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News and Notes

United States trying to return artifacts from Guatemala

NEW YORK/BOSTON (The New York Times/The Boston Globe). In January 1998 26 Precolumbian stone and ceramic artifacts from the Peten Lowlands and the southern Guatemalan coast were brought inside suitcases to Miami by two persons who described the artifacts on Customs forms as “30 artifacts and two books packed into 10 boxes.” Because no required official permission from the Guatemalan government to take them out of the country existed, U.S. Customs agents promptly seized the artifacts as cultural patrimony of Guatemala. The collection of pottery and figurines, dated between 500 and 1200 A.D. and valued at $165,000, was then taken to a vault in the basement of Customs’ headquarters inside the World Trade Center. The pieces survived the September 11, 2001, terror attacks, and were found months afterward by crews sifting through the rubble. They are now in a Miami warehouse. No information was given why the artifacts remained stored in New York for so long. With the intent of returning them to Guatemala the American Justice Department took the first steps toward legally taking ownership of the artifacts recently, but the two importers who have not been charged yet by prosecutors have hired attorneys to fight to keep the pieces in the United States. A conclusion has not yet been reached.

Xipe Totec statue found in situ in El Salvador

SAN SALVADOR/BERKELEY (Paul E. Amaroli/Karen Olsen Bruhns). Life- to near life-sized ceramic statues of the Mexican deity Xipe Totec appear in the early Postclassic throughout Mexico and Mexican influenced areas. Although a fair number of these statues are known, only three have had good provenience data: the Mazapan Phase (Early Postclassic) statue excavated by Sigvald Linné in 1934 in the ruins of a structure above the Xolalpan Palace in Teotihuacan, an Early Postclassic statue excavated by Manuel Torres in Veracruz at Piedras Negras (also known as Madereros) near Cerro de las Mesas, and, more recently, a Postclassic statue found with another, of an anthropomorphic bat deity, in Tezoquipan, in Central Mexico. However, in the early months of 2002 an additional statue of Xipe was found in central El Salvador.

The archaeological site of Carranza is located approximately 1 km south of the large urban site of Cihuatan, of which it may have been a suburb. The site is located on the floor of the Acelhuate Valley and all but two of its structures have been destroyed by agricultural activities, mainly the

Alleged evidence for Olmec origins of Mesoamerican writing

NEW YORK/WASHINGTON D.C. (New York Times/Science). At the end of last year a team of archaeologists led by Mary E. Pohl of Florida State University in Tallahassee discovered near the Olmec centre of La Venta, Tabasco, Mexico, a cylinder seal and fragments of a carved greenstone plaque bearing glyphs. These artifacts date to c. 650 B.C. and therefore predate other known examples of early Mesoamerican writing for more than 300 years. According to Mary E. Pohl, Kevin O. Pope of Geo Eco Arc Research, Aquasco, and Christopher von Nagy of Tulane University, New Orleans, who have discussed this important finding in a recent article (see: Science, Vol. 298, Number 5600, Issue of 6 December 2002, pp. 1985–1987) the artifacts reveal that key aspects of early script were already present in Olmec writing: the combination of pictographic and glyphic elements to represent speech, the use of the sacred 260-day calendar, and the connection between writing, the calendar, and kingship. The authors suggest that Mesoamerican writing originated in the polity of La Venta.

Among specialists this interpretation has been discussed controversially. While some scholars reacted to the new findings with excitement, others reacted with justifiable caution, questioning the glyphic elements as examples of true writing, as opposed to iconography. Michael D. Coe of Yale University, for example, stated that until much more evidence of Olmec writing was uncovered this interpretation would remain speculative. The image on the cylinder seal, which has the size of a human fist and apparently was used as a roller stamp, shows a bird. Two glyphs emanate from the bird’s beak, suggesting speech scrolls. The authors of the Science article interpret the glyphs as 3 Ajaw and “King”. 3 Ajaw is known as a day in the sacred calendar and could also have functioned in this context as the personal name of a king. In their report Pohl, Pope and von Nagy attempted to identify other glyphs on fragments of the plaque that was found in refuse deposits at the site of San Andres, three miles from La Venta.
Fig. 9. Excavation of Structure 1, Carranza.

planting of sugar cane. On a visit to the site in 2001, Dr. Rodrigo Brito picked up several sherds of what was evidently the body of a large, hollow Xipe statue. Other sherds of Tohil Plumbate suggested an Early Postclassic (Guazapa Phase) date for this group of (originally) more than ten platforms. Accordingly, a rescue operation, sponsored by the Fundación Nacional de Arqueología de El Salvador (FUNDAR) and directed by Paul E. Amaroli, was carried out after the cane was harvested. Six weeks of excavation, interrupted by an assault by armed robbers which resulted in the loss of all the excavation and survey equipment, were carried out on Structure 1, where the Xipe sherds had been found. Structure 1 was in an amazingly good state of preservation, given that it had been under cultivation for nearly 4 decades (Fig. 9). The platform is oriented to 14° azimuth (from geographic north). Constructed of large cobbles and earth, it originally stood about 80 cm in height. The platform was faced with slabs of pumice and tuff, including two slabs with carved designs, one a circle and dot, the other a spiral. Both designs are associated with Mexican depictions of Xipe. A stair on the south side of the platform shows two stages of construction and was bordered by balustrades with the typical Early Postclassic proportions of talud/tablero. A fragment of a bifacially worked large chert knife was found on the stairs.

The surface of the platform has a fill of white volcanic ash, perhaps the remains of a damaged floor. On the north side of the platform top were three rooms defined by their wide stone foundations, the walls probably having been of adobe, now destroyed, but suggested by the masses of a distinctive sandy clay earth (like that still used to form adobe bricks) found around the bases of the foundations and upon the contemporary soil surface around the platform itself.

Almost all of the fragments of Xipe were recovered from the centre room at a very shallow depth (between surface and 25 cm) (Fig. 10). Some of the sherds had been moved about by plowing, but the majority appeared to be in their original positions, piled on top of each other. Most were large fragments, ranging from about 10 to 30 cm in length. There was no evidence that they had been buried, as would have been the case if this was a ritual offering. It appears very much like the statue was in its original position in the centre room when it was destroyed, along with Structure 1. Like the buildings studied thus far at Cihuatan, this structure was burned and its incense burners and other materials associated with it were smashed. A number of arrow and lance points were found associated with the broken pottery and burned earth on top of and around Structure 1. A significant portion of the statue was recovered, enabling us to see that the hollow statue was made in three separate parts: the head, the chest and arms, and the lower body and legs (Fig. 11). Originally it must have stood between 1 m and 1.5 m high. The skin of the sacrificed victim which Xipe wears is represented by appliquéed scales. Many of these retain their original yellow paint.

Fig. 10. Plan of the Xipe Temple at Carranza.

A: Distribution of Xipe Totec statue fragments
B: Smashed censer

Fig. 11. Fragment of the leg of the Xipe statue. The scales are the standard manner of representing the flayed skin worn by the deity. This piece preserves some of the original yellow paint.