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FROM THE VERACRUZ COAST

(WITH THREE PLATES)

BY  
PHILIP DRUCKER  
Bureau of American Ethnology



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# TWO ABORIGINAL WORKS OF ART FROM THE VERACRUZ COAST

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(WITH 3 PLATES)

The two specimens described here were excavated at the site of Cerro de las Mesas, Veracruz, by the National Geographic-Smithsonian Institution Expedition to Mexico in 1941. Both were referred to in the published accounts of the work.<sup>1</sup> They could not be described adequately, however, at the time the reports were written, for both were badly broken, and their restoration was a long, painstaking process. This was particularly true of the pottery statue with which the preparators at the Museo Nacional de México struggled intermittently for several years before they found a way to bolster the fragments to support the figure's considerable weight. Both pieces are now among the collections of the Museo Nacional.

The specimens are important on two counts. From the cultural standpoint they reflect rather clearly the cultural heritage of their makers, and as objects of art both deserve consideration. As examples of artistic expression these two pieces rate high among the host of finer achievements of Middle American civilizations. Therefore, the accompanying descriptions and plates are presented for the benefit of students of Mesoamerican archeology and also for those interested in prehistoric American art.

## THE TURTLE SHELL

The first piece to be described is a carved turtle shell (pl. 1, and fig. 1). It was found among the numerous mortuary offerings associated with burial II-18, in trench 30, which belongs to the Lower II period of the site. The small shell, about 15 cm. in length, was complete with both carapace and plastron. Six holes about the periphery of the carapace suggest that it was meant to be lashed onto something, but the use

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<sup>1</sup> Stirling, M. W., Expedition unearths buried masterpieces of carved jade, *Nat. Geogr. Mag.*, vol. 80, No. 3, pp. 207-302, 1941; Drucker, P., Ceramic stratigraphy at Cerro de las Mesas, Veracruz, Mexico, *Bur. Amer. Ethnol. Bull.* 141, pp. 9, 12, 1943.

of the object is unknown. Perhaps it was a ceremonial rattle. Restoration of the many fragments into which it had been broken revealed a complex design consisting of a number of symbolic motifs engraved on the carapace. The design appears to have been engraved with some

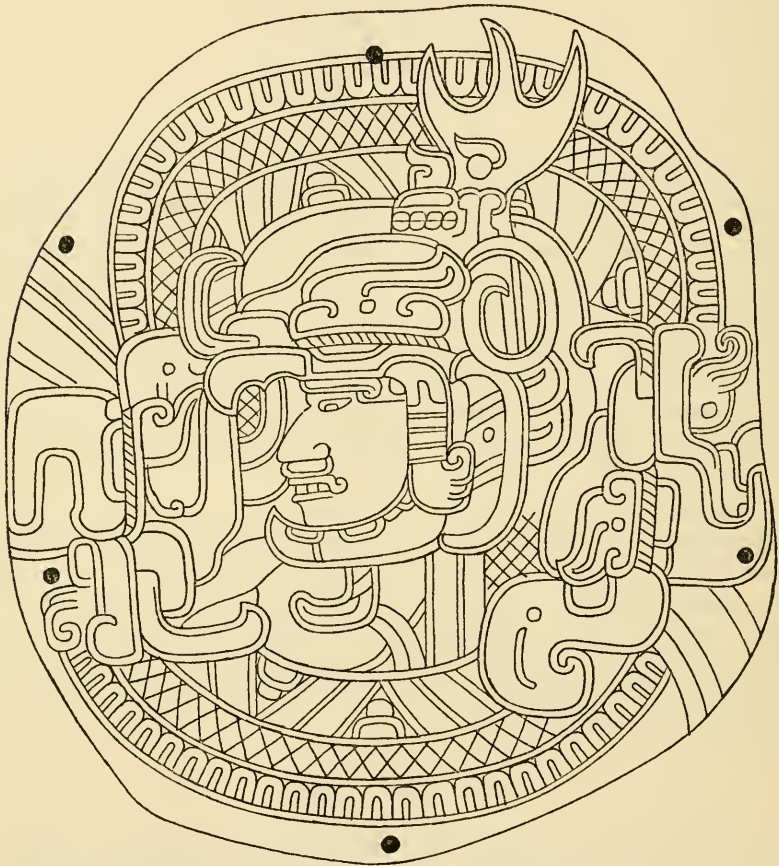


FIG. 1.—Design carved on turtle shell from Cerro de las Mesas. (From drawing by Covarrubias.)

rather sharp implement; then the areas adjoining the principal fields were scraped away to shallow bevels to give an impression of bold relief. The central figure of the design is the head of a man wearing an elaborate helmet consisting of a jaguar head, surmounted by a leering monkey skull. The jaguar's jaws are open so that the wearer's face appears between them. Such headgear was often used, we know, by Mexican priests on occasions of ritual. Considerable stylization has

taken place in the representation of the jaguar, but the beast may be recognized by the short nose, the low-domed, catlike forehead, and the large, round ears. The jaws have been modified until they differ somewhat from those usually seen in drawings from the area. They have a faint suggestion of the powerful beak of some raptorial bird. The significance of the monkey skull with its peculiar 3-tined crest is difficult to interpret.

Framing the central figure is a band consisting of two plumed serpents. The heads of these weird creatures are to be seen on either side of the head of the central personage with the helmet. The serpents' bodies are represented by bands covered with three parallel zones of small elements. The outermost of these shows unmistakably the broad belly scales, the cross hatching of the middle band representing the smaller scales of the sides, and the upper (or inner) zone indicating markings of the reptiles by opposed sets of sloping lines.

Good design is achieved by the contrast between the small compact elements of the serpent bodies and the more open areas of the central figure. There is a horizontal band set off by the plumed serpent heads, with their sweeping curves and open spaces, across the middle of the field that invariably leads the eye to the human face at the center, augmenting the emphasis of the location of the face on the high point of the shell's convexity. Were it not for this horizontal movement the components of the intricate pattern would have been lost in a confused mass of lines and small forms.

Another striking feature of the carving from the standpoint of design is its deliberate asymmetry that gives it movement and avoids the static monotony of perfectly balanced patterns. The bodies of the upper and the lower serpents are not in line. The left side of the lower one is offset markedly to the viewer's left; the right end, where it joins the head, is set over only slightly, producing a total effect of motion to the left. A similar trend is produced by the monkey skull and the plumes of the right-hand serpent which project beyond the central band and produce, with the rest of the open curvilinear areas of the central band, a triangle whose apex lies, or rather points, to the left—the same direction in which the central personage is facing. The plumes of the left-hand serpent were suppressed apparently because their use would have arrested the consistent leftward motion of the pattern.

A small area between the head and ear of the right-hand plumed serpent and the lower jaw of the jaguar headdress is partially cross hatched. It looks as though the artist had begun to fill in the entire strip between the central figure and the frame, then stopped. Why he

did not complete this filler cannot be determined. It may be that he realized such a filled area would interrupt the transverse motion of the design.

All in all the design is well executed and obviously planned. Stylistically the carvings belong to the Highland tradition. The motifs: Personages wearing headgear representing the open fauces of an animal or monster, and plumed serpents, are common in the Highland from Teotihuacan to Aztec times. (They occur also in Maya art but the style is not in the least Mayan.) The treatment: A nonrealistic stiffness of the central figure, exuberant detail and filler, remind one strongly of paintings from Teotihuacan frescoes, and also certain Oaxacan stelae. Neither the characteristics of detail nor the general staid simplicity of Olmec art can be detected in the piece. Although the design is complex it lacks the interweaving of elements, the sinuous interlocked lines, of the Central Veracruz carving found on stone yokes and palmas, the style often called (or miscalled) "Totonaac."

There is a noteworthy stylistic resemblance between the carving on the turtle shell and that of four Cerro de las Mesas stelae: those numbered 3, 5, 6, and 8.<sup>2</sup> Of all the better-preserved stone monuments from the site, these four form the most sharply defined group stylistically and, like the turtle shell, appear to derive their stimulus from Highland influences. This similarity suggests the provisional assignment of these stelae to the time horizon of the turtle shell, which, on the basis of the pottery associated with it in the burial offerings, can be dated as of the Lower II ceramic period.

#### THE STATUE OF XIUHTECUTLI

The clay statue shown on plates 2 and 3 was excavated by Stirling in Trench 34. It is to be attributed to the same temporal horizon as the turtle shell, Lower II. The large, heavy vessel that is supported on the head of the figure had been placed on a step and was buried by an enlargement of the mound. Portions of the body of the statue were inside the vessel, and pieces of clay arms and legs were stood vertically around the mouth. Within the largest fragment of the torso were bones of a human infant. Underneath the other fragments was the head.<sup>3</sup> In other words the object would seem to have been deliberately broken up so that all the pieces could be piled together as an offering during this particular enlargement of the mound.

<sup>2</sup> Stirling, M. W., Stone monuments from southern Mexico, *Bur. Amer. Ethnol. Bull.* 138, pls. 23, 24, and figs. 10c, 10a, 9, 11b, and 11c, 1943.

<sup>3</sup> Stirling, *op. cit.*, 1941; Drucker, *op. cit.*, 1943, pl. 8,c,f.

The shattered condition of the specimen when found made it difficult to recognize, in the field, the being represented; it was only when we began trying to fit parts together that we discovered that the bearded head actually belonged with the body fragments. Even then it was thought that the large vessel was a pedestal for the figure. After the figure had been restored at the Museo Nacional de México, however, Dr. Caso, Sr. Noguera, and others of the staff recognized that the statue represents Xiuhtecutli, The Fire God (also called Huehuetotl, The Old Old God), and, after examining the restored vessel, found clear indications of its former attachment to the head. After a number of trials, a base was designed which would support the figure adequately, along with an armature that sustains most of the weight of the heavy vessel—really a brazier—on the head. Xiuhtecutli, in his role as God of Fire, usually was portrayed supporting a vessel containing fire in just this fashion. It should be remarked that the complete figure, brazier and all, is between 80 and 90 cm. high, and in some areas the clay is nearly 2 cm. in thickness. The piece is therefore extremely heavy.

The statue had not been completely restored when the photographs shown in plate 2 were made. For that reason the flat tablets back of the head, which helped distribute the weight of the brazier to the shoulders, do not fit flush as they should (note daylight between the piece and the bottom of the vessel on the viewer's left, plate 2, b). Likewise, the flat strips between the figure's elbows and body and those on the knuckles were temporary braces of wood put on till the restoration of the figure could be completed. There should also be a headband about the head, with a wide flat bow, painted red, across the forehead, as in plate 3, which shows the statue as it is today in the Museo Nacional.

The basal portion of the torso, where the buttocks should be, is finished off square. I suspect the statue was built solidly in a bench or step, or on an altar, to keep it from overbalancing. The upper ends of the legs likewise are finished off square. They must have been fastened to the bench or altar or similar architectural feature.

The restored base for the figure is made so that the left leg rests within the curvature of the right. Actually, the left leg rested on top of the right, the edge of the foot attaching to the upper surface of the right leg at the point at which a small protuberance can be seen in the photograph (pl. 2, b). This seems a most uncomfortable position. Perhaps it was used deliberately to increase the tension and feeling of strain the figure portrays. On the other hand, it may have been a

customary local posture. People *can* get used to sitting that way, for I have seen Marshallese do so by the hour. This is only a random example; there is not the slightest intent to suggest any farfetched Oceanic influences.

At first glance the figure strikes one as being extremely realistic, but closer consideration shows it to contain a remarkable blend of realism and conventionalization. The sharp-peaked indentations above and below the eyes are completely nonrealistic, but the heavy shadows they produce give an effect of deep sockets from which the heavy-lidded eyes bulge. The exaggerated V-shaped cheekbones produce the effect of sunken cheeks, making the face that of an aged person. The deeply incised lines about the face suggest both wrinkles and lines formed by grimaces expressing physical strain. The formless tubular arms and legs, anatomic impossibilities, give the effect of the scrawny limbs of an old man. The body of the figure, with its shoulders hunched and back bent to an almost deformed angle to support a great weight, its sagging pectoral muscles and paunch from which the elasticity of youth have long since departed, is the most realistic unit of the piece. The effect of great physical effort and strain is achieved through a variety of ways, some already mentioned: The bulging eyes, the lines of the contorted features, the angle at which the head is held and the hunched-up shoulders, and, of course, the pronounced forward bending of the body. The original awkward position of the legs must have completed the strained, almost tortured, aspect of the figure.

The identity of the personage as Xiuhtecutli, The Fire God, who was also called Huehuetotl, The Old Old God, is quite clear, from the obvious indications of age and the characteristic brazier supported on his head. Xiuhtecutli was a Highland deity. According to Sahagun, he was the most important of the Aztec minor gods. His cult flourished from Teotihuacan through Aztec times in and around the Valley of Mexico, and Vaillant found him represented in the horizon of the Middle Cultures.<sup>4</sup> His appearance at a site in the coastal plain of Veracruz can only be interpreted as a reflection of the strong Highland influence on the early population of the Cerro de las Mesas region.

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<sup>4</sup> Vaillant, G. C., *The Aztecs of Mexico*, p. 42, 1941. The small clay figurines representing sunken-cheeked aged persons, found occasionally in the merged Proto-Classic-Early Classic horizon of southern Veracruz and Tabasco (the period Middle Tres Zapotes and La Venta), apparently simply represent elderly persons, not a cult of Huehuetotl, for they lack the specific attributes pertaining to fire, etc., that characterize that Highland deity.



## CONCLUSIONS

Both the specimens described here, with their pronounced Highland affiliations, emphasize a point brought out by the general pattern of ceramics from Cerro de las Mesas. Aztec influence, that is to say, Moctezuma's domination over the central Veracruz coast, when Cortes and his swashbucklers landed, was but one of history's repetitions. Highland cultures, richly and powerfully developed in the Mixteca-Puebla focus, had spilled down to the coast before, as demonstrated by the abundance of Cholulteca painted pottery that marks the beginning of the "Upper" culture horizon at Cerro de las Mesas. This earlier intrusion marks a Pan-Mexican period in which cultural dominance and expansion carried Mixteca-Puebla elements not only to central Veracruz and Yucatán, but to western Mexico as far as distant Sinaloa. But even before, during the long life of Teotihuacan culture, geographical distance could not restrict diffusion. From the times of the earliest occupation found at Cerro de las Mesas, the strongest influences determinable were those of Teotihuacan. Transplanted to a new setting, some of these Mexican Highland concepts attained new artistic heights on the Gulf coast, as the themes carved on the turtle shell and the statue of Xiuhtecutli clearly show.





CARVED TURTLE SHELL FROM CERRO DE LAS MESAS, AFTER RESTORATION



*a*



*b*



*c*

POTTERY STATUE OF XIUHTECUTLI, THE FIRE GOD

*a*, Facial detail, before restoration; *b*, *c*, statue as partially restored.



THE STATUE COMPLETELY RESTORED

Photograph courtesy National Geographic Society.