

AN ANCIENT SEPULCHER AT PLACERES DEL ORO,  
STATE OF GUERRERO, MEXICO

By H. J. SPINDEN

**A**N archeological discovery of great interest and in a region new to most students of Mexican art was made in June, 1910, by Mr William Niven, of Mexico City. Mr Niven has for years studied and collected the antiquities of the west coast of Mexico, particularly in the state of Guerrero. Representative collections made by him are now in the Museo Nacional of Mexico City, in the American Museum of Natural History, and in the Peabody Museum of Harvard University.

Mr Niven's investigations have shown that the state of Guerrero contains many extensive ruins which bear witness to a large pre-historic population and to a fairly high culture. The numerous pyramids and platform mounds of this region are, however, merely loose masses of natural or roughly cut boulders, and the temples which once crowned their summits are now in utter ruin. Thus, because they lack in spectacular interest, even the most important sites have never been adequately explored. The collections so far gathered consist, for the most part, of occasional finds of small carved stones, either implements or ornaments. The few slight excavations have revealed carved specimens of jadeite, serpentine, and obsidian, as well as objects of gold and copper. The series of remarkable objects that will presently be described is evidence of much higher and more intensified culture than has hitherto been suspected.

The discovery in question was made in the valley of the Rio del Oro, near the mining town of Placeres del Oro, which lies in the municipality of Coyuca de Catalan, on the Rio Balsas, about two hundred miles southwest of Mexico City. The Rio del Oro, rising in the high sierras of interior Guerrero, flows in its upper courses through a deep cañon. A few miles above the town of Milpa

Chica the cañon comes to an end and a broad rolling valley takes its place. Further down the hills close in again. From this point until it reaches the Rio Balsas the stream is tortuous and the valley narrow, with stretches of box cañon.

#### ANCIENT SITES IN THE RIO DEL ORO VALLEY

A map of this region, based upon data furnished by Mr Niven is shown in figure 9, and upon this he has marked the principal sites of ancient remains as follows:

A. Near the town of San Agustín at the mouth of the river there is a large pyramid about forty feet in height.

B. Opposite the mouth of the Arroyo Viscaino is a pyramid about thirty-five feet in height.

C. On the west bank of the river four hundred yards above the mouth of the Arroyo Viscaino is the ancient site at which was made the discovery of the sepulcher with its mortuary treasures. Here for a distance of several hundred yards the flood force of the stream has been directed against the bases of three pyramids with the result that almost a quarter of the structures has been washed away. A vertical cross-section has thus been made which reveals admirably the earth and boulder construction. The pyramids are of unequal height, the highest rising perhaps thirty feet above the plain. They are flanked by level courts. About a hundred yards west of this line of pyramids there are three others of less elevation and an orderly arrangement of small courts and plazas.

D. In the town of Placeres del Oro there are two pyramids, the smaller of which is located in the cemetery. One of these is about sixty feet in height and the other about forty feet.

E. On the east side of the river, above the Arroyo de Patamba, are boulder ruins of houses. This mass of ruins is bounded on the south by a great pyramid that rises to the height of eighty or ninety feet in four terraces.

F. On the western side of the Rio del Oro and some two hundred yards back from the river there are abundant remains of a large city extending from the Arroyo de Torres to the present town of Milpa Chica in a strip fully four hundred yards in width. The ruins con-

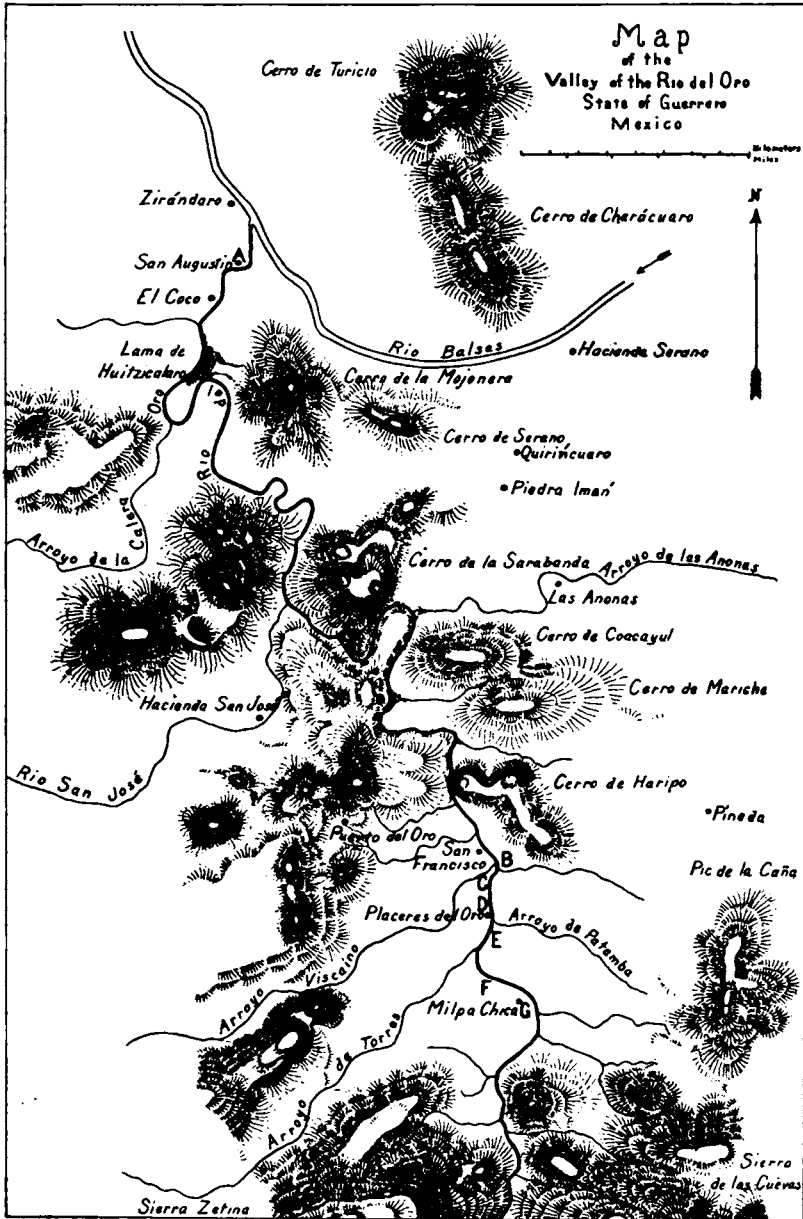


FIG. 9.

sist of small boulder mounds five or six feet in height and laid out apparently with considerable regularity. The site is so thickly overgrown with brush that exploration is difficult.

G. A short distance above Milpa Chica is a pyramid about twenty-five feet in height. There are no ruins of importance in the narrow gorge of the upper river.

According to another authority<sup>1</sup> there are also extensive ruins at Quirincuaró, which is shown on the map not far from the Rio Balsas. This site lies between two high barrancas on an arroyo that empties into the Rio del Oro from the east. Occasional excavations by the laborers of the hacienda have uncovered relics of the ancient population.

Besides these valley sites, there is, according to Mr Niven, scarcely a mountain ridge in this region which does not show remains of ancient terraces and platforms. It is possible that they belong to an epoch different from that of the lowland ruins.

#### THE DISCOVERY

After this general survey of the archeological sites of the Rio del Oro valley we must return to the site marked C on the map. Near the base of the most northerly of the three pyramids and on the plain that extends toward the Arroyo Viscaíno there is a ring of stones four feet in diameter. The ring is about six feet back from the brink of the wash bank. Just north of it are two lines of boulders, each about three feet wide and extending fifteen feet back from the edge. These appear to be sunken walls, because they extend downwards on the face of the wash bank for fifteen or twenty feet. At a point about twelve feet from the surface and directly opposite the ring of stones, Mr Niven saw the corner of a cut stone slab sticking out of the bank. Digging around this he brought to light an ancient burial.

On top was a plain slab of diorite, smoothly worked but undecorated, with the following dimensions: length forty-two inches, width twenty-four inches, thickness three inches. This slab was lying in a horizontal position, upon another plain slab of the same

<sup>1</sup>E. Ruiz, *Michoacan, paisajes, tradiciones y leyendas*, Mexico, 1891, pp. 325-327.

size and material. Under the second slab was a third, measuring twenty-eight inches by eighteen inches by two inches, the lower side being covered with curious sculpture (slab A reproduced in plate IV). About ten inches deeper was a second sculptured slab, thirty-three inches by fifteen inches by one and one quarter inches, likewise lying face down (slab B, plate V). Both sculptured slabs were broken.

Between the two carved tablets were found the following objects:

Two carved shell arm-bands, one entire, the other in fragments.

Two table urns.

One jadeite pendant.

One small metate or paint mortar.

One large cylindrical bead.

A large number of beads of stone and shell in various shapes and sizes.

A number of large shells.

An obsidian core.

Fragmentary human bones and teeth.

There is good reason to suspect that at least partial cremation of the body took place at the time this burial was made. It is, however, pretty clear that cremation was not complete because teeth and some fragments of bone remain. It is significant that the teeth were found in an enclosed space between the legs of a small table urn, where it is hardly likely they would have fallen after the decay of the body. We may be allowed to imagine that there was an elaborate cremation ceremony, such as was customary among the Tarascans.<sup>1</sup> The carved slab B was put in the bottom of the grave and then the hot ashes and smoldering remains thrown in upon it. After other mortuary offerings had been packed in carefully, the carved slab A was placed face down over the burial. This was in turn covered by two plain slabs and then the shaft filled up. The clay walls that enclosed the burial on the sides showed, according to Mr Niven, signs of having been hardened by fire. The carved slabs were both broken into several pieces and the upper

<sup>1</sup>E. Ruiz, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-49.  
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one, which would have been subjected to the greater heat, was damaged by the flaking away of part of the sculptured surface. Many of the shell pieces were very fragmentary. All of these details point towards cremation, yet the fact cannot be regarded as settled.

#### DESCRIPTION OF OBJECTS

Sculptured slab A (plate IV), presents a complicated design consisting of five heads or faces curiously combined. The upper and principal face is in front view and the other four are in profile. In the lower division of the slab there are two profile heads placed

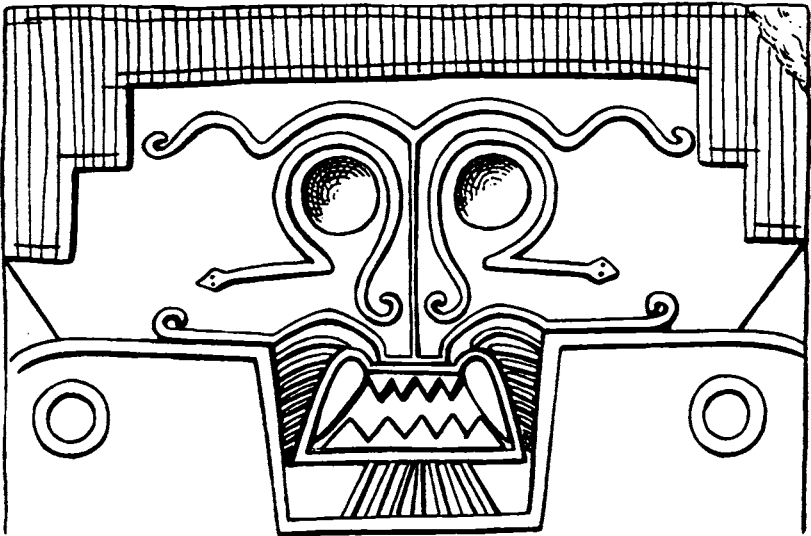


FIG. 10. — Restoration of the face at the top of Slab A.

back to back and facing outwards. Above these and under the principal face there are two other profile heads, having the lower jaws fused together, and facing upwards.

The central portion of the face at the top of the slab has been destroyed by the flaking away of the stone. A restoration of all the lost parts is attempted in figure 10. An examination of the photograph will show that there is little possibility of error, as all the parts are pretty closely indicated in the original. Still a com-



SLAB A, PLACERES DEL ORO, GUERRERO, MEXICO





parison with the somewhat similar face on sculptured slab B (plate v) will increase the certainty.

The hair is indicated by incised vertical lines drawn rather close together. It is cut horizontally across the forehead and in receding steps at the side of the face. The eyebrows are represented by an undulating line which is joined at its central point with a line extending along the ridge of the nose to the upper lip. Only the lower portion of this line appears on the original and it must be confessed that the extension upwards as far as the junction of the eyebrows is somewhat uncertain. The eyeballs are sunken pits which contain remains of what seems to be a gum or pitch, possibly copal. Now comes the most remarkable detail of the face. Each eye-socket is almost entirely enclosed by a snake's body which folds over it from the top. The two tails, symmetrically disposed, hang down between the eyes and outline the nose; the two heads shoot outward on tangents from the base of the eyes. The mouth of the grotesque face is open and both jaws have sharply pointed teeth, the upper six and the lower five. The two outer teeth in the upper jaw are much longer and more conspicuous than any of the others. They are set into sockets in the corners of the jaw and the points are turned outward as well as downward. At each side and at the bottom of the mouth are lines that probably represent hair. The chin of this front view face is let down into the open fused-together jaws of the upper pair of profile faces. At each side the ear-plug has been incorporated into the upturned nose of the profile face beneath.

The four profile heads may be briefly described. The two lower ones have a wide open mouth in which appears a device resembling a figure 8 placed horizontally. The elongated nose is bent backward so as nearly to describe a circle. Triangular teeth project from the outer line of this upturned nose as well as from the top, back, and bottom of the mouth. The eye is diamond shaped with the center sunken and is ornamented by three lines which extend from the crown of the head to the top of the eye and then continue below the eye, finally making a right-angled turn backwards. The two upper profile faces are similar to these but are incomplete since they lack the lower jaw and the figure 8 device.

The carving of this slab, as well as that of the next to be described, shows no rounded nor modeled relief, but is flat, and sharply defined, as though the drawing had been made on the smooth stone and then the background slightly excavated on an even plane, to make the masses stand out more clearly. Certain minor details were added in more delicate incised lines. While slab A may be described as a simple rectangular tablet, this will not hold of slab B since its margin has been modified and trimmed down to follow certain outlines of the graven figures.

The carving of the upper division of slab B (plate v), is similar in subject to the same part of slab A and shows a grotesque face rising out of the connected jaws of two profile heads that face upwards. The lower division is quite different, however. This presents a central blank panel bounded at top and bottom by a widened face in front view and framed in on either side by a vertical strip of geometric ornament.

The mass of hair over the forehead of the principal face is unsymmetrically blocked out and has no vertical lines. What may be termed eyebrows are represented in a somewhat complicated manner. An upper portion, resembling an undulating ribbon, is quite similar to the eyebrows of the face on slab A. Below this ribbon, however, and in part paralleling it, are two bodies of snakes curiously but symmetrically disposed, one for each half of the face. The tails of the snakes hang down close together along the ridge of the nose, the ends curling into small hooks. The heads turn sharply inwards from directly over the round ear-plugs and seem to be striking at the large staring eyes of the grotesque face. Two ribbon-like bands outline the eyes and the nose of this complicated visage. The upper band ends in upward pointing hooks just opposite the ear-plugs. It traverses the face horizontally, taking a loop around each eye, and crossing the nose below the two serpent tails. The lower band is directly beneath the upper one, and ends in similar hooks which turn downwards. The middle portion of this ribbon makes two arches over the short spirals that here indicate the nostrils. The mouth has teeth in the upper jaw only, but the long sharp fangs, set in sockets in the upper corners of the



SLAB B, PLACERES DEL ORO, GUERRERO, MEXICO



mouth, are in evidence. At the sides of the mouth are groups of lines somewhat similar to those on slab A, but the space for the lines under the chin is merely blocked out and left blank. The last detail to be noted is a narrow strip that forms a long loop and passes across the chin from each side of the mouth.

The two profile heads under the face that has just been described are much simplified. Each has a blunt upturned nose and a diamond-shaped eye. No teeth are shown. A series of figure 8's follows and embellishes the simple outlines of these connected heads.

A moulding, more noticeable than in slab A, divides the tablet into an upper and lower zone. The wide front-view faces at top and bottom of the blank panel in the lower division are evidently made by the juxtaposition, face to face, of two profile heads somewhat similar to those in the upper division. These heads are, however, more complete than the others since each possesses a mouth with sharp teeth in the upper jaw. The strip of geometric ornament, that extends from top to bottom of the lower division of the tablet on the observer's left, consists of a double guilloche that makes seven complete turns. The strip on the right contains a complex of a stepped fret, a progression of oblongs, and a sloping figure eight. The whole complex is reversed once upon the axis of this figure eight.

Next in interest to the sculptured slabs is a pair of carved arm-bands each cut from the flaring end of a triton shell. Fortunately one of these has been preserved entire, while of the second enough fragments remain to show that the carvings in the two were similar, if not identical (see plate VI, *a* and *b*, for photograph and fig. 11, *a* and *d*, for drawings). The upper cross-section of the first or complete arm-band is shown in fig. 11, *c*, and the lower cross-section in *b*. The opening at the top is circular and has a diameter of three inches. The carving commences at the end of the tangent-like projection and continues around the outer circumference of the shell to the points marked by a V on the cross-sections.

The design on the complete arm-band, reproduced from a rubbing, is shown spread out in figure 11, *a*. It begins with a narrow, vertical panel containing three disks, one above the other, somewhat

flattened on the four sides and with concentric markings, and it ends with a wider panel in which is shown an eye having a curious hook-like appendage, that hangs down and curls forward. Between these terminal panels there are represented four monkeys in profile, each with his hand before his face, and his uplifted tail curling in a spiral behind his head. The monkeys look alternately in opposite

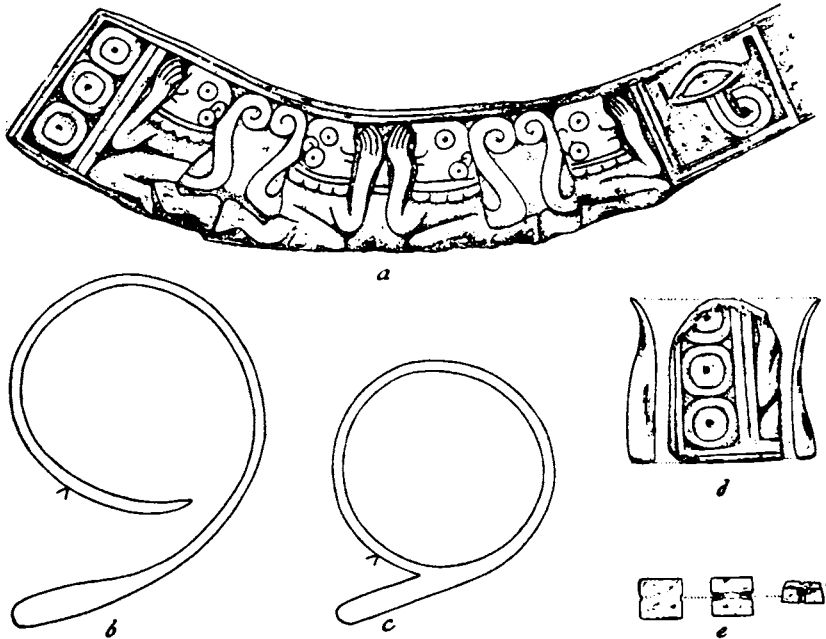


FIG. 11. — Objects made of shell; *a*, design on shell bracelet; *b* and *c*, lower and upper cross-sections of shell bracelet; *d*, fragment of second bracelet; *e*, details of shell buttons with hidden eye.

directions, the two center ones being face to face. This symmetrical arrangement greatly increases the decorative effect. The posture is peculiar and may be intended to indicate running. Both knees are bent and the lower legs are in a horizontal position, but one knee is placed forward and the other backward so that the legs are widely separated. Each monkey wears a circular ear-plug and a simple neck-band. The fragment of the second arm-band (fig. 11, *d*) shows the three disks and the knee and arm of the first monkey figure.

The first and larger table urn (see plate VI, *v*, for photograph and fig. 12, *a*, for drawing) measures seven inches in length, two inches in width, and four inches in height. It is broken into two pieces. The material is a diorite that has a decidedly bluish tinge on the fracture. There are four short rectangular legs on the bottom and two oblong shallow basins on the top. The object has been called a table urn for want of a more specific name and knowledge of its use. It may have served to hold two kinds of paint or it may have been some sort of incense burner. The urn is decorated with two heads back to back. Each head may be said to fold around two corners of the urn. On the ends are seen the front view of mouth and nose and on the side the corresponding

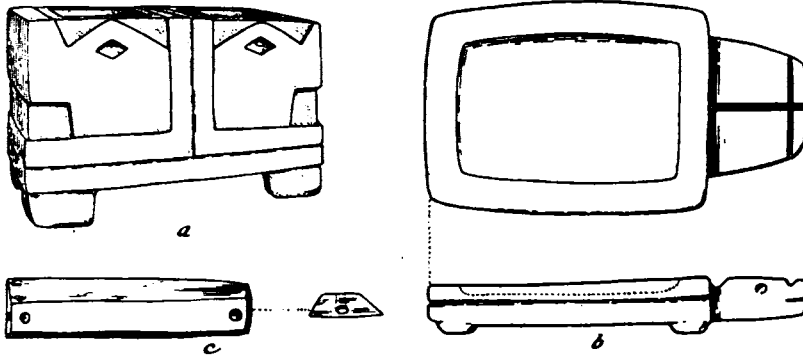


FIG. 12. — Objects of stone: *a*, larger table urn; *b*, flat mortar; *c*, stone bead.

side view showing the right-angled back of the mouth, the upturned nose, and the diamond-shaped eye. The lower jaws of the heads are lacking and no teeth are shown in the upper ones.

The second table urn (plate VI, *u*) was cut from a rectangular block of light volcanic stone of a dull yellow color. The measurements are as follows: height two and seven eighths inches; width, one and one half inches; length three and five eighth inches. The undercutting on this specimen is noteworthy, the legs are cut free from the block except for a thin horizontal shelf that binds them together near the bottom. The decoration is limited to a simple grooved moulding that runs around the edges of the upper and lower shelves. In the top of this little table are two square, sunken basins

similar to those in the first table urn. When found, the space between the upper and lower shelves was filled in with a fine brown substance in which was imbedded human teeth; some of this substance still remains in place. To an upper corner of this table urn adhered the jadeite ornament which will next be described.

This small jadeite ornament, reproduced in figure 13, *a*, is in-

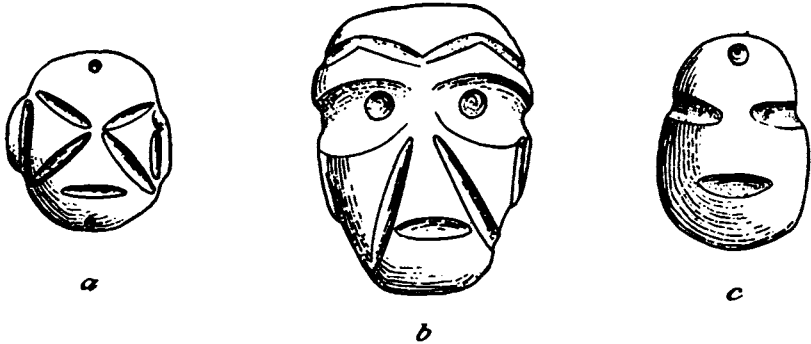
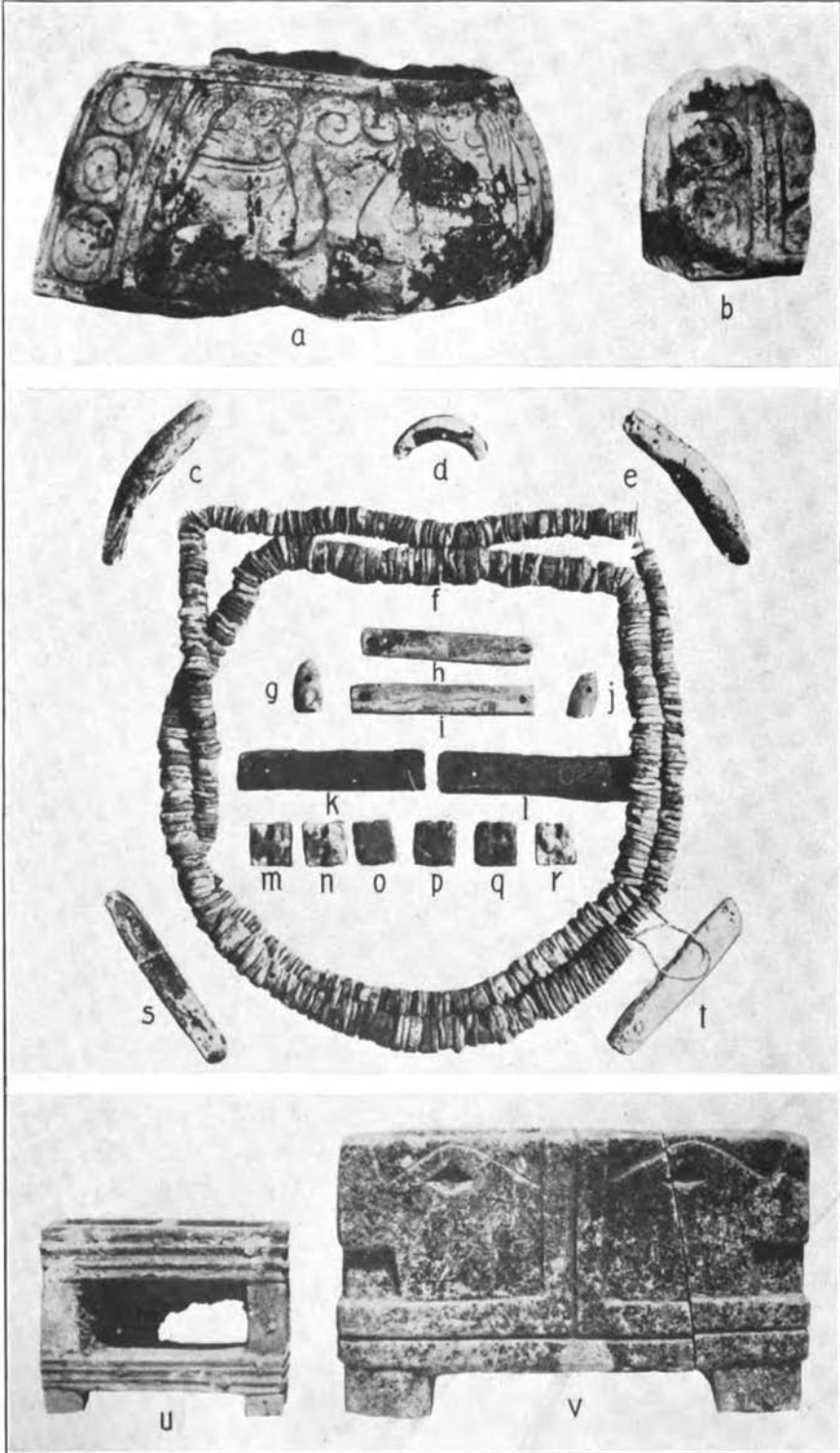


FIG. 13. — Amulets with grooves to indicate features: *a*, from Placeres del Oro; *b* and *c*, from Cerro Ceron, near Chilpanzingo (American Museum of Natural History).

teresting because it resembles in style the carvings on the ornamented celts and amulets of central Guerrero. The piece is a simple oval with a flat back and a slightly domed front which has been made into a crude face by seven straight grooves. Two vertical grooves at the side indicate the ears, four other grooves radiating from slightly above the center mark out the eyes, while a last horizontal groove shows the mouth. The stone is of a dark green color and without a flaw. There are perforations at top and bottom of the amulet. Two green stone pendants from Cerro Ceron, near Chilpanzingo, are reproduced in figure 13, *b* and *c*, for comparison.

Another specimen of considerable interest is a flat, shallow mortar, probably used for grinding paints and medicinal herbs. The dimensions are as follows: total length nine and one-half inches; width five and one-quarter inches; height one and one-half inches; depth of the basin about one-quarter inch. The material is a bluish fine-grained andesite. The body of the mortar is an oblong with somewhat rounded corners, supported on four short legs. At





OBJECTS FOUND BETWEEN SLABS A AND B, PLACERES DEL ORO, GUERRERO, MEXICO



one end is a projection probably intended for a handle. This projection roughly represents an animal head with a slightly turned-up nose, as may be seen from the drawing (fig. 13, *b*). The mortar as a whole, may indeed, represent a turtle. The turtle is frequently and excellently shown in the art of western Mexico, particularly in metal work.<sup>1</sup> The turned-up nose, however, suggests a connection with the profile heads that have just been described.

That the objects in the burial, in addition to the carved tablets, comprised a set of personal ornaments and toilet articles seems pretty clear. Beads of many kinds were found, some of which are shown in plate VI, *c* to *l*. One plain cylindrical bead of the usual bluish diorite measures five and five-eighths inches in length and one and five-eighths inches in diameter. The bore is five-eighths of an inch across. This bead probably served as a breast ornament.

Eight angular strips of shale perforated at each end for attachment were likewise discovered. These measure about three inches in length and half an inch in width. Rather obscure photographs of two of them are shown in plate VI, *k* and *l*, and a typical specimen is reproduced diagrammatically in figure 12, *c*. Close to the flat mortar, as the objects were placed in the grave, were found twelve bivalve shells about three inches in width and arranged in two rows.<sup>2</sup> These shells, which were in a crumbled state, contained about six hundred flat circular shell beads which are shown strung in plate VI, *f*. One of these large shells contained a number of very minute beads and some crumbling bones that seemed to be those of a child. In addition to the contents of these twelve shells there were discovered fourteen olivella beads with a perforation through the side (*g* and *j*), four tubular shell beads three inches in length (*c*, *e*, *s*, and *t*), one curved shell bead (*d*), thirty-one more or less rectangular shell strips, three inches in length, with a hole bored in each end (*h* and *i*), one oval-shaped amulet and twenty-six square shell buttons with a hidden eye or perforation on the under side. Of the last item six specimens are shown in plate VI, *m* to *r*, and a

<sup>1</sup>C. Lumholtz, *Unknown Mexico*, 2 vols., New York, 1902, II, p. 414.

<sup>2</sup>Some of these minor details are taken from a short account of the find printed in the *Mexican Herald*, of October 16, 1910.

diagrammatic drawing presented in figure 11, *e*. These buttons are believed to be a new type in the primitive handicraft of Mexico.

A large obsidian core from which knives were struck off was found at one side of the grave. Fragments of obsidian implements are said to be rather common on the ancient sites. Other pieces of unworked material consisted of two conch shells, one of which was nearly entire. They showed no signs of ornamentation or of use.

#### HISTORICAL REFERENCES

While very little is actually known concerning the pre-Spanish ethnography of central and northern Guerrero, the region was in all probability a debatable and ambiguous ground between the Zapotecan-Miztecan culture on the southeast, the Nahuan on the east and northeast, and the Tarascan on the north and northwest. The historians usually refer to this large area as the province of Zacatollan, but even the indefatigable Bancroft threw up his hands in disgust when he tried to gather facts concerning it.

It is known that about 1497 the province of Zacatollan, named after the city of Zacatula at the mouth of the Balsas, was made tributary to Tezcucó through the reckless daring of Teuhchimaltsin.<sup>1</sup> This region furnished much of the copper<sup>2</sup> and gold<sup>3</sup> used in the arts by the people of the highlands and for some time had excited the cupidity of the conquering Mexicans. According to Orozco,<sup>4</sup> Zacatollan comprised the territory between the course of the Rio Balsas and the shores of the Pacific and in addition extended along the margin of the sea some distance toward the northwest. The Cuitlatecán language of the Nahuan stock was spoken over a large part of this area, particularly in the southeast, and is in fact still spoken in Ajuchitlan and Atoyac.<sup>5</sup> There are, however, names of a number of other languages which have entirely disappeared.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, *Obras históricas*, publicadas y anotadas por Alfredo Chavero, Mexico, 1892, II, pp. 279-281.

<sup>2</sup>H. H. Bancroft, *The Native Races*, 5 vols, San Francisco, 1883, II, p. 473.

<sup>3</sup>Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *Histoire véridique de la conquête de la Nouvelle-Espagne*, Traduction par D. Jourdainet, Paris, 1877, p. 285.

<sup>4</sup>M. Orozco y Berra, *Historia antigua y de la Conquista de México*, 4 vols., Mexico, 1880, II, p. 175.

<sup>5</sup>Idem., II, p. 176.

<sup>6</sup>Idem., II, p. 252.

Thus, it seems quite likely that the population was heterogeneous, and may have been made up of remnants of older civilizations crowded back into this mountainous and out-of-the-way corner of Mexico by the new nations that had invaded the plateau.

But the valley of the Rio del Oro and adjacent portions of the valley of the Balsas in all probability did not actually form part of this little known province of Zacatollan. There are many Tarascan place names in this region. For instance, Zirándaro<sup>1</sup> means in Tarascan, "the place of the books or manuscripts." Coyuca,<sup>2</sup> more properly Cuiyucan, means "the place of the eagles." This town is represented in the Codex Mendoza by an oddly shaped head wearing a golden ear pendant (fig. 14). Such human head glyphs often indicate a foreign tribe. Pungaravato<sup>3</sup> means "the hill of the feathers," and the list might be continued.



FIG. 14. — Place name hieroglyph for Coyuca.

The tireless Orozco, after considering at length the various extravagant claims for the extent of the Tarascan domain, admits<sup>4</sup> that on the south it probably included some towns in the Mexican province of Zacatollan, the natural boundary of which was the Rio Balsas. Indeed, Zirándaro appears on all the lists of Tarascan towns given, and Coyuca receives prominent mention.

Fortunately we are able to fix the southern limits of Tarascan speaking peoples during the Spanish epoch beyond doubt. In the two volumes of the *Theatro Americana* of Joseph Antonio del Villa-Señor there is detailed information concerning the jurisdictions of the various divisions of the Catholic church throughout Mexico. This book bears the late date of 1746 but may well be based on church records of earlier date.

Approaching the region under discussion from the south we are told that the town of Ajuchitlan<sup>5</sup>—already noted as a place where

<sup>1</sup>A. Peñafiel, *Nomenclatura geografica de Mexico*, Mexico, 1897, p. 333.

<sup>2</sup>E. Ruiz, op. cit., p. 54, footnote, and A. Peñafiel, op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>3</sup>E. Ruiz, op. cit., pp. 334 and 339, footnotes.

<sup>4</sup>Op. cit., II, p. 211.

<sup>5</sup>A. J. Villa-Señor, *Theatro Americano, descripcion general de los reynos y provincias de la Nueva-España y sus jurisdicciones*, 2 vols., Mexico, 1746, I, pp. 223-229.

the Cuitlatecan language survives—was the head of a jurisdiction operating under the Bishopric of Mexico City. While the northern limits of this jurisdiction are not precisely defined it is clearly stated that the town of Cuzamala belonged to the Bishopric of Michoacan and that the natives spoke Tarascan. Other towns of Tarascan Indians are named. It need hardly be pointed out that church administration and instruction would naturally divide on the frontiers of language.

The town of Zirándaro<sup>1</sup> at the mouth of the Rio del Oro, was the head of a jurisdiction operating under the Bishopric of Michoacan. It is described as a "republic of Indians with a governor, and in it there are counted ninety families of the Tarascan tongue." Four ranchos or haciendas conducted by Spaniards and half-breeds are mentioned as directly tributary. Other towns administered from Zirándaro, were Santiago and San Geronymo farther down stream, Guimeo, which seems to correspond with the modern town of San Agustín, together with Coyuca and Tlapehuala. Coyuca numbered ninety-five families of Indians and Tlapehuala sixty. These pueblos bounded the Cuitlatecan jurisdiction of Ajuchitlan which has already been discussed. Pungarabato, Huetamo, and other towns on the north side of the Balsas were likewise administered from purely Tarascan centers. The old state boundary of Michoacan probably marked pretty accurately the line of language contact. It is interesting to note that Zirándaro, although on the south side of the Balsas, is still within this state and that Coyuca was likewise included until 1849.

No historical evidence has been brought forth concerning the ancient sites in the valley of the Rio del Oro with the possible exception of the one at San Agustín. It seems pretty clear that these sites were deserted, perhaps centuries before the coming of the Spaniards.

Coyuca, indeed, is frequently mentioned in Tarascan tradition, but this town, which still survives, may date from a much later time than the ruins in its vicinity. In the centuries just before the coming of the Spaniards, Coyuca was apparently a city of great

<sup>1</sup> Villa-Señor, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 92-93.

ceremonial and political importance. It may have inherited much of this importance from an earlier center of power and culture. In the anonymous *Relacion* which gives our only extended information on the pre-Cortesian history of the Tarascans, the great chiefs are frequently named as "the lords of Mechuacan and of Coyucan and of Pazcuaro." But the most interesting reference to Coyuca is as follows:<sup>1</sup> "Let it be added that Tariatcuri divided Mechuacan into three lordly domains. Hirépan was ruler in Cuyacan which was the capital because Curiacaberi existed there in that stone which was said to be Curiacaberi himself." Unfortunately little is known concerning the mythical history of Curiacaberi, the chief divinity of the Tarascans, or his representation in art. Brinton,<sup>2</sup> on slender evidence, calls him a god of light. To be able to connect this divinity with the sculptured slabs we have just described would be most exciting. But in all the range of Tarascan art nothing has yet been discovered that remotely resembles these curious sculptures. To identify out of hand the faces on these slabs with this great divinity, who is said to have dwelt within a few miles of the site where the slabs were discovered, would be an act of pure romanticism quite out of keeping with science of the twentieth century.

Many interesting but uncertain details regarding this region are to be gathered from the book of Señor Eduardo Ruiz entitled *Michoacan, paisajes, tradiciones y legendas*. Using as a basis the anonymous relation that has just been referred to, he set for himself the difficult task of "seeking out the intention, reconstructing the idiom and adjusting the narrative to exact requirements." He patched out the faulty narrative with fragmentary folk-tales still current in the back country. Partly upon the authority of a Señor D. Trinidad Bustos of Huetamo he relates<sup>3</sup> that Hirépan, to whom Coyuca had been awarded when the Tarascan area was divided, set out from Uruapan to conquer the city of Tumbiscatio, whose ands

<sup>1</sup> *Relacion de las ceremonias y ritos, poblacion y gobierno de los Indios de la provincia de Mechuacan* etc., edited by F. Janer, Madrid, n.d., p. 292.

<sup>2</sup> D. G., Brinton, *American Hero Myths*, Philadelphia, 1882, p. 208.

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit., pp. 328-332.

lay between the Balsas and the provinces of Coalcoman and Colim. Having succeeded in this he crossed the Balsas and near the present town of Cuahuayutla met the inhabitants of the ancient city whose ruins are now known as the Casas Viejas or Casas Grandes. Continuing towards Coyuca he crossed the Rio del Oro, in the stream bed of which his soldiers picked up nuggets of gold. He found the valley well populated and watched the sunset from a small temple in which was an ancient priest wearing a mask of stone. Hirépan finally arrived at Coyuca where he was appointed king. It is probable that Hirépan ruled Coyuca hardly more than a hundred years before the coming of Cortés and that this fantastic legend is merely a modern attempt to account for the ancient ruins.

It seems unnecessary to pursue this matter further. The perplexing and highly unsatisfactory historical material relating to the Tarascans, and their ethnography as well, has been fully treated by Dr Nicolas León.<sup>1</sup> Descriptions of antiquities also appear in *Unknown Mexico* by Carl Lumholtz and in the *Anales del Museo Michoacan*. It is to be hoped that a full account of the valuable researches of Bishop Plancarte will soon be published.

There are few references to the antiquities of Guerrero. Bancroft<sup>2</sup> refers to a statistical work by Señor Celso Muñoz. A brief account of Mr Niven's<sup>3</sup> explorations for the American Museum of Natural History is the only other reference that has come to light.

But collections from Michoacan and from central Guerrero show few similarities to the material from Placeres del Oro, being in general much cruder. The likeness in carving between the jadeite armband and the decorated celts and small stone figures from the ruins around Chilpanzinco has already been pointed out. At Cerro Ceron were found fragments of a carved shell arm-band comparable to the one already described. A good collection of potsherds from these three areas would quickly settle the question of likeness or unlikeness, but there is no such collection.

<sup>1</sup> *Los Tarascos* (appeared in parts in *Boletín del Museo Nacional*, segunda época, 1, 1904, and in *Anales del Museo Nacional*, segunda época, I and III, 1904 and 1906).

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, IV, pp. 423-424.

<sup>3</sup> W. Niven, Omitlan, a Prehistoric City in Mexico, in *Journal of the American Geographical Soc.*, XXIX, 1897, pp. 217-222.



## ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Let us now attempt a more analytical study of the two remarkable tablets. Considering the design on slab A as a whole it is conceivable that it was intended to represent an entire figure. The four subordinate faces might, in the course of artistic elaboration, have replaced the original arms and legs of the principal personage.

Such replacement would be in accordance with the common process of substitution that prevails in all highly elaborated art whether barbaric or civilized. Indeed, the substitution of new and striking details for old and commonplace ones—even at the expense of the first meaning of the design—is one of the simplest and most natural ways by which imagination can reconstruct and revivify worn out subjects. The effort of creation is noticeably less in making a parody than an original work of art. For the parody preserves, in greater or lesser degree, the fundamental composition upon which much of the noteworthy individuality of the original depends. Especially in the art of drawing, details of a composition may be progressively replaced by other quite different details, realistic or geometric, until in the end only a trace of the original setting remains. The history of the design is then made clear only through a study of the homologous parts of a long series. While it is dangerous, in the absence of intermediate evidence, to state positively that the four supplementary heads on slab A have replaced the arms and legs of an earlier entire figure, still the possibility of such a change is made more striking by changes which clearly did take place and which will presently be described. But in slab B the design as a whole, is even farther removed from such a possible origin.

It is now necessary to lay the ground for further elucidation by a rapid summary of ancient artistic results in Mexico and Central America and the conditions which created them. The art was, as everyone knows, strongly religious and the religion was, at heart, a complicated animal worship. The serpent and the jaguar played the leading rôles but many other animals were cast for minor parts. These animals, conceived and represented as gods, passed through a line of change from the natural, through the grotesque, to an

approximation of the human form. Even when drawn with their natural bodies they commonly wore human ornaments such as nose- and ear-plugs. But while the outward characteristics of human forms were given in part to animals there was often a reciprocal debasement of the really human with the curious result that it is often difficult to tell whether a face was intended to represent reptile, bird, wild beast, or human being.

Much has been written concerning the undoubted importance of the serpent in the religion of this area. There is good reason to suspect that the serpent was even more potent in art than in religion. Many of the gods of the later Mexican pantheon were distinct enough in powers and attributes and seem to have successfully cast off some earlier animal form only to be endowed afresh with ophidian features. Decorative art, even when applied to the meanest object, was filled with the suggestion of the serpent. This dominating character of the serpent in Central American art was probably due to its peculiar form of body which was able to furnish a richer theme, and one with more striking possibilities of artistic development, than could that of any other animal in competition.

A third point deserves a word or two; namely, the question of the relations existing between geometric and realistic art in this region. It is a well known fact that geometric art reaches a high plane among many people of low culture. In most cases it has doubtless been developed by the limitations and suggestions of the common technical processes of basketry, weaving, etc. The universality of geometric art is easily explained on esthetic grounds, for such art constitutes the simplest and most unmistakable expressions of order and harmony, without which no successful appeal can be made to the unintelligent sense of the beautiful. Many attempts have been made to prove that geometric motives arise from the decay of earlier realistic ones. The rich geometric art of Mexico and Central America has been attributed to the dissolution of the serpent in design. Such can hardly be the case. Geometric art, sure of its absolute power to please, is a very militant principle rather than a product of decay. It attracts the realistic or didactic

forms and throws them into "conventionalized" forms which appeal, at once, to the understanding and to the esthetic sense.

With this preamble let us proceed to the examination of the front view faces on the tablets. Although large circular eyes—an evident geometric modification—are found on many sculptured faces, in particular on the face of the Aztec rain-god, Tlaloc, yet plainly marked eyebrows in conjunction with them occur rarely except on representations of the monkey. Figure 15, *a*, presents in a more or less diagrammatic manner, the central portion of a typical monkey face on a figurine found in the Valley of Mexico. Note the arched eyebrows, the eyes of concentric rings, and the flaring nostrils with the horizontal nose-plug. Ear-plugs were also shown on the original but have been omitted in the drawing.

Turning one's attention to the central portion of the face on slab B (fig. 15, *b*) it is evident that the above described assemblage of features has been modified as follows. Two serpent bodies have been interpolated between the eyes and the eyebrows. In the endeavor to adjust these intrusive bodies comfortably and characteristically to the limited space, the lines of the eyebrows have been considerably altered. Quite apart from this, the nose plug has divided into an upper and a lower strip and the upper strip has "captured" and made tributary the outer ring of the eye. The nostrils are represented by two short spirals but the rest of the nose is only vaguely suggested by a number of related angles and curves.

The artificiality of the face that resulted from these changes is quite obvious. Judged simply as a design it is an excellent example of an unstable composition with extravagant individuality. In the next face to be considered we will behold the successful attempt to reduce this complex to lower terms.

The central portion of the face on slab A (fig. 15, *c*) shows that each intrusive serpent has slipped down from its former anomalous position and that the central part of its body has amalgamated with the outer ring of the eye. At the same time the serpent's head and the adjacent part of its body have absorbed the upper strand of the more or less dissociated nose-plug, while the tail with one sweeping curve has outlined the side and base of the nose. The

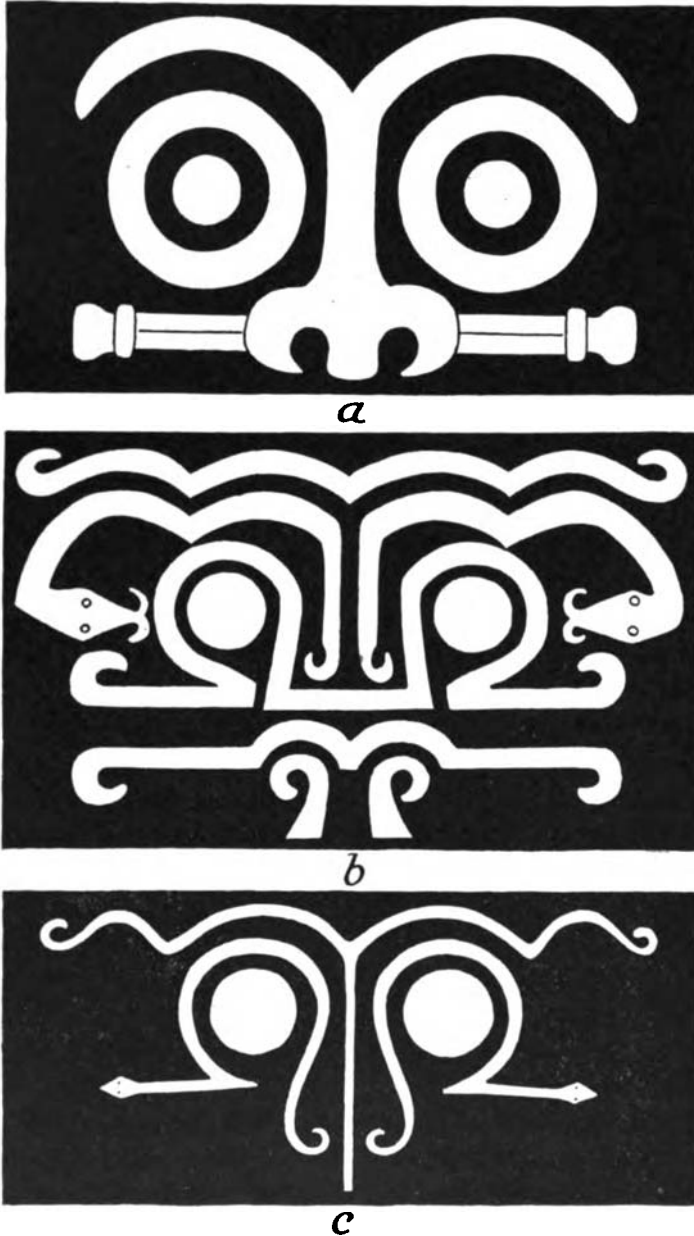


FIG. 15. — The development of the front-view faces: *a*, central portion of a monkey face on figurine from Valley of Mexico; *b*, same features on slab B with intrusive serpents; *c*, same features on slab A, showing the final adjustment of the intrusive serpents.

lower strip of the old nose-plug has either disappeared altogether or else has joined with the upper lip and is to be identified with the inconspicuous ribbon that lies along the line of contact with the profile heads (see figure 10). It has already been pointed out that the circular ear plugs of this face have slipped quite out of the proper panel and have been incorporated in the upturned noses of the profile heads beneath. The vertical line that passes along the ridge of the nose from the eyebrow to the upper lip, and perhaps the eyebrow as well, may be ascribed to the survival of the background design plotted in the more complex face between the serpent bodies and the free curve of the eyebrow. It is a well known fact that under certain conditions the usually negative background may flash positive and so greatly modify a design.

Of course the sequence of design just given does not prove that the heads were intended to represent monkeys but it establishes the possibility. The most important single feature is the eyebrow, which would in the case of the monkey, be the very prominent supraorbital ridge. The careful line of demarcation of the hair across the forehead is frequent in ancient representations of the bonneted or Capuchin monkeys, and, in fact, follows nature pretty closely. The mouth does not at first appear to be simian. This is because of the contracted lips. These monkeys have well developed canine teeth, with four small teeth between, exactly as is shown on slab A. The lines extending outwards and downwards from the sides and bottom of the mouth may represent the hair behind the cheeks and on the throat. Unnecessary as they may seem, lines around the mouth to represent hair occur frequently in drawings and on figurines that represent monkeys. The argument that the grotesque faces are monkey faces is strengthened by the fact that undeniable monkeys are shown on the carved arm-band from the same burial.

It is possible that the figures were intended to represent some monkey god or totemic spirit and that the representation was artistically infected by the serpent. As is well known, the monkey is not found on the highlands of Mexico although his name, *ozomalli*, was given to the eleventh day of the twenty-day calendar month of

the Aztecs. However, monkey faces and figures often occur in the codices, in pottery stamps and figurines, and in gold ornaments.

If we judge the grotesque faces simply by the prominent canine teeth we may conclude that the jaguar or coyote was intended. The bristles about the mouth would strengthen this theory. Both animals are common enough in art all over Mexico and Central America.

There is also a strong possibility that the faces were those of Tlaloc, the Aztec rain-god. Such faces usually show circular eyes and several long teeth in the upper jaw. Speaking of Tlaloc, Dr Seler says,<sup>1</sup> "The god . . . is also everywhere represented in a somewhat similar and very remarkable manner. His face, as is very well shown on a stone effigy in the Uhde collection, which is contained in the Royal Ethnological Museum, Berlin, is properly speaking entirely formed of the coils of two snakes, which being entwined spirally develop a kind of nose in the middle of the face, then with a circular convolution encompass the eye on both sides, while their heads at last meet together with the snouts so as to represent the upper lip of the god and his long teeth projecting downward." It seems likely that this elaborate face, which Dr Seler considers the point of departure for the simple faces of the god, was merely a richly elaborated specimen, itself based on the lower, demotic forms. The head he described resembles in type and tendency the horrible figure of Teoyamiqui with her twining serpents. Many such examples of reptilian enrichment occur in Mayan and Nahuatl art, and are not absent even among the Tarascans.<sup>2</sup>

The Tlaloc face most nearly resembling those on the slabs is one on a large terra cotta vase in the Museo Nacional (fig. 16, *a*) after Brasseur de Bourbourg. The nose-plug is clearly represented and the face is more or less humanized. A simpler Tlaloc face is shown in figure 16, *b*, and occurs on a stone sculpture from Huachinautla, in the western part of the state of Puebla, in the collection of Mr Juan E. Reyna.

It has been stated that the grotesque face at the top of slabs

<sup>1</sup>E. Seler, *Codex Vaticanus No. 3773*, Berlin and London, 1902-1903, p. 107.

<sup>2</sup>C. Lumholtz, *op. cit.*, II, p. 400.

A and B is seen rising out of the amalgamated jaws of two profile heads that look upwards. These heads (figure 17, *a*), if not considered entirely distinct, may be regarded, first, as representing a sort of

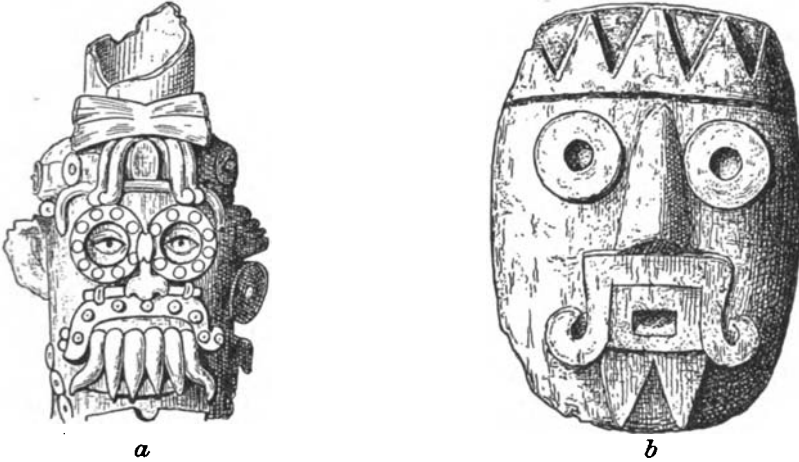


FIG. 16. — Face of the Aztec rain god Tlaloc: *a*, on a vase in the Museo Nacional, Mexico City; *b*, stone sculpture in private collection of Mr Juan E. Reyna.

ornamental collar around the neck of the upper face, second, as being highly modified arms of an earlier entire figure, third, as forming a vessel or container from which the grotesque face has emerged and in which the rest of the body lies hidden. Comparative art would hardly support the first explanation, obvious as it may appear;

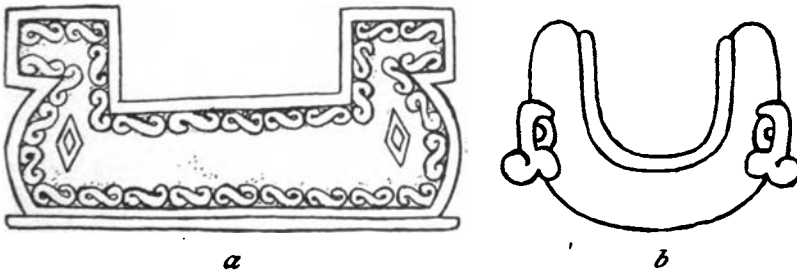


FIG. 17. — Relation of the fused-together heads to the earth-bowl: *a*, detail of slab B; *b*, the earth-bowl, after Gordon.

the second has already been commented upon; the third will now be considered.

This hollow, basin-like device made by the joining of two incom-

plete heads strongly resembles certain elaborated drawings of the so-called earth-bowl, frequently pictured in Nahuatl codices (figure 17, *b*). Arguing from complex towards simpler forms, Dr Gordon<sup>1</sup> refers the origin of this symbolic figure to the modified serpent's head, explaining that the serpent passed by degenerate conventionalization into "abstract forms representing definite ideas, in no way associated in our minds with the serpent." In the case of the earth-bowl the serpent element must surely be a later religious or artistic addition. The hollow land that holds lakes or seas, and the grave that encloses the dead were each directly and quite naturally represented by the graphic simile of a bowl. The sides of this bowl were fair field for any embellishment the artist chose to put there although it is possible that the presence of the serpent might have served some secondary religious purpose.

When the profile heads are arranged in a series (figure 18) some interesting changes are to be noted. None of these heads contains all the features. The most complete profile head is *a* which makes half a front view face on slab B. The more simplified face *b* is also only a portion of a face that is folded around two corners; note the absence of the lower jaw. The incomplete face shown in *c* is one of the fused-together heads; note its similarity to *a* in general outlines. The figure 8 decoration around the border, as well as in the mouth of the next head, has been explained as a Nahuatl astronomical symbol. Since native explanations are lacking such identification is pure guess work. Profile heads *d*, *e*, and *f* all show a peculiar device attached to the eye. Somewhat similar eye ornaments are found on carvings from the Calchaqui of Argentina and the mound-builders of the United States but, of course, no significance is to be given to this fact. The last head from the shell arm-band is the most incomplete of all. Only the eye with its appendage can be definitely made out. It seems probable, although by no means certain, that these profile heads were intended to represent the ever recurring serpent.

The double-headed serpent, commonly represented in Central

<sup>1</sup>G. B. Gordon, The serpent motive in the ancient art of Central America and Mexico, in *Trans. of the Dept. of Archaeology*, University of Pennsylvania, 1, pt. 3, 1905, p. 10.



America and Mexico, may have been intended by the design on each side of the plain panel at the base of slab B. The vertical strips of geometric ornament may form the body, and half of each lower and upper front view face may form the heads. The decoration of one

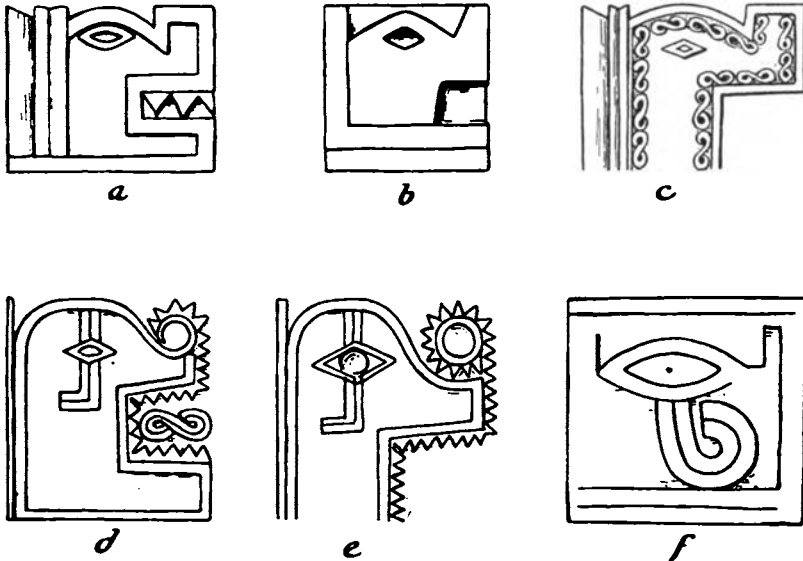


FIG. 18. — Series of profile faces: *a*, slab B, lower part; *b*, larger table urn; *c*, slab B upper part; *d*, slab A, lower part; *e*, slab A, upper part; *f*, shell bracelet.

body would then be the guilloche which Dr Gordon derives from the serpent on no stronger grounds than that snakes in design were sometimes thrown into this primitive mode of order. The design on the other body would have geometric figures common from Peru to the Pueblos of the Southwest.

To sum up: The multiplicity of possible connections between these sculptures and those of Central America and the Valley of Mexico seems to indicate pretty clearly that the ancient culture of Placeres del Oro was more closely related to the Nahua than to the Tarascans. But there is such a strong note of individuality that we are almost justified in naming these artifacts as masterpieces of a new culture area. Certainly, these interesting specimens should stimulate further exploration in this little known region.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY,  
NEW YORK CITY.