UNKNOWN AMAZON
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Santarém

Symbolism and Power in the Tropical Forest
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Introduction

Santarém pottery, with its rich repertoire of anthropomorphic figurines (fig. 5.2) and elaborate vessels bearing a bewildering menagerie of mammals, reptiles and birds (fig. 5.13), is at first sight quite unlike any other known style from the Amazon. This poses a number of intriguing questions: when was this pottery made? Was it influenced by more complex cultures from outside the Amazon? What kind of society produced it? What is the significance of the unusual shapes and exuberant imagery on certain kinds of vessels? Why were they created, what did they mean and how might they have been used?

Santarém ceramics are named after the homonymous river port located at the junction of the Tapajós and Amazon rivers (see fig. 5.3). A southern tributary of the Amazon, the Tapajós is a clear-water river fed by headwaters that drain the central Brazilian plateau. As with many other rivers in the Amazon basin, a very wide lake formed at the mouth of the Tapajós due to the rise in sea level from the beginning of the Holocene around 10,000 years ago (fig. 5.1). It is around this wide body of water that most of the archaeological sites with Santarém ceramics have been identified.

Early information on the Tapajó Indians that inhabited the Santarém area until the eighteenth century can be gathered from historical sources dating back to the sixteenth century. Indeed, the earliest historical reference to them can be found in Friar Carvajal’s chronicle of the Orellana expedition in 1542, the first to traverse the full length of the Amazon river from the Andean cordillera to the Atlantic Ocean in the east (see also Barreto, this volume). The location of the expedition’s encounter with the Tapajó can be deduced from the geographical description of the area. Carvajal wrote that Orellana’s group remained for one and a half days ‘at the mouth of a river [the Tapajós] that flowed in from the right of the one we were sailing [the Amazon], and it was one-league
wide. There, although they made no direct face-to-face contact with the Indians, they apparently saw a great number of canoes.

This episode marked the first-known contact between Europeans and the Tapajó and was followed by other exploratory and slaving expeditions before the Portuguese settled in Santarém in the seventeenth century and founded their first religious mission. The missionaries' reports give us an intriguing glimpse of Tapajó social organization, rituals and funerary practices. A careful reading of the historical documents also helps to open up insights into the iconography of Santarém pottery, which is otherwise not directly accessible.

A little more than a century later, in 1637, Pedro Teixeira organized an expedition departing from Pará at the mouth of the Amazon westward to Quito. Alonso de Rojas, the chronicler of the expedition, described the Tapajó as a warm and friendly people who could also become fearsome warriors and cannibals that relished eating their captives. One of the reasons they made war, so it was said, was to seize land from other groups. On his return from Quito to Pará, in 1639, Pedro Teixeira was accompanied by Father Cristobal de Acuña, who reported in his chronicle of the journey that the expedition traded with the Tapajó, obtaining plenty of food: ‘ducks, chicken, nets, fish, flour, fruit’. Acuña also points to the warlike demeanour of the Tapajó. He
could not hide his surprise at witnessing the submission and lack of resistance of the Tapajó upon being enslaved by the Portuguese. The context of this episode indicates the onset of a process that eventually led to the dissolution of the Tapajó as a distinctive ethnic group by the end of the eighteenth century.

A brief overview of archaeological research

Scientific archaeological research in the area began in the early 1870s with the testing – by the Canadian geologist Charles F. Hartt9 – of a shell mound at the site of Taparinha located 40 km east of the mouth of the Tapajós.10 Among the archaeological pottery recovered there were sherds with vestiges of red slip, others unpainted but bearing geometrical incisions, vessel rims with zoomorphic appendages, and basal fragments with palm-leaf imprints, all typical of the Santarém style. Around the same time Brazilian naturalist João Barbosa Rodrigues11 identified sherds with this style along the banks of the Tapajós river as much as 370 km upstream from its mouth.12

In the 1920s the German-Brazilian anthropologist Curt Nimuendajú carried out extensive archaeological surveys in the lower Amazon for the Göteborg Museum of Sweden, identifying a total of sixty-five sites in the Santarém area.13 Nimuendajú’s research extended the known distribution of Santarém pottery westward to Tupinambarana Island and eastward to Grande de Gurupá Island and Caxiuanaí bay (fig. 5.3).14 Although his archaeological reports remain poorly published (with the exception of a posthumous article15), they provided grounds for other anthropologists to acknowledge Santarém pottery as evidence of ‘an extremely developed indigenous civilisation’.16 Nimuendajú was not only familiar with the historical data. His fieldwork demonstrated unequivocally that this newly discovered pottery style is found distributed across a considerable area. He noted the existence of a potential site hierarchy around Santarém, the presence of connecting trail networks and the building of wells in areas far distant from the large rivers. Taken together, this new information presented a picture of populous riverine societies that confounded notions of a simplified ‘Tropical Forest Pattern’ of adaptation usually thought to be more typical of indigenous Amazonian cultural development.

Nimuendajú’s research provided the data for one of the first attempts at a thoughtful synthesis of Amazonian archaeology: Erland Nordenskiöld’s beautifully illustrated L’Archéologie du Bassin de l’Amazone (1930). In this book he called attention to the stylistic similarities between Santarém ceramics and pottery from the Antilles and Central America, and explained these as deriving from the shared ethnic origin of far-flung Arawak-speaking groups.17

After Nimuendajú’s research there began in the late 1930s a phase of museum collections studies initiated by Helen Palmatory who worked on several collections first in North American museums, then in Brazilian institutions. Palmatory developed a classification of Santarém ceramics based on vessel size, basal shape and decoration.18 Following ideas about the spread of culture traits by diffusion which were fashionable at the time, Palmatory surmised that there might be direct connections between the ceramics from Santarém and those of Central America and even as far afield as the Mississippi valley. Although these ideas seem wrong today, Palmatory’s and Nordenskiöld’s work at around the same time helped to bring Santarém pottery to the attention of a much wider public and helped to place the Tapajó in a historical context, as well as setting parameters for further research.19
A similar ‘diffusionist’ perspective is reflected in Corrêa’s 1965 catalogue of Santarém figurines from the Museu Emilio Goeldi. This catalogue follows a model of four major horizon styles for the Amazon advanced by the North American archaeologists Betty Meggers and Clifford Evans of the Smithsonian Institution in the early 1960s. Meggers and Evans also championed the idea that the Amazon had always played a marginal role in the cultural development of continental South America. In the case of Santarém pottery, Correia placed particular emphasis on the idea of cultural contacts and migrations originating in Venezuela and reaching the Tapajós via the many tributaries feeding from the north into the mainstream Amazon.

A contrasting approach to collection studies can be found in the work of Frederico Barata, whose stylistic analyses focused exclusively on the artistic elements without establishing a comparative or historical framework. Barata was the first investigator to make a revealing observation about the dual perspective of modelled zoomorphic elements on the so-called ‘caryatid vessels’ which are discussed below.

Some decades later Macdonald (1972) made an initial attempt at interpreting the meaning of Santarém iconography. Macdonald examined historical textual descriptions and accounts of indigenous social organization and religion to explore how Santarém iconography might reflect some of the fundamental ways in which the Tapajó ordered their universe. Based on these ethnographical accounts, she assigned a mythological significance to both animal and human elements depicted in the pottery.

More recent collection-based studies include Guapindaia’s technological assessment of Santarém ceramics concentrating on use-patterns in raw materials, tools and manufacturing techniques, and my own catalogue of the Santarém collection of the Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia of the Universidade de São Paulo. Thermoluminescence assays of sherd samples from this collection provide some of the few dates for Santarém ceramics currently available and more securely place their date of production from at least AD 900 to 1200.

In the 1980s Anna Roosevelt initiated an ambitious long-term research programme in the Santarém area. This work has provided important data on the beginnings of ceramic production in the Amazon, with implications for the whole American continent (see Oliver, this volume). Roosevelt and her colleagues have not yet published the full results of their work on the Santarém sites. Nevertheless, in her overview of cultural developments Roosevelt characterizes Santarém as the centre of a great chieftaindom in the heart of the Amazon, whose apogee lasted from the tenth to the sixteenth century AD. This model envisages several chiefs unifying and controlling an area of some 23,000 sq. km, with densely populated settlements comprising a total population of many thousands of people. It is inferred that chiefs were ranked according to their power and influence, and that they would have collected tribute and deployed the labour pool at their disposal to co-ordinate tasks such as building dwellings and developing transport and defence. Early historical accounts report religious practices focused on the worship of images and mummies of chiefs and ancestors, which probably served to strengthen and affirm the status of chiefs, priests and heads of lineages. The exchange of ideas and trade goods along networks linking these riverine chieftaindoms may help to account for the stylistic similarities found between Santarém pottery and other types from distant areas of northern South America.

This brief review underlines the fact that an overview of Santarém archaeology
must at present draw as much upon studies of museum collections as information gathered from fieldwork. Nevertheless, even working with the relatively small body of intact Santarém figurines and vessels can – when informed by archaeological, historical and ethnographic information – provide valuable insights into the social, religious and political life of a cultural florescence that was rapidly eclipsed by the impact of European newcomers.

**Nature and culture in Santarém pottery**

The Santarém pottery inventory comprises several distinct kinds of artefacts which can occasionally be surprising. One significant group consists of naturalistic anthropomorphic objects. Within this group there are a range of smaller figurines, usually female (figs 5.4–5 and 5.7), and larger figurines, as well as hollow vessels in the form of seated males (fig. 5.2), probably used for storing beverages or possibly also as funerary urns (figs 5.11–12).\(^{34}\) The smaller figurines tend to be more stylized than the larger male anthropomorphic vessels. While the female figurines are quite common in museum collections, the male anthropomorphic figures are rarer.\(^{35}\) Another group of objects includes caryatid vessels (figs 5.13–14), necked vessels (figs 5.20–21), globular vessels (fig. 5.25), plates and bowls, and other rarer items, all of which share in common the application of modelled zoomorphic appliqué figures and the presence of a ring base. While the study of figurines in the former group opens windows into understanding the role of gender and status in Tapajó social organization, it is the complex compositions among the latter group that offers some of the most fascinating insights into the cultural appropriation of nature by an Amazonian society.

**The figurines and anthropomorphic hollow vessels**

The smaller human figurines range in height from approximately 10 to 30 cm and are nearly all female, although males are occasionally represented as well (figs 5.6). It has been suggested that these artefacts could be related to domestic cults dedicated to female fertility, and to increasing the birth rate among competing agricultural societies.\(^ {36}\)

Typically the females have a semi-circular base instead of legs and feet (fig. 5.4).\(^ {37}\) These figures generally have a stylized, standardized appearance although there are one or two which adopt rather odd positions, such as an individual holding her foot to her mouth (fig. 5.5). Historical accounts give glimpses of the role that women could play in Tapajó society, possibly indicating a matrilineal organization.\(^ {38}\) A case in point is the famous ‘Maria Mochaça, reported by Father Betendorf to be a woman of high status and a ‘princess by descent’\(^ {39}\) who towards the end of the seventeenth century was sought for consultation as an oracle.\(^ {40}\)

A wide range of body ornamentation is seen in both male and female figurines.

5.4 Figurine of a pregnant woman with her hands clasped to her abdomen. These kinds of figurines may have been linked to domestic fertility cults (height 26.5 cm, width 17.5 cm, depth 11 cm; Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia da Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil).
These include ear lobe perforation and ear plugs; wrist and ankle bands (figs 5.5 and 6); and feather headdresses and head bands, which all find parallels in contemporary tropical forest societies. Such ornaments may identify an individual’s social role, as is the case today among the Bororo of central Brazil, where it has been shown how differences of feather colour and size in a group of headdresses - the ‘pariko’ – mark clan affiliation. It has also been suggested that body ornament can be interpreted as part of a strategy of female display to ensure reproductive success in the context of demographic growth.

Another figurine portrays a female seated on the ground grasping a large open bowl resting on outstretched legs before her (fig. 5.7). She appears to be an adolescent female whose elegant, elongated, pierced ear lobes perhaps indicate her status in the community as a member of a prestigious lineage. Close examination reveals a wealth of unexpected detail, for the vestiges of black pigment trace an application of body paint that once covered almost her entire body. The designs are best preserved on the face, back, upper arms and lower legs bearing a range of geometric motifs that can be recognized in other media (fig. 5.9).

Moreover, in common with many of the other figurines illustrated here, she wears a band around her head which binds a carefully braided coiffure that is seen to best
effect from the rear. Affixed to the head band are two groups of three modelled zoomorphic appendages (fig. 5.8). Careful inspection of these appendages points to marked similarities with a special category of small objects fashioned in semi-precious stones for which Santarém culture is renowned. Known as muiraquitás, these exquisite miniature masterpieces were treasured objects, the raw material for which probably originated far afield in the Guyana highlands. Many muiraquitás are fashioned in translucent gemstones of greenish hue and a great number mimic the form of a frog (fig. 5.10).
What might explain this constellation of body ornament and body paint on the seated female figure? Lacking written texts, we must resort to reading the visual vocabulary of motifs and seek analogies in what is recorded of the rituals enacted at key moments in an individual’s life cycle, especially the critical transition to full adulthood.

In lowland South America the body can be seen as a ‘canvas’ upon which an individual’s social identity can be transformed and constructed.\(^4\) The deployment of body paint to effect these changes in identity and social role often works in tandem with ceremonies involving masks.\(^5\) This might explain how a young female who is becoming a fully fledged member of adult society would be adorned. We might envisage in this case how her elaborate body paint and other adornments signal her change of status as she assumes a new social identity. This would have entailed her leaving her natal household and the protection of her kin and making the dangerous passage to a new place in society with her prospective husband’s family. As such she is charged with the responsibility of conception and child bearing – a procreative role upon which the future life and well-being of the community as a whole depends.

A second group of human-shaped vessels consists of large, hollow, rotund seated males, more than 35 cm high (figs 5.11 and 12).\(^6\) Their form suggests that they could
5.12 Anthropomorphic vessel depicting a seated man holding a rattle in his right hand (height 34 cm, width 39 cm; Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia da Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil). Rattles were frequently used in shamanic curing ceremonies and other rituals.

have been used to hold and serve liquids, probably fermented beverages. These male figures are usually depicted holding a rattle and seated on low stools, which correspond to the wooden stools that are the privileged possession of elder males and shamans among contemporary Amazonian societies (see McEwan, this volume). One seated individual holds a rattle in his right hand (fig. 5.12). These vessels also remind us of the anthropomorphic funerary urns with seated figures that are characteristic of the Maracá phase at the mouth of the Amazon (see Guapindaia, this volume). A number of the figures wear head bands like those on the smaller figurines already described. Likewise these seated males feature perforated ear lobes with prominent ear spools inserted as symbols of their status.

The large dimensions and imposing globular shape of some of these vessels underline the importance of these particular individuals. Historical reports often make reference to ranking and hierarchy in Tapajó society. Writing on Tapajó government in the early seventeenth century, Heriarte, 37 a lay member of the Teixeira expedition noted how ‘these Indians are governed by principals, one in each hut of twenty or thirty couples, and all are governed by a great Principal over all of them, who they very much obey’. 38 Clearly this reflects a specific tier of authority in a chiefly hierarchy, the full extent of which we can only guess at. 39
Tapajó settlements were still very sizeable and densely populated as late as the beginning of the seventeenth century. Describing the place where the contemporary city of Santarém nowadays lies, Heriarte relates that 'this is the largest village and settlement that we have discovered so far in this district. It raises 60,000 bowmen, when war is afoot and since there are so many Tapajó they are feared by the other Indians and nations and thus became the sovereign power in this district.' If a figure of 60,000 may be something of an exaggeration, recent archaeological work in other areas in Amazonia, several hundred miles upstream from Santarém, certainly corroborate the existence of very large settlements throughout the region (see Petersen et al., this volume). In fact there is little doubt that, at the onset of European colonization, the indigenous population of the Amazon was very much greater than today, and it is entirely possible that the figures provided by Heriarte are not too much off the mark.

Together with ranking, it is also likely that some form of institutional division of labour existed among the Tapajó. Betendorf, writing towards the end of the seventeenth century at what was a time of profound change, reports how having seen no living person there before, I found in a corner a small boy reduced to bones, lying on the ground, with a piece of manioc bread in his hand ... I gathered him up and took him home ... believing he was still a pagan, I asked why he had not been baptized and an Indian replied it was because he was a slave.

The term 'slave' carries many connotations not all of which may have been strictly applicable in this particular case, nevertheless peonage relationships are not uncommon in lowland South America. In the upper Rio Negro basin, of the north-west Amazon, riverine Tukanoan and Baniwa Indians engage in asymmetric trade and labour negotiations involving peonage with their neighboring Maku groups, who are mostly hunters and gatherers settled in hinterland areas (see Politis and Neves, this volume).

Some mortuary practices also seem to indicate differentiation of individual status or rank. We know that endo-cannibalism was practised among the great chiefdoms of the Middle and Lower Amazon. Heriarte notes, for example, that in the case of the Tapajó:

Upon the death of one of these Indians, they lay his corpse in a hammock and place all his worldly goods at his feet, and at his head the figure of the Devil, done in their fashion, with needlework, and then put him in especially built huts, where they shrink and eat the meat; and the crushed bones are soaked in wine that their relatives and others drink.

Although endo-cannibalism has been recorded among contemporary Amazonian groups such as the Yanomami and the Desana, and historically among the 'Mujaraguanos' (sic) and 'Rombos' (sic), the Tapajó differ in their treatment of the dead, for some reports hint at the practice of mumification. Betendorf writes:

There was Father Antonio Pereira, then a missionary at Gurupatyba and Tapajós, where he took action worthy of his great zealosity viz: the Tapajó Indians kept the shrunken corpse of one of their ancestors they called Monhangarpy, meaning first father, whom they honoured with offerings and dances for many years, the corpse hung from the ridgepole of a hut, like a coffin in a tomb ... One night he had the hut where it was kept set on fire, and it was burnt to ashes.

The eighteenth-century chronicle by Father João Daniel confirms the practice of preserving or mumifying dead bodies:
The Indians answered that they worshipped some bodies and creatures, which they kept well hidden in a hut in the midst of the bush, known only to elders and adults. The priest warned them that they should bring in all these bodies and indeed they brought seven shrunken bodies of their ancestors; and some five stones that they also worshipped. In the face of the Indians’ lack of religion and the sight of so much idolatry, the missionary had these idols burnt in public, and he ordered the ashes of the seven dried bodies and the stones to be put in the middle of the river so that along with them would be drowned their blindness, and blind idolatry.60

The display of the dead and access to them by their living descendants finds an archaeological parallel in the Maracá area, where anthropomorphic funerary urns were not buried but left visible to the community (see Guapindaia, this volume).61 The kind of treatment of the dead outlined above, intercession with the ancestors and access to the spirit world are all integral aspects of tropical forest cosmology, and more fascinating glimpses of these distinct ways of perceiving and ordering the world are found in the kinds of vessels that I will now turn to.

The ‘caryatid’ vessels

Caryatid vessels – so-called because the small crouching modelled figures supporting the bowl recall the elements in classic Greek architecture – comprise the most distinctive, and in many ways the most surprising, vessel forms in the entire Santarém ceramic inventory.

These vessels are shaped by coiling and modelling the clay into three superimposed components: a hollow base; a middle level composed of three modelled anthropomorphic ‘caryatid’ supports; and a bowl around which are arranged combinations of modelled zoomorphic and anthropomorphic appendages (fig. 5.13). These sophisti-
TOP 5.14 Caryatid vessel and its constituent elements: (a) whole vessel, (b) incised patterns around the rim, (c) king vultures arranged at regular intervals, (d) three caryatid figures and (e) incised patterns on the base.

ABOVE 5.15 Different visual perspectives of modelled king vulture appendages on caryatid vessels.

LEFT 5.16 A king vulture – one of the creatures most frequently depicted in Santarém ceramics.
cated creations reveal surprising subtleties and nuances in the organization of the component elements and their attention to detail.

Caryatid vessels usually have four distinct kinds of decorative elements (fig. 5.14a): first, patterned bands running around the circumference of the rim (fig. 5.14b); second, modelled appendages representing king vultures arranged at regular intervals around the vessel (fig. 5.14c); third, the caryatid figures (fig. 5.14d); and fourth, incised patterns on the base (fig. 5.14e).

The incised decoration on the band around the rim is composed mainly of bilateral motifs but there are also asymmetric elements, combining rotational and bilateral symmetry (fig. 5.14b). The modelled king vultures follow this same translational movement in which the figures alternate between front and back views of the bird also with outstretched wings (fig. 5.14c). Beneath, the small modelled human figures supporting the bowl are arranged in an outward facing radial pattern (fig. 5.14d). Finally, a further application of the principle of bilateral symmetry is also evident in the organization of the motifs on the basal band (fig. 5.14e).

Depending on the angle from which some of the small modelled figures are viewed the animal representation differs. As the viewer's perspective changes, so the creature in question appears to metamorphose, assuming a different form, e.g. a king vulture (fig. 5.16) becomes an anthropomorphic figure and vice-versa (fig. 5.15).

5.17 Various bicephalous king vulture appendages in which two heads share the same body. They recall the kinds of metamorphoses and transformations that occur in the course of shamanic trance.

Bicephalous human-like zoomorphic figures on caryatid vessels call to mind the kind of transformations experienced in shamanic trance (fig. 5.17). Under the effect of hallucinogenic drugs the human themselves shift and metamorphose. This is a world-view where the culture-nature opposition becomes blurred and where, indeed, nature ceases to exist as an external realm.

How then can one conceive of the kinds of social and ritual contexts in which the vessels were created and used? The iconography on caryatid vessels was perhaps bound up with the transmission of oral traditions during collective ceremonies. The caryatids proper, i.e. the female appendages supporting the vessels, are suggestive of these kinds of collective rituals (fig. 5.18). They are usually displayed seated, squatting, eyes or mouth covered by their hands, and in a body posture that finds possible parallels with that of women banned from attending male religious ceremonies, which was widely observed among Amazonian societies (fig. 5.19).

Again, in the words of Betendorf:

The Tapajó had an open area dedicated to the Devil where they gathered for drinking and dancing, telling their women to bring them much wine, after which they squatted and covered their eyes with their hands so as not to see [my emphasis], the talk of the sorcerers [shamans] in a thick and hoarse voice persuading them that this was the voice of the Devil, and they put into their minds whatever they wanted.

The link between the textual description and the iconography on the vessels is of
course tenuous but nevertheless suggestive. They also lead us to ask why and when such collective community rituals might have taken place and why they might have been so important.

Once more, Heriarte’s account offers some intriguing clues when he reported that: When the sowing lands are ripe, to each a tenth is allotted, and altogether they store it in the house of the idols, saying that it is destined for *potaba de Aura*, which is the name of the devil in their language; and from this corn they make wine every week, and on Thursday night they carry it in large vessels to a very clean and tidy threshing area beyond the village, where all of the nation gather, and with the sounds of horns and sad and fateful drumming, begin to play for the time of one hour, until there comes an enormous earthquake, that seems to be knocking down trees and mountains; and with it comes the Devil that goes into a house the Indians have made for him, and then with the coming of the Devil all begin to dance and sing in their language, and to drink the wine to the end, and thus they are misled by the Devil.⁶⁸

Among contemporary Amazonian societies, important collective rituals take place at specific times of the year. The ancient use of what Heriarte calls horns probably refers to the long wooden trumpets still played in these rituals. The memory of the great collective rituals among the chiefdoms of the lower Amazon may be preserved in the very toponym ‘trombetas’, as applied, for example, to the Trombetas river, not far away from the Tapajós. The Portuguese named it after the instruments the indigenous peoples used for their feasts and drinking bouts, to which they were highly disposed.⁶⁹ In Heriarte’s narrative the devil figure preceded by the sound of the great earthquake might refer to the narrator’s vivid impressions of a cacophony of trumpets and of a masked shaman in ritual trance. This passage suggests that such rituals are closely connected with the seasonal agricultural cycle and may be accompanied by the collective redistribution of food and drink. In the north-west Amazon flutes and trumpets are played in the context of ceremonies associated with the ‘Jurupari complex’,⁷⁰ a group of tales on the social and cosmological order transmitted through initiation rituals that emphasize exogamy.⁷¹

**Necked vessels**

The so-called ‘necked vessels’ are composed of three parts: a neck on the top; an oval middle part with six protuberances to which a combination of modelled zoomorphic and anthropomorphic appendages are attached; and a truncated conic hollow

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⁶⁸ For a fuller account of these and other collective Amazonian rituals see F. Boas, *The Social Organization of the Amerindians of the Amazon*.


5.20 Necked vessel with zoomorphic appendages comprising cayman, frogs, monkeys and birds (height 18.9 cm, width 31 cm; Museu Paraense Emilio Goeldi, Belém, Brazil). The profusion of animal imagery probably reflects Amazonian notions of cosmological order.

5.21 Necked vessel and its constituent elements: (a) whole vessel, (b) incised patterns around the neck rim, (c) anthropomorphic face appendage, (d) alligator head appendages with superimposed animals and two frogs, and (e) incised patterns around the base.

base (fig. 5.20). Four kinds of decorative design are applied with some variation (fig. 5.21a): first, repetitive incised patterns on the neck rim (fig. 5.21b); second, an anthropomorphic face appendage on the middle part (fig. 5.21c); third, also on the middle part, two three-dimensional appendages in the shape of alligator heads, with other animals superimposed (king vulture, bush dog, curassow, etc.), in addition to two toads (fig. 5.21d); and fourth, an incised pattern on the base (fig. 5.21e). On both rim and base one finds bilateral symmetry, while in the centre the zoomorphic appendages follow radial symmetry.
5.22 Caymans and alligators are powerful riverine predators and often feature on Santarém vessels as fundamental elements supporting different kinds of animals.

ABOVE 5.23 Monkeys appear frequently in the compositions of tropical animals represented on Santarém vessels.

LEFT 5.24 Detail of the appendage on a necked vessel in the shape of a cayman snout with attached animals including an anthropomorphic figure with a tail.
From the formal point of view anthropomorphic elements occupy their central parts with a cornucopia of tropical animals – caymans, frogs, monkeys, macaws and other creatures – arrayed around them at different levels (figs 5.22–3). This profusion of animal imagery plausibly evokes a kind of creation tale in which the principal actors engage with each other, reinforcing the social order and cosmology during collective ceremonies. Finally, hybrid creatures (anthropomorphic figures with tails) decorate the necked vessels (fig. 5.24).

The globular vessels and plates

Globular vessels have a much simpler structure, formed by coiling and modelling. They too are divided into three parts: a neck somewhat wider than the ones found on necked vessels; the large globular body to which are attached two appendages representing either an animal’s head and tail or human features; and the same truncated conic base as the above types (fig. 5.25a).

They usually have two kinds of decorative design: the neck with incised motifs in which bilaterally symmetrical patterns are clearly recognizable (fig. 5.25b); and appendages that include jaguars, agoutis, alligators and anthropomorphic figures arranged in bilateral fashion. In some cases other iconographic representations (snakes and seated anthropomorphic figures) are added to the basic scheme, resulting in more elaborate compositions and radial arrangements (fig. 5.25c). The base, however, is always plain, bearing no incised bands like those on the rims (fig. 5.25d).

Yet another distinctive kind of vessel comprises shallow plates with appliqué elements on the inner surface as well as around the rim. One such vessel has snake motifs arranged within a quadripartite division of the plate’s inner rim (fig. 5.26).
Conclusion: a structured cosmos - order and symmetry in Santarém iconography

The meagre archaeological data combined with a careful study of the historical resources point to Santarém, like Marajó Island (see Schaan, this volume),72 being an important Amazonian population epicentre.73 Over time, demographic expansion must have led to keen rivalry among sizeable villages and settlements. Slowly some of the more powerful polities are likely to have controlled a hierarchy of subordinate settlements and perhaps imposed their identity through different media.74 The stylistic variations in the pottery, both in terms of decoration and technology, provide strong evidence of the existence of a regional style.

The range of Santarém pottery perhaps reflects some aspects of craft specialization and standardized production. Santarém pottery draws on a repertoire of basic elements that are inventively combined. The way in which this was achieved reflects a coherent, highly structured symbolic system.75

In asking what might have inspired some of the most sophisticated creations such as the caryatid vessels, I have explored suggestive elements including the metamorphosing animal imagery featuring king vulture iconography and the squatting female figures with their hands over their mouths. The vessels embody fundamental aspects of the way in which order is expressed in material culture. The application of symmetry and the way in which the design patterns form recursive and well-structured sets of relationships communicate organizing principles that also apply to other areas of social life.76 The carefully ordered iconographic assemblages may also have incorporated elements of mythological significance. Although our archaeological knowledge of Santarém pottery is scant, it can give surprising insights into a hidden world. In this context larger male figurines and urns, sometimes naturalistically depicted, are clearly indicative of social prestige in a tropical forest society. Judging by attributes such as rattles and stools, they represent shamans as leaders of rituals and guardians of cosmological knowledge.

Finally, I have suggested that contemporary Amazonian practices – such as the so-called Jurupari complex – might shed light on the kinds of collective rites and rituals that find expression in the sophisticated compositions embodied in Santarém pottery. The shared cultural elements that I have pointed to indicate that among tropical forest societies there was a pan-Amazonian pattern of social and religious customs that embraced collective feasting, marriage, trade and warfare and that was widely practised by multi-ethnic local groups in pre-colonial Amazonia.77 The extensive distribution of such a ceremonial complex is confirmed by the ethnohistorical references,78 and indicates that selected myths and social practices persisted over time because of their adaptive advantages from a biological point of view in selecting for exogamy.

In this sense, I would like to stress the potential of these objects for providing information that extends far beyond an appreciation of their aesthetic qualities. They symbolize a vital connection with one of the last frontiers of the human imagination, how the world was viewed and ordered in the unknown Amazon.

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Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, Fundação Brasil Central and several private collections.

19 See, for instance, the later work by Easby 1952, Collier 1989, Corrêa 1965, Guapindaia 1993, Macdonald 1972, Gomes 1999, which all draw upon Palmatary’s pioneering efforts.

20 Corrêa 1965.

21 Meggers and Evans (1961). This forty-year-old model still provides the basic chronological framework for Amazonian archaeology.

22 See, for instance, Meggers and Evans 1983.

23 Corrêa 1965.

24 Not an archaeologist by training, Barata was a newspaper man turned antiquities collector who developed a strong interest in Santarém ceramics later in his life.


26 He based his approach on the anthropological classic Primitive Art by Franz Boas (1955).


28 Guapindaia 1993. This research enabled her to divide Santarém ceramics into two main groups, before and after European contact.

29 Gomes 1999. Here I present a revised pottery typology and propose a tentative chronological framework within which the sequence of ceramic complexes might be placed. This is, of course, likely to be modified and refined as new information and dates from stratified archaeological contexts become available.

30 AD 600 ± 160 to 1150 ± 210 (Gomes 1999). These dates are based on thermoluminescence testing of sherds from the MAE (USP) collection, run at the Instituto de Física, Universidade de São Paulo. This study partially confirms the hypothesis that Santarém pottery ought to date to around 1000 to 1500 (Meggers and Evans 1961, 1963; Brochado and Lathrap 1982).

31 Roosevelt 1993, 1995, 1996. Detailed excavation reports of this work have not yet been published.

32 The sites of Taperinha and Pedra Pintada, both located a few dozen kilometres downstream from Santarém, have provided the earliest dates for the beginning of ceramic production in the Americas (Roosevelt et al. 1991, 1996).

33 Roosevelt 1992: 80. In addition to relations among communities belonging to the same polity, interaction between larger centres is likely to have taken place, which would help explain the adoption of technological innovations or parts of the symbolic repertoire. Therefore the stylistic traits of Santarém pottery related to the Amazonian Polychrome tradition – such as mazel flanges, ‘ear eyes’ (Magalis 1975), arched eyebrows and polychrome painting (Gomes 1999) – may be explained through the existence of a network of contacts connecting societies of the middle and lower Amazon river. Although each of the main pottery styles in the period prior to contact (Santarém, Marajó, Maracá, Guaraiva, etc.) may be viewed as unique, the presence of shared elements identified in the analysis of the pottery indicates the dynamics of a ‘tropical forest cultural tradition’. Of course these two functions are not mutually exclusive.


37 This kind of base is also called ‘semi-lunar’. Roosevelt 1988: 11.

38 Roosevelt 1988: 11.

39 Betendorf 1910: 171–3. Betendorf was sent to the Tapajó by Father Antonio Vieira, a Portuguese-Brazilian Jesuit priest and humanist, who, like a sort of seventeenth-century Las Casas, fought to protect Indians against enslavement and was persecuted by the Inquisition. Chronicles of religious missionaries, such as Betendorf, who were more interested in indigenous religion than the early explorers, provide an important source on Tapajó culture. Their reports coincide with the final stage of the cultural disintegration of the Tapajó, with the impostion of Christianity and the practice of mass conversion, when individuals from different groups were relocated to Christian villages for indiarticulation (Menendez 1981; Porro 1993).

From these sources, the earliest available document was written by Betendorf (1910), in the second half of the seventeenth century. Next, one hundred years after the establishment of a mission in Santarém, there is the report of Father João Daniel (1776).

40 Nimuendajú 1949: 98.

41 Dorta 1981.


44 Seeger et al. 1979.

45 Baer 1993: 305.


47 Unlike previous chroniclers, Heriarte (1874) provided specific references on the size of Tapajó villages, their form of government, religion and funeral rites. More than any other, Heriarte’s account contributed to the construction of the hypothesis of social complexity in Santarém.

48 Heriarte 1874: 38.

49 The pottery inventory and the historical data provide elements that fit into a chieftain model for the political organization of the Tapajó as recorded in anthropological literature: Carneiro 1981; Earle 1987; Carneiro (1981), and Flannery and Marcus (2000: 31–2) suggest that chieftainship does not have a monolithic character but may take on different forms. These authors stress interaction, usually of a competitive nature, as a trait common to chieftains, which are never found alone in a given area. Based on these observations, the Tapajó can be viewed as a policy that shared underlying economic and religious practices with other Amazonian societies. Progressive demographic expansion led in particular historical situations to the emergence of social complexity (Drennan 1995, Flannery and Marcus 2000: 31–32).

50 Heriarte 1874: 35.

51 Heckenberger et al. 1999; see also Myers 1973.

52 Deneven 1992a.


54 Ramos et al. 1980. Although parallelisms between contemporary north-west Amazon and historical Tapajó are germane, the scale of labour mobilization between these societies is probably very different. Hence, while the size of ethnographic and archaeological villages in the Uapés river, upper Rio Negro basin, had not changed significantly during the five hundred years of European colonization, the same did not happen among the Tapajó (see Neves 1999b).

55 See p. 131, n. 55.

56 Heriarte 1874: 36–7.

57 Chagnon 1983.

58 Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971.


61 In contrast, Amazonian ethnography is full of references to restrictions on even mentioning a deceased person’s name.
62 Macdonald (1972) addresses Santarém iconography, linking it with certain features of Tapajó cosmology. Her hypothesis, yet to be confirmed, of a possible Carib origin for the group, resulted in her use of Carib myths and consequent correlation of some pottery decoration with the Warau mythological narrative. In turn, Roosevelt (1987, 1992, 1996) suggests that the portrayals of king vultures, alligators, snakes, jaguars and toads may be related to warrior symbols, in an implicit allusion to prior studies on the iconography of Panamanian chiefdoms. See also Linares 1977 in Flannery and Marcus 1996.

63 Among Tukanoans, drawings on the walls of the longhouses portraying narratives of the creation of the universe turn into the actual process of creation unfolding before people's eyes while ingesting powerful hallucinogenic substances: Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975, S. Hugh-Jones 1979. See also Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971, Hugh-Jones 1985 and Békési 1984 for discussions of the symbolic wealth of the decoration and form of Tukanoan malocas (communal longhouses).

64 Such operations are characteristic of the so-called 'perspectivist Amerindian thinking' (Viveiros de Castro 1998)

65 Barata 1953a and b; Macdonald 1972; Roosevelt 1997a.


68 Heriarte 1874: 36.

69 According to Heriarte (1874: 39), 'the lands of this Trombetas River (the Portuguese named it after the instruments the indigenous peoples used for their feasts and drinking bouts) bear more manioc than the Tapajó lands and there is much hunting'.

70 S. Hugh-Jones 1979, 1988; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1989; Wright 1992a & b.

71 Reichel-Dolmatoff 1989.

72 Roosevelt 1991.

73 Shennan 2000.

74 Flannery and Marcus 2000; Renfrew 1986.

75 Hays 1995.

76 My observations here are based on my study of the symmetry on the composition of one- and two-dimensional, incised and painted patterns found on the rims, as well as the relative position of the tridimensional appendages, in a sample of seventy-one vessels and large fragments from the Tapajós Collection of the Museu de Arqueología e Etnologia, Universidade de São Paulo (Gomes 1999).

77 Reichel-Dolmatoff (1989) suggested that the widespread distribution of this ceremonial complex over time and place in the Amazon indicates that selected myths persisted over time because of their adaptive advantages from the biological point of view, i.e., selecting for exogamy.