



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL

<http://bookofmormoncentral.org/>

Type: Newsletter

Newsletter and Proceedings of the S.E.H.A., no. 103 (August 12, 1967)

Editors(s): Ross T. Christensen and Evan I. DeBloois

Published by: Society for Early Historic Archaeology, Brigham Young
University

Published several times a year by THE SOCIETY FOR EARLY HISTORIC ARCHAEOLOGY at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, for the dissemination among its members of information on new discoveries in archaeology throwing light on the origins of civilization in the Old and New Worlds, on the earliest periods of recorded history in the two hemispheres, and on the important historical claims of the Hebrew-Christian and Latter-day Saint scriptures; also news of the Society and its members and of the B.Y.U. department of archaeology and anthropology, of which the Society is an affiliated organization. Included are papers read at the Society's and Department's annual symposia on the archaeology of the Scriptures. All views expressed in this newsletter are those of the author of the contribution in which they appear and not necessarily those of Brigham Young University or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Subscription is by membership in the Society, which also includes subscription to other publications.

103.0 REVISED CONSTITUTION RATIFIED. Ballots sent in by members of the SEHA during recent voting on the revised constitution (Newsletter, 102.0) were counted by the Society's Executive Committee at a meeting held on July 27. The tally was as follows:

178 votes approving the proposed revision
5 votes disapproving it
1 blank ballot
184 total ballots received.

Following the counting, Virgil V. Peterson, Society president, declared the revised constitution ratified and in effect.

Copies of the constitution were mailed to all members of the SEHA in June, together with Newsletter 102. Extra copies are available, however, and should a member desire one he may obtain it by writing to the Society office, 139 Maeser Building, BYU, Provo, Utah. It will be sent free of cost and will not be charged against the member's entitlement of five "free past publications" per year (Newsletter, 89.4).

103.1 SYMPOSIUM DATE SET; ABSTRACTS DUE. October 14 has been set as the date for the "Seventeenth Annual Symposium on the Archaeology of the Scriptures," according to the Symposium Committee (Newsletter, 101.1, 102.3). The place will be Room 184 in the Jesse Knight Business Building on the BYU campus, where the Symposium has been held several times in the past.

All members of the SEHA have been invited to prepare papers for possible reading at the Symposium. Those who plan to do so should submit a one-page abstract or summary of the proposed paper without delay, so that the selection of papers to be read may be made ahead of time. The Committee has set September 21 as the deadline for receiving such

abstracts. They should be sent to: Symposium Committee, 139 Maeser Building, BYU, Provo, Utah.

(It is not necessary to submit the paper itself by the early date of September 21--only the one-page abstract.)

The only limitation as to subject matter is that each paper should deal with some archaeological find or development as it bears upon the Scriptures--Bible, Book of Mormon, and Pearl of Great Price. Selected papers will later be published in the "Newsletter and Proceedings."

Reading time for most papers will be 20 minutes. Following each paper there will be a discussion period of approximately 10 minutes.

The SEHA reserves the right to publish any paper read at the Annual Symposium. Each author is asked to submit his paper in finished form to the chairman at the end of the day or, if minor changes are needed, within ten days from the Symposium date.

Each member of the Society and his partner will be admitted to the Symposium free of charge upon presentation of his membership card. (Two persons representing an Institutional Member will be admitted free of charge.) Non-members will be charged 75 cents per person.

The Annual Symposium on the Archaeology of the Scriptures is a traditional all-day event, co-sponsored by the SEHA and the BYU archaeology-anthropology department.

103.2 GRADUATES IN ANTHROPOLOGY. Eloise Margret Davis will graduate from BYU with a Bachelor of Arts degree in anthropology at the August 17 commencement.

Miss Davis spent the first year of her university training at North Adams State College, North Adams, Massachusetts; the remainder has been spent at BYU. She has concentrated while here on social anthropology,

her minor study being history.

Miss Davis plans to accept employment in social work or a related field and desires later to undertake advanced study in cultural anthropology and psychology.

103.3 NEW SCHEDULE OF MEMBERSHIP FEES. In accordance with Article IV of the newly ratified constitution of the SEHA (see above, 103.0), a new schedule of membership fees will soon go into effect:

ANNUAL MEMBER	\$4 per year
INSTITUTIONAL MEMBER	\$4 per year
LIFE MEMBER	\$75
RESEARCH PATRON	\$15 or more per year

This new schedule of fees will become effective on September 1, 1967. For all memberships processed prior to that date, fees will be accepted according to the present schedule (\$3, \$3, \$50, and \$10).

In addition to the above categories of paid membership, it should be noted that under the new constitution COMPLIMENTARY MEMBERSHIP is available to the following: (1) persons who have rendered some special benefit or service to the Society or to the BYU archaeology-anthropology department; (2) graduates in archaeology from BYU; and (3) fulltime missionaries. Inquiries should be made of the Secretary-Treasurer at the Society office.

103.4 PAMPHLET FOR SALE. A free copy of "Gold Plates Used Anciently," a 12-page illustrated pamphlet based on research by Dr. Franklin S. Harris, Jr., has been mailed to every member of the SEHA whose ballot was received in the recent voting on the revised constitution (see above, 103.0). The remainder of the Society's supply of this pamphlet has been placed on sale at the following prices: to members of the Society, 10 cents per copy; to non-members, 15 cents per copy. Any number of copies may be ordered at a time.

As well as eight photographs, the pamphlet contains a chart and a map locating 62 finds of inscribed metal plates in the Old World. It consists of material taken from an article by Dr. Harris which appeared in The Instructor of October, 1957. (Copies of the article were distributed to Society members at that time; see Newsletter, 46.20.)

Dr. Harris is a professional physicist and a student of ancient metallurgy. He is at present a general officer of the SEHA, having previously served as both president and vice-president of the Society and as director of the former Salt Lake Chapter (Newsletter, 21.12, 23.5, 37.00). He is the author of The Book

of Mormon Message and Evidences and a co-author with Dr. John A. Widtsoe of Seven Claims of the Book of Mormon. He has contributed a number of papers to the Society's Annual Symposium on the Archaeology of the Scriptures and has appeared at BYU Education Weeks.

103.5 FILM ON MEXICAN ARCHAEOLOGY AVAILABLE. "Scenes of Ancient Mexico" is the name of a Kodachrome motion picture purchased by the SEHA some years ago for the purpose of making it available to its members (Newsletter, 69.6).

The 16mm silent film is 432 feet long and can be shown in approximately 10 minutes. More than a dozen scenes of ancient Mexican ruins such as Teotihuacán, Chichén Itzá, and Monte Albán, also native dances and market places, are included.

Any person may rent the film, which may be kept for three days before being returned. The charge is \$1.75. Orders should be sent to: Educational Media Services, 247 HRCB, BYU, Provo, Utah. Since the film will be handled by that office, orders should NOT be sent to the SEHA.

The producer is Otto Done, a well-known tour organizer and professional photographer specializing in Mexican archaeological subjects. He has also served the SEHA as both president and vice-president and was the director of its former Mexico City Chapter when the latter was founded in 1955 (Newsletter, 27.1, 37.01, 61.1).

103.6 PROCEEDINGS OF THE SIXTEENTH ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM ON THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE SCRIPTURES (continued). Two more of the papers delivered at the Society's Sixteenth Annual Symposium on the Archaeology of the Scriptures, held on October 22, 1966 (Newsletter, 100.0), are published in this issue. Both are on Mesoamerican topics.

The original title of Mr. Nelson's paper (103.60, below) was "The Colossal Stone Heads of Veracruz."

Mr. Palmer explains that his contribution (103.61, below) is a "freely revised and augmented version" of his original paper, which bore the title, "The Snail-Shell Symbol and Spiritual Rebirth in Early Mesoamerica." He gratefully acknowledges the assistance of SEHA member Darrell J. Stoddard, a student of art history and formerly a major in the BYU archaeology department, in the preparation of the present version.

Other papers read at the 1966 symposium may be found in the Newsletter and Proceedings: 100.1, 101.30, 101.31, and 101.32.

103.60 The Colossal Stone Heads of the Southern Gulf-Coast Region of Mexico. By Fred W. Nelson, Jr. Some investigators maintain there was a

strong Negro influence in the Western Hemisphere prior to the coming of Columbus and believe they see this influence in the art and legends of the ancient Americas. In this paper a study will be made of only one small part of ancient American art: the colossal stone heads of Veracruz and elsewhere. I shall try to ascertain whether or not these heads show, by their physical characteristics, Negro influence in this part of the New World. By the methods of the physical anthropologist it will be determined how closely the features of the heads compare with those of the Negro.

1

First, however, comes a brief account of the stone heads themselves. They have been found in southern Veracruz and western Tabasco, close to the Gulf Coast (see map). There are three sites at which a total of 12 heads have been discovered. Two were found at Tres Zapotes; one of these is still there, and one is now in the museum at Santiago Tuxtla. Six were found at San Lorenzo; four of these have been moved to the museum at Jalapa (cf. Newsletter, 69. 30, 91. 0; Christensen, pp. 156-158), while one is at the National Museum in Mexico City and one still at the original site. Four more heads have been found at La Venta, all of which are now at the museum at Villahermosa (Aveleyra A. de Anda, p. 14; Parsons and Jenson, p. 135).

The first head was discovered in 1858, when a native of Veracruz found what appeared to be an upside-down kettle protruding from the ground. The "kettle" was excavated and seen to be a colossal stone head. This was all that was done, and gradually the jungle again covered up the head and it was forgotten, except for the native legends, until 1939, when Dr. Matthew W. Stirling re-excavated it. Since that time eleven more of the huge heads have been found (Irwin, pp. 122-125).

The heads are remarkably similar in character, and ". . . in some instances it does not seem improbable that the same artists operated in the three sites. While at first glance the various heads appear very similar, closer examination shows that this resemblance is probably due to the racial type represented, and each is actually quite individual in character. Close study of these heads leads me to the belief that they are actual portraits of prominent individuals" (Stirling, 1955, p. 20). If this is true, and these stone heads show Negroid characteristics, then there had to be a Negroid population in southern Veracruz at about 500 BC, which is the date that most archaeologists assign to the heads. (Pedro Armillas, however, gives 1200-600 BC as the time of occupation of the LaVenta site; see

Jennings, p. 304. Michael D. Coe gives the date of the destruction of San Lorenzo as before 800 BC; see Coe, p. 25.) This is the time of the end of the Early Cultist or "Olmec" period of Mesoamerica, and the stone heads are typically Olmec in their art style.

All the heads are carved from basalt. The nearest basalt is located in the zone of Los Tuxtlas (see map), which is almost 100 miles from La Venta. It is somewhat closer to San Lorenzo and only about ten miles from Tres Zapotes (Covarrubias, 1947, p. 95). It is not known how the blocks of basalt were transported from the quarry to the sites where the stone heads were found.

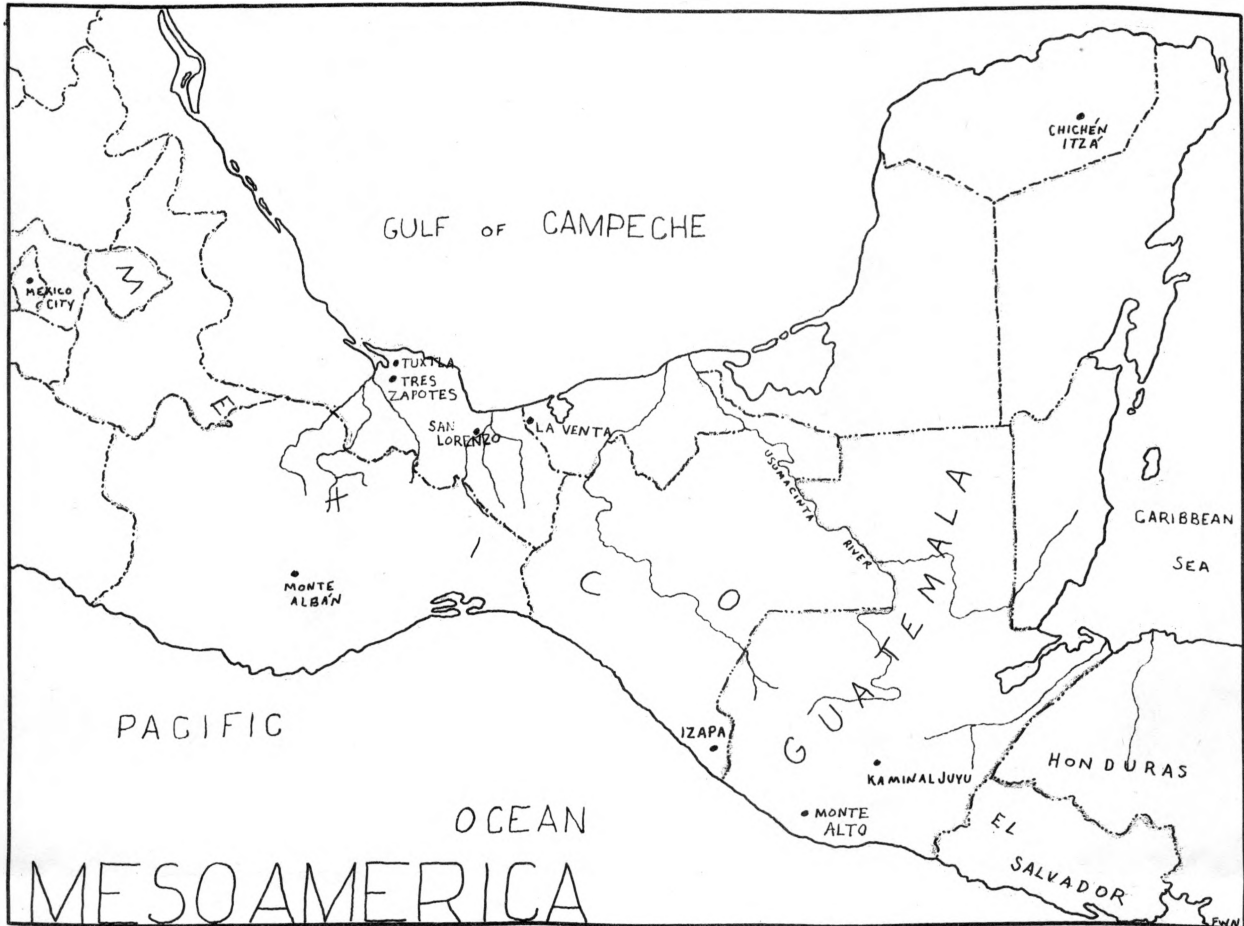
These heads range in height from nine feet four inches to five feet four inches. All of them wear headdresses or helmets. These helmet-like headdresses may represent the stylized jaguar motif, which was so common in Olmec times. On three of the heads there are definite jaguar features. On Monument 1 at La Venta (Fig. 2) there are a U-shaped symbol and jaguar fangs over the forehead, evidently representing the rain or life god. Monument 4 at La Venta has jaguar fangs on the forehead, and Monument 5 at San Lorenzo (Fig. 4) has two jaguar paws with three claws on each paw draped over the headband and above each eye (Stirling, 1943, 1955)

All the colossal stone heads are somewhat flattened and have a flat strip along the back, which seems to indicate that they were made to stand against a wall. They were intended to be viewed full front, and because of the flatness they looked out of proportion when viewed from the side. Monument 5 at San Lorenzo (Fig. 4) is the only exception, having been carved in full relief. Some of the heads were found standing on a platform of unfinished stone, which is interpreted to mean that they were never connected to a body and were never intended to be.

2

A second group of stone heads has been found at a site called Monte Alto, which is in the Department on Escuintla, Guatemala, only 20 miles from the Pacific coast (see map). At this site there are six stone monuments, but only two of them are colossal human heads. (Of the remaining four, three are fashioned into rotund human forms, and one is a jaguar-monster mask.) The larger of these two heads is four feet eight inches high (Parsons and Jenson, p. 135).

There are some similarities between the stone heads found on the Gulf Coast and those found at Monte Alto. Both seem to have the same manner of representing the ears, and some of the ear plugs are similar. But there are also some differences: The representation



PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF VARIOUS RACES COMPARED WITH THOSE OF THE COLOSSAL STONE HEADS

Physical Characteristics	Armenoid	Mediterranean	Asiatic Mongoloid	American Indian	Negro of Western Africa	COLOSSAL STONE HEADS
Head Form	brachycephalic	dolichocephalic	brachycephalic	mostly brachycephalic but varies	dolichocephalic	brachycephalic
Head Height	very high	low, medium	low	low to medium	high	high
Forehead	some slope	verticle	verticle	usually verticle	verticle or slightly sloping	verticle
Brow Ridges	none	small	none	little or none	little or none	none
Facial Index	lepto- to mesoprosopic	leptoprosopic	eury- to mesoprosopic	eury- to mesoprosopic	leptoprosopic	euryprosopic
Prognathism			none	slight	marked	none
Nasal Index	leptorrhine	very leptorrhine	mesorrhine	usually mesorrhine	platyrrhine	mesorrhine to platyrrhine
Nasal Root	very high	high	very low	high, some medium or low	low	medium to low
Nasal Bridge	very high	moderate to high, narrow	very low	high, some medium or low	low, broad	medium to low
Nasal Profile	convex	straight or concave	concave	straight or convex	straight or concave	straight or concave
Lips	full, lower lip everted	medium	medium thick	thin to medium thick	thick, everted, lip seam, puffy	medium thick, slightly everted, lip seam
Eye Fold			frequent inner and complete fold	rare		no epicanthic fold

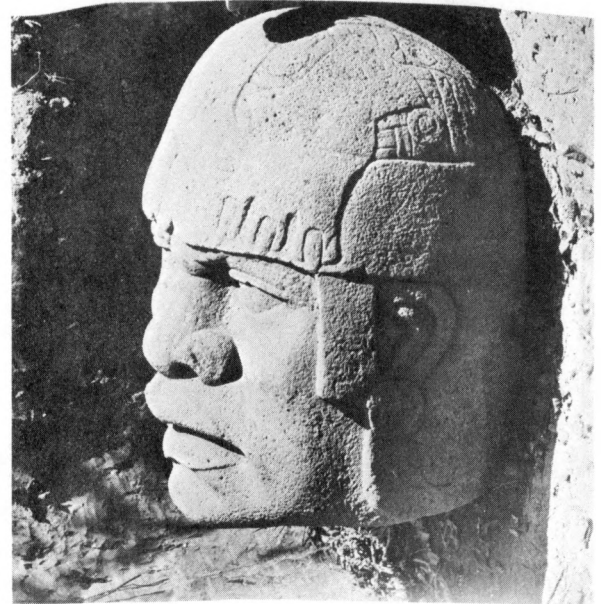
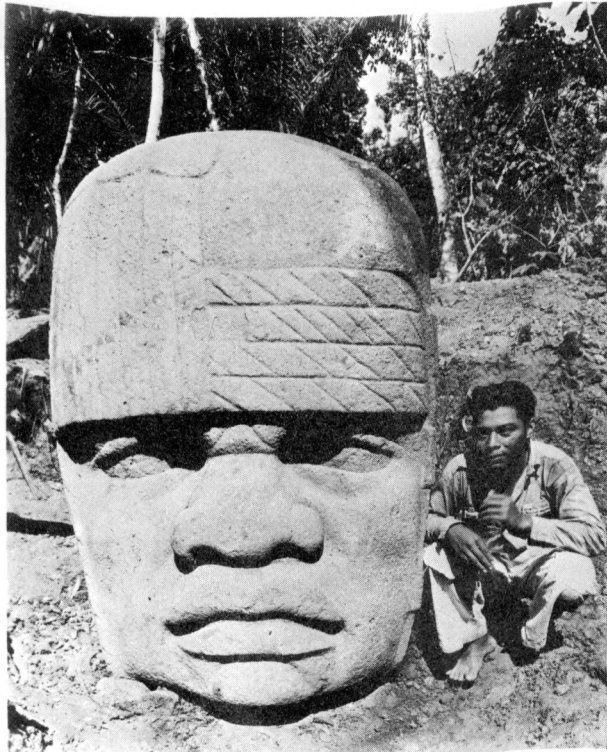
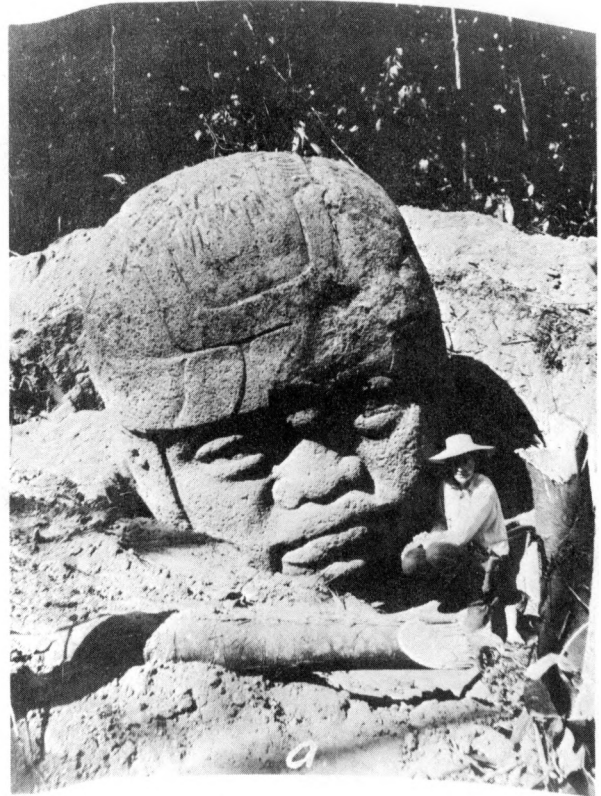


Fig. 1 (upper left), Monument A, Tres Zapotes. Fig. 2 (upper right), Monument 1, La Venta. Fig. 3 (lower left), Monument 4, San Lorenzo. Fig. 4 (lower right), Monument 5, San Lorenzo. Photographs by courtesy of the Smithsonian Office of Anthropology, Bureau of American Ethnology Collection.

of the eyes differs, and also the heads of the Gulf Coast all wear a particular kind of headgear which those at Monte Alto do not have. "The conceptual and stylistic continuity between the Monte Alto colossal heads and the Olmec colossal heads on the Gulf Coast is clear" (Parsons and Jenson, p. 144), but it is not yet known whether the Monte Alto heads are pre-Olmec, of Olmec period, or post-Olmec.

Also, the upper part of a colossal stone head has been found at San Miguel, which is close to La Venta. It is made of basalt and has been broken off at the level of the eyes. This head has smaller faces carved into its surface and does not have the typical helmet nor the jaguar elements which the other heads have (Stirling, 1957).

3

A common belief is that the colossal stone heads were sculptured to represent Negroes or a Negroid people. Following are examples of opinions on this subject: The heads are "in the likeness of a flat-nosed, thick-lipped, rather Negroid man's head" (Covarrubias, 1947, p. 84). "How then to account for the presence of a Negro in Middle America in the millenium before Christ" (Irwin, p. 126). "It is no mere accident that in 1862 a colossal granite [basalt] head, representing a Negro, was found in the canton of Tuxtla, that is, near the place where the most ancient statuette was discovered. . ." (Wiener, p. 322). "Not only were African Negroes held in reverence by the Indians of antiquity, but they appear frequently in early American sculpture and design. Stone statues depicting an African Negro morphology have been discovered throughout the Americas. Five solid granite [basalt] heads, the largest weighing close to five tons, have been found in the canton of Tuxla [Tuxtla], and at Vera Cruz, Mexico" (Lawrence, pp. 326-327). "At first impression the features seem quite Negroid in appearance, but in general the head may be considered to represent an unusually find example of the broad-nosed, short-faced figures, evidently an early type, that are found over a considerable area in Middle America" (Stirling, 1943, p. 16).

The first four authors quoted above definitely believe that the colossal stone heads were sculptured to represent Negroes in Mesoamerica. Matthew Stirling (the one who discovered them) is more conservative, and although he admits that the heads might show some Negroid features he is not willing to say they necessarily represent Negroes.

4

It now remains to study the colossal stone heads on the principles of physical anthropology and to describe their physical characteristics. The heads are definitely brachycephalic (broad). (This has had to be determined from photographs of all twelve of the Gulf Coast and both of the Monte Alto heads. It may not be possible to get from these heads a valid cephalic index of the race they represent, however, for they may not be sculptured in true proportion.)

The only head that at first glance looks somewhat dolichocephalic (long) or mesocephalic is Monument 4 at San Lorenzo (Fig. 3), but this is due to the high headdress it is wearing. The cranial height of all the heads is great, and the forehead is vertical. There are no brow ridges. The face is very euryprosopic (broad) with very heavy and broad jowls. The cheeks are full, and because of their roundness and smoothness it appears they were carved to represent a thick fatty layer covering the cheekbones. The smoothness and fine finish of the stone heads could represent smooth skin. Also there is no prognathism (projecting of the jaws), and the chin is weak.

The measurements given for Monument 1 of La Venta indicate that the nasal index is mesorrhine (nose of medium breadth). The width is 23 inches and the length 29 inches, which gives 79.5 as the nasal index. This, however, could be erroneous, for there is no way of telling from what points on the nose the measurements were taken. This is the only case in which the length and width of the nose are given (Stirling, 1943, p. 57). Judging from the photographs of the monuments it would seem that the nasal index should be classified as platyrrhine (broad) because of the very broad appearance of the nose. The nasal root and bridge are low to medium with the nasal profile straight or slightly concave.

The lips are slightly everted, but in every case the top lip more so than the bottom lip. Also, the top lip protrudes slightly more than the bottom lip. Although the lips are everted and protrude, they do not appear to be the thick, puffy lips characteristic of Negroes. Some of the monuments have a definite lip seam (slight ridge outlining the membranous portion of the lips), which can be easily distinguished (e. g., Monument 1, San Lorenzo; illustrated in Newsletter, 60.30, 91.0, and in Christensen, p. 158).

Negroes possess certain distinctive physical characteristics. Many of these do not mean much by themselves, but when grouped together they constitute only the Negro. Most Negroes are dolichocephalic and have a high vault, vertical forehead, and little or no supra-orbital (browridge) development. The face is usually leptoprosopic (narrow), and most Negroes show definite prognathism. The chin is weak and the jowls narrow.

A platyrrhine nasal index in the most common, and the nose is broad and low at the root and bridge, while the tip of the nose is thick. Also, the wings are thick and flaring and the nasal profile is straight or concave. The lip form of the Negro is distinctly different from that of other races. The lips are very thick and puffy, and both the upper and lower lips are very everted. The lip seam is often distinct. The ears are short and wide, and often there is little or no ear lobe (Beals and Hoijer; Cole).

5

As mentioned at the beginning, many investigators believe that the physical characteristics of the colossal stone heads indicate the presence of Negroes or a Negroid physical type in ancient Mesoamerica. If this be the case then the characteristics of the stone heads and those of the Negroid race of physical anthropology should be similar.

In order to compare these characteristics I have prepared the accompanying chart, which summarizes the physical features of the colossal stone heads, those of Negroes, and those of certain other races that are or could be of interest in this study. The Negro column represents Negroes from western Africa, while the Mediterranean column refers to such peoples as those of Spain, Portugal, and southern Italy. The Armenoid column represents early people of Mesopotamia. "The earliest known center of development for Armenoid populations appears to be in Asia Minor. Here we find the type represented in the sculptured remains and monuments of the Sumerians of the third and fourth millenia BC. Similar Armenoid traces are found among the later Babylonians, Assyrians, and Hittites" (Beals and Hoijer, p. 166). The rest of the columns on the chart are self-explanatory.

As one studies the chart it becomes evident that there is not much similarity between the colossal stone heads and Negroes. In fact, in many instances the heads are exactly opposite from the Negroid type. For example: Negroes are dolichocephalic, while the heads are brachycephalic; Negroes are leptoprosopic, but the heads euryprosopic; Negroes show prognathism, while the heads orthognathic (jaws do not project); etc. In fact, the only significant characteristic that seems to be shared by both is the lip form, but on close examination it appears that the lips of the stone heads are not the thick, puffy, everted lips of Negroes. Therefore, I am of the opinion that the colossal heads are not representations of Negroes but of some other physical type.

6

There is still other evidence which leads me to believe that there never was an important Negro influence in ancient Mesoamerica. In human blood-group studies of the past few years it has been discovered that there are certain antigens that are peculiar to Negroes from Africa. Some of these are the S^u antigen, the H_e antigen, the J_s antigen, and the V antigen. These are found only in the blood of Africans or people of African descent.

Now if there was an important Negro element in Mesoamerica of about 500 BC, when the colossal heads were sculptured, there should exist in the blood of the present-day Indians of that area at least some indication of this. These four antigens should show up at least sporadically; but this is not the case! The pure Indians are found not to have any of these antigens (Matson and Swanson; cf. Newsletter, 91.0). This means that there was probably no important Negro influence in prehispanic Mesoamerica and therefore that the stone heads could not have been sculptured to represent Negroes.

7

In conclusion I wish to present two alternative hypotheses as to what the colossal heads were sculptured to represent:

a. During the Early Cultist or "Olmec" period (c. 1500-c.500BC) important art conventions of southern Veracruz were the jaguar symbol, baby-face figurines, an infant rain god held by a female personage, etc. Almost all the art of this time is centered around the jaguar symbol, infantile figures, and combinations of the two. Many Olmec works are half jaguar and half human, and sometimes it is hard to tell which the sculptor was trying to represent (Covarrubias, 1957, p. 50). The jaguar and the baby-face symbols were both representations of the rain or life god.

As was stated earlier, the headdress of three of the colossal stone heads (Monuments 1 and 4 at La Venta and Monument 5 at San Lorenzo; see Figs. 2 and 4) has jaguar symbols as part of the ornamentation. Also, at least one of the heads (Monument 1 at La Venta; see Fig. 2) has the U-symbol, which also represented the rain or life god.

Could it be that the colossal stone heads were sculptured to represent the rain god? The jaguar symbols and U-symbol indicate this; also, their physical characteristics could easily be interpreted as infantile. Babies have round heads, full puffy cheeks, full lips (somewhat everted), broad flat noses, weak chins and very smooth skin. The stone heads show these characteristics.

Some of the heads (Monuments 2 and 4 at La Venta

and Monument 2 at San Lorenzo) show four upper teeth, and this could also be an attempt to show an infantile characteristic. If all this is true, then they present a combination of the jaguar and baby-face motifs of the Olmecs and therefore could have been sculptured to represent the rain or life god. (This interpretation was first proposed, to my knowledge, by Dr. M. Wells Jakeman, professor of archaeology and anthropology at BYU, in a class lecture presented in 1965.)

One argument against this conclusion is the fact that each monument has individual characteristics which distinguish it from all the others. As Stirling indicated, their generally similar appearance seems to be due to the fact that they were sculptured to represent several individuals of a particular racial type, not just a single individual. If they had been sculptured to represent a specific god then the monuments would probably be highly conventionalized and idealized.

b. Another possibility is that the "Olmecs" were the same people as the Jaredites of the Book of Mormon. As has been stated, the date assigned by archaeologists to the stone heads is c. 500 BC. This date corresponds to the last period of the Jaredite civilization, which at that time was decaying from within and not long afterward was destroyed by civil war. The Jaredites had populous urban centers (Ether 10:4, 12, 20) and therefore presumably the manpower and skill to sculpture such monuments as the colossal stone heads. These heads could have been sculptured to represent the kings or famous generals of the period. Moreover, the tentative location of the Jaredite civilization is the southern Gulf Coast region, and this also seems to have been a center of the Olmec culture.

On the basis of the evidence presented in this paper, I believe the colossal stone heads were definitely not sculptured to represent Negroes. But I am not ready to say which one of the two alternative hypotheses is correct, or that either one of them is. Not enough is known at this time about the Preclassic Period to reach a decision on this point.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abbott, Carol, "West Africa: Something Different In American-Indian Origin Theories," U. A. S. News-letter, 91.0. University Archaeological Society, Provo, October 30, 1964. (This is a brief review of the article by Harold G. Lawrence listed below. In it Miss Abbott foreshadows the conclusions of the present paper. Ed.)
- Aveleyra A. de Anda, Luis, "Una Nueva Cabeza Colosal Olmeca," Boletin INAH, June, 1965.
- Beals, Ralph L., and Harry Hoijer, An Introduction to Anthropology. MacMillan Company, New York, 1954.
- Christensen, Ross T. (editor), Progress in Archaeology: An Anthology. University Archaeological Society, Provo, 1963.
- Coe, Michael D., et. al, "Exploraciones Arqueológicas en San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, Veracruz," Boletin INAH, June, 1966.
- Cole, Sonia Mary, Races of Man. British Museum (Natural History), London, 1965.
- Covarrubias, Miguel, Mexico South. Knopf, New York, 1947.
- Covarrubias, Miguel, Indian Art of Mexico and Central America. Knopf, New York, 1957.
- Irwin, Constance, Fair Gods and Stone Faces. St. Martin's Press, New York, 1963.
- Jakeman, M. Wells, "Archaeology and Early History of Middle America," course given at Brigham Young University, fall semester of 1965-66.
- Jennings, Jesse D., and Edward Norbeck (editors), Pre-historic Man in the New World. William Marsh University, University of Chicago Press, 1964.
- Lawrence, Harold G., "African Explorers of the New World," The Crisis, Vol. 69, No. 6 (June-July, 1962), pp. 321-332. Reviewed by Miss Abbott (see above).
- Matson, G. Albin, and Jane Swanson, "Distribution of Hereditary Blood Antigens Among American Indians in Middle America: Lacandón and Other Maya," American Anthropologist, Vol. 63, No. 6 (December, 1961), pp. 1292-1322.
- Parsons, Lee A., and Peter S. Jenson, "Boulder Sculpture on the Pacific Coast," Archaeology, Vol. 18, No. 2 (June, 1965).
- Stirling, Matthew W., "Discovering the New World's Oldest Dated Work of Man," National Geographic Magazine, Vol. 76, No. 2 (August, 1939).
- Stirling, Matthew W., "Great Stone Faces of the Mexican Jungle," National Geographic Magazine, Vol. 78, No. 3 (September, 1940).
- Stirling, Matthew W., "Stone Monuments of Southern Mexico," Bulletin 138, Bureau of American Ethnology. Washington, 1943.
- Stirling, Matthew W., "On the Trail of La Venta Man," National Geographic Magazine, Vol. 91, No. 2 (February, 1947).
- Stirling, Matthew W., "Stone Monuments of the Rio Chiquito," Bulletin 157, Bureau of American Ethnology. Anthro. Papers, No. 43. Wash., 1955.
- Stirling, Matthew W., "An Archaeological Reconnaissance in Southeastern Mexico," Bulletin 164, Bureau of American Ethnology. Anthropological Papers, No. 53. Washington, 1957.
- Wiener, Leo, Africa and the Discovery of America, Vol. III. Innes and Sons, Philadelphia, 1922.

103. 61 A Study of Mesoamerican Religious Symbolism. By David A. Palmer. Religious symbolism abounds in the art of ancient Mesoamerica. This paper will attempt to elucidate the interrelationships among some of the theological symbols and go back where possible to their derivation and meaning. The symbols treated are the tree of life, the serpent, fire, water, the snail or sea shell, and the stepped fret.

1

The phrase often repeated in the Mesoamerican chronicles, ". . . to perish in order to be born," was one of the principal concepts in the Maya and Nahuatl religions. The basis of this concept, according to Paul Westheim, was the firm belief that men contained a "vital energy," which is indestructible and independent of time, space, or matter. "The old men used to say," explained Friar Sahagun, "that when men died they didn't perish, but they once again began to live . . . They turned into spirits or gods."¹ In addition, both the Mayas and Aztecs had complete faith in a life god, whom they represented from very ancient times with the symbol of the serpent.

Perhaps the spiritual conditioning of the ancient Mesoamerican was partly responsible for his artistic endeavors. For a first example we choose the stepped fret, which superficially offers no theological connotations. In Post-Classic Mexican art, such as at Tula and Mitla, the stepped fret was the symbol. Its basic forms are shown in Figure 1. Lack of symmetry in any direction is strong evidence that it originated as a symbol rather than just an art form.

Hermann Beyer, whose work on the stepped fret² includes 250 examples, sees it as a modification of stylized waves. A presentation by him of the different stages of modification is given in Figure 2.

Beyer uses the Spinden correlation to place the initiation of this symbol at about 400 AD. Those attempting to interpret the symbol have said that it may be a sign of wind, of waves of water, or of serpents. Strebel and Preuss further believe that the original form of the spiral was derived from a transversal cut of a marine shell,³ as shown in Figure 3. An association with Quetzalcóatl seems likely, since as Ehecatl (his representation as the god of wind who breathes life into man) he is seen with the stepped fret completely covering his cape.⁴

2

In addition, marine and snail shell symbols had great significance in Preclassic and Classic times through their association with the life god Quetzalcóatl.

Their use lasted until the Conquest, being abstracted to spirals such as seen in the stepped fret. Of considerable interest is a combination of the sea snail and the stepped fret, as shown in Figure 4.⁵

According to Tozzer and Allen of Harvard University, the shell usually represented is that of the Fasciolaria gigantia, which is the largest known American shell and is found on the coast of Yucatán.^{5a} This view is challenged by Emily H. Vokes of Tulane University, however, who points out that the sea shells on the Temple of Quetzalcóatl at Teotihuacán (cf. Newsletter, 28. 50) have a closer resemblance to the Turbinella angulata or West Indian chank.⁶ She believes this represents a Hindu influence in America. However, the case for the view of Tozzer and Allen is very strong because one of the most widely used stylizations is that of a transversal cut of the American shell, such as is shown in Figure 3.

This shape, called the "wind jewel," is one of the most characteristic ornaments of Quetzalcóatl, who wears it on his chest. Figure 5 shows a bas-relief in greenstone found in Veracruz, representing Quetzalcóatl.⁷ Figure 6 shows a typical stylization of the wind jewel, which is seen on Quetzalcóatl in the codices. The upper portion of the figure is a necklace of snail shells. Neither the wind jewel nor snail shell is seen on any of the Mexican deities other than Quetzalcóatl. (This deity is referred to a number of times in the Newsletter; see especially 60. 50, 78. 2, 91. 32. Ed.)

On the significance of the shell symbol, whether seen in top, side, or cross-sectional view, there is agreement among scholars. To introduce the concept we refer to the description given in the Codex Borgia of the resurrection of Quetzalcóatl as the morning star (Venus). "The god born of water rises from a snail shell. In one hand he holds a serpent, the sign of lightning."⁸ Laurette Séjourné in reference to this tradition states,

The snail shell was interpreted by the ancient and wise Mexicans as a symbol of generation, of birth, which coincides with the tradition which makes Quetzalcóatl the procreator of man. This culminating phase (his resurrection) which is marked by both his birth and death can only refer to the overcoming of earthly passions . . . The art at Teotihuacán confirms the role of the snail shell as a generator of spirituality.⁹

Tozzer and Allen state that "the snail is considered by the Nahuas as the symbol of birth and death."¹⁰ Paul Westheim believes that the snail shell represents the female reproductive organs, which have much the same shape.¹¹ Pedro Rios, interpreter of the Telleriano-

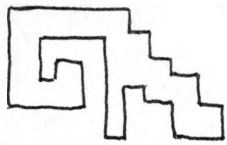


Fig. 1. The stepped fret.



Fig. 2. Stages in the formation of the fret from spirals.

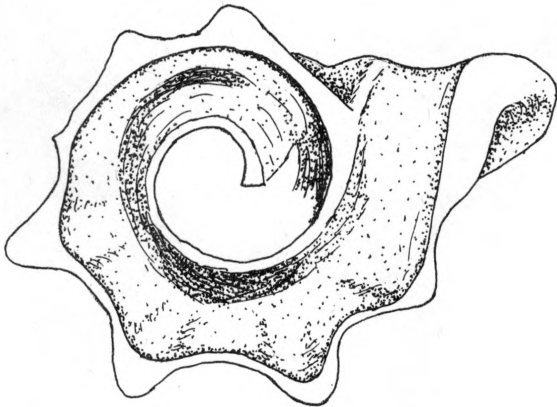


Fig. 3. The wind jewel symbol.

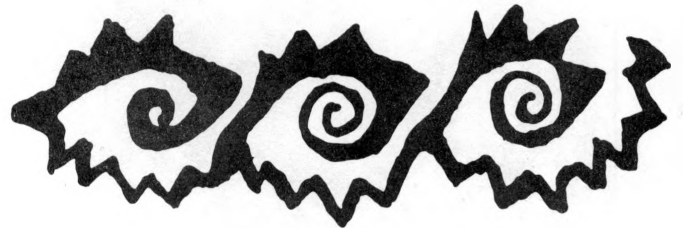


Fig. 4. Combined sea snail and stepped fret.



Fig. 5. Quetzalcóatl with wind jewel on chest.



Fig. 6. Stylized pectoral.

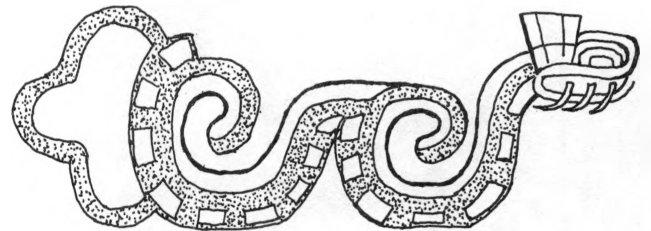


Fig. 8. Serpent, after Séjourné.



Fig. 7. Old man emerging from shell.



Fig. 9. Date: Four-Water.

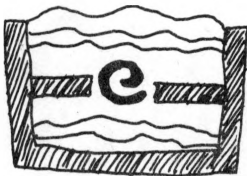


Fig. 11. Water.



Fig. 12. Hieroglyph from Almojahuacán.



Fig. 13. Water symbol from Stela 5, Izapa.



Fig. 15. Birth by water.

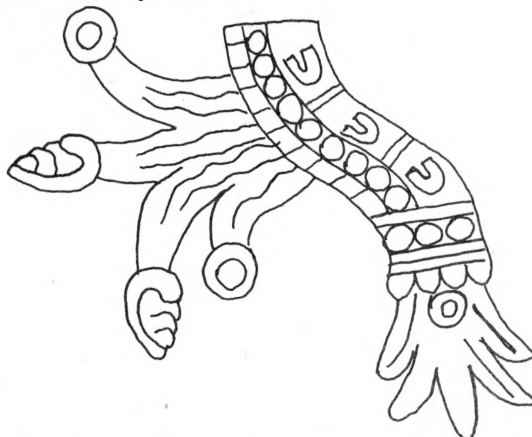


Fig. 16. Union of fire and water.



Ahuilizapan

Fig. 14. The hieroglyph "Ahuilizapan."

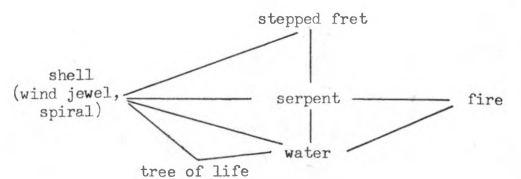


Fig. 17. Interrelationship matrix.

Remensis codex, says, "Just as the snail comes out of the shell, so too man emerges from the womb of his mother."

Representations of gods or humans emerging from shells were widespread in ancient Mesoamerica as well as ancient Peru, India, and possibly other places. An interesting feature in two of the Maya codices, the Dresden¹² and the Peresianus, is the idea of old men emerging from shells. This is also seen on two tenth-century golden discs taken from the Sacred Well at Chichén Itzá. This could tell us that a spiritual rather than a physical birth is represented. Séjourné says that the king in Figure 7 ". . . seems to emerge from the snail shell itself, which goes along with a concept which we find in diverse centers, strangely associated with old men. This suggests the arrival in the world of hidden knowledge."¹³

The association of the shell with the stepped fret and its use as a pectoral on images of Quetzalcóatl has already been indicated. In addition, the appearance of the shell on the Temple of Quetzalcóatl at Teotihuacán beside the serpent heads and figures of the rain god Tlaloc shows an early association with the ancient life god, rather than with just the tenth-century priest-king, Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcóatl. Since a coiled serpent has a form similar to many sea shells, it is possible that the two symbols were both intended to represent the Mesoamerican Quetzalcóatl, whose mission, according to Séjourné, was to bring about the spiritual rebirth of man.¹⁴

The wind jewel appears ". . . repeatedly on the bodies of plumed serpents . . . It also appears on the colossal statues at Tula Hidalgo and on the serpent found on a gold disc taken from the Sacred Well at Chichén Itzá."¹⁵ In Figure 8 the close association of the shell and the serpent is evident. The wind jewel is on the tail, and the spiral form of the shell appears twice on the serpent's body.

3

Another symbol occurring frequently with serpents is fire. Fire serpents are abundant in pre-Columbian art. An excellent example is found on the so-called "Aztec Calendar Stone," where two stylized serpents with very visible flames on their bodies cover the perimeter of the stone. Flaming serpents are an outgrowth of belief in the life god Quetzalcóatl.

This symbolism may be surprising to the modern Christian, who is more apt to think of serpents or snakes in connection with the devil. But the ancient Israelites of the Near East also had the serpent as a symbol of life: during their sojourn in the wilderness of Sinai they were bitten by "fiery serpents." "And Moses prayed for the

people. And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, . . ."16

This same symbol of the fiery serpent is also mentioned in the Book of Mormon, which spells out its significance as understood by an ancient Israelite people in the New World.¹⁷

Yea, did he [Moses] not bear record that the Son of God should come? And as he lifted up the brazen serpent in the wilderness, even so shall he be lifted up who should come. And as many as should look upon that serpent should live, even so as many as should look upon the Son of God with faith, having a contrite spirit, might live, even unto that life which is eternal.

In Palestine the serpent was the principal symbol of the hoped-for Messiah until about 700 BC. A brass serpent on a pole was maintained as a representation of the Messiah in Solomon's temple.¹⁸ This parallel between Old and New World religious symbolism is striking!

(For pointing out this important parallel between the "fire serpent" of ancient American religious symbolism and the "fiery serpent" of the ancient Israelites and the Book of Mormon, the writer is indebted to Dr. M. Wells Jakeman, professor of archaeology and anthropology at Brigham Young University.¹⁹)

Referring again to the Aztec Calendar Stone, we see that one of the ages of the world, "the sun of water," has a familiar representation. ". . . The four currents of water which come out of the receptacle end in shells and discs. Here it appears in reference to a period of the world in which man was destroyed by a flood--with only Nota and Nona escaping."²⁰ The day sign on the calendar called "water" is represented in the same way. A manuscript representation of the date is shown in Figure 9.

Two concentric circles (possibly the end view of the shell) are often used with the same intended meaning (see Figure 10).

4

The spiral, which is a derivation of either shell shapes or the coiled serpent, is often used to represent water, as in Figure 11.²¹ Figure 12 shows a unique combination of shells and spirals.

Aside from shells and serpents, the spiral has a very rare occurrence in nature. It is not observed in waves, and its use as a representation of water is most

unusual. Over a hundred grade-school children were recently asked to draw with lead pencil a picture of water so that those not understanding their language who would look at the picture hundreds of years later, could understand it. Not a single picture had any kind of a spiral, shell shape, or concentric circles, even though children at this age are more creative artistically than at any time in their lives. Many of them, for example, used wavy lines. The use of a spiral or shell to represent water in two different places could be categorized as a rather arbitrary cultural link between them.

The representation of water running beneath the tree of life on Stela 5 at Izapa is a series of spirals resembling the stepped fret in Figure 2. Figure 13 shows this representation, including the two wavy lines running below.

In complete harmony with other correspondences that Stela 5 has with Mesopotamian art,²² the symbol in the latter for water is that of small whorls. Professor Parrot has illustrated bas-relief carvings of water scenes from Nimrud and Khorsabad.²³ Close examination of these reveals not only the spiral but in many cases the snail shell also.

The same symbol is observed wherever water is depicted in Mesopotamian art. Elsewhere, Parrot has illustrated a wall painting in the temple of Mari dating to the eighteenth century BC.²⁴ Underneath the trees of life, which are guarded by cherubim (as also on Stela 5, Izapa), runs a band of spirals. The present writer believes this represents water whose significance is identical to that portrayed two millenia later on Stela 5 at Izapa, Mexico.

5

At this juncture an explanation of the spiritual importance of water to the pre-Columbian mind would be appropriate. One Post-Classic people claimed that "only in the water is their salvation."²⁵ The possibility of some form of water baptism being the reason for this belief is upheld by the many accounts which tell of the performance of this ordinance in Mesoamerica.²⁶ Sahagun described a baptism performed by believers in Quetzalcóatl where the baptizer said, ". . . now he lives again and is born again, once more he is purified and cleansed."²⁷

In another account Sahagun quotes the words of a priest, "When thou wast created and sent here, thy father and mother Quetzalcóatl made thee like a precious stone . . . but by thine own will and choosing thou didst become soiled . . . and now thou hast confessed . . . thou hast uncovered and made manifest all thy sins to our Lord who shelters and purifies all

sinners; and take not this as mockery, for in truth thou has entered the fountain of mercy, which is like the clearest water, with which our Lord God, . . . washes away the dirt from the soul . . . now thou art born anew, now dost thou begin to live; and even now our Lord God gives thee light and a new sun . . ."²⁸ The hieroglyph "Ahuilizapan" from the Codex Mendocino²⁹ seems to have pertinence to this subject. It means, "in the waters of pleasure or the happy river" and is shown in Figure 14.

In Figure 15 is shown a drawing taken from the Codex Dresdensis.³⁰ A religious rite is depicted, which is interpreted by Villacorta as follows: "God B (the serpent god) is on the water holding a serpent with his left hand. A snail shell appears in the water and a human being is coming out of it as a symbol of birth." The interpretation of the drawing's significance is left to the reader.

Water was not only associated with the shell but also with fire. Excellent examples are found in later art.³¹ On an image of Quetzalcóatl is seen the symbol of burning water shown in Figure 16. The water is on the left (the two middle streams terminating in snail shells and the two outer ones in concentric circles) and the band of fire on the right.

A similar theological union of fire and water is seen on another mural at Mari in Mesopotamia dating to the eighteenth century BC.³² Fire and water are both shown being offered upon the altar

If this symbolism also seems odd to the Christian, he should remember that he is told in the Bible he must be born again--of water and of fire (cf. Matthew 3:11; John 3:1-13).

6

In summary, a matrix is shown in Figure 17 which illustrates the interrelationships brought out in this paper. It should be noted that all the symbols point towards the serpent, which represented the life god. They give evidence that anciently a well-defined theology surrounded this deity. Every one of these symbols, except the stepped fret, which evolved from the others, was found in Palestine or Mesopotamia before its appearance in America. Independent invention in two different places of such symbols with the same assigned meanings is so improbable that a cultural movement from the Old World to the New World seems to be the imperative conclusion.

The religious beliefs which these symbols evoke can be understood only dimly without the illumination of documentary sources. May such documentary discoveries shortly be made, to light the path toward a better understanding of the ancient civilizations of America.

NOTES

- ¹Paul Westheim, Ideas Fundamentales del Arte Prehis-pánico (Mexico, DF, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1957), p. 59.
- ²Hermann Beyer, "La Greca Escalonada," El Mexico Antiguo, Tomo X (Mexico, DF, Sociedad Alemana Mexicanista, 1965), p. 70.
- ³Hermann Strebel, "Zur Deutung eines altmexikanischen Ornamentmotivs," Globus, Vol. 71 (1897), p. 201; K. Th. Preuss, "Kosmische Hieroglyphen der Mexikaner," Zeitschrift für Ethnologie, Vol. 33 (1901), pp. 31-32.
- ⁴Beyer, op. cit., p. 98, from the Codice Nuttal, p. 65.
- ⁵Jorge Enciso, Design Motifs of Ancient Mexico (New York, Dover Publications, 1953), Figure IV, p. 61.
- ^{5a}Alfred M. Tozzer and Glover M. Allen, Animal Figures in the Maya Codices (Cambridge, Mass., Peabody Museum, 1910)
- ⁶Emily H. Vokes, "A Possible Hindu Influence at Teotihuacán," American Antiquity, Vol. 29 (1963), p. 94.
- ⁷Presumably the ancient life god. In the tenth century a priest-king (Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcóatl) taught many of the same doctrines which had been taught earlier by the god. At present it is extremely difficult to separate the legends and facts pertaining to the god from those of the priest-king. For a complete treatment of the subject see Saenz, Quetzalcoatl (cf. Note 15, below).
- ⁸Codice Borgia, p. 42 (Berlin, 1904). Xolotl is shown. He is the twin of Quetzalcóatl and appears occasionally with the wind jewel, as in the Codex Borbónico (cf. Newsletter, 60.50. Ed.).
- ⁹Laurette Séjourné, El Universo de Quetzalcoatl (Mexico, DF, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1962), p. 54.
- ¹⁰Tozzer and Allen op. cit., p. 297.
- ¹¹Paul Westheim, The Art of Ancient Mexico (New York, Garden City, Doubleday, 1965), p. 118.
- ¹²Codices Mayas, reproducidos y desarrollados por J. y C. Villacorta (Guatemala, CA, 1933). Dresden, p. 41b.
- ¹³Séjourné, op. cit., p. 50.
- ¹⁴Laurette Séjourné, El Pensamiento y Religión en el Mexico Antiguo (Breviario del Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, DF, 1956), pp. 60, 86. In the city of the gods (Teotihuacán) the worshiper followed the example of Quetzalcóatl by striving for celestial status through inner growth. (For a brief review of the English edition of this work, see Newsletter, 78.2. Ed.)
- ¹⁵Cesar Saenz, Quetzalcoatl (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico, DF, 1962), p. 35.
- ¹⁶Numbers 21:7-9.
- ¹⁷Helaman 8:14-15. The Book of Mormon, in which this reference appears, describes the life and religious beliefs of the Preclassic and Protoclassic inhabitants of Mesoamerica.
- ¹⁸Maurice H. Farbridge, Studies in Biblical and Semitic Symbolism.
- ¹⁹M. Wells Jakeman, comment in symposium discussion, also class lecture in "Archaeology of Middle America," course given at Brigham Young University, spring semester of 1967.
- ²⁰Beyer, op. cit., p. 187. Of corresponding interest in the Maya culture would be the scene on p. 74 of the Codex Dresdensis. Could this not represent the death and spiritual rebirth of the world?
- ²¹Beyer, op. cit., p. 191.
- ²²M. Wells Jakeman, The Complex "Tree-of-Life" Carving on Izapa Stela 5. Brigham Young University Publications in Archaeology and Early History, Mesoamerican Series, No. 4 (Provo, 1958).
- ²³André Parrot, The Arts of Assyria (New York, Golden Press, 1961), p. 40.
- ²⁴André Parrot, Sumer, the Dawn of Art (New York, Golden Press, 1961), p. 269.
- ²⁵Anales de los Cakchiqueles, Adrian Recinos translation (Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, DF, 1950), p. 62.
- ²⁶For example, Historical Recollections of Gaspar Antonio Chi (edited and translated by M. Wells Jakeman), p. 42. Brigham Young University Publications in Archaeology and Early History, No. 3 (Provo, 1952).
- ²⁷Bernardino de Sahagun, Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España (edition of Angel M. Garibay, Editorial Porrúa, Mexico, DF, 1956), Vol. 2, p. 207.
- ²⁸Séjourné, op. cit., 1956, p. 56, quoting Sahagun.
- ²⁹Antonio Peñafiel, Nombres Geográficos de Mexico, Catalogo Alfabético, Estudio Jeroglífico, Matricula de los tributos del Codice Mendocino (Mexico, DF, 1962).
- ³⁰Codices Mayas, Dresden, p. 37b.
- ³¹Codice Borgia, p. 23, for example.
- ³²Parrot, op. cit. (Sumer), p. 282.