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**COSTA RICAN ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY**

Essays in Honor of Frederick R. Mayer

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## CHAPTER 7

# THE COSTA RICAN EFFIGY HEAD TRADITION

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### INTRODUCTION

The Costa Rican effigy head tradition is one element of an artistic and religious tradition that exists throughout the world. From Mesopotamia to Southeast Asia and Africa people have carved, sculpted, and honored effigy heads. Among Precolumbian cultures the tradition ranges across a broad area, and most Precolumbian peoples from South America, Central America, Mesoamerica, and North America produced effigy head sculptures and/or vessels.

In spite of the wide range and variety of effigy heads in the Precolumbian world, a few generalizations about the tradition can be made. Precolumbian effigy heads come almost exclusively from mortuary or religious contexts. As grave and temple goods, the heads carry elite associations. In addition, each culture represented a number of different identities in effigy head form, depicting portraits, deities, death masks, shamans, warriors, ball players, and composite human/deity or human/animal heads. While no single culture depicted all of these, at least two or three different identities were usually produced.

It is with this general Precolumbian effigy head tradition that the Costa Rican tradition is aligned. In Costa Rica the effigy heads seem to come exclusively from mortuary contexts; they are associated with elite graves—so identified by the presence of other grave goods such as painted ceramics, stone work, jade, and jewelry. As seen in other Precolumbian cultures, the effigy heads from Costa Rica depict a variety of iconographic themes. Even though few can be named, several distinct identities—some obviously human, some less so—can be distinguished.

The following discussion characterizes the Costa Rican effigy head tradition and offers an interpretation of the iconography. This

chapter describes the unity in the tradition and addresses the distinct forms, iconography, and pattern of development that the two major branches of the tradition display.

### COSTA RICAN EFFIGY HEADS

Although poorly provenanced, effigy heads come primarily from two regions of Costa Rica: the Central Highlands/Atlantic Watershed (CHAW) and Guanacaste-Nicoya. The two areas share a general pattern of social development, showing evidence of population growth, social stratification, and artistic development beginning as early as 300-500 B.C. (Lange 1984b; Snarskis 1984) and continuing until the arrival of the Spanish in the 1500s.

The archaeological evidence, however, also indicates that distinct cultural and socio-religious patterns developed in the two areas. The Atlantic shows heavy emphasis on agriculture and incised ceramics, an early importance of jade associated with stone sculpture and mace heads, and a long tradition of basalt sculpture. On the other hand, cultures in the Pacific area of Costa Rica relied heavily on a mixed subsistence economy including the use of marine resources on the coast. They worked jade from 300 B.C. on, and created polychrome ceramics with some general and occasional specific affinity to Mesoamerican wares. The effigy head tradition reflects the divergent patterns apparent in the archaeological record. A fundamental unity in the tradition exists but the tradition shows divergence in form and pattern of development, when the Atlantic and Pacific are compared.

The unity in the Costa Rican effigy head tradition refers to the general features shared by the CHAW and Guanacaste-Nicoya. In both areas, the effigy heads form part of an elite mortuary tradition which spans nearly 1,200 years, from A.D. 300-1500. During that time, changes in form and iconography occurred, yet the overall tradition is a continuous one, always maintaining elite mortuary connections. The presence of the tradition, its longevity, and its continual link to elite mortuary practice are the most important elements indicating unity. They are not, however, the only indications of unity. In addition, the effigy head tradition in both regions shares motifs with other contemporary elite arts, and early in time both the CHAW and Guanacaste-Nicoya heads exhibit naturalism which diminishes after A.D. 800. Finally, the two regions share some effigy head-vessel forms, particularly after A.D. 1000.

However, given that the fundamental unity of the tradition is quite general, the specific features of the tradition must be characterized by divergence between the CHAW and Guanacaste-Nicoya, with each region having its own pattern of development, repertoire of

forms, use of materials, and iconography. This pattern of unity and divergence also is the case for a number of other elite arts in Costa Rica. (See Figures 7.1 and 7.3.)

### CENTRAL HIGHLANDS/ATLANTIC WATERSHED

The effigy heads from this region of Costa Rica take three primary forms: ceramic sculptures in the round, stone sculptures in the round, and ceramic head-vessels.

#### Sculptures in the Round

The most common effigy heads from the CHAW are the ceramic and stone sculptures in the round; the production of these heads spans the entire 1,200 years of the effigy head tradition. Some pieces date as early as A.D. 300-500, while others may have been made as late as A.D. 1500. The ceramic pieces (c. A.D. 300-1000) predate the stone ones (c. A.D. 1000-1500); however, both ceramic and stone heads portray similar ideas.

The ceramic heads may be of bichrome or monochrome ceramic and range in size from 15-25 cm (Plate 13). These heads often have large holes punched in the bottom to indicate decapitation and thus represent dead humans. Facial features are modelled to emphasize naturalism and individuality, and careful attention was given to detailed hair styles, headgear, hats, and helmets.

The stone heads are exclusively carved in the round from a volcanic pumice or basalt. Most stone heads range in size from 10-25 cm, but a few miniatures (c. 4-5 cm) do exist. The heads generally depict dead humans, although signs of death do not always appear. Elaborate patterns carved on top of the heads probably represent hair and, in some cases, headgear and/or helmets are also present.

Although the relationship between the ceramic and stone heads cannot be clearly defined, both show naturalistic facial features, indications of death, and elaborate headgear or hair patterns. The techniques of working stone vary from those used in ceramics, as carving replaces modelling, painting, and incision. Nevertheless, the emphasis on individual features—particularly the nose, lips, and top of the head—suggests that the two traditions may be continuous.

Iconographic evidence indicates that many of these ceramic and stone heads can be interpreted as trophy heads. The five primary elements which support this interpretation include: 1) features indicating death, such as closed eyes, blank eye sockets, eyes sewn shut, and mouths sewn shut or grimacing; 2) evidence of decapitation, especially in the bichrome ceramic heads; 3) absence of any intent to depict a body with these heads; 4) the presence of elaborate headgear, often depicting helmets; and 5) the similarity between the features of the

stone heads and obvious trophy heads depicted on contemporary stone metates and ceramic warrior figures (Plate 14).

Ethnographic evidence also supports the interpretation of these heads as trophy heads. The practice of taking trophy heads is spread throughout the lower Central American and northern South American tropical forests and may relate to battles for land or hegemony (Disselhoff 1960; Stone 1961; Snarskis 1984). This practice may also be connected with agricultural fertility (Roarke 1965), while Stone (1961) noted that historical documentation in Costa Rica emphasized the custom of human sacrifice every moon:

There are many ceremonial objects which perhaps developed [a] cult. The figures holding or carrying human heads make one division; the lone heads constitute another. Grinding stones and circular tables decorated around the rim with stylized human heads . . . as well as individual human heads of stone compose still other groups. In fact, the continual appearance of this [trophy head] motif throughout the [CHAW] region suggests that the common way to meet religious demands was to offer a head in sacrifice.

However, not all heads sculpted in the round depict trophy heads. Monochrome ceramic pieces exhibit no features truly indicative of trophy heads, except their dissociation from bodies, while some of the stone heads have carved ropes around their heads and necks; others lack helmets and show signs of scarification. These heads may portray slaves, captives, or people of low status rather than sacrificial victims or war trophies.

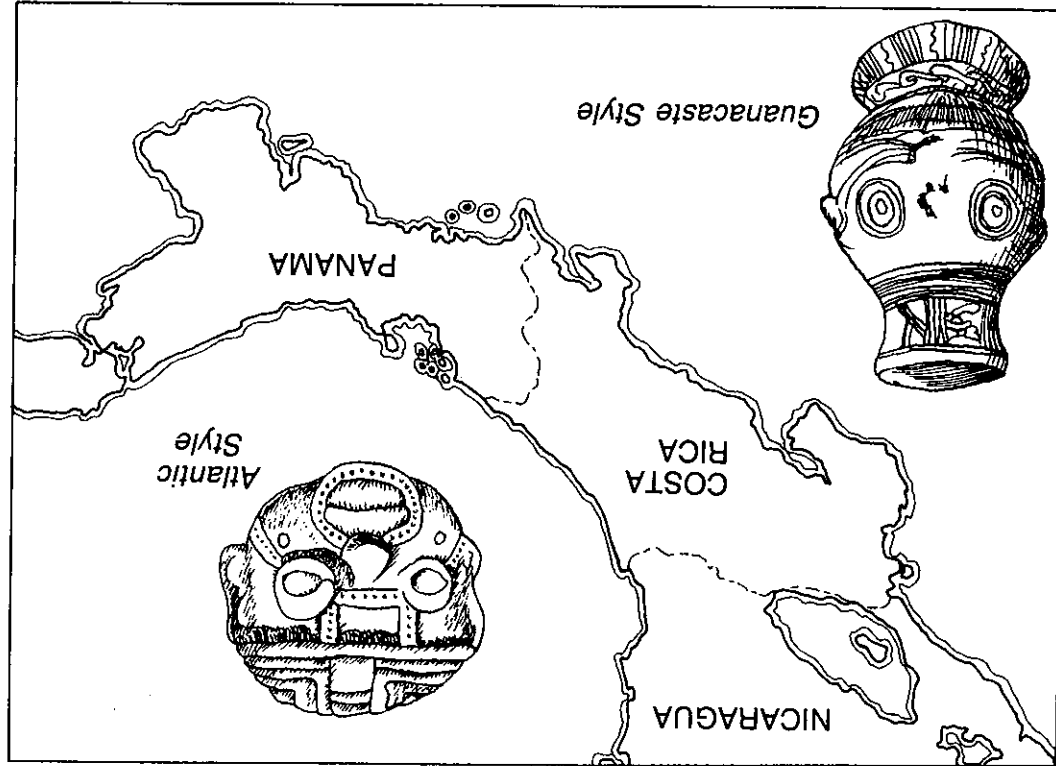
The function of these ceramic and stone heads in the mortuary context is uncertain. M. Bozzoli de Wille reports that the Bribri, who live on the Atlantic coast of Costa Rica, buried slaves and the skulls of war victims with the bodies of dead lords or warriors (1975). Perhaps the ceramic and stone heads served as substitutes for real bodies and relate to the Bribri traditions. The burial of substitute sacrifices is a common practice around the world; furthermore, bodies of ceramic, stone, or wood are often interred to mark the status of the deceased, confer honor, guard the body, or guide the deceased into the afterworld. It is possible that these Costa Rican effigy heads functioned similarly.

### Head-Vessels

The ceramic head-vessels from the CHAW show both forms and iconographies that are quite distinct from the effigy heads sculpted in the round.

One type of ceramic head-vessel dates from the Transitional Period of CHAW archaeology (c. A.D. 500-1000). These pieces take an elongated form and measure c. 10-12 cm. Although the facial features tend to be generalized, the heads maintain some naturalism akin to the effigy heads modelled and sculpted in the round.

Figure 7.1 — Map with distribution of trophy and effigy heads on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts



Perhaps the most unique attribute of these pieces is the elaborate hat. Birds, traditionally associated with alter-ego figures or transformation, perch on the hat rims. Snarskis calls the birds emissaries which represent the far-reaching ears and eyes of a shamanistic personality (1981a); these figures, then, may depict shamans. While the function of the shaman in a mortuary context is unclear, a number of shaman or shaman-like figures were placed in graves in both the CHAW and Guanacaste-Nicoya. These figures may have played protective, guardian, or psychopomp roles.

Other ceramic effigy head-vessels, from the Stone Cist Period (c. A.D. 1000-1500), seem unrelated to the earlier ceramic effigy head-vessels. The Stone Cist Period head-vessels take globular forms with either straight-sided or recurved openings; bases may be rounded or with tripod legs. These pieces range from 4-10 cm in height.

The facial features of these pieces take only the most basic form, making questions of iconography difficult to address. Some vessels have distinctly human features such as arching eyebrows that connect at a human-like nose. The features of these pieces, however, are so rudimentary that it is impossible to determine anything about the identity of the human face.

Others seem to depict human/animal—possibly human/alligator—heads. Bulging eyes, snout noses, and bared teeth support the reptilian interpretation of these heads. The alligator is traditionally associated with suprahuman powers in Costa Rica; he may play both a trickster and a mythic hero type role. These human/alligator pieces may represent powerful transformation symbols in depicting a shaman who takes the guise of, wears the mask of, or actually becomes an alligator. Alternatively, the head-vessels may represent an alter-ego figure similar to stone or jade alter-ego figures which symbolically portray the "other I" or spiritual protector of the person (Stone 1961). Although the reason why such vessels were placed in the graves cannot be known, mythico-religious implications seem clear.

The relationship between these late head-vessels and earlier ceramic effigy heads is not yet understood. Nor is the relationship between these heads and contemporary stone effigy heads an obvious one. Snarskis (1984) maintains that changes in material culture, from house forms to ceramics, occurred between A.D. 500-1000 in the CHAW. As the cultural complex changed, the ceramic tradition changed with it, and this may explain why the forms and apparent iconographic themes of these late head-vessels seem to have little connection to earlier ceramic or contemporary stone effigy heads.

The case can be made that the ceramic tradition may have changed gradually, as certain forms and complexes appear to overlap and fade out rather than disappear abruptly (Snarskis 1978, 1982). Even so, the possibility that the late period effigy head-vessels are descendants of the early ceramic "trophy" heads does not seem likely.

The iconographic differences between the late head-vessels and earlier traditions suggest that the late effigy head-vessels represent ideas largely unrelated to earlier effigy heads.

#### Central Highlands/Atlantic Watershed Summary (Figure 7.2)

The earliest effigy heads are made of ceramic and modelled in the round, and probably depict trophy heads. Perhaps they were placed in graves as substitutes for the spoils of battle, ritual sacrifices, or sacrificed slaves. In the CHAW this naturalistic trophy head tradition never disappears, although between A.D. 800-1000, stone becomes the primary medium for depicting naturalistic trophy heads.

Ceramic effigy heads continue to be made but there is a dramatic change in the use of the medium. They generally become less refined over time: modelling is cruder, facial features are simpler, and indications of individuality are absent. The effigy heads take new forms, becoming head-vessels with faces applied to globular ceramic forms. Along with the form, iconography may have changed and signs of decapitation disappear. In some cases human and alligator features were combined perhaps as representations of supernatural beings, alter-ego figures, or shaman-like transformation themes.

Late in time the CHAW effigy heads show two distinct types. Naturalistic trophy heads of stone appear to be the dominant type and are probably part of a continuous tradition which started with ceramic heads c. A.D. 300. The second type of effigy—ceramic effigy head-vessels—were also produced in the late period; it is unclear whether these pieces descend from the veristic ceramic heads or if they are largely unrelated to the early portraiture trophy heads.

#### GUANACASTE-NICOYA

The Guanacaste-Nicoya tradition effigy heads are limited to ceramics. Two ceramic traditions occur, but both of the effigies take the form of head-vessels. The dominant tradition is a polychrome one which dates from c. A.D. 500-1500. Monochrome incised head-vessels are less common and most appear to be contemporary with the polychromes, although some may date as early as A.D. 300. Both traditions emphasize naturalism early in time with a slight shift towards generalization of features c. A.D. 800. At this point the two traditions diverge. The polychrome tradition shows more and more abstraction so that by A.D. 1200-1500 human heads are no longer represented. The monochrome tradition never becomes abstract; even late in time, some of the pieces depict human heads.

In both the polychrome and monochrome traditions the forms of the vessel and specific effigy attributes show consistency within a ceramic type. Therefore, the Guanacaste-Nicoya head-vessels depict a

single iconographic theme within a given time period. Because changes in iconography and style correspond to shifts in time, the effigy heads from Guanacaste-Nicoya will be discussed by archaeological period.

#### Late Zoned Bichrome and Early Polychrome Periods

From c. A.D. 300-800, effigy head-vessels appear primarily in Guinea Incised ware, Carrillo Polychrome, and Galo Polychrome. Most vessels take the form of human heads with modelled facial features, and surface elaboration spreads over the faces, vessel openings, and backs of nearly all of these early pieces. In the polychrome wares, the faces are heavily painted, with eyes and mouths frequently outlined in black or red (Plate 15), and elaborate interlocking and concentric geometric patterns cover cheeks and foreheads. In the Guinea ceramics incising rather than painting decorates the effigy heads. Patterns which outline the perimeter of the faces and cover the opening and backs of the vessels bear close relationship to contemporary textile patterns. Perhaps more importantly, these incised and painted patterns often have elements that generally have been interpreted as stylized alligators. With very few exceptions, nearly all early effigy head-vessels show this "alligator" symbolism on the sides and/or backs, in addition to the face itself.

These early effigy head-vessels probably depict death heads. Traits indicative of death such as darkened eye sockets, circles around the eyes, mouths outlined with red, and lips frozen into grimaces with bared teeth appear regularly. Unlike the early ceramic heads from the CHAW these do not represent trophy heads. No signs of decapitation occur and helmets and objects relating to warfare are absent. No other Guanacaste-Nicoya elite works of art show trophy heads as do CHAW metates and warrior figures. Lastly, archaeological and limited ethnographic data suggest that the practice of taking trophy heads was not common in northwestern Costa Rica. This implies that the Guanacaste-Nicoya effigies grew out of social and religious circumstances quite different from those existing in the CHAW.

Guanacaste-Nicoya head-vessels may represent portraits of the elite. Most of the effigy head-vessels emphasize naturalism in both facial structure and facial features, and show variations in facial features that resemble normal variations in living human populations. *Huaquero* informants have reported similarities between the head-vessels and the skull next to them in the grave (Lange 1985, personal communication), especially in patterns of dental mutilation. These head-vessels, then, may be considered death portraits.

The function of such a portrait vessel in the grave is unknown. Bozzoli de Wille (1975) reports that the Bribri believe a soul, similar to the person on earth, must remain near the bones of the deceased. Even though the Bribri live on the Atlantic coast, this ethnographic

information may be useful in interpreting the Guanacaste-Nicoya heads.

Considering the portrait-like naturalism of these effigy heads, the *huaquero* reports, and Bribri beliefs, these human head-vessels may be interpreted as soul vessels. They may act as the home of the soul in the grave. The Bribri believe "... the souls are twins, similar to the person ... they reside in the eyes" (Bozzoli de Wille 1975). The painted emphasis on the eye area of the effigy head-vessels suggests that the death faces may represent souls.

The prevalence of alligator symbols on these "soul portraits" suggests that the person depicted in the effigy head-vessel may have had connections to the alligator, particularly its mythic, superhuman powers. If indeed these painted symbols actually do represent alligators, then these effigy head-vessels may be the soul portraits of shamans or other elite persons connected with powers of transformation and the supernatural. While the link between the human and animal world is indicated by these effigy heads, the specific nature of such connection in a mortuary context remains unclear. The "alligator" symbols may also relate to death and the underworld as well as to shamanic transformation.

In any event, the elite mortuary nature of these head-vessels and the complexity of the painting suggest that the patterns have symbolic value. While interpretation of the symbolism is not yet possible, the painted face patterns demonstrate characteristics of symbolic communication. Who was communicating with whom via the symbolic painting of these head-vessels cannot be determined. Yet the resemblance of patterns on the head-vessels to patterns on other elite objects such as metates, jades, and textiles, indicates that the face patterns must be considered part of a repertoire of symbols which expressed elite values.

#### Middle Polychrome Period

During the Middle Polychrome Period (MPP), c. A.D. 800-1350, more head-vessels start to appear in a greater number of ceramic types. A range of forms that depict a single iconographic theme appear in incised wares such as Huerta Incised and in painted wares like Mora and Papagayo Polychrome. The effigy head-vessels are generally much less naturalistic than those of the preceding period, and are no longer modelled to take the form of human heads. Rather, faces have been incised or painted on the surface of globular and elongated vessels.

In painted wares, eyes and mouths continue to be circled in red and/or black. Some of these pieces depict masked figures, and red chin and nose ornaments, which may be interpreted as jewelry, appear regularly. The jewelry, as well as other painted patterns on the rims, sides, and backs of the vessels, are signs of status and serve to emphasize the elite connotations of these pieces.

The incised wares exhibit similar qualities with elaborate incising covering the cheeks and foreheads, and backs of vessels. This incising may be strictly geometric or it may combine geometric and representational forms. While these incised patterns may represent the same ideas and carry similar connotations to the painted patterns found in polychrome wares.

The iconography of these MPP pieces is even more ambiguous than that of the Early Polychrome Period (EPP) head-vessels. Clearly a loss in naturalism has occurred; faces are more generalized and non-portrait (Plate 16). Especially in the painted polychrome vessels, the emphasis has shifted away from modelled features to painted ones. This could be the result of a gradual stylistic drift indicating change in the direction of increased abstraction.

The important question is whether these pieces are continuous with the earlier soul portrait-vessels or whether there has been a change in iconography. In support of continuity, some of the painted patterns seem to be elaborations or standardizations of the earlier patterns. Eyes are still circled in red and/or black; mouths are outlined in red; and the backs of the vessels are painted with symbolic patterns. Although the MPP pieces appear to be more heavily painted than the earlier head-vessels, relationships in the painted patterns definitely exist.

Overall, however, a new repertoire of standardized patterns appear in the MPP vessels. As facial features become less distinctive and more generalized, the mouth decoration has increased in surface area and become standardized in form. Instead of circles around the lips, the red area around the mouth often depicts gold eagle or frog ornaments. The way paint covers the vessel has also changed, and a number of MPP vessels have a distinct zone of geometric patterns around the rim of the vessel in addition to elaborate painting on the sides and backs of vessels. Also the alligator symbols disappear; they are replaced by new themes: stylized jaguar patterns predominate, but serpents and elaborately dressed warrior figures also appear. All of these elements may relate to Mesoamerican ceramic traditions and suggest that a break in iconography occurred.

One of the strongest indications of Mesoamerican influence in the MPP is the appearance of the so-called "Tlaloc" vessels, c. A.D. 1200, near the end of the period (Plate 17). These vessels, almost exclusively of Pataky Polychrome, show attributes perhaps associated with the Mexican water deity Tlaloc including goggle eyes, elaborate mouths with fangs or chin ornaments, and ear plugs. Although it is unlikely that the Nicoyan "Tlaloc" vessels depict Tlaloc as he is known in Mesoamerica, the Nicoyan vessels do share at least general features with Mesoamerican representations and may depict a Costa Rican version of the deity. Even if the Nicoyan head-vessels do not represent Tlaloc or a related being, they are without local precedent in Greater

Nicoya and thus serve as primary evidence of external contact during the MPP.

The question of external contacts between Guanacaste-Nicoya and the north directly relates to the question of continuity in iconography. Influence from and connections with Mesoamerica are undeniable during the MPP. Papagayo Polychrome, perhaps the predominant Greater Nicoya ceramic type of the period, "... was traded out to Honduras and El Salvador, and as far north as Central Mexico.... Papagayo is also associated with the... Mesoamerican Post Classic ware Tohil Plubate" (Healy 1980). In addition, Papagayo Polychrome can be related iconographically to Babilonia and Las Vegas Polychrome, roughly contemporary ceramic wares from Honduras. And some varieties of Mora, Birmania, and Altiplano polychromes (all predominant Guanacaste ceramic types of the period) may also have iconographic connections to these northern wares.

Thus during the MPP it appears that Mesoamerican influence may have spread throughout the whole archaeological subarea of Greater Nicoya (Healy 1980). At the same time, however, a number of local ceramic traditions which began in the EPP continue (Healy 1980).

Thus, two trends can be traced in the ceramic tradition of Guanacaste-Nicoya during the MPP. A widespread Mesoamerican ceramic tradition appears in the numerous variations of Papagayo, as well as other ceramic types, and local wares persist. Just as the archaeological record indicates both continuity and change, the effigy head-vessels probably represent neither a complete break with the earlier head-vessels nor a direct growth from them. I believe this accounts for the ambiguous identity of the head-vessels, the move away from modeling towards an emphasis on painting, and the move towards more generalized/abstract forms.

While the MPP vessels show some elements associated with the past, the iconography remains difficult to interpret. The vessels are no longer individual soul portraits. The masks and generalized facial features suggest these pieces represent semi-human/semi-divine beings; they may depict abstracted soul portraits, alter-ego figures, shamans, spirit figures associated with the after-life, or psychopomps. Clearly these effigy heads continue to function as carriers of elite symbols and ideas. In particular the link between human and animal worlds persists; although the effigy heads now bear jaguar rather than alligator symbols, the ideas of transformation, superhuman powers, and shamanism have not disappeared. However, these ideas may now be associated with the jaguar, due to increased Mesoamerican influence. Until more research is done on the meaning and transformation of symbols in Lower Central America, however, the identity of these pieces cannot be more clearly defined.



### Late Polychrome Period

The head-vessels of the Late Polychrome Period (LPP), c. A.D. 1350-1500, depict the most abstract effigy heads from Guanacaste-Nicoya. In many cases, prototypes of these abstract effigies exist in the MPP and attributes first seen in the MPP now appear with great regularity. In the LPP more effigy head-vessels were made in a larger number of ceramic types than in other periods. It is not clear if a greater number of effigy vessels were also produced, but a widespread sharing of the tradition in the LPP seems evident.

The LPP head-vessels exhibit a large degree of unity in iconography; the differences that exist are related primarily to ceramic types and to the form of attributes such as eye shape, the number of "whiskers" on the cheek pattern, and the amount of facial decoration. Thus, the similarities among the LPP effigy head-vessels may also point to an underlying unity among the elite in northwestern Costa Rica between A.D. 1350-1500.

The LPP head-vessels generally portray non-human figures. The degree of abstraction represented in these faces is extreme; facial features are so stylized that they bear little resemblance to human features. Additionally, attributes such as depictions of gold jewelry, eyes, ears, and motifs around vessel openings and bases appear in standardized—almost shorthand—form. Some of the effigy head-vessels may be more abstract versions of the earlier "Tlalocs." Others relate more closely to beings depicted on Mayoid vessels reportedly from the Uluva-Yajoa Valley. These Mayoid vessels depict deity forms with dotted circles around the eyes, striped streamers emerging from the mouth, elaborate ear plugs, and downturned arms with jaguar spots (see Robicsek 1972, Plates 245, 246). The beings depicted on several Nicoyan LPP vessels seem to be the same one represented on the Mayoid vessels (Plate 18). This being, for the present, remains unnamed, although it is clearly not a representation of a human form.

While it is not yet possible to demonstrate conclusively that the Nicoyans derived their ideas from Mayoid prototypes, the chronological data and stylistic analysis suggest that at least some ideas travelled from north to south (not vice versa). Thus, Mesoamerican influence at the end of the Middle and beginning of the Late Polychrome periods probably accounts for the introduction and spread of the new iconographies. Yet the nature of Mesoamerican influence and its impact in Guanacaste-Nicoya is not as well understood as one might hope. The possibility exists that the Mesoamerican influence "... may in reality ... be a veneer on continuing local cultures" (Day 1984). Any interpretation of LPP Nicoya art, then, must consider the strength of local, indigenous traditions.

Stylistic and archaeological evidence indicates that indigenous traditions, dating from the late Zoned Bichrome Period (ZBP) or EPP, persist in both the MPP and the LPP. In spite of foreign contact and/or influence the local traditions survived. This means that

continuity in iconography from EPP effigy head-vessels to LPP effigy head-vessels may exist.

While the primary facial features on some LPP effigy heads resemble "Tlaloc-faced" vessels or the being on Uluva-Yajoa vessels, others could be interpreted as abstractions of the earlier effigy head patterns. The large circled or sunburst eyes of the LPP head-vessels could be stylized versions of the earlier masks and eye circles; the mouth/cheek ornaments could be descendants of the red mouth circles and painted cheek patterns. Furthermore, many of these effigy heads bear less resemblance to Tlaloc than to MPP head-vessels, especially those with jaguar symbols. In fact, a number of the late effigy heads may be abstractions of a masked human-jaguar figure and hence continue the ideas of a link between human and animal realms, shamanism and transformation, into the LPP. Given the complexity of the permutations and abstractions on LPP ceramics (Lothrop 1926), the possibility of continuity is not farfetched.

Unfortunately, it is not yet possible, given present archaeological material, to determine which was stronger during the LPP: Mesoamerican influence or indigenous, local traditions. Elements of both are reflected in the ceramic traditions of Guanacaste-Nicoya, and the two traditions may have mingled and perhaps even fused. Thus, any interpretations of LPP iconography must consider the strength of both traditions, and the LPP effigy head-vessels cannot be interpreted as either stylized Mesoamerican deities or stylized soul-shaman portraits; rather the LPP head-vessels depict an iconographic theme with roots in both.

Perhaps the best term for these figures is *analogue*; they appear both related to, but different from, the Mesoamerican deity forms and abstract soul portraits of the late MPP. They are analogous to both but not truly one or the other. As such, the LPP head-vessels may portray intermediary figures connected to the supernatural world of deities as well as to the human world, shamanism, and concerns with death.

### Guanacaste-Nicoya Summary (Figure 7.2)

In general, the Guanacaste-Nicoya effigy head tradition can be characterized by a continuum which shows naturalistic death heads at one end and abstract deity-figures at the other. In between, semi-human/semi-divine heads appear. This suggests that the shift in iconography was a gradual one, and that the entire tradition may be continuous.

In all periods, the polychrome head-vessels show an emphasis on face painting. From the early through the late periods eyes, ears, and mouths are elaborated with black and/or red. Early in time, however, the painting is most elaborate on cheeks and forehead, and facial features modelled in relief contribute to the naturalism of these portrait death heads. In the middle period, face paint largely replaces modeling; masks, depictions of jewelry, and bands of elite symbols



form the primary motifs. By the LPP, faces have become extremely generalized and abstract, although painting continues to be used for facial features, jewelry, ornaments, and bands of elite symbols. Geometric patterns and representational motifs are often painted on the sides, back, or top of the vessels, and motifs associated with other high-status ceramics occur frequently. The change in these motifs from EPP to LPP may reflect Mesoamerican influence. The continuous presence of stylized animal patterns on the rims, sides, and backs of effigy heads, however, indicates that the themes of transformation and perhaps shamanism persisted over time. The overall emphasis on face painting and presence of elite patterns suggest that the painted designs probably had a symbolic, communicative function.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data and interpretive material reveals that, in spite of many differences, the effigy heads from Guanacaste-Nicoya and the CHAW share a number of general features. These shared features support the interpretation of a single effigy head tradition with two distinct branches (Figure 7.3).

Unity in the tradition exists at a fundamental level in the presence, longevity, and elite mortuary nature of the tradition in both regions. On another level, unity is exhibited in the character of each tradition. For example, in both areas the style of ceramic effigy heads shifts from naturalism toward abstraction over time. A commonality of forms also exists, and ocarinas, head-vessel forms, and globular forms with recurved necks or straight sides and tripod legs appear in both regions. Lastly, the effigy heads of both the CHAW and Guanacaste-Nicoya reflect patterns of social and religious development, and thus may fit into their respective cultural context in similar ways.

The two traditions diverge primarily in the use of materials and iconography. Although the general ceramic traditions in the CHAW and Guanacaste-Nicoya may be related (Lange 1984a), the materials used to make effigy heads distinguishes the heads of one region from those of the other. The CHAW heads are made of stone and a number of ceramic types characteristic of the region during specific time periods. Techniques of incising, modeling, and punching predominate in ceramic wares. In Guanacaste-Nicoya no stone is used and ceramic head-vessels appear exclusively in types associated with pacific northwest ceramic production; painting rather than modeling or incising is the primary decorative technique.

The iconography of the two regions differs in important ways. In the CHAW, the heads show links to warfare and decapitation, and analysis indicates that the early ceramic and late stone heads are

Figure 7.2 — Major types of effigy heads

Form	Material	Iconography	Features	Date
Sculpture in the Round	Ceramic: Bichrome Monochrome	Death Heads- probably trophy heads	Naturalistic human features Elaborate hair patterns Evidence of Decapitation Facial patterns suggest death	c. A.D. 300-800
Head-Vessels	Ceramic	Shamans	Human features Elaborate hats and birds perched on the rim	c. A.D. 500-1000
Sculpture in the Round	Stone		Naturalistic human features Headgear, helmets and hats Elaborate hair patterns Facial features suggest death	c. A.D. 800-1500
Head-Vessels	Ceramic	Generalized human Animal/human combinations	Generalized human facial features Combined alligator and human faces	c. A.D. 100-1500
Head Vessels	Head Vessels	Humans-possibly soul or shaman portraits	Modelled facial features Naturalistic faces with mouth, eyes circled in red and black Facial features suggest death Elaborate geometric patterns on cheeks and forehead	c. A.D. 500-800
Head Vessels	Ceramic: Polychrome incised	Semi-human/semi-divinity	Painted/incised facial features Stylized facial features with emphasis on eyes and mouth Painted masks; depictions of jewelry Symbols of Mesoamerican origin in bands at rim and base	c. A.D. 750-1200
Head Vessels	Ceramic: Polychrome	"Tlaloc"	Painted facial features Goggle eyes Elaborate mouth with fangs and/or mask Symbols of Mesoamerican origin on rim, base, back	c. A.D. 1000-1200
Head Vessels	Ceramic: Monochrome incised	Human/Divinity Analogue (painted)	Painted/incised facial features Stylized faces Sunburst or circle eyes Depictions of jewelry and some times masks Symbols of Mesoamerican origin on rim, base, back	c. A.D. 1150-1500

Guanacaste-Nicoya

Central Highlands/Atlantic Watershed

probably trophy heads. Particularly after A.D. 1000, the stone heads fit into a widespread and complex trophy head "cult" that seems to characterize most of the elite stone artifacts of the CHAW. The contemporary ceramic head-vessels (c. A.D. 1000-1500) do not seem to share the same association with the trophy head "cult" and, in fact, they may show connections to contemporary Guanacaste-Nicoya head-vessels. If this is true, the late CHAW heads indicate ties to two distinct geographic regions and cultures: 1) the jungle cultures to the south which practiced ritual warfare and the taking of trophy heads, and 2) the culture of northwestern Costa Rica which had ties to Mesoamerica and emphasized abstract transformation themes.

In Guanacaste-Nicoya, the effigy head-vessels show no signs linking them to warfare or to a trophy head "cult." Many heads appear to depict death heads, but neither stylistic nor iconographic evidence supports a trophy head interpretation. In Guanacaste-Nicoya, the early head-vessels may represent soul or shaman portraits while the Middle Polychrome Period heads probably depict stylized soul portraits fused with Mesoamerican transformation or deity themes. The Late Polychrome Period head-vessels are the most difficult to interpret; they may portray stylized abstractions of both the early soul portraits and Mesoamerican deities.

The Guanacaste-Nicoya heads consistently display signs of status and connections to other elite arts. Face painting depicts gold jewelry and patterns found on other elite goods such as metates and textiles. The Guanacaste-Nicoya heads seem to represent themes associated with death (perhaps souls), the after-life, the supra-mundane, and high status. The Guanacaste-Nicoya heads also exhibit a strong shift towards abstraction. Over time, faces and patterns become more generalized and more standardized. In this case, the shift may point to links with Mesoamerica where iconographic and stylistic prototypes most likely existed.

The two effigy head traditions reflect essentially different cultural patterns with ecological and archaeological evidence indicating that each region developed along distinct lines. The CHAW shows features and artifacts characteristic of a tropical forest adaptation (Lange 1984a), and as such, it probably had ties to similar ecological zones in northern South America such as Colombia and Ecuador (Day 1984; Snarskis 1981b; Stone 1977).

In Guanacaste-Nicoya the ecological conditions and cultural patterns developed with heavy dependence on marine resources as well as on agriculture (Lange 1984a). Ties to Mesoamerica seem to be strong, although scholars disagree about the nature and strength of these ties. During some periods, southern influences appear to be stronger than those of Mesoamerica (Baudez and Coe 1962; Healy 1980). Thus the cultural and artistic traditions of northwestern Costa Rica, including the effigy heads, indicate some affinity to both South America and Mesoamerica.

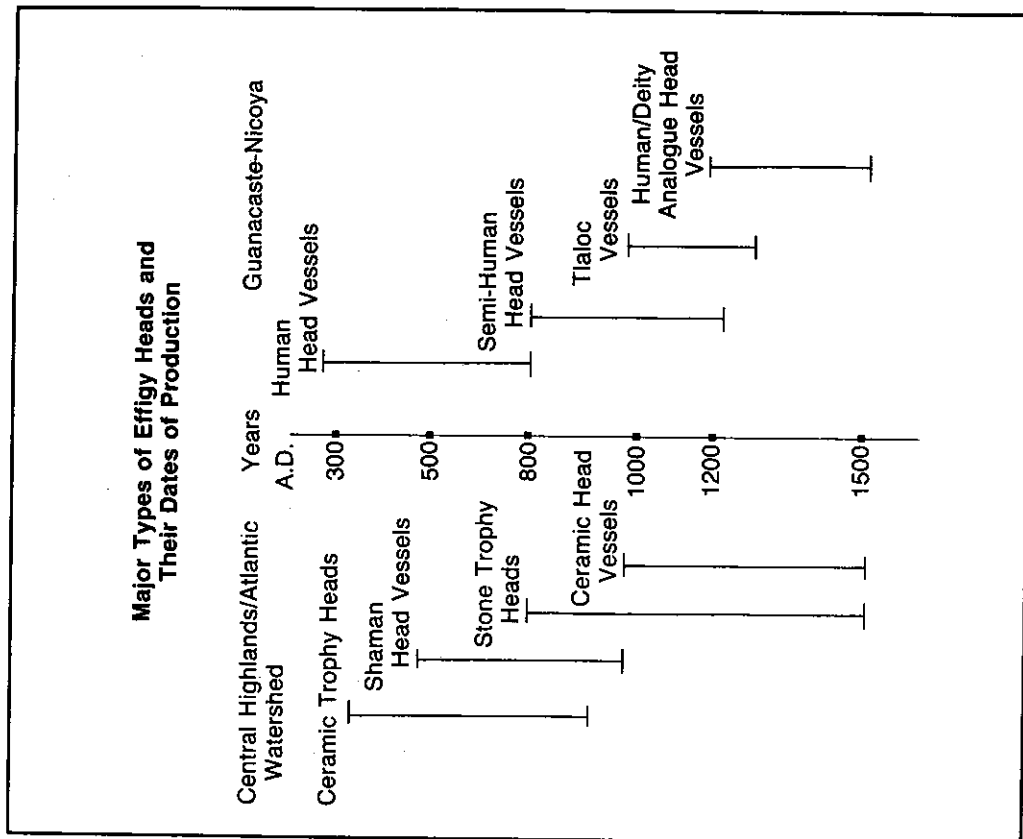


Figure 7.3 — Major types of effigy heads and their dates of production

For both the CHAW and the Guanacaste-Nicoya, however, the nature and strength of these outside ties are poorly understood. Equally ill-defined are the contacts between the two regions. Nonetheless, the CHAW and Guanacaste-Nicoya effigy heads share enough features to justify the idea that a single tradition exists. At the same time the effigy head tradition of each area forms part of a distinct cultural adaption, and this accounts for the divergence in the Costa Rican tradition.

In conclusion, the effigy head tradition does not stand alone. As one of several elite artifact traditions in Precolumbian Costa Rica, it shares a number of features with other elite practices. The effigy heads exhibit motifs and patterns commonly depicted on other elite artifacts including metates, jade, stone sculpture, ceramic figurines, polychrome ceramics, and gold. The unity and divergence that characterize the effigy head tradition can be found in other elite art traditions such as jade and stone mace heads (Balsler 1961; De La Cruz 1981; Lange, Bishop, and van Zelst 1981).

What do these similarities in elite traditions imply about Costa Rican prehistoric society? First, they indicate a strong degree of unity among the elite. Secondly, this unity appears to persist over time, indicating a relatively consistent amount of social control over the production of elite objects.

Although it is not clear how the elite artifacts functioned in prehistoric Costa Rican society, it seems that they acted, at least collectively, as signs of power or status. The shared motifs may have enabled messages of status to be communicated through a number of media to different elite groups. The effigy head tradition forms one part of the larger elite art tradition in Precolumbian Costa Rica and hence carries messages of the complex social and religious system that existed for over 1200 years.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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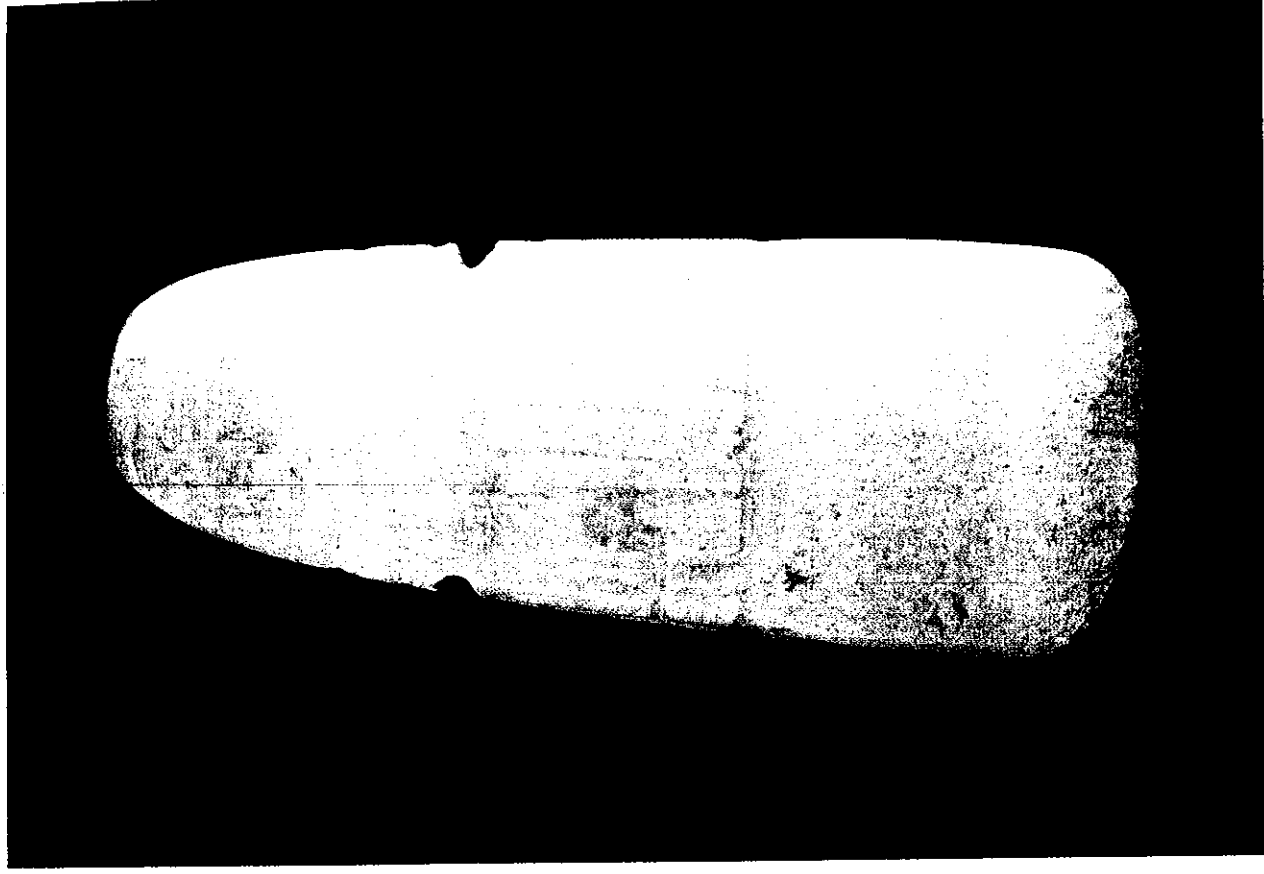
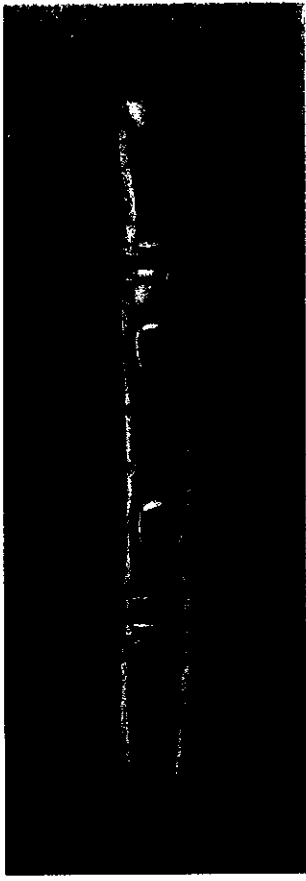
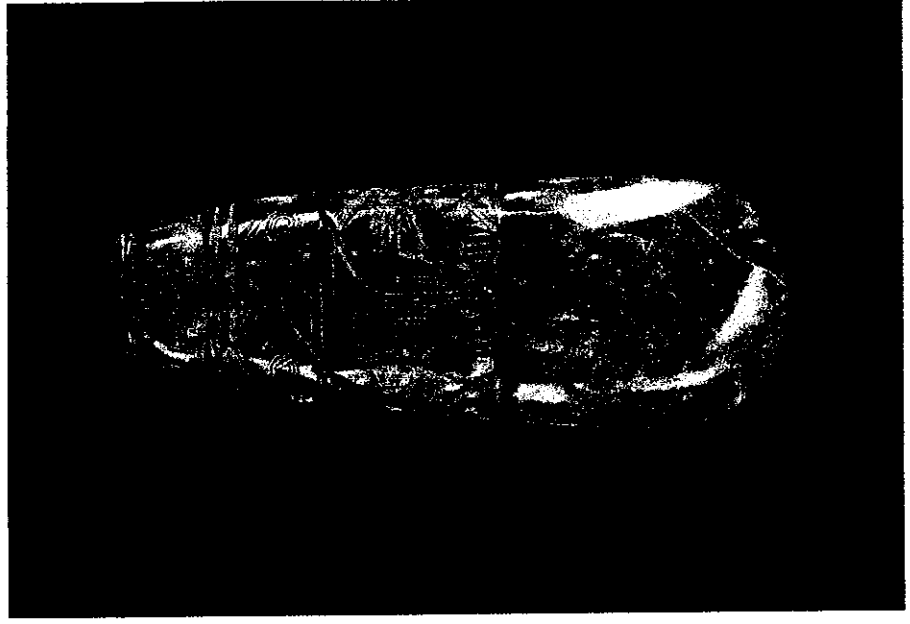


Plate 9 — Half celt, anthropomorphic pendant with tubular drilled eyes



a



b

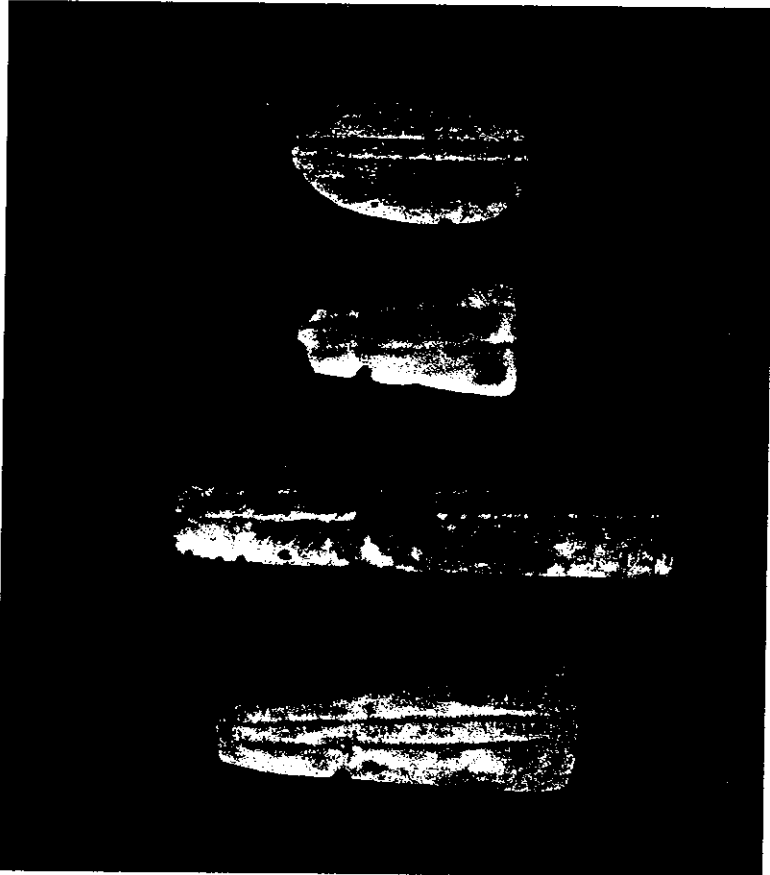


Plate 10 — Pendants with false septa

Plate 11 (a) — Bossed bar pendant

Plate 11 (b) — Half celt, crouching anthropomorphic pendant (example of a high-intensity pendant)

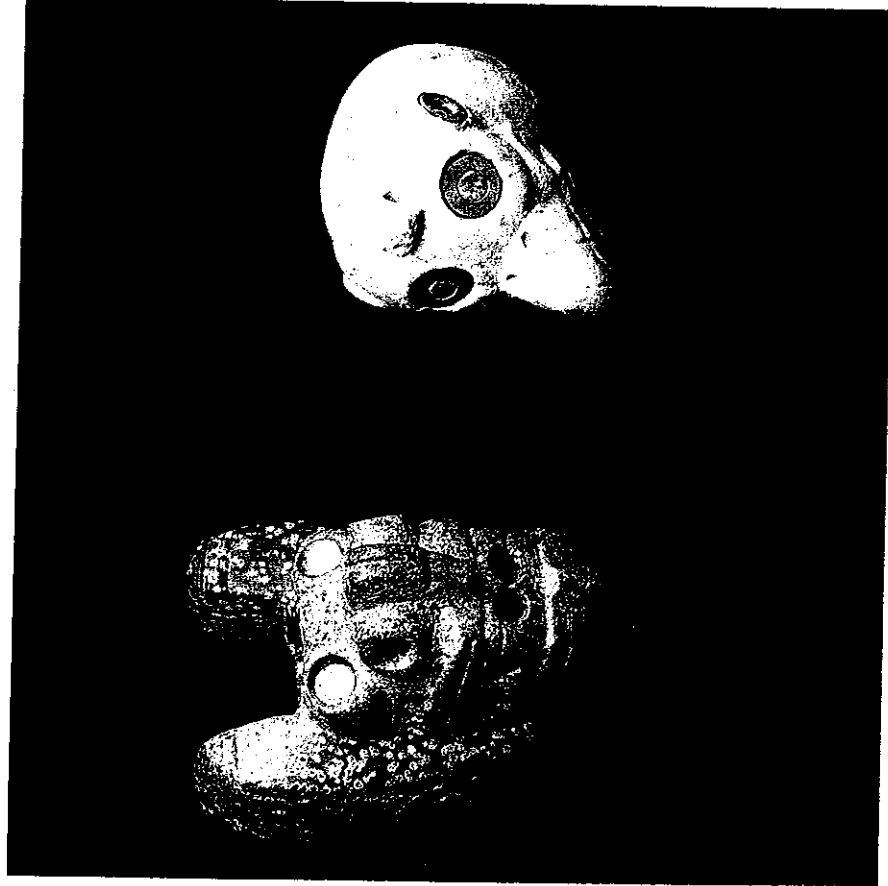


Plate 12 — Pair of northern Pacific Coast mace heads

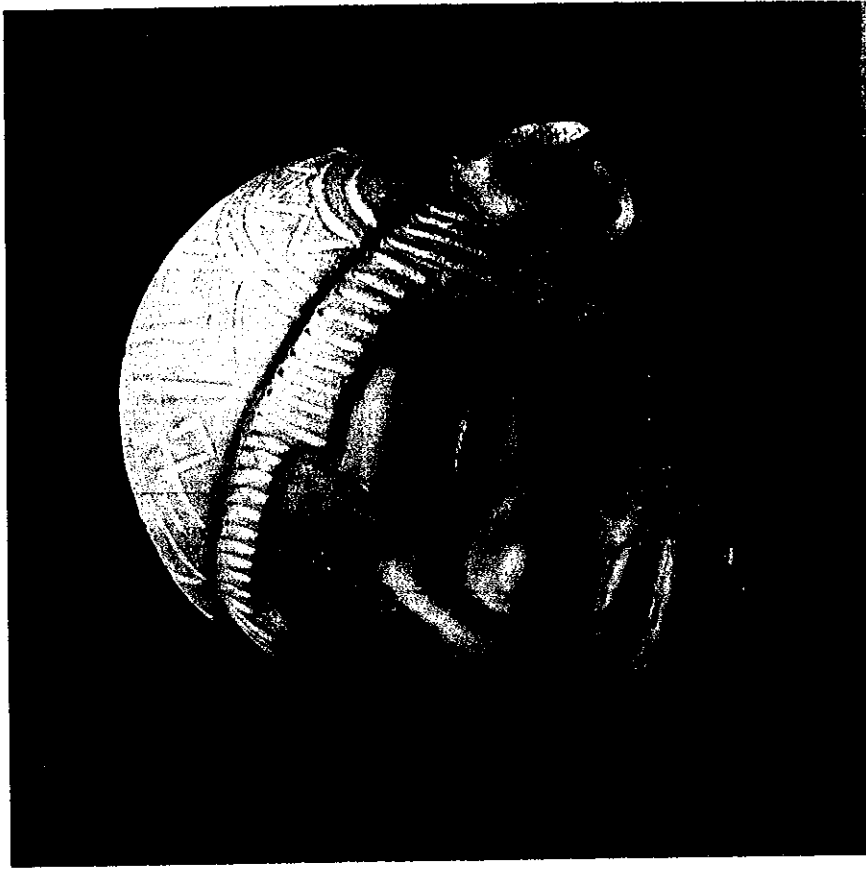


Plate 13 — Bichrome ceramic Atlantic Coast effigy head

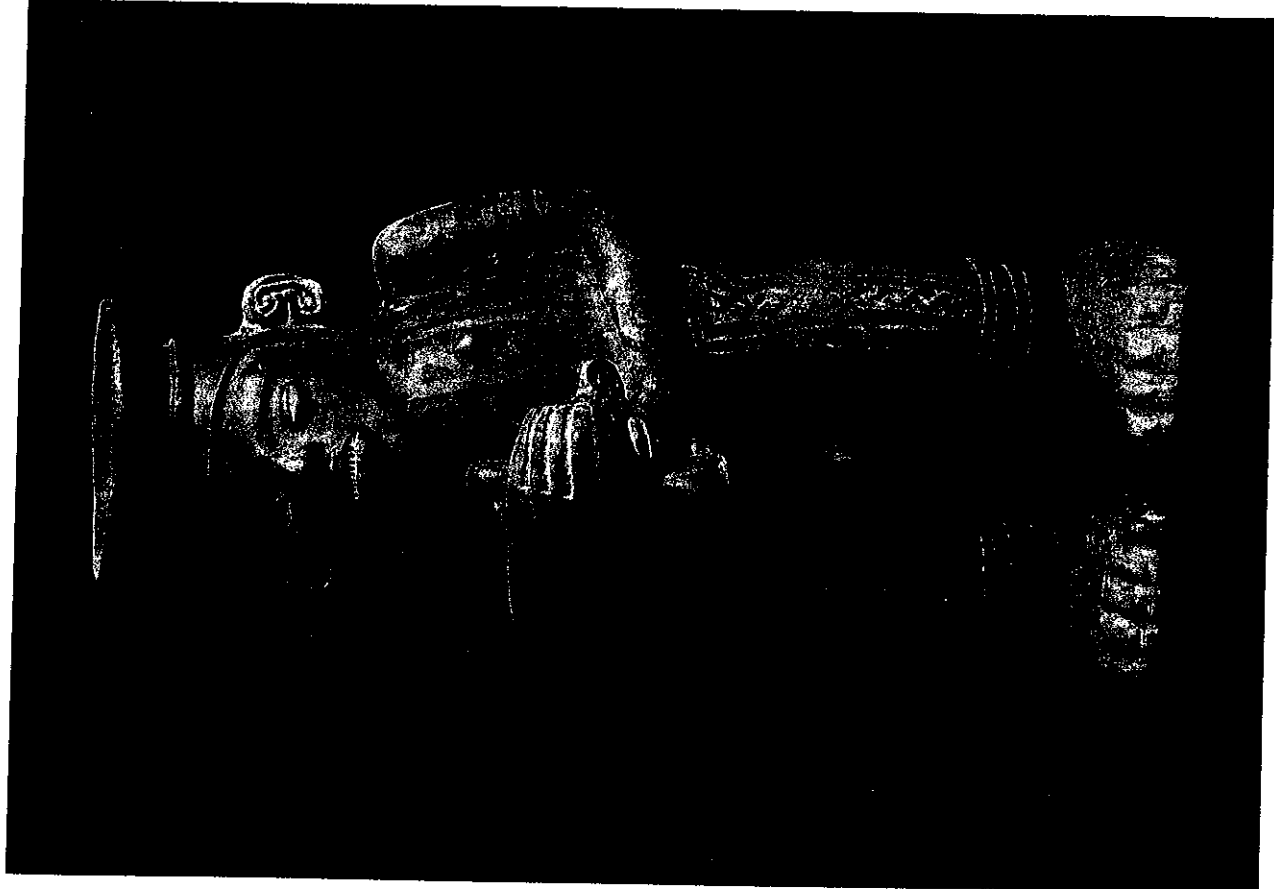


Plate 14 — Ceramic warrior figure with trophy head



Plate 15 — Galo Polychrome effigy head vessel

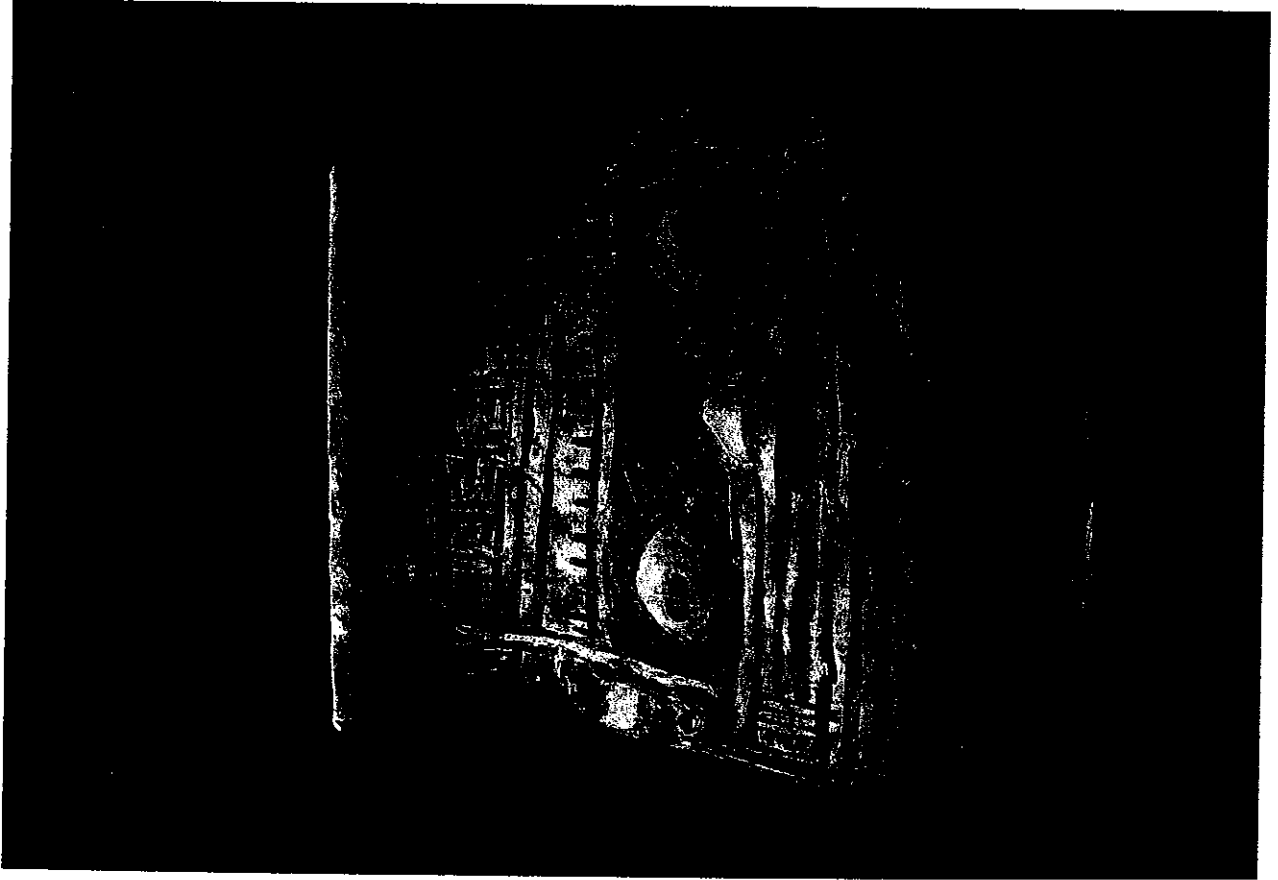


Plate 16 — Mora Polychrome effigy head

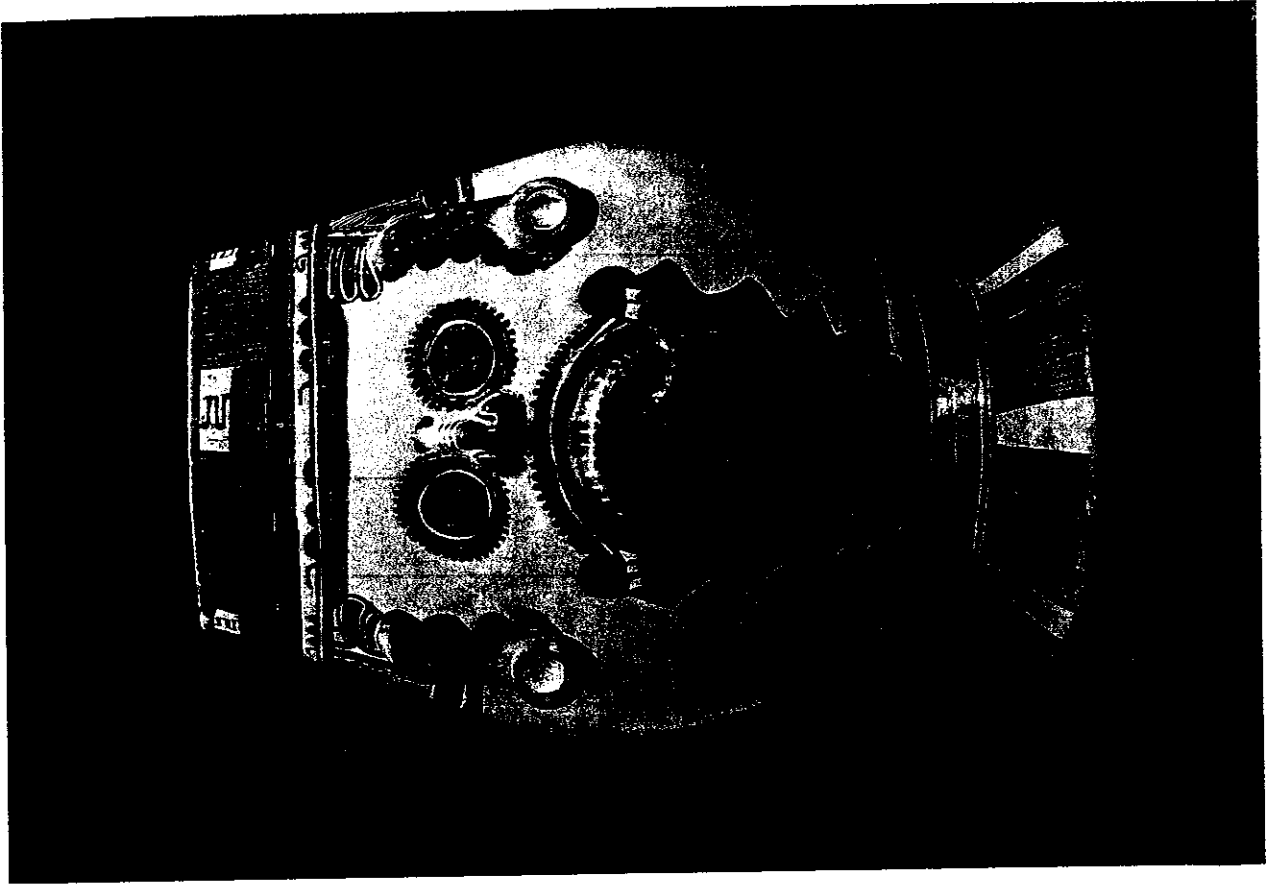


Plate 17 — Pataky Polychrome "Tlaloc" effigy head