

# Ceramic Analysis from the Site of La Delicias, Nicaragua

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**ABSTRACT.** *Information on the social identity of groups found within the early cultural periods of Pacific Nicaragua, such as the Tempisque period (500 BC – AD 300), is limited. Examining potential relationships with outside areas based on similarities in vessel form and decoration can provide a greater understanding of the social identities of the deceased and the external relationships they may have maintained. A sample of ceramic vessels from the site of Las Delicias near the modern city of Managua, Nicaragua was used to examine the variety of vessels present and possible implications of the social identity of the people. Initial analysis showed an interesting fusion of utilitarian and ceremonial vessels that can be found within this cemetery context, which may provide important information on individual social identity. Not all design elements appeared to be affiliated with the Greater Nicoya area, an area of Lower Central America subjected to much research. Interestingly, elements from the ceramic types examined appear to be more closely associated with areas such as El Salvador and Honduras, rather than the southern Greater Nicoya area.*

## Introduction

The type-variety method of classifying ceramic vessels is perhaps one of the most useful classification methodologies, especially for collections containing polychromes. This system of classification divides the ceramics into similar groups based on several important elements including paste composition, decoration applied to the vessel and the surface finish (Sinopoli 1991:52–53). Ceramics are first divided into “type” based on more general characteristics that the vessels share, while the “variety” is based around more minute details within the type groups. The research presented here consists of a type-variety classification scheme of 34 complete or nearly complete vessels from the site of Las Delicias near the modern city of Managua, Nicaragua. The purpose of this research project is to provide some insight into the period of occupation based on the types of ceramics present.

## Site Context

During the fall of 2008, a team of local Nicaraguan archaeologists excavated a cemetery site within the city limits of Managua, Nicaragua near Lake Managua to prevent further destruction of the burials from modern development in the area. The site consists of multiple burials, several non-ceramic artifacts, and a relatively large collection of complete ceramic vessels which is analyzed here. Very little is known about the site context as no prior excavations were undertaken in the surrounding area. While records on the provenience of the vessels exist, they

were not accessible for this analysis. Currently, it is unknown if there are nearby habitation sites that may have been associated with this cemetery.

### Methodology

Early classification of ceramic vessels was based on intuitive classification which allowed a very general visual categorization of the similarities and differences between vessels (Sinopoli 1991:49). These intuitive classifications were then compared to the photographic reference collections.

The analysis presented here incorporated a comparison of photographic collections of ceramics utilizing an online collection via Mi Museo (2006), Granada, Nicaragua and a photographic collection amassed by Larry Steinbrenner containing photographs from private collections he obtained access to. The photographic collection was used as a visual comparison to the ceramics from Las Delicias to assist in the identification of the types and varieties. Textual references describing the differences within the type-variety classifications found in Lower Central America including Healy (1980) and Bonilla Vargas et al. (1990) were consulted. Following the type-variety method, vessels were first classified based on similar types followed by similarities in variety. Vessels were first divided into utilitarian and non-utilitarian vessels based on decoration, after which non-utilitarian vessels were divided into separate types and varieties based on design elements. Incision was the primary type of decoration, with differences between the varieties of ceramics based on the differences in incisions.

### Results: Identified Type-Variety Classifications

Table 1 displays the different type and variety categories identified in this comparative analysis. In terms of vessel form, the majority of the assemblage consists of bowls and bottles (see Table 2 for vessel type frequencies). Decorative techniques were very limited, with incision being the predominant technique.

Table 1. Quantity of Each Vessel Type.

| Vessel Type             | Quantity  |
|-------------------------|-----------|
| Bocana Incised Bichrome | 13        |
| Espinoza Red Banded     | 1         |
| Usulután Resist         | 1         |
| Higuerito               | 3         |
| Utilitarian             | 10        |
| D                       | 2         |
| Unknown                 | 4         |
| <b>Total</b>            | <b>34</b> |

Table 2. Quantity of Each Vessel Form.

| Vessel Form               | Quantity  |
|---------------------------|-----------|
| Bottle                    | 10        |
| Superhemispherical Bowl   | 5         |
| Composite Silhouette Bowl | 9         |
| Non-Specific Bowl         | 6         |
| Other                     | 4         |
| <b>Total</b>              | <b>34</b> |

#### *Type — Bocana Incised Bichrome*

Bonilla Vargas et al. (1990) provide a general description of this type. Bocana Incised Bichrome has several diagnostic traits including painted red zones alternating with natural paste colour or cream engobe (a liquid clay slip), thick incised parallel lines, zoomorphic appliqué and use of black engobe.

*Variety — Bocana*

The Bocana variety (within the Bocana Incised Bichrome type) is identified by the presence of alternating red on cream or unslipped areas, incised grooves, and vessel forms with restricted orifices (Healy 1980:92).

Initially, I had classified several of the vessels as Bocana variety. Upon further examination, I have chosen to classify them as a separate variety due to the inconsistency in the expression of the traits identified above. Many of the vessels do not utilize the alternating red and cream or natural paste zones; instead they are all monochrome. Thus I have classified these vessels under variety “A” within the Bocana Incised Bichrome type.

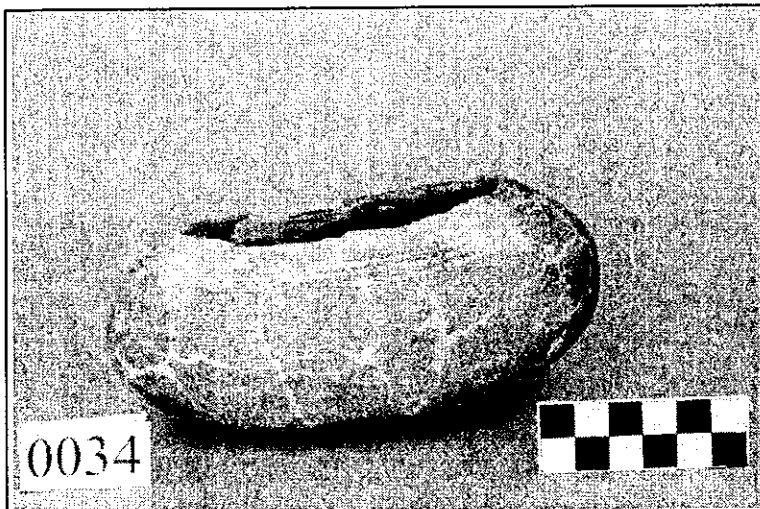


Figure 1. Bocana Incised Bichrome, Variety A (Mi Museo 2006).

*Variety A*

The main traits used for identifying this variety include the presence of parallel incised lines, often in clusters, and monochrome decoration. Vessels tend to be superhemispherical bowl or bottle form. This variety contains a total of six vessels from the assemblage. See Figure 1 for an example of this variety from the collection.

*Variety B*

The main traits used for identifying this variety include the presence of parallel incised lines (in particular short parallel incised lines evenly spaced around the entire vessel where the collar meets the body). Vessels tend to be a hemispherical bowl form with out-flaring rims and most vessels were bichromes. The profile of this variety is more angular than Variety A, with a sharp angle from the collar to the body portion. It should be noted that not all of the vessels display this sharp angle between the collar and body; rather some vessels appear to be a soft “s” shape. This variety contains a total of eight vessels from the total assemblage. (See Figure 2)

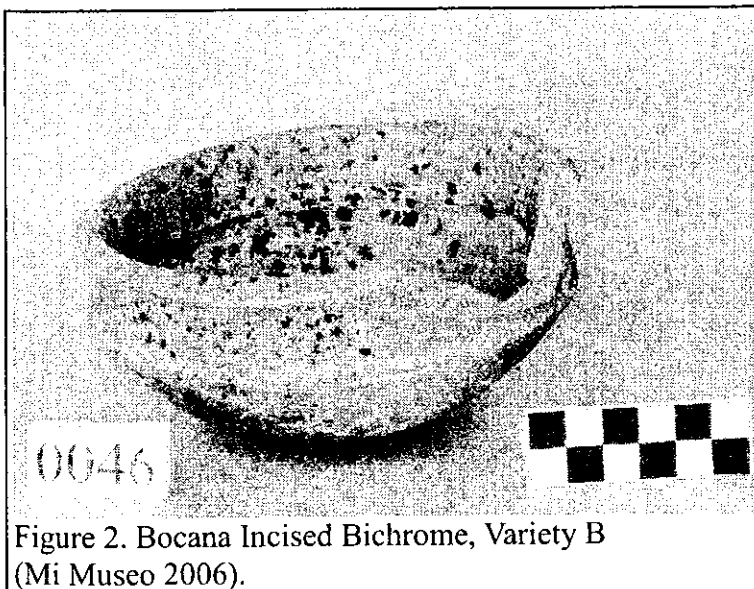


Figure 2. Bocana Incised Bichrome, Variety B (Mi Museo 2006).

*Type — Espinoza Red-Banded*

The main traits for identifying this type include red painted vertical bands, natural or buff coloured base and occasionally vessels have an appliqué. Vessel form tends to be jars with various orifices (Healy 1987:115).

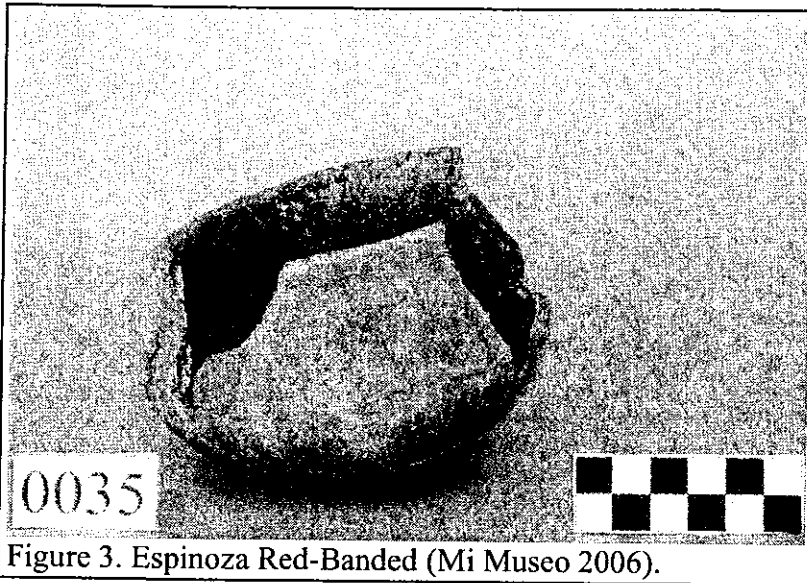


Figure 3. Espinoza Red-Banded (Mi Museo 2006).

Based on my analysis there are three vessels that can be classified as this type (see Figure 3). I have chosen to classify them under this category rather than the Bocana Incised Bichrome type because of the lack of incision. It could be argued that they concur with the vessel painting technique of alternating red and cream/natural zones. However, they lack incision which is a pivotal trait of the Bocana Incised Bichrome (hence the name).



Figure 4. Usulután Resist, Variety Unspecified (Mi Museo 2006).

*Type — Usulután Resist  
Variety — Unspecified*

This variety is characterized by negative resist painting producing straight or wavy lines, cream-brown or light orange base slip, out-curving and flared-walled bowls (Healy 1987:240).

The single bowl of this type displays an out-flaring rim with tripod supports. Negative resist painting appears as straight lines on the wall of the vessel.

The base appears to have a different negative resist design (see Figure 4).

*Type — D*

These two vessels have been grouped together because they are notably different from the rest of the collection, yet have several similar features between the two vessels. These vessels most likely consist of a different paste type that is resistant to the light orange slip that has been applied. The slip is flaking off of the vessel, suggesting the charge between the two surfaces that normally keeps the bond strong is very weak. Once the slip was applied the drying or firing process could potentially have caused this

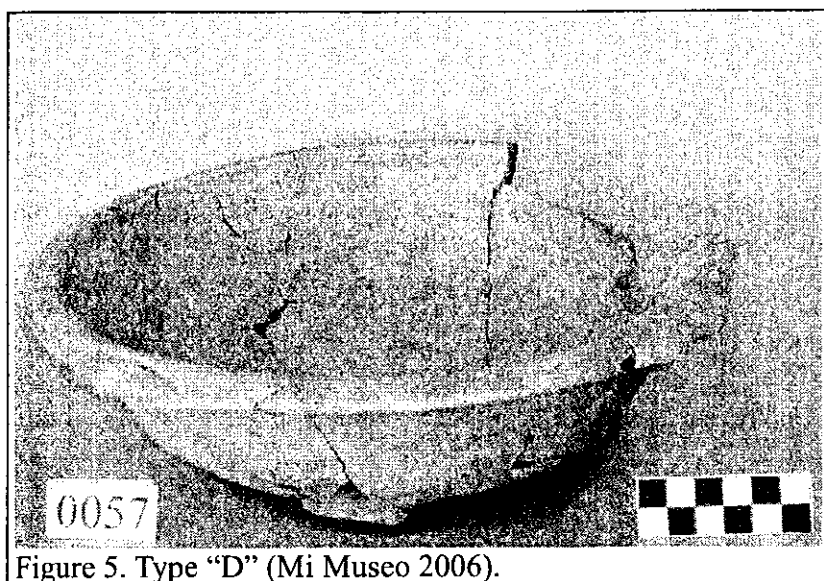


Figure 5. Type "D" (Mi Museo 2006).

slip removal (Rice 1987:150). These two shards have very different vessel forms, one with tripod supports that have been broken off while the other appears to be a gourd shape bowl (see Figure 5).

*Type — Higuerito*

Three vessels in the collection appear to share some similarities to the type Higuerito of the Cuyamel period of Northeast Honduras. Typical features of this type include the gadrooning (wave-like) effect applied to the exterior surface of the vessel. The vessel form for this type is exclusively bottle form based (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Higuerito (Mi Museo 2006).

*Type — Utilitarian/Unknown Monochrome*

I have created this type to identify those ceramics which are not diagnostic of a particular type-variety classification and are most likely utilitarian wares. These vessels appear to be unslipped and lack any decoration. This type includes

a total of fourteen vessels from the assemblage examined.

### Interpretation

Based on the type-variety ceramic classification of the assemblage, there is a strong correlation to the late Tempisque/early Bagaces period. While this classification should carry some significance, there are several factors that must be kept in mind. First, this cultural association can only be applied to the ceramic analyzed, and does not represent the entire artifact assemblage. Greater holistic analysis of the site is required to determine if the site extends beyond the confines of the period previously mentioned.

Understanding how these vessels reflect the general identity of individuals within the site is a difficult task. As this project is an early analysis of the site, it is difficult to provide any definitive

conclusion. However, there are several interesting interpretations that can be made from Las Delicias, even at this early stage of analysis.

Considering the larger context of the site, it is interesting that most of the vessels are monochrome. This might suggest that there was not great differentiation for those vessels being used in mortuary practices. Some of the vessels have blackened areas near the base, most likely from being placed over a fire during cooking. Interestingly, both decorated and non-decorative vessels have blacked areas near the bottom. The fact that these vessels are indicative of cooking implies that there may have been offerings given to the dead as a ritual feast. The fact that there is little differentiation between decorated versus non decorated vessels suggests that the feast prepared was more important than the vessel it was prepared in.

Another important factor to keep in mind is the possibility that later groups occupying the same area reused this cemetery. It becomes difficult to determine the number of occupations at the site without extensive testing and analysis of all components that make up the cemetery. Several different methods could be involved in dating the cemetery such as a variety of ceramic techniques, dating of radiocarbon samples, and analysis of human remains. Repeated usage of the cemetery would suggest that this location held a greater significance to the people living in the area and that it may have been part of a larger group identity and history as it provides a greater sense of permanence and ownership of the same general area.

The environments in which the ceramics were fired appear to be different. Some of the vessels have a different colour core and rind. In addition, some of the 'blackened' exterior vessel appears to have tan-brown/orange paste colours. This is probably due to changes in the firing and cooling conditions that the vessel was exposed to by the potter (Sinopoli 1991:30). This may indicate a technique used during the firing process in which the vessel was removed once oxidized and then smothered to create a reduced exterior appearance. Additional research is required to confirm this observation. Understanding the composition in this way of the ceramics can help us in determining the greater identity of the people who used the ceramics as it can determine whether the vessel was made locally or imported. Through the study of ceramics traded and produced, lots of information can be gathered relating to individual and group identities.

There appears to be a strong divide between those vessels that are utilitarian and non-utilitarian. Perhaps one of the most interesting non-utilitarian vessels is a necked jar vessel with a very restricted throat and neck. This vessel does not appear to have been used for liquids as it lacks any handle and it would be very difficult to pour liquid into a vessel with such a restricted orifice. Interestingly, this vessel has what appears to be an incised upside down half-circle located near the throat. It is possible that this is some type of a makers mark as this design element is not found on any other of the vessels within the assemblage.

Several of the vessels have some similarities to the ceramic type Higuero of Northeast Honduras, part of the Cuyamel period (300BC – AD 250). The gadrooning effect applied to the vessels makes them resemble tuber vegetables such as the squash. This gadrooning design is commonly found in various parts of the world as the artistic representation of food. A potential connection to countries of the north, specifically El Salvador and Honduras, may exist based on the negative resist painting displayed on the Nicaraguan vessels, similar to the Usulután Type in

El Salvador, and the gadrooned vessel similar to those found in Honduras. Whether these two vessel types were traded with the local population or the designs were mimicked, it is difficult to determine without further analysis.

### **Future Research**

Within the Isthmo-Colombian Area, cemeteries appears to have been “located away from the village or, less frequently, in a delimited locale inside the village boundaries” (Dennett 2007:97). Further excavations, possibly near Lake Managua, may result in the identification of residential compounds associated with this cemetery. This would allow an expansion of the material analysis given here to be undertaken which could lend further support to the interpretations provided

Radiocarbon dates from the site correspond to the date from AD 120–380 and AD 1280–280 (Geoffrey McCafferty, personal communication 2009). It will be important to determine what area of the cemetery these samples were taken from and to determine where the ceramics were found in relation to the radiocarbon samples. It should be briefly mentioned that this radiocarbon date corresponds relatively to the suggested culture period that I have provided via type-variety analysis of the ceramics. Further analysis of the entire ceramic assemblage (including sherds) is required to determine the entire period of occupation. It is possible that the site existed outside of the late Tempisque/early Bagaces period that the radiocarbon dates suggest.

Several non-ceramic grave goods associated with the burials were identified by excavation supervisor Bosco Moroney. Future research may include the determination of the distribution of non-ceramic and ceramic grave goods in relation to specific individuals or locations within the cemetery.

Reference collections and description into the type-variety classifications within Pacific Nicaragua are very limited. Therefore, it becomes important to utilize all available sources to achieve the greatest breadth in ceramic data. Continued research within Pacific Nicaragua and expanding into the Northern portion of Greater Nicoya will be important to increase the quality of data available for research.

### **Conclusion**

The full vessel collection of ceramics from Las Delicias, Nicaragua contains several types and varieties of ceramics from the late Tempisque/early Bagaces period identified within Nicaraguan ceramics. Due to the paucity of previous research in this area, little is known of the identity of the people from this period within Nicaragua. My research is suggestive of an external link to northern, specifically El Salvador and Honduras, human groups. This interpretation is based on similarities between ceramics from these areas and the ceramic vessels recovered from Las Delicias. Understanding basic ideas about possible trade and exchange of ideas with other groups, and how the ceramics were used within the site will help in better understanding the identity of the people from this area.

*Acknowledgments.* Dr. Geoffrey McCafferty, University of Calgary, Carrie Dennett, University of Calgary, Mi Museo, Granada, Nicaragua, Larry Steinbrenner, University of Calgary, Bosco Moroney, Site supervisor of excavations at Las Delicias, Nicaragua.

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