



Ceramics at Aztec Ruins



Pottery attracts people for different reasons. To many, designs seem to be the most intriguing and eye-catching aspect of Pueblo pottery. Even on a potsherd lying in the weeds, a black decoration on a stark white background rarely fails to attract attention. To an archeologist, pottery is one of the best detective tools available. Prehistoric ceramics have characteristics such as color, shape, design and type of finish that enable the archaeologist to answer such questions as who, when, and where. To modern Pueblo potters, prehistoric potsherds represent a sacred thread to an ancestral past. Often, the pottery was purposely broken and left behind as an offering to the ancestors.

Early Ceramics in the Four Corners Area

The earliest pottery of the Four Corners region were utilitywares - plain brown and gray pots used for everyday cooking and storage. The potter coiled ropes of clay, one atop the other, then pinched them together, smoothed the outer surface, and polished the vessel with a stone. The final step of wood firing hardened the clay for durability. About AD 950, the potters began to add indentations that gave the pots an attractive corrugated appearance.

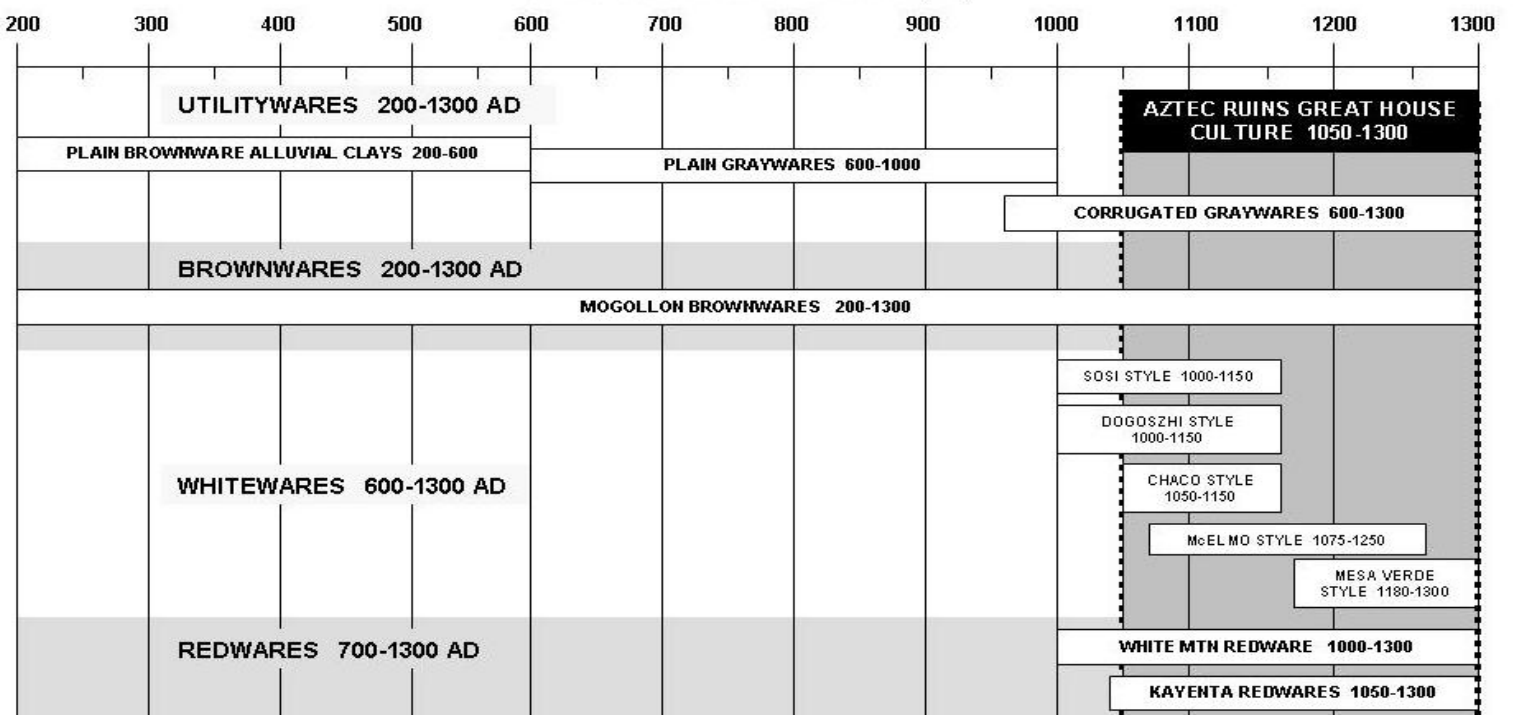


Whiteware made its debut around AD 600. Storage jars, bowls, pitchers, ladles, and mugs were made from clays that turned white when fired. Using mineral and plant pigments, black-on-white pottery was created when designs were painted on the white colored clay before they were fired. At the same time, a similar development was occurring in southeastern Utah and northeastern Arizona with production of redwares: back-on-red pottery made with red clays and painted with black or dark brown pigments.



Decorated pottery spread rapidly across the Southwest through trade networks. Over the next 700 years, designs became more intricate and refined. These designs created a chronology that is used to date archeological sites today.

CERAMIC TIMELINE ~ DATES (AD)



Ceramics at Aztec

Within the chronology of regional pottery, Aztec Ruins is a relatively late site: pottery produced before AD 1000 is not found here. Nevertheless, the extensive pottery collection of the site, with more than 40 different types, suggests that the people here imported thousands of decorated pots.

Pottery from the Mesa Verde region included some graywares, and several styles of white-wares. A lesser number of imports came from the Chaco area. Some whitewares also came from the Chuska Valley west of Chaco and the Kayenta region in northeastern Arizona. Although no redwares were made at Aztec Ruins, there were many from the Zuni area to the south and the Kayenta region.

The few brownwares found here came from the Mogollon area to the south. These ceramics are corrugated, red-slipped, or plain and usually highly polished.

The potters at Aztec Ruins produced corrugated graywares and painted whitewares. Some of the same designs, that are found on whitewares made in other regions and traded into Aztec Ruins are common on the five whiteware styles made here (Sosi, Dogoszhi, Chaco, McElmo and Mesa Verde.)



Rare ceramic forms and vessel shapes found here include animal and human effigies, flat rectangular bowls, cylindrical jars and “spiked” pots. Many researchers say that the pot on the left resembles a seed pod from the datura plant, leading some to theorize that this pot was directly associated with prehistoric datura use. Another explanation from one of the modern day Pueblos is that this pottery represents the horned toad and is used for medicine. The pot to its right has often been interpreted as a fish, a frog and, according to one Pueblo, a tadpole used to treat infertility. Numerous cylindrical jars (not pictured) were found here, similar to cylindrical jars found at Chaco Culture National Historical Park. Research and testing has shown that the jars from Chaco contain cacao residue. It may be an indication of special or ceremonial use for these rare ceramic pieces. For more information about this research refer to the web site at the University of NM, <http://www.unm.edu/~market/cgi-bin/archives/003595.html>.

Aztec Black is a style of pottery found only at Aztec Ruins. Produced in the 1200s, this style is a local adaptation of a pottery technique practiced by the neighboring Mogollon culture in southern New Mexico. These vessels are completely smudged black with a highly polished surface. This is the only known use of complete vessel smudging in the San Juan Basin. According to one archaeologist, the size, shape and color of Aztec Black vessels suggest their use was very limited, perhaps for a special group. Could the smudged black pots made here have been made by migrant potters from the Mogollon region to the south?



Embedded in the Clay

The forces that shaped the fabric of ancestral Pueblo life are recorded in the pottery and sherds found throughout the area. The economy of the household, who they traded with, when and how long they lived here, as well as their cultural ties, are all documented by clay. Embedded in the clay is the clan history, as well as the ingenuity of the potter. Her talents were not limited to those of an artist, they extended to knowledge of geology, botany, and business. Even a small sherd speaks eloquently for her skill, aesthetics, and creativity. Pueblo people say the clay remembers the hands that made it.

Sadly the connection to the past is disappearing. Potsherds are removed daily from public and private lands, others are destroyed by careless feet. Pots are stolen and sold for personal profit. Please, when visiting archeological sites, watch where you step and leave all artifacts in place for others to see and feel this connection.

