

THE LITTLE "ROMAN" HEAD OF CALIXTLAHUAJA, MEXICO: SOME REFLECTIONS

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Doubt that Christopher Columbus's sailors were not the first Old World inhabitants that made contact with American Indians is almost as old as the Spanish Admiral's discoveries.¹ In the art and folklore of American's autochthonous towns there are several indications which make us think that some sporadic contacts occurred between civilizations on both sides of the Atlantic as early as the first millennium BC. Nevertheless, except for the discovery of the Northern Newfoundland Viking settlement in L'Anse aux Meadows (Ingstad, A., 1968), to date no other archaeological evidence has been found which could confirm any of the numerous hypotheses about the arrival of Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, etc. to the American continent. Although the Scandinavian people discovered and settled the American coast during the 11th century AD, their activity has had practically no historic-cultural consequence. Their small Viking colony was isolated among the aboriginal villages and their internal and external conflicts resulted in a brief existence.

This paper reexamines one of the few trustworthy archaeological findings that supports the thesis of previous contacts between the Old and New Worlds. Today in the ceramics hall of the National Museum of Archaeology in Mexico City is displayed a little terra cotta human head with apparently non-Amerindian features.

Photo # 1



This head was found in 1933 during excavations in the archaeological zone of Tecaxic-Calixtlahuaca in Mexico's

¹It seems that the most ancient date in this respect is in *Decades of the New World* (Pedro Martir de Angleria, 1964:399). Regarding the March 1517 expedition of Francisco Hernández Córdoba, Mártir de Angleria mentions that arriving to Yucatan ". . . the Spanish saw that the Indians of Yucatan had crosses, and when they asked about their origin through languages, some answered that, passing through those places a certain man, very beautiful, had left them that old object as a way to remember him. Others said that on it there was a dead man who shined more than the Sun. For sure, we do not know."

Toluca Valley as part of a burial offering of the Aztec-Matlazinca period (12th-13th centuries AD). The offering also included several pieces of ceramics, two bracelets, a pectoral made from sea shells, four clay beads covered by thin gold layers, a small plate of the same materials, a few little heads of copper and rock crystal, remains of a turquoise mosaic, and other articles (García Payón, 1961:1). However, the piece was not presented to anthropological circles until 1960 when it was shown during the XXXIV International Congress of Americanists on behalf of Dr. Robert Heine-Geldern from the Institute of Ethnology in Vienna. The discoverer, José García Payón, calls it simply "a little clay head with strange physiognomy" (ibid.). Some of today's most important Mexican archaeologists consider it to be a colonial object and believe that it somehow filtered into an archaeological context of the pre-Hispanic era, even though *not in the three floors of stone and Indian cement under which the burial took place, nor in the offering itself there is not the least indication of such a probability.*



Photo # 2

The most popular hypothesis concerning the small head is that it is of Roman origin (2nd-4th centuries AD), and that it was imported to America via a transpacific route from southeast Asia by a Chinese or Hindu ship (Heine-Geldern, 1961:117-119). This hypothesis, although more interesting than the former one, is not very persuasive either. Except for some very general references about the stylistic relations between the find and the Hellenistic—Roman art circle, Dr. Heine-Geldern does not provide a serious argument to support his hypothesis. Furthermore, the material of which the little head is made, as well as its small dimensions,

make it very improbable that, once taken to the Pacific coast of the American continent between the 2nd and 4th centuries AD, it would have been preserved intact for close to a millennium, to be moved later on and re-located in a grave in the center of Mexico.

To this time, the lack of a trustworthy date of the finding has not permitted the establishment of a correct hypothesis about the head's chronology and origin. In a letter dated March 17, 1993, Dr. R. E. M. Hedges of the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and History of Art at Oxford University informed me that, if we would send him the piece to take a sample, we would have the dating in about six months, either by thermoluminescence or C14 in a mass accelerator. Some administrative problems have delayed this matter longer than we expected and we do not know when it will take place. Nevertheless, without trying to impose a definitive opinion, we would like to point out that with its relative chronology and some stylistic features, the little head could be related to a very probable arrival of Vikings to Mesoamerica, not to that of the Chinese or Hindus. It is well known that in this area very significant political-cultural perturbations occurred among the autochthonous civilizations between the 10th and 13th centuries AD. These were produced by a small group of white immigrants with beards who came from the Atlantic Ocean and whose leader the natives called by different names: Ce Acatl, Topiltzin, Papa, etc.² Or at least such happenings are suggested through several native Indian legends and myths from the area included between the Central Mexican Plateau and the Yucatan Peninsula. (See, for example, Duran, 1984:9-15; Las Casas, 1967: 644-645 and 648-649; Torquemada, 1943:254-256, among others.) As indirect testimony to the historicity of these legends, we can also point to certain Mayan ceramic pieces from the same period (10th-13th centuries AD) that bear representations of characters with European features and beards. Fray Juan de Torquemada (1943:243) was the first to suppose that the immigrants were Vikings. Furthermore, according to data offered by mediaeval sagas from Iceland and Greenland, the voyage of Leif Eiriksson to Newfoundland was not the only visit the Vikings made to America. Between the 10th and 13th centuries AD several similar voyages were made, some to the south of the American continent's Atlantic coast (Ingstad, H., 1968:91-95). These historical testimonies are supported by a series of findings of Viking origin (axes, spades, arrow heads, among others), coming from the East and Midwest of the

United States. (A summary about these findings can be found in Godfrey, 1955.)

Considering the stylistic aspects of the little head, I would like to point out that the cap worn by the character can hardly be described as "Roman." In my opinion, such a cap looks more like a certain type represented in several Viking art works: for example, bas-reliefs on the monumental stone of Stora Hammar, Låbro (Gotland) (11th century AD), with scenes of the heroic poem known as the Icelandic skald Bragai's *Regnarsdrapa*.

In summary, I would like to remind you again that the piece in question is the *only archaeological find of non-Amerindian origin discovered in Mesoamerica today, by a professional archaeologist and in a non-altered context of the pre-Hispanic era*. Consequently, I believe that a detailed and critical study, based on the precise dating of the little head (which I hope will be available before too long) will give us new relevant data in research of transatlantic contacts before 1492.

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²In Fray Diego Durán's *History of the Indies of New Spain* (1984:9) there is an interesting note about this character: "the news that we have about Topiltzin-Papa are great: whom I saw painted the way that appears above, on an old and ancient sheet of paper, in Mexico city, with a venerable presence. Demonstrated to be a man of age, the beard, long grayish and red; the nose, somehow long, with some wheals on it, or somehow corroded; tall in body; the hair long; very plain; seated with measure."