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THE ARCHEOLOGICAL SEQUENCE ON THE RIO NAPO, ECUADOR AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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(With 2 text-figures)

Although the Amazon basin comprises only part of the Brazilian national territory, it is larger than most of the modern nations of the world. This vast size is offset by two unusual geographical characteristics: 1) relative homogeneity in climate, topography and vegetation, and 2) a network of navigable rivers that connect the margins with the center. These two characteristics facilitate movement of people over great distances without requiring modification of basic cultural patterns, whether of subsistence, technology, settlement pattern or social organization. This situation is well illustrated by the results of archeological investigations undertaken in 1956 on the Rio Napo in eastern Ecuador.

The Rio Napo was selected for fieldwork because of the resemblance of painted vessels recovered from its banks to the painted pottery from the Marajoara Phase on

the island of Marajó (MEGERS & EVANS, 1957: 418). The fact that the Napo was an important route from Quito to the Amazonian lowlands in the early European Period, beginning with the voyage of Orellana in 1541-2, was another factor in favor of its selection for investigation. Although the survey could not be extended beyond the Peruvian border, a sufficient number of sites were found within Ecuador to permit construction of a chronological sequence and to bring to light information of more than local interest.

The earliest identified complex, labeled the Yasuni Phase, is represented at two small sites on the right bank of the Rio Napo. The pottery has suffered severely from erosion, but decoration by incision, punctation, simple modeling and zoned hachure can be recognized. Vessel shapes emphasize exteriorly thickened and broad horizontal

rims, often with lobed lips. The paste is tempered either with sand or with organic material in the form of small particles of charcoal. No stone or pottery artifacts have been identified.

The most significant feature of the Yasuní Phase is decoration by hachure in zones bounded by broad incised lines. The far-flung distribution of this technique in northern South America on a relatively early time level has been referred to as the "Zoned Hachure Horizon Style" (MEGGERS & EVANS, 1961: 375-8). Representatives along the Lower Amazon are the Jauari Phase near Alenquer (HILBERT, 1959) and the Ananatuba Phase on Marajó (MEGGERS & EVANS, 1957). The style is also present in eastern Peru, where it is known as the Tutiscainyo Phase (LATHRAP, 1958: 383), and at several sites on the coast of Venezuela and the lesser Antilles (EVANS & MEGGERS, ms.) The oldest occurrence of broad zoned hachure is in the Puerto Hormiga Phase of north coastal Colombia, which dates from about 3000 B.C. (REICHEL-DOLMATOFF, 1965: 53).

The small number and widely scattered location of complexes of this early horizon style make interpretation of its diffusion difficult. It may correlate with dispersal of one or more of the staple food plants or one of the wide

spread language families, but more data are needed before such possibilities can be evaluated. Of particular urgency is the discovery of more sites to bridge the large gap between the Rio Napo in eastern Andes and the sites on the lower Amazon (Fig. 1).

A long temporal void separates the Yasuní Phase from its successor on the Rio Napo. Although the river may have been visited by hunting parties from neighboring regions, the next settled group to be recognized is represented by two sites on small tributary of the right bank known as the Rio Tiputini. Both are shallow habitation sites of limited area, like those of the earlier Yasuní Phase. The pottery, however, is distinct in both decoration and vessel shape. The principal decorative technique is the execution of complicated abstract patterns with fine incised lines, small zones of which are painted red. Alternatively, a red band overlies an incised line. Vessels are rounded bowls and jars with a slightly modified rim, and often ovoid rather than circular in outline. The paste is tempered with sand, particles of charcoal, or rarely with cariapé. Pottery artifacts include large solid potrests and sand-tempered sherds used as shaft abraders.

Although Tivacundo Phase pottery is distinctive in both vessel

implying a population concentration greatly exceeding that of the earlier settlers. Among the cultural innovations associated with the Napo Phase are the use of anthropomorphic urns for burial, and rolling-pin shaped pottery stamps, perhaps for body painting.

The ceramics of the Napo Phase bear no resemblance either in form or decoration to those of the earlier occupants of the region. However, many similarities can be observed with complexes along the middle Amazon between Coarí and Santarém, and with the Marajoara Phase on the island of Marajó

(Fig. 2). This ceramic unity has been termed the "Polychrome Horizon Style", since red and black on white painting is one of the most typical components of the decorative complex (MEGGERS & EVANS, 1961). Other techniques include incision with a single or double pointed tool, excision, and broad incision or grooving, all of which may occur on plain, red or white slipped surfaces. Occasionally, incisions or excised areas are colored red or white to enhance their contrast with the slip. Characteristic vessel shapes include bowls with exaggerated thickening

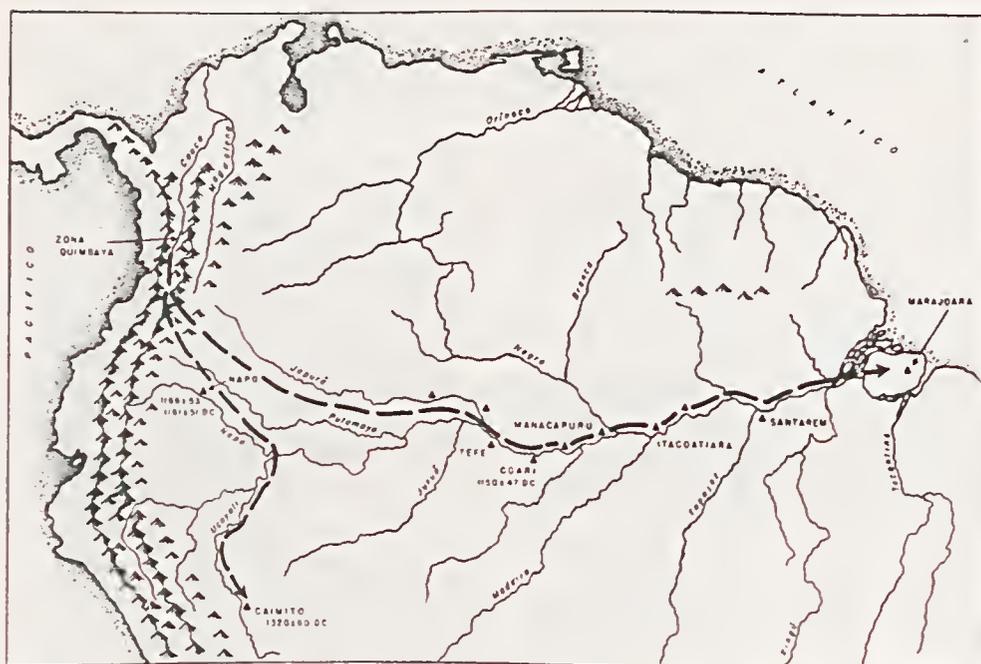


Fig. 2 — Location of sites (triangles) belonging to the Polychrome Horizon Style, and postulated routes of dispersal of the Style based on relative antiquity of carbon-14 dates.

of the angular shoulder or a flange added around the waist, and anthropomorphic jars employed as burial urns. At the western end of the distribution, exemplified by the Napo Phase, vessels are typically square. This shape becomes progressively rarer toward the east until it becomes almost unnoticeable in Marajoara Phase examples. Tempering material is not consistent, sand being used on the Rio Napo, cariapé and cauxi predominating along the middle Amazon, and crushed sherd employed on Marajó. Carbon-14 dates from the Napo Phase and Coarí place sites in the western part of the area in the second half of the 12th century A.D. No dates are yet available for Marajó.

Although most of the reported sites of the Polychrome Horizon Style are along the main channel of the Amazon, they present sufficient ceramic variation to suggest that a simple downriver movement cannot be postulated. Interestingly, the pottery of the Napo Phase is more similar to that of the Marajoara Phase than it is to most of the complexes reported from the intervening region. From the mouth of the Japurá eastward to Santarém, waist flanges are common and decoration by broad grooves and adornos is typical. Both traits are rare or absent to the east and west. Whether they were

adapted from earlier groups along the middle Amazon, or were introduced after diffusion had passed on downriver to the island of Marajó can only be decided after more stratigraphic work has been done and additional carbon - 14 dates are available.

It has been suggested that the Polychrome Horizon Style moved into the Amazon basin from the highlands of Colombia, and Napo Phase pottery offers additional support for this hypothesis in the form of a minor occurrence of two widespread and relatively early decorative techniques in the Andean Area — white-on-red and negative painting. Both are common in Colombia, where they persist into the late period, but are absent in the Amazon region. Other Napo Phase traits such as square shape, pottery roller stamps, and anthropomorphic urns are also present in Colombia, particularly in the Quimbaya region. Unfortunately, highland Colombia is little better known archeologically than the Amazon basin, and an attempt to pin down the origin of the Polychrome Horizon Style in a particular time or region is equivalent to grasping at straws. It seems relatively certain, however, that Colombia rather than Ecuador or Peru is the source, since the traits involved are rare to absent in the highlands south of the Colombian



border, and even in the southernmost portion of Colombia.

The absence of evidence of close affiliation between the Napo Phase and any of the highland Ecuadorian complexes suggests that the Napo Phase reached the eastern Ecuadorian lowlands by an indirect route. The paucity of archeological evidence from the Putumayo and Japurá makes it impossible to assess the role of these large rivers in its dissemination. Perhaps multiple routes were employed, one group moving down the Putumayo, across to the Aguarico and Napo and another descending the Japurá to the Amazon. Once again, stratigraphic excavation and carbon-14 dates are needed for reliable reconstruction of the speed and direction of the spread.

The shallowness of the refuse deposits and minor amount of alteration in the ceramic complex of the Napo Phase indicate that the group abandoned the Rio Napo area after a relatively brief stay, perhaps not much more than the 50 year interval represented by existing carbon-14 dates. A clue to its subsequent history can be found in sites with similar pottery discovered by Lathrap on the Ucayali in eastern Peru. A carbon-14 date of A.D. 1320 ± 60 from one site is sufficiently more recent than the Napo Phase dates to suggest deri-

vation from the north (LATHRAP, 1965: 12). Again, the intervening region is unknown and must be investigated to provide data for more adequate evaluation of the relationship between the sites in these two widely separated regions.

Unlike the sites of the early Zoned Hachure Horizon Style, which occur along the Venezuelan coast, sites of the Polychrome Horizon Style are limited to the Amazon Basin. This suggests different routes of dispersal, and may imply different mechanisms. It is important to learn more about the archeological sequences in the Cauca Valley of Columbia, the ecological context of the ancestral culture — assuming that it is correctly identified as of highland Colombian origin — and the possible reasons for translocation toward the Amazon. As in the case of the Zoned Hachure Horizon Style, the ceramic diffusion may have been accompanied by spread of a major linguistic stock. On the other hand, the art style alone may have spread, perhaps because of association with attractive new practices like secondary urn burial and the use of stamps for body decoration. We are in no position to choose between alternative possibilities until we know more about the archeological context of the ceramic traits whose distribution we are concerned with.

After the withdrawal of the Napo Phase, the Rio Napo was again apparently uninhabited. Accounts by members of Orellana's expedition of 1541-2 speak of the land east of the Rio Coca as "the great uninhabited region", and describe in vivid terms the starvation that threatened them because they were unable to find Indian villages from which to secure food. Subsequently, during the colonial period, the proximity of its headwaters to the Quito basin made the Rio Napo a main route of contact between the highlands and the Amazon. Missionaries arrived to "civilize" the Indians living along the foothills, and settlements began to appear along the Napo and other rivers. Archeologically, this new intrusion is recognized by the Cotacocha Phase, the pottery of which represents a fourth distinctive complex, unrelated to any of the previous complexes on the Napo. Decoration is limited to unsmoothed coils on the upper exterior, zoned punctate and fingernail punctations, and characteristic vessel shapes include bowls and jars with rounded shoulders sharply set off from the upper wall, and everted flat-topped rims. Paste is typically tempered with fine sand. This type of pottery is still being made and used.

The pattern of settlement revealed on the Rio Napo has two ma-

ior characteristics: 1) it is intermittent, and 2) each complex is of independent origin. In this respect, the situation differs from that in the Andean highlands and coast, where continuity is the rule. Although external influences are frequent there also, they are incorporated into the locally developing complex, and traditions can be traced for hundreds and often thousands of years. It is of interest to know whether this contrast in continuity of settlement pattern occurs only on the Rio Napo, or whether it is generally true throughout the lowland region.

Unfortunately, complete chronological sequences for the lowlands are extremely rare. That on the island of Marajó has been interpreted as reflecting the successive arrival of groups of independent origin, each of which was displaced or absorbed by a subsequent invader (MEGGERS & EVANS, 1957: 589). Unlike the Rio Napo, however, the sequence on Marajó does not appear to have gaps corresponding to periods of disoccupation. The work of Lathrap and his students along the Rio Ucayali and its tributaries in eastern Peru has only been published in very preliminary form, so that the distinctness of the various complexes cannot be judged. However, the fact that twelve successive complexes have been recognized (LATHRAP, loc. cit.)



suggests that discontinuity is typical there also.

Thus, what evidence exists appears to corroborate the inference made at the beginning of this paper: namely, that the relative homogeneity of the Amazon basin and multiplicity of navigable rivers facilitate movement of people over great distances. By contrast, the highlands and western coastal lowlands of South America are broken up into relatively small zones with distinctive climate, vegetation and topography, without interlacing communication routes. Under such conditions, the better the adaptation to locally available subsistence resources, the greater the difficulty of translocation. Survival was favored by continuity, and invaders were at a disadvantage because of unfamiliarity with local food resources and farming methods. Life in the Amazonian lowlands is much less specialized. Techniques of hunting, fishing and gardening practiced in the Guianas or on the Xingu work almost equally well on the Napo or the Purus. Although differences exist, they are of much smaller magnitude and less drastic in their effects on human adaptation.

Like all archeological work, investigations along the Rio Napo in eastern Ecuador have provided a few answers, but also raised a num-

ber of problems previously unrecognized. The more we learn, the clearer it becomes that detailed knowledge of the Amazon basin is vital not only for the reconstruction of South American prehistory, but also for the correct evaluation of theories about cultural development. Let us hope that important sites will not be destroyed by expanding civilization before they receive the attention of an archeologist.

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