



Re-placing plainware: Production and distribution of domestic pottery, and the narration of the pre-colonial past in the Peruvian Andes



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ABSTRACT

The location of domestic pottery production is central to archaeological narratives. Yet too often, unfounded assumptions are made about place of production, especially in relation to place(s) of distribution and use. Only rarely is this geography of production and distribution explored in detail and with perspective. Here, we investigate this problem in the context of the Peruvian Andes. We present the results of extensive ethnoarchaeological research on the manufacture of domestic vessels in over thirty villages with potters in Northern Peru. Drawing on the ethnographic concept of *technical style*, we identify three tendencies on the relationships between toolkits, manufacturing techniques, geographic units, and exchange. From these tendencies we develop two models of domestic pottery production and distribution: the *local production* model and the *non-local production* model, which are applied in analysis of archaeological materials. While this distinction is apparently simple, we demonstrate how the explicit or implicit use of each of these models has shaped some of the most important debates and issues in Andean archaeology. In sum, we explain how understandings of the manufacture, exchange, and use of plainware impacts narratives about the pre-colonial past.

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Introduction

Undecorated pottery is the most common type of material excavated and collected by archaeologists yet it is also one of the most difficult to study and most rarely analyzed in depth. However, the provenance of plainware is a crucial issue for developing narratives about the past, in the pre-colonial Andes, as in other regions. Starting with the basic question – were undecorated pots locally produced or did they originate somewhere else? – this article explores the methods and interpretive models that may be used to address this enquiry. In the Andean region, many ethnographic projects have described extensive trade in archaeological ceramics, but these findings have not been well communicated for archaeological purposes, and it is not always clear how archaeologists could incorporate these ethnographic findings into their interpretations. Consequently, the literature on pottery production in the Andes is divided into two main groups: many archaeologists assume that plainware was locally produced in pre-colonial times (Ikehara, 2008: 384; Patterson, 1991: 19; Raymond et al., 1994: 44, 1998: 166; Stanish, 1992: 34, *inter alia*), while anthropologists mainly record the opposite for the ethnographic present, documenting the occurrence of extensive trade in plain pots (Arnold,

1993: 130–139; Bankes, 1985a; Druc, 2005; Hagstrum, 1989; Mohr, 1992; Morales, 1994; Ramón, 1999; Sillar, 2000; Valdez, 1997, and the studies in Ravines and Villiger, 1989). Considering this contradiction, this article tackles the issue of the location of plainware production in order to reincorporate this class of objects into interpretations of the pre-colonial past and to extract new meaning from a traditionally silent material source. We present findings from extensive ethnoarchaeological investigation of over thirty villages with potters in the Northern Peruvian Andes (NPA – comprised of the Departments of Piura, Lambayeque, La Libertad and Ancash), and identify three tendencies on the relationship between pottery production and place. Finally, we explore the implications of these tendencies for archaeological interpretations of plainware production and distribution.¹

The provenance of archaeological pottery can be investigated by several methods. Stylistic features like decoration have long been used in the Andes to identify provenance areas of decorated wares (e.g., maps of archaeological cultures in the *Handbook of South American Indians*: Stewart, 1946). More recently, the development and proliferation of physical analytical methods has allowed

¹ In archaeological and ethnographic contexts not all domestic pottery is plainware and vice versa. Recognizing this difference, here our work is focused on domestic contexts and the pottery used for food and beverage preparation or storage, which is more frequently undecorated than decorated.

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archaeologists additional ways to examine plainware for place of production. These methods include petrography, Neutron Activation Analysis (NAA) and Inductively Coupled Plasma Mass Spectrometry (ICP-MS) (for the Andes, see Chapdelaine et al., 1995; Czwarno, 1983; Makowski et al., 2008; Terada and Onuki, 1982: 269–287; Vaughn, 2009, *inter alia*). While these studies provide valuable information about the mineralogical and chemical components of pottery, the cited cases tend to be based on normative assumptions about the life cycle of pottery; and the relationships between production and distribution areas are taken for granted. Such common assumptions include that plainware was locally produced, that the nearest clay source was used (regardless of its quality for potting) and was not shared, and that decorated or fancy pottery was not locally produced (e.g., Stanish, 1992, and see below for further discussion).

Meanwhile, ethnoarchaeologists have also been tackling the issue of pottery provenance by developing the concept of technical, or manufacturing, style to interrogate archaeological contexts (Dietler and Herbich, 1989, 1994; Gosselain, 1992, 2002; Lechtman, 1975). Ethnoarchaeologists especially emphasize that all of the features that make up the “normative” assumptions about the life cycle of pottery, as described above, are cultural decisions, and therefore must be tested and proved, rather than assumed (e.g., Gosselain, 2002: 10, see also Dietler and Herbich, 1989, for Kenya, and Sillar, 2000, for the Andes). Here, this article draws on the concept of technical style to consider the relationship between pottery production places and manufacturing techniques in the Andes. It demonstrates how systematic and conscious application of ethnographic findings could improve understandings of the geography of the life cycle of domestic pottery in the pre-colonial Andes and elsewhere.

To explore the problem of place of production of pre-colonial plainware we begin by discussing the results of extensive ethnoarchaeological fieldwork in the Northern Peruvian Andes. We synthesize these results to form generalizations – labeled here as “tendencies” – relating to tools, technical styles, distribution practices, and places of pottery production. Specifically, toolkits are used as indices of technical style, or the ways pots are produced. Consequently, toolkits can be used as marker or identifiers of place. Provenance, therefore, can be verified by considering technical style along with other physical analytical methods. Subsequently, we examine two opposing models for understanding and interpreting the location of pottery production in relation to its place of use developed from our fieldwork and from the literature on Andean ceramics: the Local Production Model (LP) and the Non-Local Production Model (NLP). We analyze the implications of the ethnographic observation of extensive trade in undecorated domestic pottery (i.e. NLP) for archaeological interpretations of four topics of major significance in Andean archaeology, in which assumptions about pottery exchange do not match ethnographic observations: (1) interactions between communities, (2) Murra’s verticality model, (3) the existence of markets in the Andes, and (4) the use of pottery as an indicator of ethnicity. Our aim is not to promote one model over the other; rather, we posit that there are multiple answers to the question of where domestic pottery is produced, and encourage more critical application of these models when thinking about pre-colonial ceramics.

The following is divided into four sections: (1) An introduction to the main concepts applied in this study (technical style and ethnographic analogy) and to the project design and research methods; (2) The results of the ethnographic fieldwork synthesized into three tendencies on toolkits, techniques, and distribution; (3) An in-depth discussion about the implications of assumptions of either local or non-local production of domestic pottery, incorporating both the archaeological and the ethnographic literature on the topic; and (4) Concluding remarks that revisit the signifi-



Fig. 1. *Technical Style v. Decorative Style*. On the right, Felicitá Rojas from Yacya [23] forms the pot (*technical style*) and on the left, Maura Yauri from Acopalca [22] applies the decoration (*decorative style*). (Photo: J. Pino).

cance of models of production and distribution of undecorated ceramics for major issues in Andean archaeology, including several guidelines for archaeological analysis of plainware.

Background: technical styles and ethnographic analogy

Recent work by ethnoarchaeologists has been confirming the relevance of ethnography in shaping the overall narrative of the remote past (Owen and Porr, 1999; Stark et al., 2008), of which, the most comprehensive studies are devoted to ceramics. For example, ethnoarchaeologists have developed a sophisticated analytical framework to go beyond decorated pottery in order to study plainware in detail, namely, the technical style approach. In Andean ethnography, this procedure allows us to work on two levels when dealing with pottery. The first is the technical or manufacturing style (also known as internal style) defined as the sequence of actions carried out in the production of a vessel (Ramón, 2008a: 65–72). For archaeologists this is the physical record of how the object was made. This may be contrasted with the second level, which is the concept of decorative or external style, defined as all of the modifications applied to a vessel after it is formed (i.e. the decoration). (Fig. 1). As has been recognized by ethnographers for decades, and confirmed by our work in the NPA, potters show considerable flexibility with decorative style, but generally only work with one technical style (Digby, 1948: 605; Foster, 1948: 367–9; Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1945: 430). By focusing on the material traces left during the manufacturing process, technical style allows scholars to distinguish between manufacturing techniques, and therefore to discriminate different groups of plainware. In general, it amplifies the informative value of ceramics.² Within this vast tendency, the regional approach championed by Gosselain (2002) is most relevant here (see below).

Hand in hand with the technical style approach goes the issue of ethnographic analogy, a basic tool in archaeological interpretation. Here we propose a conservative approach to analogy, which must be briefly defined. Considering historical change, ethnographic practices cannot be directly assumed as reflecting the pre-colonial past, and historical change must be considered. However, since the beginning of archaeology as a discipline, those practices have been a major source used to elaborate explanatory models of the production and circulation of objects found in excavations and collections (Owen and Porr, 1999; Wylie, 2002). What is at issue

² For the genealogy of the technical style approach see the early issues of the journal *Techniques et Culture* (<http://tc.revues.org/>).

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