legs on tripod bowls seems to have decreased markedly. Was Nolasco Bichrome disintegrating as a patterned system of design or undergoing additional elaboration in the direction of greater coherence? Whatever its character and significance, the trend was abruptly truncated when the pottery and its cultural context were eradicated by the Spanish Conquest.

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Nolasco Bichrome pottery was a basic component of the domestic assemblage in at least the Naco Valley and southern Sula Plain during the Late Postclassic period. As ritual equipment or mortuary accompaniment, it was employed in other contexts also, but its primary setting was within the household, where its most popular forms (tripod bowls and ladle censers) probably were used in a few specific activities such as serving food and censuring. Nolasco Bichrome was the good china of its day, in all likelihood manufactured by the same social unit that consumed it.

The central image of the tightly structured Nolasco decorative system was an imaginary or mythic avian creature possessing triadic properties in its painted feathers or modeled facial protuberances. Nolasco potters seem to have been obsessed with visual metaphor alternating between relatively naturalistic and abstract depictions of the bird referent. This was a pattern appearing in painted form on every Nolasco vessel, but the visual redundancy was developed to its highest degree on tripod bowls combining graphic and plastic mediums of

design. These were the most common Nolasco vessels. In them, the metaphoric presentation was reiterated and elaborated in two or three dimensions, horizontally and vertically, inside and out.

Attempting to elucidate what the pottery may have meant to its users, I compared aspects of the design system to verbal expression in two respects. On the one hand, the visual repetition so prominent in Nolasco is reminiscent of elaborated restatement built into the parallel couplet—a predilect and widely distributed form of speech, probably of considerable antiquity in Middle America. Developed to its most formal extreme in prayer and song, the sheer density of parallel strophes serves to emphasize the sacred and symbolic content of an utterance. This principle of stacking semantically impoverished metaphors resembles verbally what Nolasco conveyed visually, perhaps with much the same numinous effect.

On the other hand, the Lenca story of Comizahual provides one of a number of indications that belief in nagualism was pervasive and significant in conquest period Honduras. Therefore, what visually is recursive alternation between variant aspects of a zoomorphic image possibly represented to native eyes a theme involving nagualistic transmutation of a mythically important personage.

A fully developed Nolasco Bichrome appeared in the archaeological record when Naco emerged rapidly as a large town at the beginning of the middle facet of the Late Postclassic about 1250. The pottery appears to have been an amalgam of completely new attributes (about which little can be said) with older, locally identifiable traits. During the early facet just prior to 1250, for example, tripod bowls and ladle censers painted red-on-white were present at Naco, although not in the precise forms typical of Nolasco. Earlier still, painted motifs probably ancestral to those of Nolasco were characteristic of the Classic period (ca. 400–1000) in the Naco Valley, where they appear on a limited number of vessel shapes—decorated forms, that is, apparently functionally specific to certain activities within the household, such as serving food (bowls of Chamelecon Polychrome).

These local antecedents suggest that Nolasco Bichrome was native to the Naco region. Further, by incorporating these particular characteristics, Nolasco preserved an ancient, indigenous tradition that assigned meaning to a conjunction of painted ceramics and quotidian residential activities regarded as more than ordinary. Finally, the apparently simultaneous appearance of Nolasco Bichrome with polity formation at Naco implies that the pottery's creation coincided with, and probably resulted from, circumstances drastically altering the fabric of social relations. As a response in physical form to changing and uncertain conditions, Nolasco Bichrome may reflect a new ideological synthesis in which the invocation of ancient tradition was highly desirable, perhaps necessary.

Naco's late facet (beginning ca. 1400–1450) was characterized in the central complex by new architecture and ceramics, both manifesting affinities to distant regions of Mesoamerica. Vagando Polychrome, for example, was a variant of the "Postclassic Religious Style" denoting elite commonality throughout much

of Middle America. By employing the vessel forms typical of Naco's red-on-white pottery, Vagando Polychrome co-opted the format of Nolasco's meaningful associations in order to broadcast a very different message. While Nolasco evoked common, autochthonous tradition, Vagando advertised upper-class, international affiliation. It was an iconography of contrast congruent with the differential spatial distributions of the two types.

These oppositional qualities indicate the probable existence of separate groups, presumably unequal in socioeconomic standing, who defined their ethnic distinctiveness at least partially through the medium of household pottery. Objects normally confined to private settings were chosen to signal social boundaries of a public nature because Nolasco Bichrome was an accepted and eminently available material for the expression of fundamental group sentiment and symbolism, one appropriate to the cultural tradition of the Naco Valley.

Nolasco Bichrome evidently existed at an interface of cognitive and social domains deemed worthy of reification and was the last manifestation of a local cultural code in which multiple layers of expressive meaning physically coalesced. Four such dimensions of significance are identified in this study: household setting and domestic use and (within the visual system of design) metaphorical properties and mythical connotations. These levels of meaning doubtlessly were operative mutually and simultaneously. Here they are separated in order to review discursively their characteristics and ramifications.

### *1. Household Setting*

Nolasco Bichrome and its painted prototypes of the Classic period were symbolic mediums primarily found and meaningful within the context of the pre-Columbian household. But what was a household? We lack the archaeological data that would define its composition and size, and we do not know how variable in space or continuous in time these characteristics may have been. What is clear from the archaeological record is a repetitive assemblage of domestic artifacts and food residues strongly implying the existence of a recurrent social unit of residence in which food was prepared and consumed. These social modules were common and essentially nonelite; they were generalized rather than specialized in their activities and possessions; and—as seen most clearly in the behavioral complex associated with food—these units apparently were basic and irreducible.

This was a household in archaeological terms, but, in view of a tremendous body of historical and ethnographic evidence about households from Middle America, it seems reasonable to add that this probably was a family unit characterized by a sexual division of labor. Very possibly it was the primary unit of subsistence production in its society, and, almost certainly, it was the most intimate and fundamental arena of customary social interaction, involving cohabitation and socialization, familial commensality and cooperation. I have suggested, therefore, that the tradition in the Naco Valley of decorated household pottery was bound up with primordial sentiments, or whatever descriptive term one prefers for those values of place, orientation, and rightness inculcated

from the earliest age in the home. The important point is that this was an ambience in which the daily use of certain vessels cumulatively acquired profound affective connotations for the pre-Columbian citizen of the Naco Valley.

## 2. *Domestic Use*

Most anthropologists presumably recognize that categories of food and modes of food preparation may be ordered as systems of cultural classification reflecting, among other things, social distinctions, symbolics, and values. Unfortunately, that kind of generalization is not directly applicable to the context of prehistoric northwestern Honduras, where comparatively little is known of the actual foods or the manner in which they were prepared. What is at issue archaeologically is less the semiotics of food than the evidence of sentiments associated with the food containers (the "mediatory utensils" themselves) and perhaps inhering in the roles played by the vessels in social acts of transferring or consuming food. The evidence collectively compiled from Nolasco Bichrome and the earlier types, Chamelecon Polychrome and Magdalena Red-on-Natural, seems reasonably clear: vessels belonging to a tradition of painted domestic ceramics in the Naco Valley were functionally specific and specifically meaningful within their rather narrow parameters of household context and use.

The application of painted design to a ceramic vessel was not a random or whimsical process. Conversely, the absence of painted design cannot be explained solely by the expectation of a brief vessel life; many unpainted pots, for example, apparently were not exposed to cooking fires or the vicissitudes of rough handling. Numerically, the painted vessels comprised a small percentage of the total domestic assemblage of pottery, and painted decoration consistently was restricted to a very few vessel shapes. Some of these were not associated clearly with food. The ladle censer must have been employed ritually in censuring (food for the gods rather than mortals?), and the Magdalena jars probably held liquid of some sort. Most painted vessels were, however, bowls suitable as containers for the serving of food prepared or processed in other pots. The presence of painted decoration, therefore, defined a conceptual dichotomy within the spectrum of ordinary, quotidian activities performed within a household. The ceremonial-ritual overtones of censers and, sometimes, Nolasco bowls imply a distinction between the sacred and profane. The bowl forms of Nolasco and Chamelecon suggest a division between those vessels from which food was eaten and those in which food was cooked, processed, stored. So it may be that painted was to unpainted in the ceramic tradition of the Naco Valley as sacred and cooked were to profane and raw. But whatever the precise terms of the distinction, it seems likely that matters of food (and liquids?) were differentially invested with affective and symbolic values, and these values were extended to associated vessels (cf. Miller 1982:92-93; Braithwaite 1982:84).

How such a congeries of meaning in household ceramics originated, how far into the past it extends, and how widespread the phenomenon may have been are questions for a historical and comparative inquiry well beyond the scope of this study. But if the analysis is essentially sound, the system of contextual,

functional, and symbolic associations must have been in place by about A.D. 400 and perceived as sufficiently significant to have been reassembled in the form of Nolasco Bichrome about nine centuries later.

### 3. *Metaphorical Properties*

A striking characteristic of the design system of Nolasco Bichrome is its quality of visual metaphor repetitively articulated graphically and plastically in different dimensions, planes, and surfaces. This format resembles the redundant and semantically limited stacking of metaphors typical of the most formal extreme of Chamula speech described by Gossen (1972). Visually and verbally, it may have been the structure of presentation appropriate to conveying the most sacred and symbolic propositions with similar effects on viewer or hearer.

At one level of causation, the style of speech presumably has a great deal to do with the structuring of symbolics. Hunt's analysis of a Chiapan "mythical poem," for example, demonstrates the complex fashion in which a Mesoamerican oral tradition serves "as a significant vehicle for the formation, transmission and preservation of symbols" (Hunt 1977:281). The relationship between language and material symbols has been little explored in Middle American studies, although the Tedlocks recently outlined an interplay of common patterning tendencies discernible in the language and technology of the Quiché Maya (B. Tedlock and D. Tedlock 1985). On the pre-Columbian horizon, Townsend (1979:28–30) has shown how ritual attire and cult images among the Aztec may be "read" as metaphoric terms of speech made visually manifest.

I do not wish to imply, however, that the Nolasco phenomenon need be attributed to deep structures determined by genetics or thought patterns specific to a single language. It seems more reasonable to suppose that homology in pottery design and oral expression ultimately derives from something like a culturally conditioned philosophy of wide distribution concerned with the proper expression of concepts believed to be significant. And it makes little sense to speak of the material culture from Naco as a coherent system informed by some pervasive, unitary mode of patterning. Relational and symbolic principles manifested in Nolasco Bichrome seem exclusive to that pottery type, or at least they are not discernible in other known classes of artifacts.

### 4. *Mythical Connotations*

The notion that myth may be depicted on painted pottery is not new to Middle American studies. Nearly a half century ago, J.E.S. Thompson (1939) proposed this possibility for polychrome ceramics of the Maya Late Classic period (A.D. 600–950)—an idea spectacularly developed in recent years by Coe (1973, 1975, 1978, 1982). Probably commissioned by the elite for activities involving ancestor worship and funerary ritual, such vessels commonly were embellished with painted scenes composed of mythic and death-related imagery. Some of these compositions apparently depict events described in the *Popol Vuh*, a sacred book of the Quiché elite written in European script late in the sixteenth century.



I have suggested that Nolasco Bichrome also possessed a mythic or mythico-religious referent. The myth is lost, but possibly it centered on a theme of nagualism similar to the one stressed in the Lenca legend of Comizahual. This is plausible in terms of the historical and ethnographic evidence. Nagualism was the only element of the pre-Columbian belief system in Honduras to consistently attract the notice of early chroniclers, and it seems to have been the only one to survive in western Honduras for several centuries. But the idea of a mythic referent is also a logical conclusion in view of the conceptual congruence between the visual essence of Nolasco decoration—an extended visual metaphor stressing alternation between abstract and representational variants of an avian image—and the idea of nagualistic transformation from one physical state to another. Additionally, one could infer that the dominant motif (A) of painted design was grounded in myth simply by the manner in which it naturalistically depicts an unnatural creature.

But if themes of mythical import were common to pottery of the Late Classic Maya and the Late Postclassic Naqueños, we must recognize also that these mythic incorporations occurred in dissimilar contexts with very different ideological ramifications. Whereas the scenes on Classic Maya pottery reflected a belief system primarily associated with a privileged minority, the mythic theme in Nolasco Bichrome conveyed information about a common outlook representative of its time and place. The outlook was so widely shared as to suggest that a mythic component was essential to the collective perception of cultural commonality; that myth, in other words, served as group charter.

Where myth was so employed and hypostatized in archaeologically recoverable form, it should be possible to distinguish distributions of prehistoric groups in terms at least roughly comparable to those recognized by the people who fashioned and experienced such social boundedness. That kind of analysis, however, cannot be accomplished on the basis of current information from the Late Postclassic of northwestern Honduras, where we know neither the precise extent of Nolasco distribution nor the characteristics of coeval, neighboring folk cultures. Far more comparative information is available from the regional Late Classic period. In western Honduras during that time (A.D. 600–950), Urban and Schortman (1984) discern a number of small culture areas defined on the basis of fairly discrete clusters of material traits. Each of these zones, they believe, was composed of several societies regularly interacting and maintaining similar belief systems and social structures. The authors tentatively propose that the Naco Valley comprised one of these zones.

The Late Classic Naco Valley almost certainly was a culturally distinct entity from the perspective of this study. Although neighboring areas shared many similar ceramic characteristics, in no other region was the iconographic system of, for example, Chamelecon Polychrome—with its banded processions of birds and crabs—duplicated. I interpret this phenomenon as a manifestation of collective, local self-identity indicative of a single society; an expression, moreover, possibly founded in common mythic reference.

An additional implication of the analysis is that, within the Naco Valley, it

may be possible to monitor temporal change or continuity in this collective outlook. If painted design on domestic pottery alluded to a specific and commonly recognized corpus of narrative, iconographic transformation would strongly imply change in content of the mythic correlate. I have emphasized the considerable degree of continuity indicated by the retention in Nolasco Bichrome of a traditional, domestic complex of meaning in ceramic context and use. I noted further that Classic and Postclassic pottery at Naco are closely related at the level of formal similarities in painted motifs. But it must be observed also that the painted design systems of Classic period Chamelecon and Magdalena differed significantly from that of Nolasco Bichrome. This would suggest a Classic-Postclassic disjunction in the specific substance of the corresponding beliefs—a change, it may be, in the mythic charter of Naco folk over time.

The myth hypothesized for earlier times is, of course, lost also. I find it entertaining to imagine that the birds and crabs displayed on Chamelecon Polychrome were allegorically connected with prepared food in a fashion similar to the relationship posited in the Jicaque story “When the First Fire Was Stolen” (Chapman 1978a:101–102). This is a modern narrative (collected in central Honduras sometime between 1955 and 1972) describing, in part, why Indians have to buy matches from Ladinos. But primarily it is an account of how the origin of birds and crabs dooms those creatures to consumption of raw maize, while reserving to humans the right to cook their food with fire.

In sum, Nolasco Bichrome comprised a major expressive medium, the only one from the Late Postclassic of northwestern Honduras accessible to us today. Apparently originating from interplay between a distinctive cultural milieu and specific historical events, this pottery reified a complex conceptual package difficult to summarize neatly. Meaning effloresced not merely in a system of visual metaphor conveying the sacred, traditional, and mythic, but in a totality composed as well of form, function, proximate use, and setting. These vessels were “goods to think with” (Leach 1976:32), and they were good to eat from. Their presence at the heart of this society—without benefit of elite commission or mandate—suggests that a universe of sentiment and symbol may await study among other quotidian artifacts of Middle America.

## NOTE

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