

JAN 11 2008

Decoding Chacoan Ceramics from Aztec Ruins

WESTERN NATIONAL PARKS
ASSOCIATION

WNPA Grant No. 06-01

Lori Stephens Reed
Animas Ceramic Consulting, Inc.

In April, 2006 Tori Myers and I spent three weeks at Western Archaeological Conservation Center (WACC) in Tucson, Arizona analyzing ceramic artifacts from several rooms and kivas at Aztec Ruins National Monument. As outlined in our Western National Parks Association (WNPA) grant proposal: *Decoding Chacoan Ceramics from Aztec Ruins*, the analysis focused on identifying aspects of the ceramic assemblage indicative of migrant potters from the Chaco region or emulation of Chacoan pottery attributes by local potters. To this end, assemblages from rooms and kivas identified by Earl Morris (1928) as containing Chacoan (late Pueblo II to early Pueblo III) deposits were targeted for analysis. Four rooms and three kivas located in the West Ruin of Aztec were selected for ceramic analysis. In all, 3,087 sherds and 74 whole or reconstructible vessels were analyzed.

ROOM 43 CERAMICS

Room 43 is located in the West Wing of the West Ruin at Aztec. Morris (1928:296) excavated the two floor levels found in Room 43. The second floor level contained refuse identified as Mesa Verde style sherds and an incomplete black-on-white dipper. In the fill of the first floor, Morris identified the refuse as Chacoan including numerous sherds and a black-on-white ladle. The assemblage from Room 43 at WACC includes 305 sherds, the McElmo Black-on-white ladle identified by Morris (AZRU 00001/805), and a partial Flagstaff Black-on-white canteen (AZRU 00008/4973). The sherd assemblage includes a variety of ceramic types and traditions. As expected by Morris' description of the deposits as Chacoan age, the ceramics include abundant types dating to the late Pueblo II and early Pueblo III periods. Only 10 sherds (3.3 percent of total assemblage) were identified as Mesa Verde Black-on-white, the signature middle to late Pueblo III period type. Even the McElmo Black-on-white sherds indicate an assemblage dating to the early 1100s or possibly the late 1000s. Twenty-three of the McElmo Black-on-white sherds were identified as Early style. If this style of McElmo (with tapered to rounded rims, thin vessel walls, sparse rim decoration, and frequently Pueblo II style designs) dates earlier than A.D. 1100, then the number of Early style McElmo sherds along with abundant Pueblo II types suggests an assemblage dating to the late 1000s or into the early 1100s. Thus, Morris' Chacoan classification of the deposits in Room 43 is correct. This assemblage is comparable to those at Salmon Ruins identified as Chacoan and dating to the same time period. The variety of ceramic types and their distributions are similar to those in the Chacoan deposits of Rooms 90W and 100W, for example, at Salmon Ruins (Reed and Myers 2006). Calculation of dates based on the typable ceramics was undertaken using the mean date formula and manufacturing date ranges for types presented in Reed (2006a). A ceramic mean date is calculated as A.D. 1129 and the best range (interquartile) is A.D. 1098 to 1160. The full range is A.D. 1067 to 1191.

ROOM 109 CERAMICS

Room 109 is located in the South Wing of the West Ruin at Aztec. Morris (1928) identified two floor levels in this room. From the upper floor to the surface of the mound, this room was filled with refuse containing Mesa Verde Wares. Morris (1928:286) identified three black-on-white bowls and three miniature bowls in the Mesa Verde refuse, but these vessels were not present in the WACC collection. Between the two floor levels, the room was filled with Chacoan age trash, including a McElmo Black-on-white olla (AZRU 00008/5021) and an Escavada Black-on-white frog effigy fragment (AZRU 00008/5023). Mesa Verde Black-on-white and Mesa Verde style sherds comprise 21 percent of the assemblage. These sherds and the three St. Johns Black-on-reds are probably from the upper floor refuse. The remaining 79 percent include ceramics dating to the late Pueblo II and early Pueblo III periods. This assemblage includes fewer Early style McElmo sherds and is primarily the fully formed McElmo with

flattened decorated rims and thick vessel walls. Calculation of dates based on the typable ceramics was undertaken using the mean date formula and manufacturing date ranges for types presented in Reed (2006a). A mean ceramic date for the Chacoan trash assemblage is estimated at A.D. 1121 and a best range (interquartile) is given as A.D. 1091 to 1151. The full range date is A.D. 1061 to 1181.

ROOM 145 CERAMICS

Room 145 is located in the West Wing. Morris (1928) indicates that Chacoan wares were observed in the refuse of the lowest levels. Thus, this room was selected for analysis. At WACC, however, the only ceramics present in the collection are four bowls. Three bowls are Early McElmo Black-on-white representing the local Animas Variety. One bowl is Nava Black-on-white of the Chuska tradition. Two of the Early McElmo Black-on-white bowls have washy slips similar to Chacoan pottery. The other Early McElmo Black-on-white bowl is unslipped. The number of locally produced bowls with washy slips from Room 145 is interesting and future analysis of other ceramics from this room may be informative.

ROOM 159 CERAMICS

Room 159 is located in the South Wing and is identified by Morris (1928) as having Chacoan ceramics. Along with a black-on-white olla, Morris (1928) recovered numerous sherds from the Chacoan refuse. The WACC collection includes 1,312 sherds, but the olla is not part of the collection. Excluding the later Pueblo III period ceramics (e.g., Crumbled House Black-on-white, Mesa Verde Black-on-white, Dogoszhi Polychrome, and St. Johns Polychrome), the bulk of the typable assemblage (n=448) is approximately 74 percent late Pueblo II types and McElmo Black-on-white. The percentage and variety of Pueblo II types is comparable to that of Chacoan contexts at Salmon Ruins (Reed 2006b). The remaining roughly 32 percent of the typable assemblage consists of ceramics associated with later Pueblo III Mesa Verde contexts. Most of these sherds are likely from the upper levels of Room 159 above the Chacoan refuse as identified by Morris (1928). Calculation of a ceramic mean date and range for the Chacoan refuse indicates a mean date of A.D. 1108, a best range (interquartile) of A.D. 1080 to 1136, and a full range of A.D. 1051 to 1164.

ROOM 193 CERAMICS

Morris (1928) indicates Room 193 has a predominantly Mesa Verde assemblage, but also contains a slight Chacoan admixture. Room 193 is located in the North Wing of Aztec West. Morris (1928:362) notes that bowl fragments are relatively rare in the assemblage and that a considerable number of "very fine medium-sized water jars and mugs" were placed in the refuse. Due to the limited mix of Chacoan period ceramics in Room 193, it was not initially selected for analysis. Laurie Webster, who has been conducting the perishable textile analysis and research for Aztec Ruins, requested that we examine the ceramics from one Catalog Number given the unusual character of the fragment. The collection from AZRU00008/5020 includes a single undiagnostic white ware sherd and a nonlocal Cibola Gallup Black-on-white jar fragment with a polychrome-painted design over the original hatchure motif. The polychrome-painted design on this jar fragment is similar to other examples of postfiring paint treatment called "pseudo-cloisonné" (Holien 1974; Strazicich 2002). Morris (1928:363) notes the unusual example from Room 193 indicating "the entire surface was completely hidden by a coat of lacquer bearing an elaborate design in yellow, red, and black, distinctly similar to those upon the painted mortar and the painted board from Pueblo Bonito."

KIVA Q CERAMICS

The ceramic assemblage from Kiva Q and Kiva Q Court includes 18 whole or reconstructible pots and 155 sherds. The vessel assemblage includes 14 bowls, 1 miniature vessel, and fragments of 3

effigies. These vessels are described in detail in Appendix B. Of the 155 sherds, 11 are bowl fragments, 25 are jar sherds, 45 are from pitchers, 5 are ladle fragments, and 69 are undiagnostic ceramics for which vessel form was not recorded. In contrast to other proveniences, the WACC collection for Kiva Q contains no Late Pueblo III ceramics, such as Mesa Verde Black-on-white, Crumbled House Black-on-white, or St. Johns Polychrome. All of the ceramic types from Kiva Q date earlier than roughly A.D. 1150. The single Flagstaff Black-on-white sherd is the only ceramic type with a manufacturing range beginning at or after A.D. 1150. With the combined vessel and sherd assemblages, 100 items were used to generate the mean ceramic date and ranges for the Kiva Q contexts. A mean ceramic date of A.D. 1094 was generated. The presence of Flagstaff Black-on-white did not significantly effect the ceramic dating. With the single Flagstaff Black-on-white sherd factored out of the mean date calculation, the mean date was only one year earlier than a calculation including this later type. With a mean date of A.D. 1094, the best range (interquartile) is A.D. 1066 to 1123 and the full range is 1035 to 1151. Given the full date range, the assemblage from Kiva Q dates no later than A.D. 1150. Similar to Kiva R, the Kiva Q ceramic assemblage suggests that this structure may be one of the earliest constructed at Aztec Ruin.

KIVA R CERAMICS

The ceramic assemblage from Kiva R at WACC includes 61 sherds and 34 whole or reconstructible vessels (Table 8). The sherd assemblage includes examples dating primarily to the late Pueblo II through early Pueblo III periods. Only three sherds have manufacturing date ranges beginning after A.D. 1150, including two Mesa Verde Black-on-white and one St. Johns Polychrome. Although the sherd assemblage includes only bowl (n=36), jar (n=23), and pitcher (n=2) fragments, along with indeterminate forms, the vessel assemblage is comprised of numerous specialty forms. The specialty items are typical of vessels from kiva or ritual contexts, including 2 miniature vessels, 5 effigy fragments, 1 cylinder jar, and 1 clam-shaped bowl, along with ladles (n=3), bowls (n=21), and pitchers (n=1). The presence of a cylinder jar, although fragmentary, in Kiva R represents one of the rare occurrences of this vessel form outside Chaco Canyon. It is the only known cylinder jar from any site in the Middle San Juan.

KIVA S CERAMICS

The ceramic assemblage from Kiva S at WACC includes 164 sherds and 13 whole or reconstructible vessels. Similar to Kivas Q and R, the Kiva S assemblage includes examples dating primarily to the late Pueblo II through early Pueblo III periods. Only one sherd is Mesa Verde Black-on-white and the absence of other late Pueblo III ceramic types is noticeable. Although the number of Pueblo II type ceramics is relatively high, the distribution of types is less varied than those from Kivas Q and R. McElmo Black-on-white dominates this assemblage by comparison to the other kivas. Bowl fragments dominate the sherd assemblage with 99 percent of the analyzed sherds representing bowls and the remaining originating from jars. The vessel assemblage is more varied, including 2 miniature vessels, 5 ladles, 1 seed jar, 3 bowls, and fragments of 1 duck effigy and 1 human effigy. The vessels are described in Appendix B. Given the number of McElmo Black-on-white ceramics, the mean date for the Kiva S assemblage is later than those calculated for the Kiva Q and R contexts. A mean ceramic date of A.D. 1135 is assigned to the Kiva S assemblage. The best range (interquartile) is A.D. 1103 to 1167 and the full range is A.D. 1071 to 1199. The ceramics from Kiva S correlate well with Early San Juan phase assemblages identified at Salmon post-dating A.D. 1125 (Reed 2006b).

CONCLUSIONS

Examination of ceramic assemblages from four rooms and three kivas in the West Ruin at Aztec Ruin National Monument was undertaken to identify Chacoan ceramics and locally produced pottery with Chacoan attributes, specifically application of washy slips. Based on Morris' (1928) interpretation of these room and kiva contexts as Chacoan age, the collections at WACC were analyzed and documented. Using a mean ceramic date calculation, all of the contexts examined in this study most likely date earlier

than A.D. 1125, representing some of the earliest rooms and kivas at Aztec. The data collected for this study will be further examined and merged with the larger ceramic dataset for multiple sites in the Middle San Juan region. In conjunction with a National Science Foundation Grant focused on the Middle San Juan region, including Aztec Ruins, these data will be evaluated and published within a comprehensive study of the region and the influence of Chacoan culture and migration.

During this initial examination of ceramic data from Rooms 109, 145, 159, 193, and 43, it is apparent that the typological configuration of the assemblages is similar to those at Salmon Ruins dating to the Chacoan period (see Reed 2006b). With the large number of late Pueblo II period types, the variety of types, the presence of McElmo Black-on-white Early style, and the high percentage of trade ware ceramics, these room assemblages fit well with the expected signature for pre-A.D. 1125 contexts. The low number or complete absence of Mesa Verde Black-on-white in these Rooms confirms the presence of earlier assemblages. Comparably, the assemblages from Kiva Q and R conform to the pre-A.D. 1125 signature. Kiva S with its small percentage of trade ware, fewer variety of ceramic types, and greater abundance of McElmo Black-on-white probably dates after A.D. 1125 but prior to A.D. 1175 and the initial production of Mesa Verde Black-on-white. A more detailed evaluation of ceramic contexts and existence of tree ring dates from these rooms and kivas will enhance the interpretative potential.

The search for Chacoan ceramic attributes proved lucrative during this analysis. Based on analysis of assemblages from Salmon (Reed 2006a) and the Tommy Site, the presence of washy slips on local Animas Variety ceramics is considered significant. Although only about 10 percent of the locally produced ceramics from the Chacoan contexts have washy slips, the spatial distribution suggests clustering of this particular attribute in specific contexts. For example, both Kivas Q and R have a high percentage of local ceramics with washy slips in contrast to other proveniences. Also, these two kivas have a high percentage of nonlocal ceramics from the Cibola region. Given the probability that the presence of washy slips on locally produced Cibola ceramics indicates the presence of migrant potters from the Chacoan region, the clustering of these ceramics in specific kivas suggests these contexts were used by Chacoan inhabitants of Aztec. Also, the presence of washy slips on locally produced rock-tempered (Northern San Juan) ceramics is likely indicative of emulation and the influence of migrant Cibola potters on Northern San Juan tradition craftspeople. Blending of technologies is evident with the presence of washy slips on local Northern San Juan ceramics and thicker slips on local Cibola pottery. Further examination of these data and comparison with other sites in the Middle San Juan will provide support for these suppositions.

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