

A bowl from Honduras – probably made between 600 and 800 AD



The Maya civilisation was one of the great cultures of the Americas, occupying a large area in central America in the first millennium AD, building great cities and, uniquely for the Americas, developing a fully-fledged writing system. Within the Maya lands various independent states coexisted, and sometimes fought one another. From the 5th to the 9th century one of the main Maya kingdoms was based at a city on the southern fringes of the Maya lands (in present-day Honduras) – Copan, where this large bowl (24 cm across) was probably made. Copan is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, famous for the remains of its Maya buildings

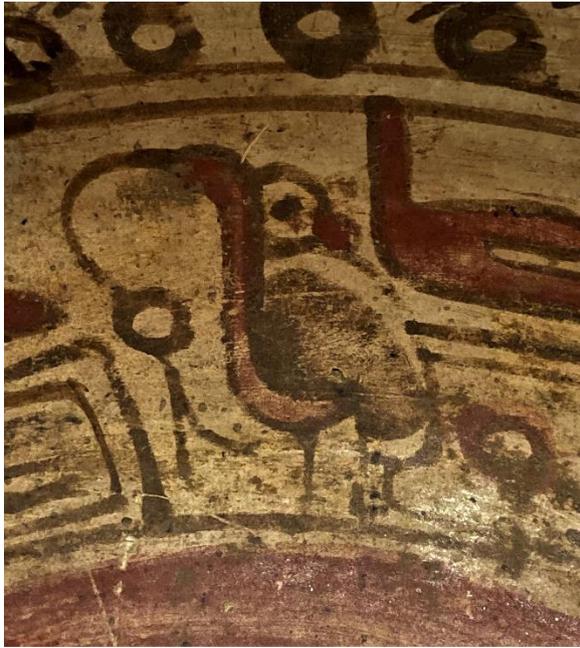
The Maya created sophisticated and highly skilled artworks in carved stone and painted pottery, mainly featuring people involved in a variety of activities. The outer surface of this bowl shows a frieze of seated persons, all facing the same way. The appearance of these persons marks this bowl as coming from Copan – common features in much Copan pottery include the coloured headband, the hair streaming backwards, the complex belt with a large bunch of material at the back, the large nose and slanted forehead, the staring oval eyes and the red rimmed mouth. It is not clear what they are doing, but the Maya people seem to have been obsessed with death and the afterlife and it is possible that they are carrying out some ritual, which could also have involved the use of this bowl. One theory for the sudden appearance of this type of bowl in the 7th century is that about that time there was a breakdown in relations with a ceremonial centre in a neighbouring state, which is thought to have been providing ceremonial vessels to Copan, so that Copan then had to make their own.

Interestingly, there are clear signs of wear on the inside of my bowl, so it has been used for some purpose and was not merely decorative. The Maya were known to drink foamy, savoury chocolate drinks and I quite like the idea that my bowl was used for drinking chocolate. However, the writing on other Maya pots suggests that cylindrical cups were used for drinking chocolate, whereas more open bowls like mine were used for atole, which is a traditional maize-based drink which is still popular in central America and Mexico. A more gruesome thought is that the Maya rituals involved a lot of bloodletting, so maybe the bowl was used to collect human blood!

Maya writing consisted of a series of stylised drawings, or glyphs, which could each represent a word or give the sound of a syllable in a word. At one position on the outside of my pot are three glyphs in a column (the normal orientation of Maya writing). It was only in the second half of the 20th century that Maya writing started to be understood, and at present over 1000 different glyphs have been identified. The meaning of about 60% of these has now been deciphered, but that still leaves many which are a mystery. I have skimmed through a dictionary of Maya glyphs and the top glyph on my bowl is a preposition, meaning 'in, at, with or to'. This seems promising as it suggests the other two glyphs may be the location of the ceremony depicted on my pot. However, sadly I have been unable to find these glyphs in any dictionary. Maybe they are part of the 40% which are still not deciphered.



Inside the bowl the painted decoration shows a number of geometric features and nine bird-like creatures in a circle. The auctioneer called these birds turkeys and I have read elsewhere that turkeys were depicted in these bowls. It is true that the turkey originated in central America, but I fancied a bit of ceramic ornithology and these birds don't look much like turkeys to me. Looking at the birds on my bowl, it seems to me that the red blob to the right of the head is a beak. If the birds are facing to the right, then it might follow that the long stringy object dangling to their left may be a tail. A very long thin forked tail makes me think of a famous central American bird – the quetzal (though I can't explain the strange ring half way down the tail of my birds).



Bird on my bowl



The Resplendent Quetzal

The quetzal was venerated by the Maya. They considered that it represented freedom and wealth and it was associated with a feathered serpent god, equivalent to the Aztecs' Quetzalcoatl.

My bowl was almost certainly made by coiling and scraping and/or paddling the clay smooth. There were no potters wheels in the Americas before the Europeans came. A circular band on the base of the bowl has fourteen broad grooves, positioned as if they were spiralling out from the centre. These could have been carved into the bowl but a more likely explanation is that the bowl was started by forming the base with a layer of soft clay inside a shallow bowl-shaped former which had raised ridges on it.



The images and geometric patterns appear to have been painted on the surface using two slips – one which fires black or dark brown, possibly derived from a natural umber mineral (containing iron and manganese), and one which fires a brick red, probably made using naturally occurring iron oxide (haematite) or an ochre (clay containing a lot of iron oxide). Interestingly, for just one item in the decoration – the lower clothing of the people – a pale brown colour has been used, and I suspect this was achieved by applying the dark brown pigment very thinly. In Copan pottery, the iron oxide in the red pigment tended to be a special form called specular haematite, which contained very shiny flakes ('specular' literally means mirror-like) which make the pigment glitter. If I hold my bowl up to a bright light and slowly tilt it to and fro I can see the red areas sparkle and flash.

The whole of the exterior, apart from the centre of the base, has been burnished to a high shine, and close examination in a bright light reveals the individual burnishing marks, probably made using a smooth pebble. The very top of the inside is also burnished and I suspect the whole of the interior was burnished originally, but the wear of repeated use has worn the burnish away.

The bowl was previously in the collection of a Swiss artist, Romi Rey, who was based in London and died in 2020. She had a great interest in ancient and tribal art, particularly from the Americas, and it inspired some of her artwork. It is probably the fate of most collections to end up in an auction house on the death of their owner. I expect mine will go the same way, but I find the prospect somehow reassuring, that my beautiful and interesting pots will go on to join new collections and give pleasure to another generation of pottery enthusiasts.

Kevin Akhurst
November 2022