ABSTRACT

Antropomorphic 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 site, a vessel with a Tlaloc figure was recovered from a buried kazan area and a sherd with a partial dragonfly was found in an area of the pueblo remains. While both of these figures were included on rock art panels in the Mimbres area, they were infrequent on ceramics. This paper examines the prevalence of dragonflies and Tlaloc figures on ceramics throughout time and space within the Mimbres Valley. Sites and contexts of Tlaloc figures were compared and dragonflies were analyzed for distribution patterns and stylistic similarities. A possible reason to investigate the distribution and style of these figures is the role that the research may play in understanding the complex theme of “rain,” as dragonflies and Tlaloc were both associated with water throughout the Mimbres Valley.

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 79661) is a large Classic period (AD 900-1300) Mimbres mound located in the northern portion of the Mimbres River valley, Grant County, New Mexico. The site sits on the north slope of the Mimbres River near a spot on both US-90 and US-Forest Service 12 road. Current excavations are part of mitigation efforts to protect the site from flood waters in an attempt to mitigate the situation of the site.

Additional Mimbres Sites

Other sites within the Mimbres Valley that yielded vessels with either dragonfly or Tlaloc figures include Swarts, NAN Ranch, Eldy, Pruitt, and Galilea.

RESULTS

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

Vessels from Elk Ridge, NAN Ranch, and Galilea.

- Possible depictions of dragonflies on sherds/vessels were found at Elk Ridge, NAN Ranch (two vessels), Swarts (two vessels), Eldy (two vessels), and Galilea.

- Common traits shared by most of the dragonfly depictions include antennae, dual sets of wings, and geometric designs on their thorax and abdomen.

- The vessel from Elk Ridge was the only depiction of a dragonfly that did not come from a burial.

- The sherd from Elk Ridge was recovered from the floor fill of Room 113.

- The presence of these motifs on Mimbres vessels has been attributed to simple representations as a result of seeing them in nature (Forbes 1925). However, ethnoarchaeologically the dragonfly is known to both Hopi and Zuni lore with beginning associations with the beginning of summer. Wringen of corn stalks, and healing people to water (Malotki 1997). 17 potential depictions of dragonflies were found in the database search (including a sherd recovered from Elk Ridge), of which sherd had known contexts.

- The presence of these insects on ceramics include a sherd from Pruitt, a vessel recovered from a burial at NAN Ranch, and a vessel of unknown context excavated by E. D. Osborn (Brody 2004).

- The dragonflies on the vessel differed from all of the others based on the direction of the antennae—internal/external terminations versus the outward termination on all other depictions.

Depiction of dragonfly on an Elk Ridge vessel.

- 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 Kazan at Elk Ridge, and a vessel of unknown context excavated by E. D. Osborn (Brody 2004).

- Vessels from Swarts and NAN Ranch also had drop pendant embellishments on the rims.

- Widening the research to include other insect zoomorphs may make patterns of distribution and stylistic characteristics more visible.

- Since vessels with dragonflies were rare, the lack of overall examples may be the result of context bias during early excavations.

- Tlaloc was part of the Aztec pantheon, representing the god of rain.

- Although representations include numerous large pempolytypes at Swarts, TLALOC vessels are few in the Mimbres Valley.

- Stylistic similarities on the few known Tlaloc vessels include a sky or cloud with wings, head, and arms patterns in a zoomorphic body.

- TLALOC (cont)

- "Thunderbird" figures have distinct wings like appendages and are not included in the sample.

REFERENCES


Swarts, Wendy Sutton and Chris Adams, Steve LeBlanc and the crew, students, and volunteers that helped during the 2016 season.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although much common, dragonflies on pottery were dispersed throughout the Mimbres Valley.

- Some stylistic similarities were noted on vessels from various sites.

- A vessel from Elk had a similar overall swell when compared to one of the Swarts sherds.

- Swarts 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 look.

- Samples for DNA have been taken from the Elk Ridge vessel which may provide further information on the distribution of this figure if the vessel survives for a future date from another site.

- Research can be expanded by incorporating Tlaloc figures found in formosa rock art to investigate stylistic similarities and differences, while discussing the appearance of this figure throughout the wider Zapotec culture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gila National Forest- Wendy Sutton and Chris Adams, Steve LeBlanc and the Mimbres Vessel Database, all the crew, students, and volunteers that helped during the 2016 season.