

Chasing Tlaloc and Dragonflies in the Mimbres Valley: An Analysis of Ceramic Motif Distributions

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ABSTRACT

Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures were common design elements on Classic Mimbres ceramics. However, certain forms and motifs were more widely used than others. During the 2016 field season at the Elk Ridge Ruin, a bowl with a Tlaloc figure was recovered from a burned ramada area and a sherd with a partial dragonfly was found in one of the pueblo rooms. While both of these figures were included on rock art panels in the Mimbres area, they were infrequent on ceramics. This poster examines the presence of dragonflies and Tlaloc figures on ceramics through time and space within the Mimbres Valley. Site reports and Mimbres ceramic databases were examined to gather an inventory of ceramic vessels and sherds with either of these images. This allowed for a visual analysis of style and a means for gathering geographic data to map the sites where these artifacts were recovered. Distribution patterns coupled with stylistic similarities and differences may help resolve the question regarding why these particular motifs were used.

METHODS

- The Mimbres ceramic vessel database managed by Steven LeBlanc was used to find vessels and sherds that depicted dragonflies or Tlaloc figures.
- For dragonflies, only vessels with known contexts were used in order to better analyze any patterns and rule out reproductions. Since vessels with Tlaloc figures were rare, those not associated with a site were also considered.
- Vessels were analyzed for stylistic similarities in addition to distribution patterns.

Elk Ridge

The Elk Ridge Site (LA 78963) is a large Classic period (AD 1000-1130) Mimbres pueblo located in the northern portion of the Mimbres River Valley in Grant County, New Mexico. The site sits on the north side of the Mimbres River near a spring on both private and U.S. Forest Service land. Current excavations are part of mitigation efforts to protect the site from flood waters in an arroyo that cuts through the western portion of the site.

Additional Mimbres Sites

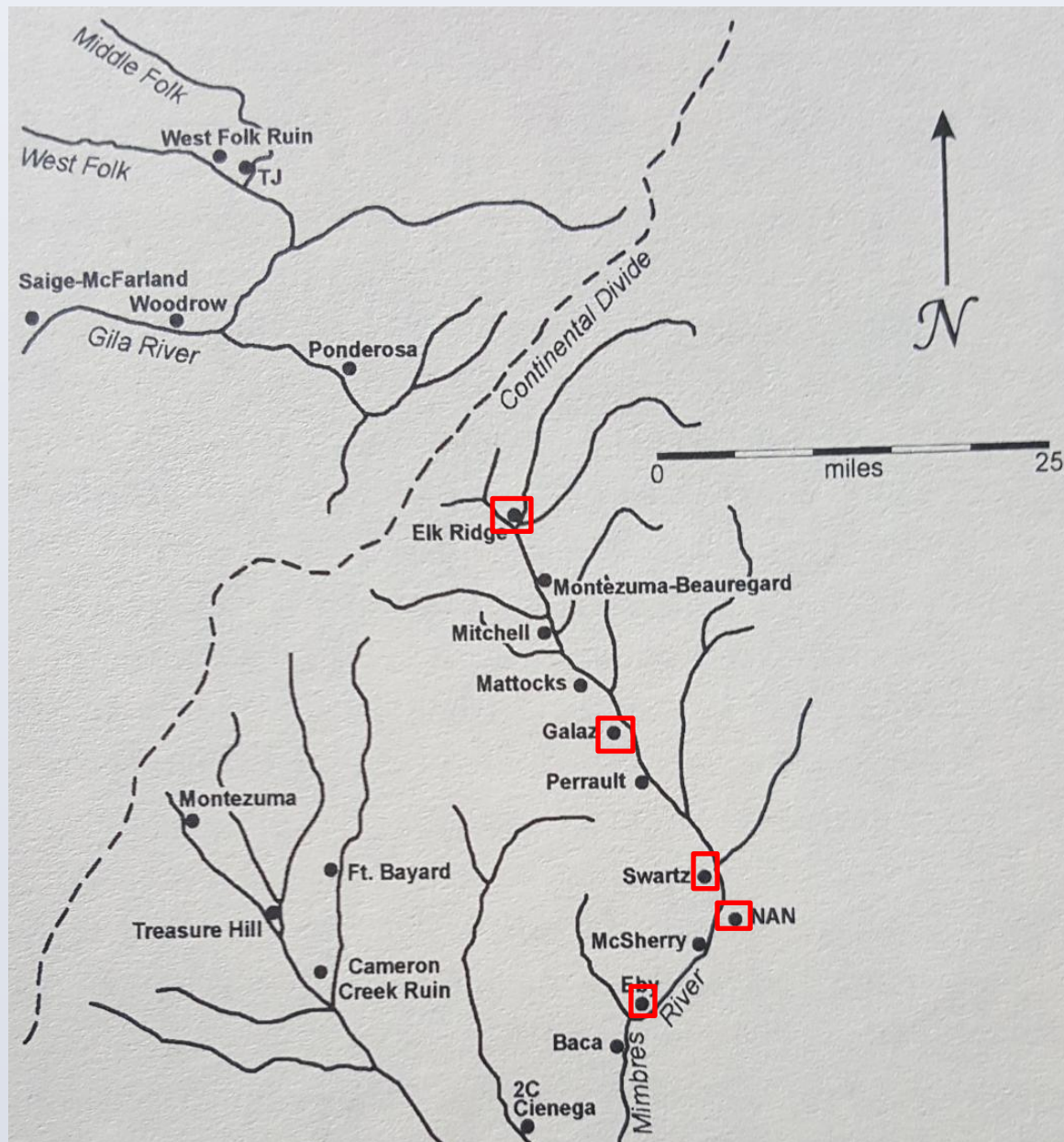
Other sites within the Mimbres Valley that yielded vessels with either dragonflies or Tlaloc figures include Swarts, NAN Ranch, Eby, Pruitt, and Galaz.



Overview of the 2016 Elk Ridge excavation.

DRAGONFLIES

- Dragonfly iconography in the Southwest has been noted on both rock art and ceramic vessels, yet has not been widely discussed.
- The presence of these insects on Mimbres vessels has been attributed to simple representations as a result of seeing them in nature (Fewkes 1923).
- However, ethnographically the dragonfly is featured in both Hopi and Zuni lore including associations with the beginning of summer, blooming of corn tassels, and leading people to water (Malotki 1997).
- 17 potential depictions of dragonflies were found in the database search (including the sherd recovered from Elk Ridge), of which nine had known contexts.



Distribution of vessels depicting dragonflies. (Base map courtesy Shafer 2003.)

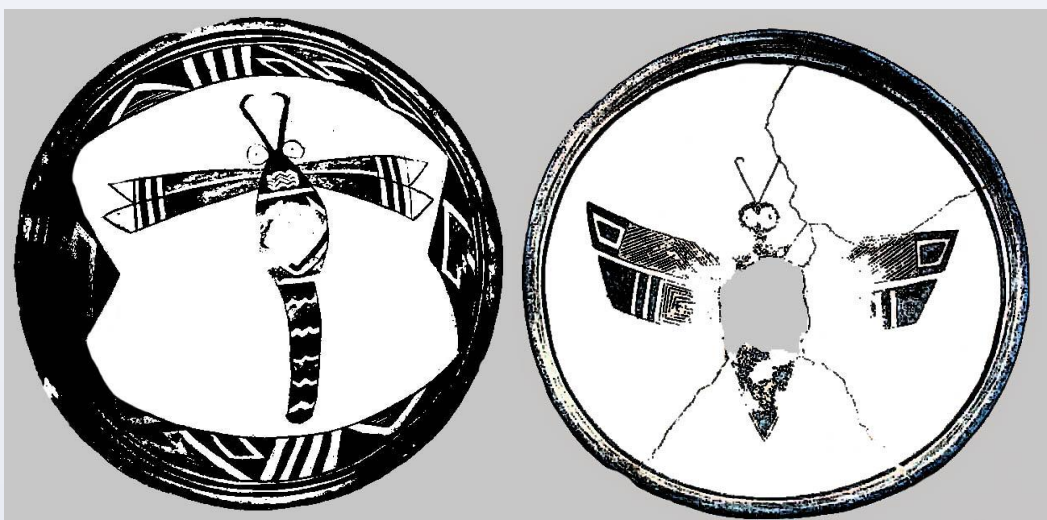
- Possible depictions of dragonflies on sherds/vessels were found at Elk Ridge, NAN Ranch (two vessels), Swarts (two vessels), Eby (two vessels), and Galaz.
- Common traits shared by most of the zoomorphs include antennae, dual sets of wings, and geometric designs on thorax and/or abdomen.



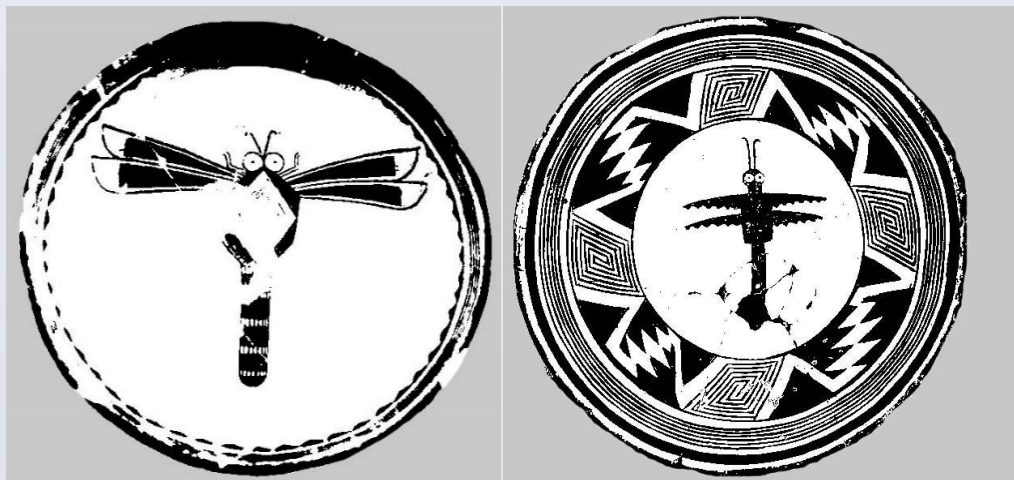
- The sherd from Elk Ridge was the only depiction in the dragonfly sample that did not come from a burial.
- This sherd was recovered from the floor fill of Room 113.

DRAGONFLIES (cont)

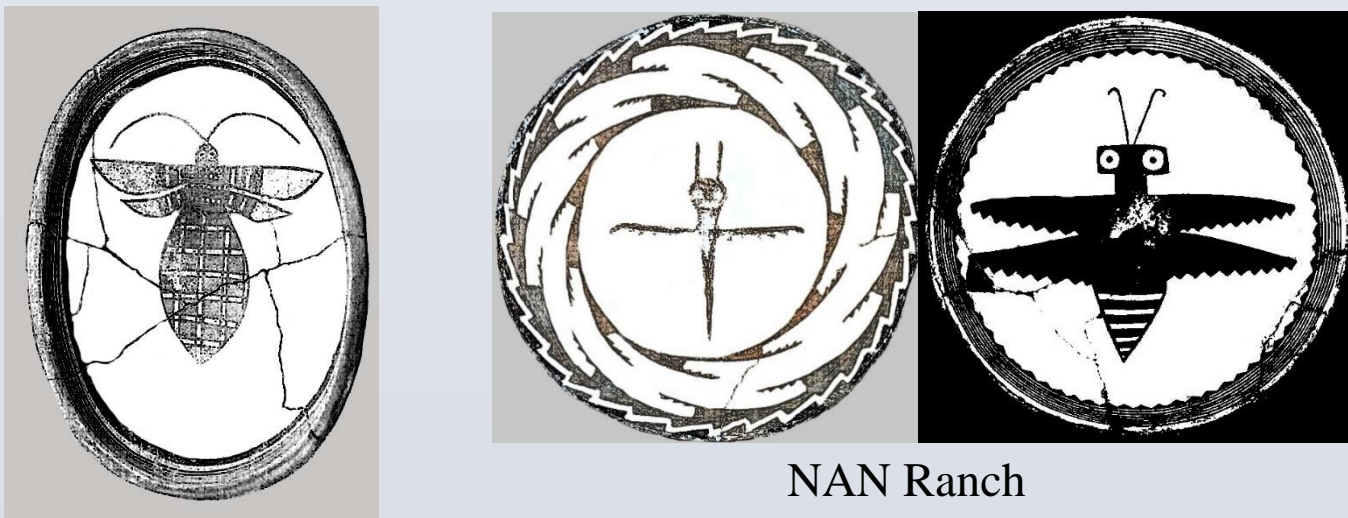
- The dragonflies on the Eby vessel differed from all of the others based on the direction of the antennae- inward termination versus the outward termination on all other depictions.



- The other vessels showcased the range of stylistic differences present, with some depictions possibly representing other insects such as the example from Galaz and one of the vessels from NAN in which the insect only had one set of wings.



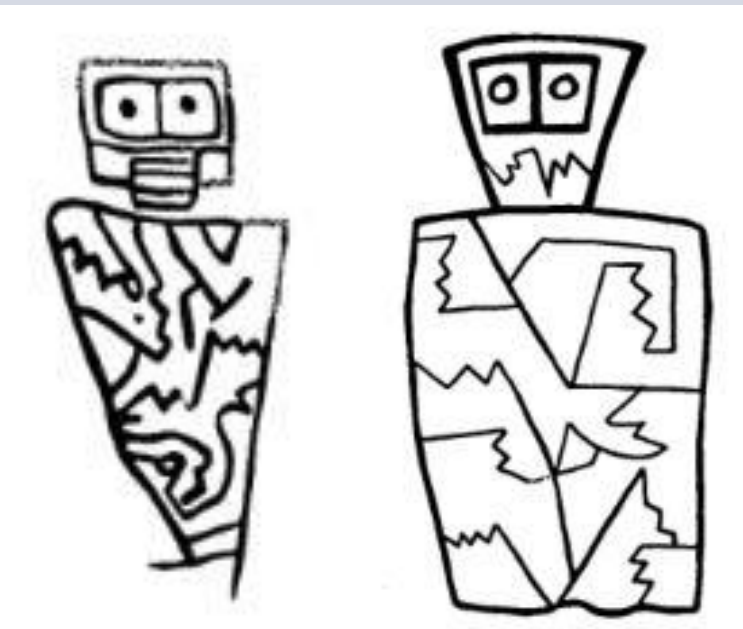
Galaz



NAN Ranch

TLALOC

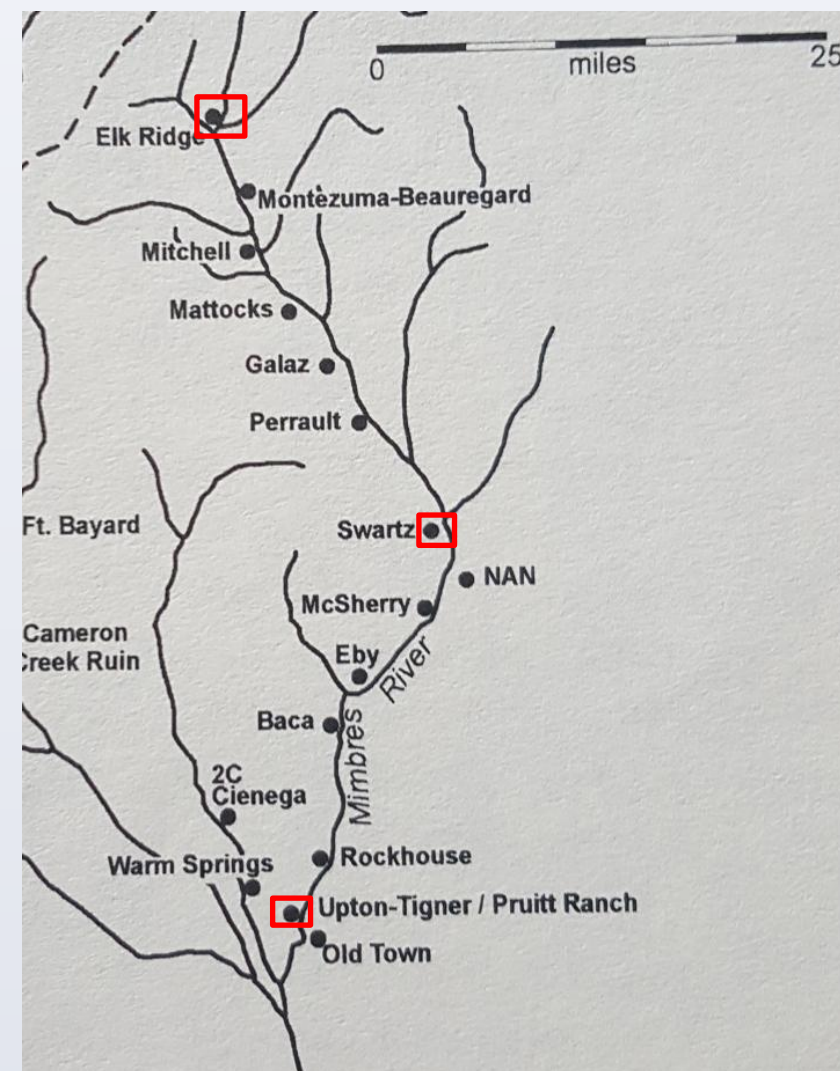
- Tlaloc was part of the Aztec pantheon, representing the god of rain.
- Although rare in the Mimbres Valley, notable representations include numerous large petroglyphs at NAN Ranch.



NAN Ranch Tlaloc petroglyphs. Credit: Creel 1989

TLALOC (cont)

- Tlaloc representations on Mimbres ceramics include a sherd from Swarts, a worked sherd/ladle from Pruitt, a partial vessel recovered from a burned ramada at Elk Ridge, and a vessel of unknown context excavated by E. D Osborn (Brody 2004).



Distribution of vessels depicting Tlaloc. (Base map courtesy Shafer 2003.)

- Stylistic similarities on the few known vessel representations include a trapezoidal or square head, “waving” hands, and geometric patterns in a rectangular body.
- “Thunderbird” figures look similar but have distinct wing-like appendages instead of arms, and these were not included in the sample.



Elk Ridge vessel.



Swarts sherd

Credit: Mimbres Vessel Database



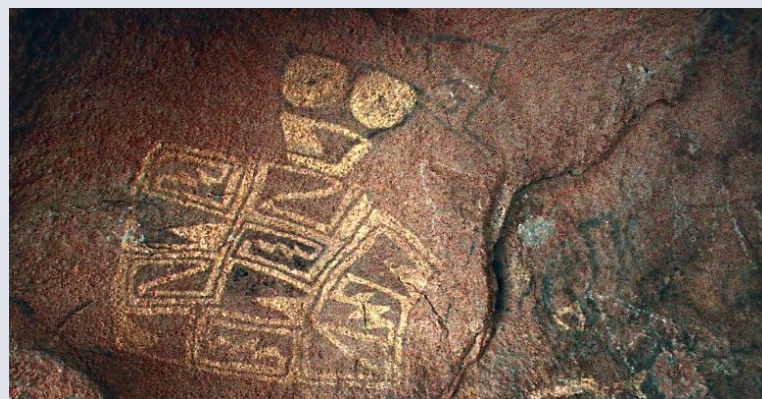
Unknown context. Credit: Creel 1989



Ladle from Pruitt

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Although not common, dragonflies on pottery were dispersed throughout the Mimbres Valley.
- Some stylistic similarities were noted on vessels from various sites.
- A vessel from Eby had a similar overall look when compared to one of the Swarts vessels.
- Vessels from Swarts and NAN Ranch also had drop pendant embellishments on the wings.
- Widening the research to include other insect zoomorphs may make patterns of distribution and stylistic characteristics more visible.
- Tlaloc figures on ceramics only occurred at a few sites. Unknown contexts of vessels skew the distribution results and the lack of overall examples may be the result of context bias during early excavations.
- Further work can be done comparing the figures on the vessels to those found on rock art. Creel (1989) noted that the rock art Tlaloc representations lack arms.
- Samples for INAA have been taken from the Elk Ridge vessel which may provide further information on the distribution of this figure if this vessel proves to be a trade item from another site.
- Research can be expanded by incorporating Tlaloc figures found in Jornada rock art to investigate stylistic similarities and differences, while discussing the appearance of this figure throughout the wider Mogollon culture.



Jornada Tlaloc rock art. Credit: Texas Parks and Wildlife

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