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Terracotta Pipes with Triangular Engravings

Flavia Zorzi

Conicet, Centro de Arqueología Urbana (FADU-UBA), Instituto de Arqueología (FFyL, UBA), flaviazorzi@gmail.com

Daniel G. Schávelzon

Conicet, Centro de Arqueología Urbana (FADU, UBA), dschavelzon@fibertel.com.ar

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Terracotta Pipes with Triangular Engravings

Cover Page Footnote

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Terracotta pipes with triangular engravings recovered in Buenos Aires

Smoking pipes in historic Argentine archaeology: general information and precedents

Since European and American populations came into contact, tobacco and its associated paraphernalia have had a vertiginous journey around the world. Throughout this process, smoking pipes were diversified into innumerable forms and materials, according to modifications made by each local artisan or workshop. As a result, different shared traditions were gradually established, tied as much to smoking as to stylistic norms and symbols that in many cases can be identified in the pipes.

Smoking pipes are a very frequent category of artefact at colonial archaeological sites in the Americas, and Argentina is no exception. In general terms, the pipes found in colonial contexts in Argentina can be divided into two main categories: white clay pipes, of European origin, and terracotta pipes. The latter, frequently handmade, are extremely variable in shape and style, and in most cases the lack of evidence of workshops where they were produced, whether from the archaeological record or written sources, makes it difficult to determine where they were made.

Since the beginning of the development of the discipline, Argentine archaeology has made reference to finds of terracotta smoking pipes (Ameghino 1881, Torres 1911, Boman 1927, De Aparicio 1931, Márquez Miranda 1934, Vignati 1935, Gancedo 1973, Semper 1973, Morresi 1983, Lagiglia 1992). While many pieces reported by these authors were originally considered pre-Hispanic, we are better placed today to argue that most are in fact post-contact products (Schávelzon 1991: 142 and 2003: 249; Zorzi & Davey 2011: 204) and, in some cases, correspond to the material culture of enslaved African groups (Schávelzon 2003 and 2009).

One of the broadest groups of colonial terracotta pipes found in Argentina is that recovered at the Cayastá ruins. This archaeological locality includes over 400

examples (Letieri *et al.* 2009) in a wide variety of shapes and styles. The terracotta pipes of Cayastá have been interpreted as local products showing indigenous, European and African styles (Letieri *et al.* 2009).

Other interesting and varied groups of terracotta pipes from the colonial period were recovered in the city of Buenos Aires, at the Bolívar 373 site (Zorzi & Davey 2011) -of which one of the pieces is described in this study- and in salvage work on an 18th-century shipwreck (Sportelli 2012).

To date, there is no archaeological evidence or written records of the manufacture of terracotta pipes in the Buenos Aires area or the surrounding regions during the colonial period.

Pipes with triangular engravings

In the heterogeneous overview of terracotta pipes in Argentine colonial archaeology, one category of piece has been found on numerous occasions. These are angular pipes that are distinguished by a decorative pattern formed by a series of triangles and other engravings and incisions of geometric elements on the bowls and/or the tubes. This pattern has numerous variations, but always consists of associations of engraved triangular designs, separated by “crests” which in turn sometimes have a fine lengthways incision running through them. In some cases, the triangular designs are set out to form bands of rectangles or rhombuses.

To date, from both published and unpublished samples, at least seven pipes of this kind have been found in Buenos Aires and at least another six in Cayastá. Two new examples are described below, one found at Bolívar 373 and the other at Casa de Liniers, both sites in the historic old quarter of the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The example from Bolívar 373

Located in the historic city centre, Bolívar 373 site was the subject of an archaeological intervention between 2005 and 2011 (Schávelzon 2005 & 2008,

Zorzi 2012). It is one of the most important archaeological sites in Buenos Aires, with deposits dating from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.

The pipe with triangular incisions and engravings recovered at this site (Register number 02-GCBA/sc/dgpat24-347, Figs. 1A, 1B and 1C) was found in a rubbish pit dated to the first half of the 17th century, in association with ceramics of indigenous tradition, Portuguese and Spanish tin-glazed ceramics, Sevillian olive jars, Venetian-style glass objects, and archaeofauna remains, among other materials.

The piece is represented by two assembling fragments corresponding to the lower part of the bowl and the upper part of the tube. It is made from fine grain clay. It is reduction fired and is at first glance quite compact, although it does have large separate cavities. Under the microscope, quartz clasts can be observed corresponding to at least two different granulometric fractions, with the larger clasts rounded, and some small mica flakes.

The bowl is cylindrical to slightly conical in shape, with a rounded base and external diameter of 2.5cm. Its walls are 5mm thick. The tube is cylindrical with a maximum diameter of 2cm diminishing towards the lower end. The smoke circulation channel is slightly off-centre and has a 3mm diameter.

The union between the bowl and the tube forms an angle of approximately 90 degrees.

The external surfaces are polished. The decoration is visible on the anterior and posterior surfaces of the bowl and consists in each case of a vertical band formed by engraved triangular designs with lines of incisions.

An analysis of the carbonized material in the bowl revealed the presence of non-diagnostic plant materials, such as cells possibly corresponding to trichomes, starches and resins (Lema 2013).

The example from the Liniers House

The Liniers House site, located less than 200m away from Bolívar 373, saw archaeological work in 2011 and 2012, including the excavation of a deposit consisting of materials assignable to the 17th century and, to a lesser degree, the 18th century. This deposit, from which were recovered ceramics of indigenous

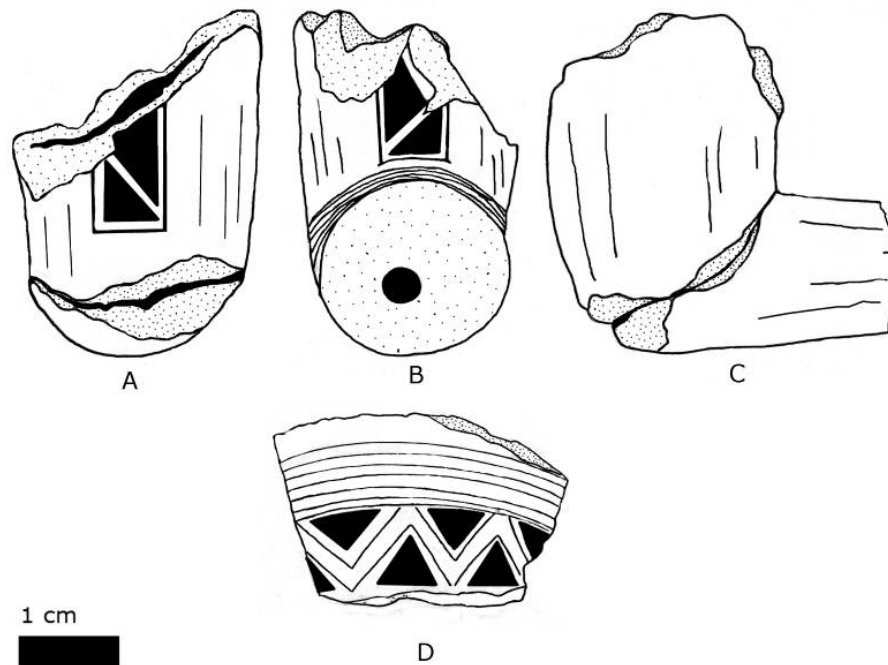
tradition, Portuguese tin glazed ceramics, archaeofauna remains, glass beads, among other materials, is not a rubbish pit specifically nor an habitation floor, but was probably the result of re-depositing of sediment extracted from some other area (Schávelzon *et al.* 2014).

The engraved pipe (Register number 02-MC/SC/DGPeIH-130-0018, Fig. 1D) from Liniers house is represented by a fragment of the bowl. Like the example recovered at Bolívar 373, this pipe is reduction fired and made from a fine paste. Under the microscope, the ceramic body has a compact appearance, and well-selected inclusions of quartz and fine grain mica can be observed. The bowl is of conical shape and the mouth has an external diameter of 6cm. It has a flat lip and walls 8-9mm thick.

The external surface is smooth. The bowl decoration consists of a series of fine horizontal parallel lines, cut rather untidily from under the lip, and a horizontal band, found on the middle line of the bowl, formed from engraved triangular motifs and marked out by incisions of lines.

The internal surface shows some adherence of soot, suggesting that this piece, like the one from Bolívar 373, has been used.

Figure 1



Correlations

The examples described above correspond to a particular kind of design which to date has been observed in pipes from Buenos Aires and Cayastá in Argentina, as well as from Rio de Janeiro and Santos, in Brazil.

Reports of these pieces in Buenos Aires began in the early 20th century, when Carlos Rusconi published the find in the Villa Lugano area, in the south of the city of Buenos Aires, from a hearth with remains of traditional indigenous pottery, rustic European ceramics, remains of fauna species of European origin, lithic artefacts (including a possible gunflint) and other materials that denote a colonial chronology. The materials mentioned included a fragment of a bowl from a ceramic pipe (Fig. 2A) decorated with a series of vertically-arranged squares, in which can be observed two criss-crossing lines made by incision, marking out four triangles described as “quite deep and well-faceted” (Rusconi 1928: 107). This piece, like a second pipe with decorative incisions recovered at the same site, was interpreted by Rusconi as an indigenous product.

A few years after Rusconi's find, Vignati (1935) reported a very similar pipe (Fig. 2B) found in the town of Punta Lara, in the east of the province of Buenos Aires, on the coast of the River Plate. This example, recovered intact, has the decorative pattern of criss-crossing lines and triangles engraved around the bowl and on the upper part of the tube. Like Rusconi before him, Vignati considered that this pipe was an indigenous product. Following a line of reasoning all too common at that time, Vignati claimed that both this kind of pipe and the associated ceramics, from what he could tell, "belonged to a group that lived in the coastal area of the River Plate, penetrating along the edges of its tributaries and the chains of lakes that run parallel to the coast many kilometres inland" (Vignati 1935: 35-36).

More recently, Schávelzon reported a third pipe of this type in Buenos Aires (Fig. 2C), an example found near the River Riachuelo and kept in a private collection (Schávelzon 2003: 148).

Lastly, there are at least two pipes from this type collected from a shipwreck that ran aground in the 18th century in the River Plate, in what is now Puerto Madero, in the city of Buenos Aires.

In Cayastá, province of Santa Fe, at least six pipes were recovered belonging to this typology (Letieri *et al.* 2009) (Figs. 2D and 2E). These examples, which show different shapes and firing atmospheres, were found in contexts dating from between the late 16th and mid 17th century.

At colonial sites in the region of Guanabara Bay in Brazil, numerous pipes were identified, many of which show the engraved triangle motif (Fig. 3A). These pipes, of varied shapes, tend to be recovered in spaces occupied by Europeans, in association with imported artefacts, and from their decorative motifs they have been interpreted as part of the material culture of the Africans who co-existed with Europeans in domestic spaces (Gaspar 2009: 39 and 2011: 42). At the Codesp site in Santos, Brazil, a waste disposal area dating from between the early 17th century and the last quarter of the 18th century, a reduction-fired, angular ceramic pipe with engraved triangular designs was recovered (Fig. 3B) (Robrahan González and Dantas de Blasis n.d: 147).

Outside of the areas mentioned (Fig. 4), there are no records corresponding exactly to this type of piece. One possible exception is the pipe recovered in la Isabela, Dominican Republic (Deagan 2002, figure 14.9, top right). Although the piece is incomplete and the full motif cannot be appreciated, under two bands with criss-crossing incisions there is evidence of engraved triangular designs similar to those of the pipes covered here.

Figure 2

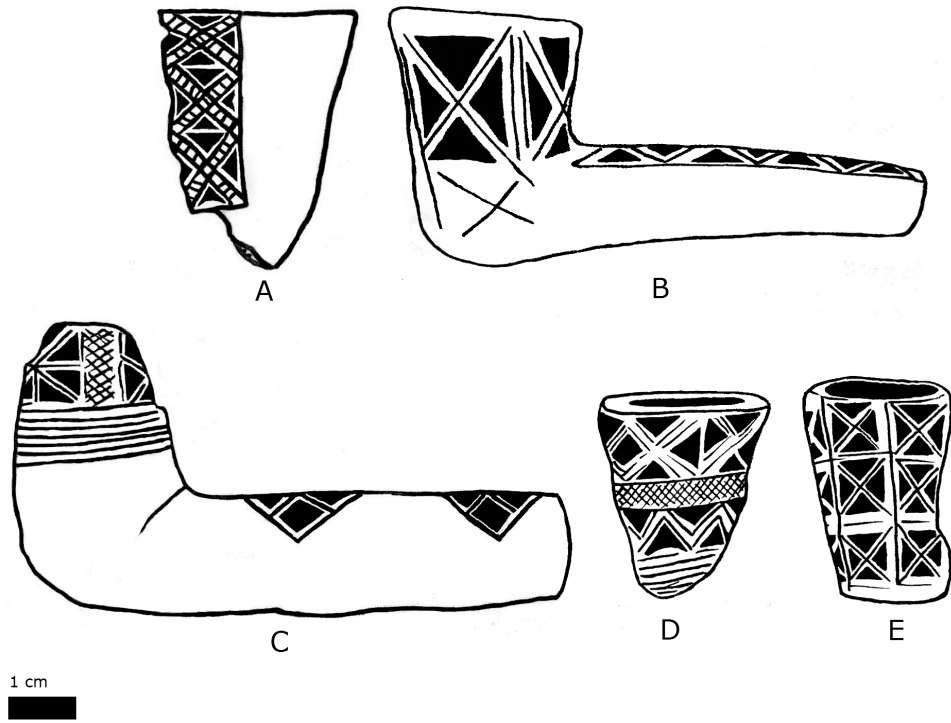


Figure 3

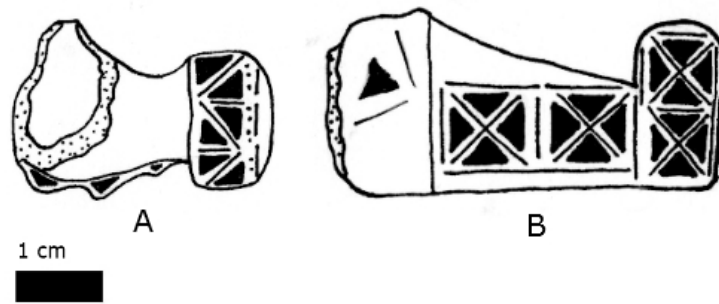


Figure 4

Discussion

The terracotta pipes decorated with engraved triangle designs were considered as part of the material culture of the African groups that were brought to the River Plate area as slaves (Schávelzon 2003, Cornero & Ceruti 2012, Gaspar 2009: 39 & 2011: 42; Lima 1993 in Robrahan González & Dantas de Blasis s/a: 147). More specifically, interpretations of these pipes and their decoration have referred to the continuity of African religious practices in the colonial context (Schávelzon 2003: 161, Cornero y Ceruti 2012: 75).

The assignation of these pieces to the African population derives essentially from the fact that the decorative style that they present does not appear to correspond to patterns of indigenous design in the region, nor to those of European tradition common in the 17th century.

The fact that pipes have been recovered with the same decorative designs in areas as far apart as Buenos Aires and the Dominican Republic suggests that these could be related to the existence in the colonial context of shared stylistic patterns derived from the process of the African diaspora. Some authors have even suggested that low-cost objects, including pipes and some ceramic recipients, may have been manufactured in colonial times for consumption by slaves (Schávelzon 2003: 148, Cornero & Ceruti 2012: 75).

The decoration of these pipes is indeed reminiscent of various objects of the material culture of west African groups. The engraved triangular designs of these pipes were related, for instance, to the symbols present in textiles and carvings from the Mahoney kingdom (now Benin), which correspond to the 17th and 18th centuries (Cornero & Ceruti: 75).

Triangular carvings similar to those on the pipes are present in the repertoire of symbols of the art of the Chokwe, Igbo and Yoruba peoples, among others. The Akan from Ghana, for instance, have a symbol system called Adinkra which is seen in various objects. Some of their carvings, textiles and smoking pipes (Duco 2001, figures 3, 5 & 7; Vivian 2008, figure 1) have engraved triangular designs very similar to those of pipes covered in this study. However, there is no evidence to date of the use of Adinkra symbols prior to the 19th century (Seeman 2010: 112) and in fact the pipes referred to by Duco (2001) and Vivian (2008) date from the 19th and 20th centuries.

Even though the relationship between the decorative style of the pipes and the African diaspora process is firmly suggested, there is still no absolute certainty about what specific ethnic group they represent, if any, or whether these pieces were produced specifically for consumption of the African population.

Making accurate claims to the relationship between the decorative style of these pipes and symbolic and identity questions remains fraught with difficulty, due to the lack of written evidence, the lack of clarity regarding the contexts in which the pieces were found and the inherent complexity of the colonial situation, with its processes of assimilation, imitation and hybridization. It must also be clarified that the state of debate and study of the African presence in Argentina, although in

permanent growth, has not been developed at length nor have there been systematic studies, which further hinders this question.

We trust that as more of these types of pieces are recorded and correctly identified as items of material culture from the colonial context, it will be possible to clarify in future the geographic distribution of these artefacts and their possible relationship with African-American groups and their symbolic complexes.

Figure captions

Figure 1: A: Bolívar 373 pipe (02-GCBA/sc/dgpat24-347), front view; B: idem, rear view; C: idem, profile view; D: Liniers House pipe (02-MC/SC/DGPeIH-130-0018).

Figure 2: A: pipe from Villa Lugano (after Rusconi 1928); B: pipe from Punta Lara (after Vignati 1935); C: pipe from the Riachuelo River margin; D and E: two pipe bowls from Cayastá.

Figure 3: A: one of the pipes recovered in the Guanabara bay, Río de Janeiro, Brazil; B: pipe from Codesp site, Santos, Brazil.

Figure 4: map showing the distribution of the finds pipes with engraved triangles.

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