This report describes the ceramics of the Late Postclassic or Protohistoric period (ca. 1200 to 1500) uncovered in a recent archaeological investigation in the western Maya highlands. The Proyecto Arqueológico de la Región Huista-Acateco, directed by the author, investigated the region in the Cuchumatan Mountains currently occupied by the Huista and Acatec Maya (Figure 1), documenting 150 archaeological sites and an occupation sequence spanning the Terminal Preclassic to Late Postclassic/Protohistoric periods, ca. 100 to 1525 (see Borgstede 2004). The modern towns of Jacaltenango and San Miguel Acatan are the center of the region.

The ceramics described here are from the Late Postclassic period, also known as the “Protohistoric” period in the Guatemalan highlands due to the incipient Spanish invasion and existing ethnohistoric records of the period. The seminal ceramic report on this time period is Robert Wauchope’s 1970 publication, “Protohistoric Pottery of the Guatemala Highlands.” The current study attempts to augment and refine Wauchope’s interpretation, specifically for the western Guatemalan highlands. Wauchope synthesized most studies prior to 1970, and comparative examples in the following descriptions are drawn from Wauchope as well as more recent studies, including Arnauld 1986, Culbert 1965, Ichon 1987, Nance 2003a, Nance 2003b, and Weeks 1983.

The Late Postclassic period remains one of the most intensely studied in the Maya highlands, in terms of archaeology and ethnohistory. The existence of competing Maya kingdoms, including those of the K’iche’, the Kaqchikel, and the Mam, coupled with the persistence of written documentation immediately prior to, during, and after the Spanish invasion, provide the Protohistoric period with an abundance of anthropological data for understanding this complex era. Archaeological evidence, particularly ceramics, has played a role in interpreting the cultures, histories, and structures of these societies. Archaeological investigations have been carried out at most of the known major Late Postclassic centers—Utatlan (Q’umarkaj), Iximche, Zaculeu, and Mixco Viejo—as well as in regional centers (e.g., Robinson 1998) and by regional surveys (e.g., Borgstede 2004; Braswell 1996; Hill 1996; Lowe 1959).

The purpose of this study is twofold. The first is to present descriptions of the Late Postclassic period ceramics of the Huista-Acatec Maya region. Descriptions include forms, decoration, paste types, and comparative examples from elsewhere in the Maya highlands. The majority of comparative examples derive...
The Late Postclassic ceramics of the Huista-Acatec region are presented in a manner similar to that of Calvert (1965). This includes: 1) description of the ceramic, including type-variety name, surface decoration, forms, paste, and other relevant distinguishing criteria; 2) comparative material; and 3) comments, when appropriate. General comments are reserved for the discussion following the descriptions. The type-variety system was used for the typology following convention in Maya archaeology (Gifford 1960), despite questions of its utility in the Maya area in general (e.g., Hammond 1972) as well as in the highlands specifically (Poponne de Hatch 1997). Given that this is the initial typology presented for this area in general (e.g., Hammond 1972) as well as in the specific sense developed by Gifford (1976), it must await further exploration and elaboration of the ceramics in the region. Comparative material derives from published sources, primarily in the Guatemalan highlands to which the Huista-Acatec material is most closely tied during the Late Postclassic period. Ceramics of other periods (Classic and Terminal Classic) from the Guatemalan highlands—western and central—have the closest ties during the Late Postclassic period. Ceramics from other periods (Classic and Terminal Classic) in the Huista-Acatec region are not included here (for summary descriptions, see Borgstede 2014). The second purpose for this study is to discuss a number of implications of the ceramic typology. Because Wauchope’s seminal study with which to draw conclusions about the far western highlands in 1970, this study will expand upon his typology for this region and complement his study by presenting a number of new types found in the Huista-Acatec region. In general Wauchope’s seminal study has successfully stood the test of time, but this study augments his work.

Synthesis of Ceramic Descriptions with Comparisons

The Late Postclassic ceramics of the Huista-Acatec region are presented in a manner similar to that of Calvert (1965). This includes: 1) description of the ceramic, including type-variety name, surface decoration, forms, paste, and other relevant distinguishing criteria; 2) comparative material; and 3) comments, when appropriate. General comments are reserved for the discussion following the descriptions. The type-variety system was used for the typology following convention in Maya archaeology (Gifford 1960), despite questions of its utility in the Maya area in general (e.g., Hammond 1972) as well as in the highlands specifically (Poponne de Hatch 1997). Given that this is the initial typology presented for this area, a Late Postclassic period ceramic “complex,” in the specific sense developed by Gifford (1976), must await further exploration and elaboration of the ceramics in the region. Comparative material derives from published sources, primarily in the Guatemalan highlands to which the Huista-Acatec material is most closely related, but some comparisons are drawn from published material from the Chiapas Highlands of Mexico. Some published material is not type-variety, representative of an earlier tradition in Maya archaeology. A summary table is provided (Figure 2). Figures provide the most illustrative examples of each type for comparative purposes.

Polychromes

Ajul Polychrome: Ajul variety (Figure 3). Hemispherical bowls with a small diameter, usually 12-18 cm. Decoration is on the interior of the bowl and consists from the Guatemalan highlands—western and central—of culture to which the Huista-Acatec region had the closest ties during the Late Postclassic period. Ceramics from other periods (Classic and Terminal Classic) in the Huista-Acatec region are not included here (for summary descriptions, see Borgstede 2014). The second purpose for this study is to discuss a number of implications of the ceramic typology. Because Wauchope’s seminal study with which to draw conclusions about the far western highlands in 1970, this study will expand upon his typology for this region and complement his study by presenting a number of new types found in the Huista-Acatec region. In general Wauchope’s seminal study has successfully stood the test of time, but this study augments his work.

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Polychromes

Ajul Polychrome: Ajul variety (Figure 3). Hemispherical bowls with a small diameter, usually 12-18 cm. Decoration is on the interior of the bowl and consists
of fairly thick black lines. Two or three of these lines are located sub-rim parallel to the rim. The rim itself is painted red. The background color ranges from buff to brown to white. Paste is variable, from coarse to medium, often with small calcite inclusions. As described by Wauchope (1970:112-114), these are “Hemispherical Bowls,” which he felt were produced in a single workshop (possibly in San Rafael Petzal of the western Guatemalan highlands) due to their uniformity. In the Huista-Acatec region, they are more variable than Wauchope described. Similar hemispherical bowls were described by Weeks (1983:174) for Chialalo—“Sipaca Polychrome: variety unspecified”—and by Woodbury and Trik (1955:196) from Zaculeu as a “bowl similar to Chisalala Polychrome.”

**Ajul Polychrome: Cuchumatan variety** (Figure 4). A variety of Hemispherical Bowls that is similar in form and size to the Ajul variety, but differing in paste. The Cuchumatan variety is made of a distinctive orange, sandy paste. Rims are painted a dark red, usually with a horizontal black line immediately below the rim, often on a white slip. All designs are on the interior. This variety was found exclusively in the Huista region.

**Ajul Polychrome: Nupup variety** (Figure 5). Surface decoration consists of black outlining of red zones on a cream or unslipped surface. Forms are primarily small to medium bowls, usually with constricted necks (not hemispherical bowls). Paste is variable, but often compact with small calcite inclusions. This variety is very similar to Wauchope’s (1970:114-115) “Black-outlined or chocolate-brown-outlined red-on-cream.” The Nupup variety’s colors are always black, however, with no fading to chocolate or brown. Wauchope describes only a single example of this type—from the Antigua valley in the central highlands. In addition he suggests that this is a version of Polychrome very similar to “Marinera Red-on-Buff” from El Salvador (see Haberland 1964) and associated with the Pipil expansion during the Late Postclassic period. In the Chiapas highlands, “Huistan Hard: Huistan variety” (see Culbert 1965:72, Figure 34) is also a red-on-buff, but lacks the black outlines of Wauchope’s and the Huista-Acatec versions.

**Ajul Polychrome: Huista variety** (Figure 6). Decorative designs are on
the exterior and consist of red zones, black lines, and black dots on a lightly polished buff, brown, or cream surface. The designs are usually zoned, often with crosshatching. Elongated triangles hang sub-rim. Forms consist of bowls with curved sides and curved base (often with a slightly constricted neck), small jars with vertical necks and curved sides, and jars with vertical necks. All forms are relatively thin. Paste is usually light red and brown with small calcite inclusions. The decoration and forms are fairly uniform in all examples. While closely related to other red/black/cream polychromes, this variety was not described by Wauchope (1970). Nance (2003b:Figure 6.20b) illustrated a similar pattern for a vessel from Iximche, occurring in a category he terms “Orange on Gray-Buff.”

Ajul Polychrome: Paiconob variety (Figure 7). Surface decorations are always on the exterior and include black and red designs (occasionally only black lines), both curvilinear and rectilinear, on a brown to white/cream surface. Paint is dull rather than glossy. Pastes are variable, but usually compact, often with clay or calcite inclusions. Forms include tall-necked jars with strap handles, occasionally with interior-folded rims. According to Wauchope (1970:108-110), these are the “Dull Paint Style” polychromes. They are found primarily in the northern part of the Maya highlands—the northern part of the central highlands (El Quiche and Huehuetenango) and the northern highlands (Alta and Baja Verapaz) (Wauchope 1970:110). Examples were also found at Nebaj (Becquelin 2001:Figure 99) and in Chiquin at Lagartero (“cerámica roja oscura y negro/crema” [Rivero Torres 1997:230]) and in the upper Tributaries of the Grijalva Basin (Lowe 1959:Figures 32d-g, 50a-c).

Ajul Polychrome: Tenam variety (Figure 8). In contrast to the previous examples, decorations on the Tenam variety are glossy or bright. These are highly polished with red and black on a glossy white/cream background. Black designs are curvilinear and rectilinear as well, and enclose red-painted zones. Forms are similar to the Paiconob variety: tall jars with constricted necks and strap handles. Paste types are compact, often with small calcite inclusions. According to Wauchope (1970:110-112), these were the “Bright Paint Style” polychromes which are found primarily in the southern part of the Guatemalan highlands, although never in great amounts. The Tenam variety was also found at Iximche (Nance 2003b:157) and, more frequently, at Mixco Viejo (Navarrete 1961:13-15). At Iximche, for example, Nance described a “Black and Red on White” as “…well-finished (slipped and polished) on both surfaces and manifests a well-executed polychrome design on the exterior surface” (Nance 2003b:156). It is probable that “Brown-Black on Buff” from Iximche (Nance 2003b:155, Figure 6.22b) and “Tezcomal Black on White” from Chisalain (Weeks 1983:177-178) are also closely related examples.

Monochromes

Ixtenam Red: Ixtenam variety (Figure 9). Surface decoration includes a vibrant red paint (7.5YR 5/8-red) applied unevenly over the interior and exterior vessel surfaces. Forms are small bowls—either hemispherical or with vertical walls. Paste is gray and sandy with quartz inclusions or orange and chalky. Wauchope (1970:103-107) grouped all monochrome ceramics into a single, inclusive category—“Monochrome red, tan, or brown”—which probably encompasses this and a number of other varieties.

Pueblo Viejo Red: Pueblo Viejo variety (Figure 10). Surface decoration is a light red paint on a light gray surface on both the interior and exterior. Sometimes red paint appears only above the vessel shoulder. Forms consist of bowls with slightly flaring walls and bowls with a flat base, constricted necks, and hollow, ovoid feet. Paste is gray and fine, with calcite inclusions.

Greg Borgstede
Polished
Conhob Thin: Conhob variety (Figure 11). All examples are very thin (3–4 mm body, slightly thicker at neck/shoulder), with forms of vertical-neck jars, vertical-wall bowls, shoulder-grooved bowls, and incurved-wall bowls. The jars occasionally have strap handles and/or one to three shallow grooves around the neck, shoulder, or sub-rim. Color varies from brown to dark orange, and all are smoothed/polished. Pastes are variable, but usually compact with small calcite inclusions. Occasionally mica inclusions are found. At Ixmucane, these are probably “Brown Slipped and Polished” and “Red Slipped and Polished” (Nance 2003b:137–142) and closely related to “Brown Utility” and “Red Utility” (Nance 2003b:125–128). Nance (2003b:128) states that the Red is usually thinner than the Brown, although it is possible that these are the same ceramic type, just with slightly different colors due to firing or clays. Forms are similar throughout. At Mixco Viejo, “Roja Pulida” (Navarrete 1961:11-12) is a related type, also colored brown to red. At Zaculeu, these were characterized as “Cinnamon” (Woodbury and Trik 1953:174-175) and usually contained cremations.

Huitzinaal Orange: Bi Tonam variety (Figure 12). An uneven orange-red color with a smoothed/polished surface on interior and exterior forms. Includes small bowls, often hemispherical, with a mediod groove, and constricted-neck bowls with flaring necks and slightly flaring rims. Paste is soft and chalky with some small quartz inclusions, with occasional darker pastes. These are related to the “Orange-Polished” found at Ixmucane (Nance 2003b:174) and “Orange-Red” at Zaculeu (Woodbury and Trik 1953:176-177).

Yultenam Brown: unspecified variety (Figure 13). This ceramic type has a brown to dark red color with a polished surface, usually exterior and interior. Forms include small bowls, often hemispherical, with a mediod groove, and constricted-neck bowls with flaring necks and slightly flaring rims. Paste is soft and chalky with some small quartz inclusions, with occasional darker pastes. These are related to the “Orange-Polished” found at Ixmucane (Nance 2003b:174) and “Orange-Red” at Zaculeu (Woodbury and Trik 1953:176-177).

San Antonio Striated: unspecified variety (Figure 14). Surface decoration is of deep or shallow striations, often in the same direction (no crosshatching), and usually on the exterior surfaces of bowls and jars. Striations are usually light to medium, all in the same direction (no crosshatching), and usually on the necks of jars or sub-rim on bowls. Forms include bowls, constricted-neck bowls with flaring rims, and jars with incurved sides and vertical necks with strap handles. Forms are similar to the Conhob Thin type. This appears to be a common utilitarian ceramic in the Huista-Acatec region.

Miscellaneous Forms
PeCauch (Figure 17). A colander form is common in the Huista-Acate region in the Late Postclassic period. These are usually jars with strap handles with holes through the body or medium-sized bowls. Hole spacing can be either relatively close or far apart, either in rows or random patterns. Pastes can be variable but usually compact. Examples can be either smoothed/polished or unpolished. Some examples apparently were found in the Chiapas highlands—Culbert (1965:75) notes “colanders” as a diagnostic form of the eastern Chiapas highlands.

Comales (Figure 18). Comales are griddle forms used for food preparation. These are flat, shallow dishes, often with loop handles. They are distinctive in that one side is smoothed/polished while the other is usually coarse and burnt. Usually there is a rough edge along the rim of the smoothed side, to which two handles are attached. Rarely they will have rim decoration, appliqué, or mold. Paste types are variable, from fine to coarse. One subset has a distinctive micaceous paste and another a soft, chalky paste. The colaf form is fairly common in the Maya highlands during the Postclassic Period (Wauchope 1970:107-108). Comales were found at Ixmucane (Navarrete 2003a:187) and at Chisalun (Weeks 1983:160-170), of various types/varieties. A micaceous paste example is found at Chisalun—in the “Yultenam Brown” type (Weeks 1983:163). Stefan de Borhegyi (1959:57) has suggested that comal forms may be related to inances rather than a utility form used in cooking. Most archaeologists, however, view the comal as a distinct utilitarian
dull paint Chinautla polychromes are generally found in the northern parts of the Guatemalan highlands and bright paint Chinautla polychromes are generally found in the southern parts of the Huista-Acatec region; the local distribution of these varieties within the Huista-Acatec region is also delimited. Aja Polychrome: Paiconob variety, the local Dull Paint Chinautla polychrome, is found throughout the Huista-Acatec region; Aja Polychrome: Tenam variety, the local Bright Paint Chinautla polychrome, is found only in the area currently occupied by the Acatec Maya. In addition, Aja Polychrome: Huista variety, a Chinautla polychrome not described by Wauchope, is found exclusively in the region currently occupied by the Huista Maya. While the contexts were not definitive in the distributional data, both locally within the Huista-Acatec region and in the Guatemalan highlands in general, provide further support for the suggestion that the Acatec area was part of a broader highland interaction sphere, rather than an isolated local area. This evidence suggests that food preparation was not uniform across the Maya highlands, with changing patterns across the Late Postclassic landscape and changing patterns throughout the Preclassic sequence.

In conclusion, the ceramics of the Late Postclassic period in the Huista-Acatec region closely follow the typology laid out by Robert Wauchope in 1970. They suggest that occupants of the Huista-Acatec region during the Late Postclassic period were closely tied to developments within the Guatemalan highlands to the east, as opposed to developments in the Chiapas highlands and the Petén region. The most common and well known of these Late Postclassic ceramic types is micaceous, which is found in a number of different contexts in the Huista-Acatec region. The most common horizon types is collectively known as “Chinautla Polychromes,” which include a wide range of red-black-white ceramic forms found throughout the Guatemalan highlands, but not in great numbers. In the Huista-Acatec region, the Chinautla Polychromacy is comprised of the Aja Polychrome types and varieties, some of which are more distinctive than others. Following this idea, in the Huista-Acatec region all types/varieties with mica pastes lack other kinds of surface decoration; that is, no polychromes or monochromes have mica pastes. The differential distribution of Chinautla polychromes generally found in the Huista-Acatec region is also delimited. Aja Polychrome: Paiconob variety, the local Dull Paint Chinautla polychrome, is found throughout the Huista-Acatec region; Aja Polychrome: Tenam variety, the local Bright Paint Chinautla polychrome, is found only in the area currently occupied by the Acatec Maya. In addition, Aja Polychrome: Huista variety, a Chinautla polychrome not described by Wauchope, is found exclusively in the region currently occupied by the Huista Maya. While the contexts were not definitive in the distributional data, both locally within the Huista-Acatec region and in the Guatemalan highlands in general, provide further support for the suggestion that the Acatec area was part of a broader highland interaction sphere, rather than an isolated local area. This evidence suggests that food preparation was not uniform across the Maya highlands, with changing patterns across the Late Postclassic landscape and changing patterns throughout the Preclassic sequence.

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