Report on Seized Salvadoran Antiquities

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By archaeologists:

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Introduction

On July 8, 2008 Mr. [redacted], Special Agent with US Customs and Immigration, currently stationed at the US Embassy in el Salvador, brought out to the Cihuatán Archaeological Park, El Salvador (where we are conducting an excavation and where Dr. Bruhns is currently staying), several boxes of antiquities which had been seized in the United States, for our expert identification. On Friday, July 11, 2008, he brought out 2 more boxes of antiquities which had been seized from the same source. The total number of objects examined and identified was 13. We would like to state that:

a) All these pieces originated in El Salvador. Although some of these styles do have a slightly wider distribution, as a lot they could only have originated in El Salvador.

b) All are genuine antiquities, whose removal from the country and whose importation into the United State is forbidden by law.

c) Most of the pieces pertain to ancient Maya cultures found in western and central El Salvador.

d) All (with two exceptions as noted) are of Late Classic date (ca. 600-900 A.D.). This time frame has been set by excavation data, radiocarbon dating, and by inscribed and dated ancient Maya monuments in Mexico and Guatemala.

e) All these pieces represent ancient tombs or special offering deposits which were destroyed by the looters in their search for salable merchandise. It is possible that the sites from which these pieces came are national property or are otherwise subject to more intensive protections than those ordinarily applicable by Salvadoran law (which does prohibit looting and export of the cultural heritage).

f) Despite the broken or worn character of many pots (it looks like the dealer had her unhappy maid, armed with steel wool, wash many of the pieces), all could easily be restored and would fetch a far greater price than the dealer seems to be asking. If estimates of her gains are correct (we understand that the dealer has sold hundreds of vessels), this single dealer is responsible for an enormous amount of destruction of the Salvadoran heritage, as a given tomb usually has 1 or 2 pots and one or both may not be salable.

g) Finally, although the dealer was not asking top price, one suspects that many of her customers were dealers. Dealers, or their paid minions, troll the Internet in case some unknowing person puts up genuine pieces for sale or they see a bargain by a not so knowledgeable colleague. The price of all antiquities is highly variable, depending upon how likely the dealer and buyer are to get caught and have to return pieces amidst much bad publicity, how popular that particular type of antiquity is at the minute, and, of course, the address and interior decoration of the gallery in which a piece is displayed and sold. Pieces may vary as much as $1,000 to $100,000 dollars in price depending upon these variables and, of course, on how much the dealer has convinced the
buyer that he needs the piece. For this reason we cannot give absolute monetary values to pieces; a piece which the dealer might have sold initially for $300 may be on sale today in, say, a Santa Fe or Beverley Hills venue for 20 to 50 times as much. As an example: the authors saw in San Salvador some years ago a green stone palma (a type of stone sculpture related to the Mesoamerican ball game; real palmas are often amazing works of sculptural art). The asking price was high for El Salvador, about $1,000 US. Recently this same palma (it is a ghastly poor forgery, in fact) appeared in the on-line gallery of a prominent Beverly Hills antiquities dealer. The asking price was not stated, one was coyly asked to contact the gallery for particulars. This means the asking price could be in excess of $100,000, given the habits of this particular dealer. Antiquities pricing is very much situational.

Ceramic Types Represented in the Seized Items

The 13 seized pieces consist of ceramic vessels and figurines. Most pertain to two major prehistoric ceramic groups (types). Both groups are indigenous to central and western El Salvador, where they are commonly found in sites of the appropriate age.

The most common type of ceramic in this group is that which is called Copador. First identified in a series of tombs and ritual deposits in Copan, Honduras, Copador has come to be recognized as the pre-eminent type of ceramic of the El Salvador Late Classic. All types were made in El Salvador and pieces found outside that country’s modern boundaries are apparently the result of long distance trade in this attractive ceramic ware. Copador has been found in quantity only in central and western El Salvador and in the vicinity of Copan and is extremely rare to non-existent anywhere else, even as an exotic trade ware.

Copador ware is distinguish by its cream colored paste (the base ceramic of the vessel) and by the use of a black paint which is actually sepia in color. Red and yellow, or sometimes orange, pigments complete the Copador color scheme. The red paint is often specular hematite, that is, it is a mineral which has flecks in it which cause the red paint to sparkle.

Copador is an extremely programmatic ware with a series of standard forms and decorative painted motifs. Designs include seated persons facing seated humans, dogs or, occasionally, other animals, “swimming” human figures, scenes with a monkey holding a mirror for a human figure, highly stylized lines of water birds, and complex profile zoomorphic heads. The other distinguishing design of Copador is its use of “pseudo-glyphs”, flashy interpretations and simplifications of Maya hieroglyphs used as decorative bands and elements, without regard to any meaning the originals may have had (literacy was apparently very rare among the Salvadoran Maya). Common shapes include a large variety of bowl forms, (including ones with fluted lower portions), cylindrical vases, toad effigy bowls or vases, and, occasionally, other forms such as low jars.

The other common type represented in this group is Arambala Polychrome. This is sometimes called “False Copador” and is quite like Copador, although it is less fancy
and the designs are even more schematic. This ceramic style was very popular along with “real” Copador in Late Classic western and central El Salvador. It is not found elsewhere. Arambala and Copador have been found together in burials, so there is no dispute concerning relative age of these two styles.

Arambala is sort of a “poor cousin” of Copador. The pieces have a reddish paste, usually covered with a lighter slip that fired to a light brown, somewhat darker than real Copador’s base cream color. The colors of the paint are different too: the red used is a dark orange (not the dark and usually specular red of Copador), although the black is the same sepia color. Yellow or light orange paint is usually absent and the decoration is often streaky due to poor burnishing. Motifs are limited with some emphasis on seated human figures (often highly stylized) and pseudoglyphs, especially geometric ones. Vessel forms are similar to those of Copador, although the more elaborate vessels seem to be absent.

Several other ceramic types were identified; we will refer to those in their place.

**Identification of the Artifacts**

1. **Copador Polychrome Cylinder Vase**

This vessel is absolutely typical of the Copador style. Note the casually painted vertical lines in red, black and orange on the body, terminated at the bottom by a thin black and thicker red line. The cream base is typical Copador clay. The pseudoglyphs around the top, perhaps, meant to imitate a Peten Maya Primary Standard Sequence, are without meaning, although attractive and unusually detailed for a Copador vessel.
2. Copador Fancy Bowl

This is an extremely fine example of the Copador category. The band of carved pseudo-glyphs on the exterior, left on an unpainted, unpolished band of the clay, shows a repeat with every other glyph upside down. The fluted exterior, with its very wide, flowerlike, indentations is extremely handsome. Inside, the painting is both carefully done and unusual in topic, with a cheerful, yet menacing, rattlesnake repeating around the wide band that encircles the sides of the interior bowl. The decorated rim too is typical of the finest of Copador production.
3. Copador Fluted Bowl

This is another fancy bowl with a fluted lower body. The red paint is specular hematite. The squared glyphs are unusual.

The geometricized pseudo-glyphs are simpler on the inside of the bowl.
4. Arambala Polychrome Bowl

This vessel has a break presumably suffered in its robbery from the archaeological context (i.e. not ancient damage). The cream paste and non-specular red are typical, as is the simple shape. The painted designs around the outside are stylized glyphs of a human holding up his arm.
5. Arambala Polychrome Bowl

The red paste is a giveaway as to this vessel’s identity, as is the sloppy imitation Copador painting on the exterior. The decoration is a dog and scroll design that is quite common in Copador, where it is recognizable, which it is not here. The squared off pseudo-glyphs are typical of Arambala.
6. Arambala Polychrome Bowl

This bowl has a reddish paste covered with a light brown slip in imitation of Copador. The extremely sloppy design is also derived from Copador and is a highly stylized monkey and red spots.
7. Campana Bold Line Polychrome Bowl

This tetrapod bowl shows new breaks from poor handling by the dealer. Any halfway decent restorer, however, could return it to a state of shining newness that would entrance a collector. The bold T shaped motifs (a variant of the “ik” or wind sign in Maya writing and iconography) alternates on the exterior with handsome painted and carved medallions. The four hollow feet have small clay balls in them so that the bowl would rattle when moved.

Vessel laid out to show design as a whole.

Detail of painted and engraved medallion with a pseudo-glyph.
8. Machacal Polychrome Pedestal Bowl

This vessel has been criminally over-washed and scraped and it is hard to tell if the black paint is really the purple that these pieces usually have. However, both form and design are typical of the Late Classic Machacal Polychrome style found in western and central El Salvador only.
9. Perulapan Polychrome Painted Bowl

This rare vessel is one of the two pieces of those we were shown which does not date to the Late Classic period. It pertains to the Middle Preclassic period (ca. 900-500 B.C.). It was defined on the basis of examples found at Chalchuapa, and was later also documented at a site on the coast of Ahuachapán, from which it may be supposed to have a extensive distribution in the departments of Santa Ana and Ahuachapán. These vessels have a burnished black or brown base color covered with colored “stucco” which was decorated with incision and excision in geometric designs. The vessels are almost all, as is this one, yellow, black, and red. The most common shape is a flat bottom bowl with flaring sides and a simple rim, such as this vessel.

The Chalchuapa-Santa Ana region has a well developed series of early cultures preceding the better known Late Classic Maya. The presence of characteristic monumental sculptures in Chalchuapa show that these people had some sort of contact with the Olmec of Mexico and Guatemala and it has been suggested that the early pyramidal group at El Trapiche-Casa Blanca (within modern Chalchuapa) is associated with their culture. Thus it is little surprise to see that an enterprising dealer in looted archaeological materials has gotten her hands on a piece this early.
On July 11, 2008 Special Agent Placencia returned to Cihuatán to show us another vessel and three figurines that had also been seized from the same source. These too are all genuine antiquities covered by Salvadoran law and the Salvador-USA Memorandum of Understanding. Identification of the pieces is as follows.

10. Late Classic Jar

This handsome handled jar fits well within the Late Classic ceramic tradition of western and central El Salvador. The well burnished dark red paint sets off the chalky white of the neck, handles and shoulder and the applied nose shows us that this vessel is meant to be a peccary, perhaps referring to this desired food.

Although the paste, slip colors and form are common in western and central El Salvador, due to the enormous amount of looting in this region, this specific ceramic type cannot be attributed to any specific site or micro-region. We suspect that it comes from the Chalchuapa-Santa Ana region, not only because this dealer was plying her trade in that region, but because the vessel is very similar to ones excavated or said to come from Late Classic sites of the area. The piece fits well within the canons of size, shape, color and decorative motifs of this time and place and is very different from pieces of similar use earlier or later or from a different region, such as, say, Usulután.

This cute “piggy” points out the sad fact that looters and dealers are rapidly destroying their own history as well as that of their fellows and that foreigners are aiding and abetting them. One looks sadly to a future with no past, save pretty pieces on a shelf and the vapid babbling of a “connoisseur” concerning some imagined aesthetic.
11. Middle Preclassic Figurine Head (ca. 900-500 B.C.)

This solid clay head is broken off the body at the neck. Handmade figurines, mainly of females, were extremely common among Preclassic cultures all over Mesoamerica and have been postulated to have had a variety of uses, ranging from dolls to ceremonial objects. This style was first defined at the Chalchuapa (department of Santa Ana) as the “Noguera High-forehead” type (though it was then erroneously attributed to the Late Preclassic period). This piece could have come from a grave or been encountered in the course of digging up an ancient cemetery or town.

This head shows the typical “coffee-bean” eyes, and double punched nose and mouth. It is somewhat eroded. These figures were hand made.

Front and profile views of the figurine head
12. Cotzumalhuapa Parrot-Man Figurine

The Late Classic culture called Cotzumalhuapa (after the modern town of Santa Lucia Cotzumalhuapa in eastern Guatemala) is one of the major cultural traditions of its time along the far southeastern Guatemalan coastal plain and adjoining El Salvador. This culture was highly developed in western El Salvador, with monumental sites as Cara Sucia, and remnants of it are found from Sonsonate to the río Paz (the Salvadoran version of the Cotzumalhuapa culture has also been referred to as the Tamasha Phase). Moreover, the style was so popular that it was traded widely and Cotzumalhuapa figurines have been found frequently in sites such as Tazumal, Casa Blanca, San Andrés and even as far as the vicinity of San Salvador. Today the small scale vendors of antiquities in Chalchuapa have a supplier in the Cara Sucia area, so any person buying antiquities for resale would not have a hard time encountering small pieces such as these.

Cotzumalhuapa figures (including whistles and ocarinas) are made in a one part mold (the front) with the back added as a pinched on sheet of clay. Other details are put on as appliqués on the front of the figurine.

The collection of seized artifacts includes two Cotzumalhuapa figurines. The first of these is this small whistle represents a man with a parrot’s head and wings. It is mold made with appliquéd wings, feet and headdress. He wears typical male clothing: a fancy loin cloth, a necklace, and a flaring headdress. The figure is covered with a chalky white slip. This would have been a base for application of other colors, none of which survive.

Three-quarters view of Parrot-Man whistle figurine.
Front of Parrot-Man whistle

Back of Parrot-Man whistle showing the hand-modeled whistle device.
13. Cotzumalhuapa “Bell” Figurine Fragment

The second Cotzumalhuapa artifact in this collection is one of the most typical productions of this culture: a mold made figurine showing a woman with fancy headdress and a hollow, bell-shaped, skirt. This example has the skirt broken off and only the upper body remains.

This figurine shows an elderly woman (a common Cotzumalhuapa theme), holding a bowl or jar. Her hands and the vessel are appliquéd onto the mold made body, as is her headdress. This is of a semilunar shape, another very typical Cotzumalhuapa detail. This artifact is largely covered with orange slip, as is common with bell figurines.

Front view of the figurine showing the wrinkled face of the elderly woman and her damaged semilunar headdress.

Side view featuring the jar or bowl.
This rear view shows the large hole commonly made at this location on “bell” figurines.