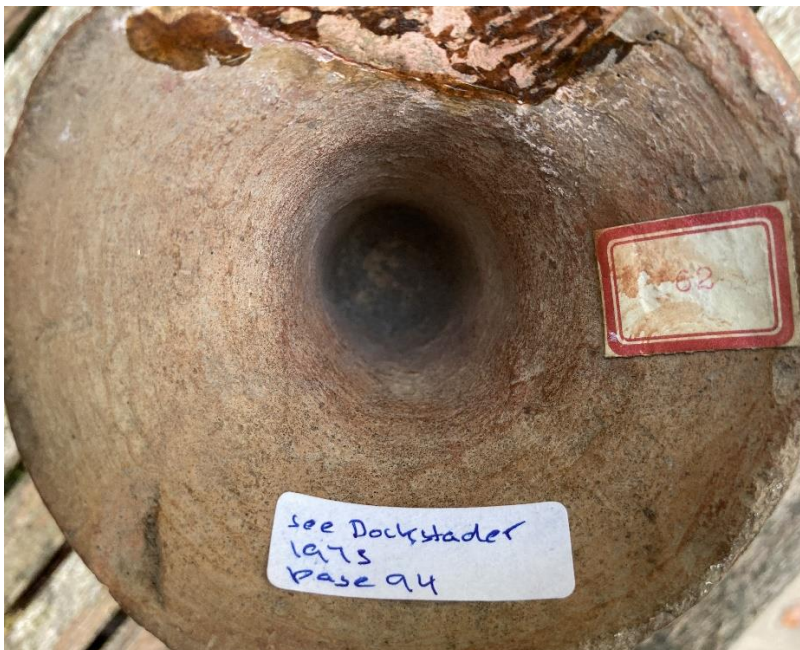


An Aztec goblet from Mexico, 12th to early 16th century AD



The goblet (15 cm tall) in the photo above has a small label inside the foot, presumably placed there by a previous owner, which says 'see Dockstader 1973 page 94' (see photo below). This refers to a book, published in 1973, by Frederick J. Dockstader, called *Indian Art of the Americas*. On page 94 there is a picture of a very similar goblet. The book says their goblet was 'Collected in 1880 by Gustave Bauer. AZTEC. Huexotla, Mexico. 1340-1521'. Huexotla was one of the main cities of the Aztec Empire and is now an important archaeological site.



Base of my goblet



From Dockstader 1973 page 94

The Aztec empire is probably best known nowadays for its bloodthirsty religious rituals, in which hundreds, maybe thousands, of people were sacrificed each year, and for the fact that they were conquered in 1521 by the Spanish conquistador Cortez. When the Spaniards arrived, the main city of the Aztecs, Tenochtitlan, was one of the largest cities in the world. The Aztec empire was really a political unification of several different ethnic groups who were living in the Valley of Mexico at the time.

One of the most characteristic pottery wares of the Aztecs has been called 'black-on-orange'. Their clay fired to an orange-brown colour, especially when burnished, and they used to decorate the surface of these vessels with black painted lines and marks. On my goblet there is a horizontal black line around the bowl and, standing on this line, a design repeated three times, which may be purely abstract or may have some symbolic significance. The black design on the bowl has been outlined by scoring into the clay, giving it a rather modern feel. In addition two vertical black bands have been painted on the tall conical foot of the goblet and there is another black band around the rim of the bowl. This tall spreading conical foot is a typical shape for Mexican bowls and cups. There are other vertical marks on the foot, which appear to have been made by drawing a blunt tool across the surface, enough to roughen the burnished surface but not creating a groove.



Part of the rim of the goblet is chipped, revealing that though the outer one or two millimetres of the clay is a light orange colour, the interior of the clay body is a dark grey (see photo on next page). This greyness is probably due to carbon in the clay – near the surface this would have been burned away during the firing. Some clays have organic material, containing carbon, in their natural state, but it is also known that the Aztecs added plant fibre to their clay to improve the properties during the forming and drying of their pots.



The book by Dockstader said that this goblet was used for drinking pulque, which is an alcoholic drink made from the fermented sap of the maguey plant, which is a type of agave. I don't know how he knew that, but it is certainly plausible. Pulque was the only alcoholic drink made by the Aztecs and it was a major component of Aztec religion and the subject of a cult with many deities. It was used in rituals and for most people intoxication was prohibited by law. However, old people were apparently allowed to get drunk, in recognition of their long life!

The goblet in the Dockstader book was in the collection of the Museum of the American Indian, in New York. In 1994 this became the core collection of the new National Museum of the American Indian, which is part of the Smithsonian Institution. The Smithsonian was kind enough to send me more details of their vessel – it turns out they had fourteen of these, all purchased from an amateur archaeologist and dealer in Mexico City in 1905. They also sent the photo below. The goblet on the right is the one in the Dockstader book and the one on the left is another in their collection. Although the designs painted on each cup are different, there is a common design scheme, with a motif featuring spikes pointing horizontally (branches of a tree, flags, ..?) and a linear motif standing on the baseline and made of horizontal and vertical segments.



The Smithsonian said that these goblets might be older than indicated in the Dockstader book, and gave them a creation date of 1150 AD to 1521. 1150 is roughly the date when the tribes who became the Aztecs first arrived in the Valley of Mexico, having migrated from further north.

The notes from the Smithsonian also say that one of their fourteen cups was 'Exchanged to Arthur M. Sackler, Dec 1964' – Arthur Sackler was a member of the, now notorious, hugely wealthy Sackler family, held responsible by many for America's current crisis of opioid addiction and death. I believe that my cup is actually the one that went to Sackler in 1964. His collection was dispersed after his death in 1987 and I have found evidence online that another item from his collection passed through a London gallery and ended up owned by a London-based Swiss artist, Romy Rey. The auctioneer who sold my goblet told me it came from Romy Rey's collection, so there is a potential, if rather circumstantial, line of ownership connecting my piece to the collection now in the Smithsonian.

It is quite satisfying that a small label on my goblet has allowed me to link it, through a circuitous path, to a specific group of pots purchased in Mexico City in 1905 and probably collected from Huexotla in 1880.

Kevin Akhurst
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