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Studies on ceremonial ceramics from the Ixil Region – interpretation difficulties related to the vessels from the museum collection in Nebaj, El Quiché, Guatemala

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The presented report is the result of the research project funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Poland. The project's title: *Rytuały pogrzebowe Majów Ixil: analiza naczyń z kolekcji w Nebaj (Gwatemala) (Funerary rites of Ixil Maya: analysis od ceramics from collection in Nebaj [Guatemala]),* Diamond Grant program, project no. 0026/DIA/2014/43

1 Introduction

The Ixil Maya is a group of indigenous population living up to the present day in the Guatemalan El Quiché department, located in the central-west part of the country (Fig. 1). They live in a hardly accessible territory of Cuchumatanes Mountains, forming the ethnic group estimated nowadays on around 130 000 people.

The history of the inhabitants of the region is filled with military conflicts and oppression. It concerns not only the Spanish conquest, effects of which are still visible today in the local culture, but also the lands' robbery for coffee plantations and a brutal civil war that took place in the second part of the 20th century (Banach 2019, 124–125). The conflict decimated the Ixil society and left a permanent mark in the still-living generations. We should also mention the contemporary so-called fourth invasion. It is a mining industry related policy leading to many changes in the region (Banach 2019, 129–134).

2 Archaeological research in the region

Regardless of the undisputed archaeological potential of the area, there are only three places in whole Ixil Region where comprehensive excavations had been executed. The first research was conducted by A. Ledyard Smith and Alfred V. Kidder in Nebaj (the site is located on the outskirts of the town of Nebaj, which is currently the largest functioning city of the Ixil people and was named after this site) in 1940s for 3 seasons (Smith, Kidder 1951). The second area is Acul Valley (7 km westward from Nebaj), where archaeological research was led in three of four sites located there. These sites are Baschuc, Bijux and Xemsul Bajo. No excavation was conducted in Xemsul Alto. The fieldwork was led by Pierre Becquelin, Alain Breton and Véronique Gervais (Becquelin et al 2001). The third site is called Xacbal, located close to the northern border of the region. Juan Luis Velásquez conducted an archaeological project called Proyecto de Rescate Arqueologico Xacbal there in years 2008–2009 (Velásquez 2010).

3 Archaeological documentation project

The archaeological project conducted in years 2014–2018 by Magdalena Krzemień focused on the sacred sphere of ancient Ixil Maya through increasing our knowledge on their funeral customs. The main goals of the project were analysis and documentation of ceremonial ceramics – urns, censers and other ritual deposits – stored in the Museum of Archaeology in Nebaj. The project involved creating of the first catalog of Ixil ceramics by using the cutting-edge technology (3D scanning made by Bolesław Zych) and the field reconnaissance.

4 Reconnaissance

The field reconnaissance was carried out within the project with the aim to find new sites with archaeological remains in order to obtain new information about the settlement and the ritual activity of Ixil Maya in the ancient times. The prospection was performed with the help of the inhabitant of Chajul, Mr. Lucas Asicona. Geolocations of the places with recorded archaeological material were collected using a GPS device. As a result maps with ceramic clusters and architectural remains were created by Karol Sobolewski

(Krzemień 2019, 40). Reconnaissance was performed in the Chajul and Juil areas (Fig. 2).

Juil is one of the main sacred places of the Ixil people. Thousands of pottery fragments lie there on the ground, some of them with ornaments or pigment tracks. There are also architectural structures, including the chapel, which is still used during the ceremonies (Krzemień 2019, 40–42).

In the vicinity of Chajul many fragments of pottery, as well as obsidian blades were encountered. Numerous architectural structures are clearly visible in few places (Krzemień 2019, 42–43).

In a short distance from Chajul a site called Xix is situated. People still visit this place for ceremonial purposes – there is a chapel on a top of the mountain. The base of the mountain is studded with archaeological material. Not only preserved fragments of pre-Columbian architectural structures are visible, but also censers, axes and figurines. There is a large number of funeral urns; fragments on the ground as well as entire vessels below the earth's surface[1]. It may indicate the use of this place as the burial area of non-elite members of the pre-Columbian Ixil society, as it is known that in this highland region the urns were for burials of common people (Krzemień 2019, 33).

5 A problem with the context of the artifacts

Every example of aforementioned research in Ixil area proves the huge archaeological potential of the region, confirmed by rich material culture encountered during the realization of the project. Unfortunately, the knowledge about the valuable artifacts found during the excavations and the ones discovered by owners of allotments within their properties has raised the serious problem.

Ancestral culture and the worldview associated with the sacred landscape play very important role in the Ixil society. However, the confiscation of estate or complicated politic and economic situation sometimes ruin human life and push people to find any means to make the ends meet. One way to make a living in regions with a huge archaeological potential all over the world is to plunder archaeological sites and sell artifacts on the black market. This problem also concerns the Ixil Region. Due to depriving the artifacts of the archaeological context it is impossible to find important answers on the

[1] Personal communications with a person who looted the site.

history of said objects and, in the wider perspective, of this still not well-described group of the Maya. The scale of the problem is clearly visible in the Museum in Nebaj, which houses objects salvaged by looters, namely a huge collection of ceramics and figurines related to the sacred sphere of the ancient Ixil Maya, not only from the Nebaj site, but also from the whole region.

6 Analysis of the artifacts

During the realization of the documentation project the attempt to analyse ceremonial ceramics without archaeological context, stored in the museum and private collections was made. In a result, 171 artifacts were analysed and documented (both entire and fragmentarily preserved vessels)[2].

The interpretation of certain ceremonial ceramics is not difficult due to their typical forms, such as large semi-oval vessels, which are definitely burial urns. However, in the case of other vessels, without the knowledge on their context one can only hypothesize about their function. There are common decorative motifs that appear on the surface of all groups of ceremonial ceramics, such as similar iconography depicting anthropo- and zoomorphic figures related to the underworld, for example gods, jaguars or bats (Fig. 3). Decoration in the form of spikes referring to the ceiba – sacred Maya tree symbolizing the *axis mundi* – is also a common motif to all groups of the ritual Maya ceramics (Fig. 4).

Notwithstanding, certain features of artifacts and known analogies allowed to define their function. From among 171 analysed specimens, three groups of ceremonial ceramics were distinguished, such as urns, deposits and censers. Each group of the artifacts contains several subtypes. The typology was made on the basis of vessels' forms[3].

7 Chronology

The chronology of the ceramics was defined on the basis of analogies from Acul Valley, where comprehensive archaeological research was conducted.

[2] Ibidem. – brak stron

[3] Ibidem.- brak stron

The chronological range includes times from the Early Classic period (300–700) to the Postclassic period (1000–1530). However, most of the ceramics from the collection is dated to the Late Classic period (700–1000)[4].

8 Funeral urns

Funeral urns in this part of the highlands appeared in the Late Classic period (700 AD–1000 AD – *Batz* phase). They were used for the skeletal burials. According to the archaeological research at the aforementioned sites, it is believed that cremation was not practiced in that region. Places where the funeral vessels are found in the Ixil area suggest us that they were reserved not for elites (as in many Maya regions), but for the common people.

Funeral urns form the first group of artifacts distinguished during the studies in the museum. The analysis of 59 vessels resulted in a division into urns of a semi-oval form (U-A type) and urns of a globular form (U-B type). The prefix -U comes from the Spanish word *urna*, which means urn[5].

The most numerous type of urns in the collection is composed of semi-oval urns (U-A), well known from the archaeological excavations (Becquelin et al 2001, Figs. 69.1, 69.2, 73.1, 73.2, 74.4, 76.2). They are characterized by a height in the range of 60–68 cm and rim diameter of 50–60 cm. Such dimensions make it possible to place an adult inside the urn in a sitting position with legs bent under the chin and arms wrapped around the body.

Among the semi-oval urns from museum 4 types are distinguished: U-A1, U-A2, U-A3, U-A4, where U-A1 are semi-oval urns with decorations, such as jaguars or symbolic representations of the faces of deceased. These are large sized vessels. Other types of the urns are vessels without decorations and they differ in their size: U-A2 are large urns without decorations, U-A3 – medium urns without decorations, U-A4 – round urns without decorations (Krzemień 2019).

The second kind of urns are the globular ones. Among them three types are distinguished: U-B1, U-B2, U-B3, where U-B1 are globular urns with decorations, U-B2 are globular urns without decorations, and U-B3 are globular urns with long neck[6].

(Table 1)

[4] Ibidem.
[5] Ibidem.
[6] Ibidem.

9 Ritual deposits

Ritual deposits constitute another group of artifacts. The analysis of 45 vessels resulted in a division into hemispherical vessels (D-A type) and the so-called various vessels (D-B type). Prefix -D comes from the Spanish word *depósito*, which means deposit[7].

Among the hemispherical vessels 4 types were distinguished: D-A1, D-A2, D-A3, D-A4. D-A1 type is represented by hemispherical vessels with decorations, D-A2 by hemispherical vessels without decorations, D-A3 by small hemispherical vessels, and D-A4 is composed of hemispherical vessels with divergent walls[8].

Without knowing the context of hemispherical vessel without decorations there is a huge problem with interpretation of its function, as it does not have the common features of the ceremonial ceramics in general. However, these vessels were interpreted as such on the basis of similar finds from nearby sites (e.g. Baschuc) (Becquelin et al 2001, figs. 83.3, 83.4). where they were found during excavations as a part of various types of ritual deposits. There are bones inside the several hemispherical vessels from the museum, also in the form of ashes. Therefore, they could be interpreted as urns, but their small size excludes the possibility of burying an adult inside, and the children were not buried in urns in the region. The practice of cremation in this part of the Maya highlands is also rejected. That is why these vessels were not treated as crematory urns, but as a part of ritual deposit, with bones as its significant part. However, it cannot be excluded that during so few excavations the cremation rites or children urn burials were simply not captured in these territory. Therefore, the function of hemispherical vessels analysed during these studies should be treated as a hypothesis.

The second kind of ritual deposits is composed of various vessels (D-B), characterized by a large variety of forms. The presence of several elements facilitates the interpretation of their function. The common feature is a presence of decorative motifs related to the underworld, such as symbolic representations of the faces of deceased, characteristic zoomorphic figures and spikes (Fig. 3). Similar artifacts from excavated sites in the region show that such ceramics was often used as a part of ritual deposits (Smith, Kidder 1951, fig. 78 a, b, c, d, e, f, g, 79 c.), hence the said interpretation of the vessels from the museum collection (Krzemień 2019).

(Table 2)

[7] Ibidem.
[8] Ibidem.

10 Censers

The third group of the artifacts is composed of censers. This kind of ceramics was a very important element of the Maya ceremonies, as the smoke transferred the people's petitions to the gods and enabled communication between them (Goldstein 1977, 405). Some of the vessels from museum have traces of burning. Censers are the most diversified group from whole collection. The analysis of 67 censers resulted in the division into 14 types: I-A1, I-A2, I-A3, I-B1, I-B2, I-B3, I-B4, I-B5, IC, ID, IE, IF, IG, IH. Prefix -I comes from the Spanish word *incensario*, what means censer[22]. The abbreviations mean respectively:

I-A1: large-sized cylindrical censers with pedestal supports,
I-A2: medium-sized cylindrical censers with pedestal supports,
I-A3: cylindrical censers with annular supports,
I-B1: large-sized censers with hollow tripods and decorations,
I-B2: medium-sized censers with hollow tripods and decorations,
I-B3: medium size censers with hollow tripods without decorations,
I-B4: medium-sized censers with solid tripods and decorations,
I-B5: small-sized censers with solid tripods and without decorations,
I-C: lids,
I-D: censers of the plate form,
I-E: censers of the bowl form,
I-F: censers of the globular form,
I-G: handle censers with decorations,
I-H: various censers – their variety does not allow to classify them as one of the aforementioned types.

(Table 3)

11 3d scanning

Documentation of the vessels included photographic and drawing documentation. It should be noted, however, that traditional drawing documentation was replaced by modern methods. Drawings of the artifacts were generated on the basis of data obtained during 3D scanning. Scanners are increasingly used in archaeology to create three-dimensional documentation which is characterized by greater precision and faster execution time than in the case of the traditional hand drawings.

Laser scanners use a laser beam. To put it simply, the emitted laser beam refracts from the encountered surface and returns to the scanner's sensor providing information on the distance and location of the point in the coordinate system within the scanner range. Considering the fact that the scanner can collect nearly one million points during one scan, it results in great accuracy of documentation [9]. During this project all drawings of the ceramics and the cross-sections were generated this way (drawings are presented in the tables).

The detailed results of the project and the whole catalogue of artifacts can be found in the publication *Cerámica Ceremonial de los Ixiles. Análisis de las Urnas Funerarias, los Depósitos y los Incensarios de la Colección del Museo de Arqueología en Nebaj, El Quiché, Guatemala*, which summarizes the research.

It is also possible to get acquainted with 3D virtual museum that was created within the project by Piotr Kołodziejczyk (Los Artefactos de la Colección del Museo de Arqueología Nebaj).

[9] https://centrumdruku3d.pl/na-czym-polega-specyfika-pracy-ze-skanerami-3d-dalekiego-zasiegu-i-do-czego-moga-byc-wykorzystywane/ (access: 01.06.2020).

Figures and tables

Fig. 1. Map of Guatemala with location of the Ixil Region (Map: Karol Sobolewski)

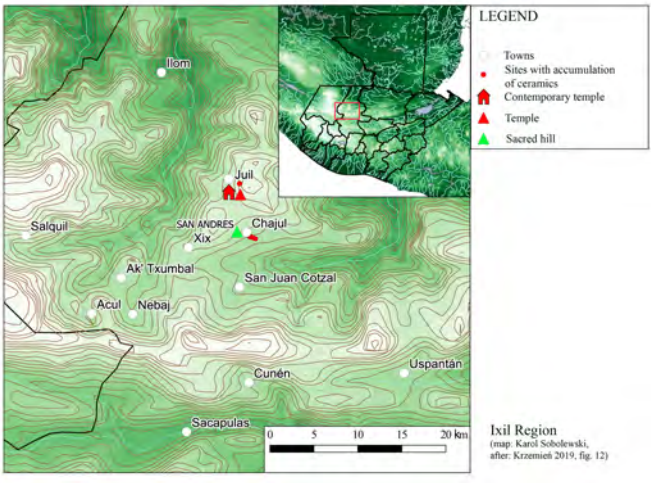


Fig. 2. Map showing the reconnaissance area (Map: Karol Sobolewski)

Fig. 3. Common decorative motifs for ceremonial ceramics. At the top: face of the deceased and jaguar; below: feline animal and maize god (Photos: Magdalena Krzemień)

Fig. 4. Elements symbolizing ceiba spikes. At the top: urn and censer; below: ritual deposits (Photos: Magdalena Krzemień)

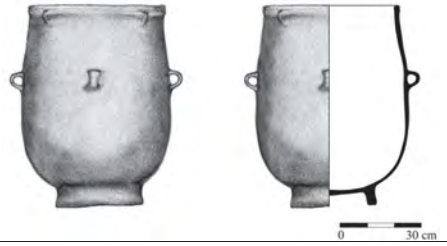
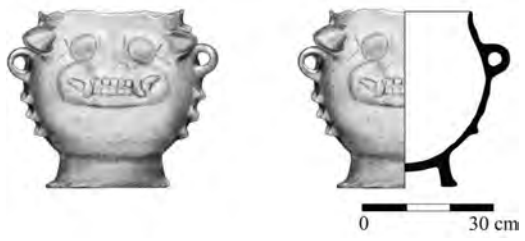
Type	Description	Drawing
U-A1	Semi-oval urns with decorations	
U-A2	Large semi-oval urns without decorations	
U-A3	Medium semi-oval urns without decorations	
U-A4	Round semi-oval urns without decorations	
U-B1	Globular urns with decorations	

Table 1. Types of the studied urns (Scans: Bolesław Zych, typology: Magdalena Krzemień)

U-B2	Globular urns without decorations	
U-B3	Globular urns with long neck	

Table 1. Types of the studied urns (Scans: Bolesław Zych, typology: Magdalena Krzemień)

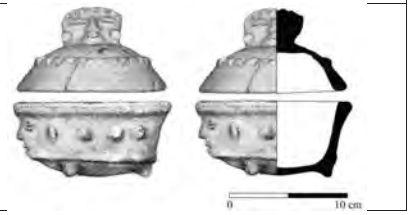
Type	Description	Drawing
D-A1	Hemispherical vessels with decorations	
D-A2	Hemispherical vessels without decorations	
D-A3	Small hemispherical vessels	
D-A4	Hemispherical vessels with divergent walls	
D-B	Various vessels	

Table 2. Types of the studied deposits (Scans: Bolesław Zych, typology: Magdalena Krzemień)

Type	Description	Drawing/Photo
I-A1	Large-sized cylindrical censers with pedestal support	
I-A2	Medium-sized cylindrical censers with pedestal support	
I-A3	Cylindrical censers with annular support	
I-B1	Large-sized censers with hollow tripods and decorations	
I-B2	Medium-sized censer with hollow tripods and decorations	
I-B3	Medium size censer with hollow tripods without decorations	

Table 3. Types of the studied censers (scans: Bolesław Zych, photos and typology: Magdalena Krzemień)

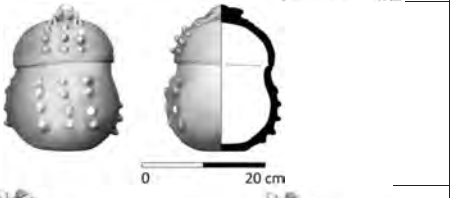
I-B4	Medium-sized censer with solid tripods and decorations	
I-B5	Small-sized censers with solid tripods and without decorations	
I-C	Lids	
I-D	Censers of the plate form	
I-E	Censers of the bowl form	
I-F	Censers of the globular form	
I-G	Handle censers with decorations	
I-H	Various censers	

Table 3. Types of the studied censers (scans: Bolesław Zych, photos and typology: Magdalena Krzemień)

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