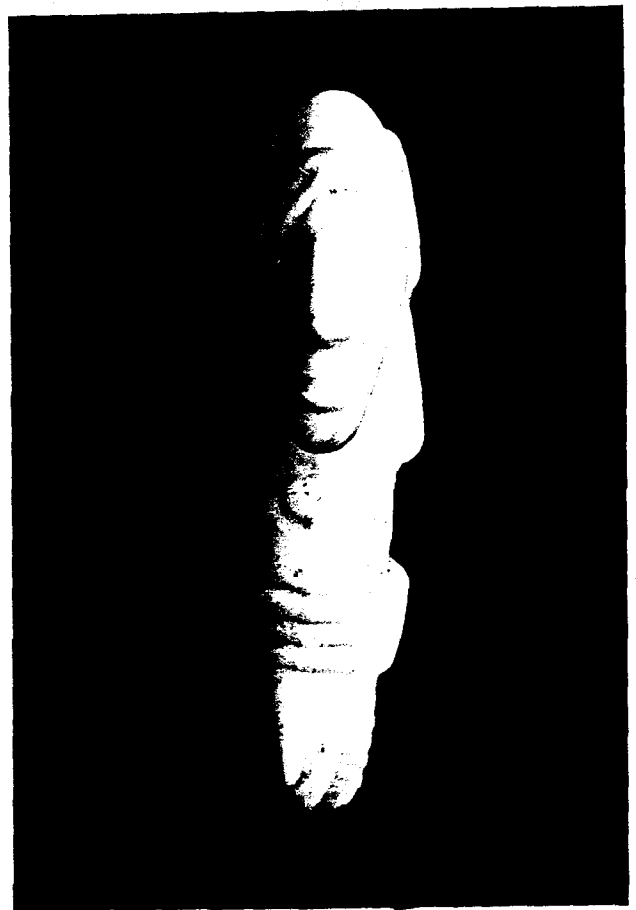
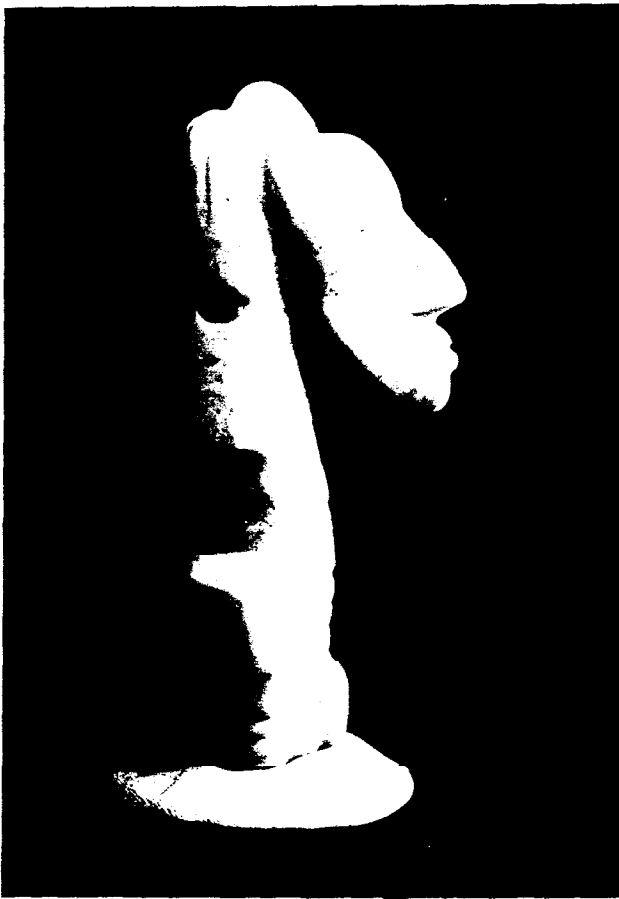


A COLLECTION OF AMERINDIAN ARTIFACTS
FROM REPÚBLICA DOMINICANA

David Kenneth Wetherbee



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A collection of Amerindian artifacts from República Dominicana

by David Kenneth Wetherbee

During the course of several years of zoological collecting in Hispaniola, from 1984 to 1991, I have found several artifacts as surface finds that have Amerindia (Taino) origin. These are described as follows:

1. An extraordinary marble statuette
2. A bat face
3. An incised frog celt
4. An owl face
5. Two scrapers
6. A hammer-head
7. A circular weight
- 8a. A human face 8b. Another human face

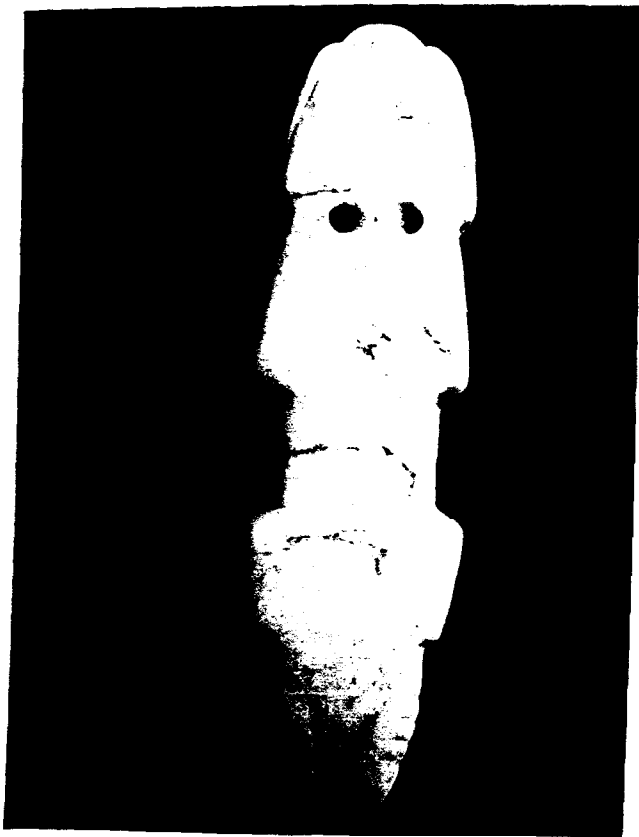
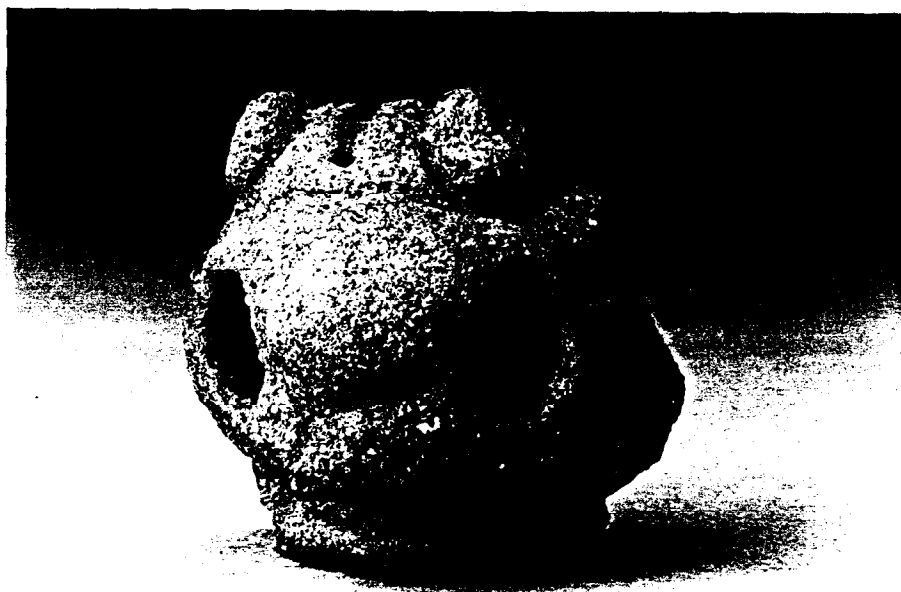


Figure 1. Verso. See cover illustration.

12-3-91 - David Wetherbee - gift

1. An extraordinary marble statuette. 3 oz. See cover illustration.

This perfect, white, smooth marble was found near Bohechio, Provincia San Juan. It measures 95mm x 25mm x 30mm and has a pair of perforations on each side 25mm from the top that communicate with a pair on the flat, slightly arced verso. Obviously it was worn in suspension. The bilateral symmetry, almost perfect, depicts a male Amerindian. See Figure 1. One can comment on the ingenious artistry and workmanship for making it compact without doing violence to its naturalistic features. The head is large, forward, and low positioned; the long nose is sharp; the eyes are long and stylized, slanted. The closeness between the arm and leg articulations (shoulders and hips) contributes to its compactness. The appendages are abbreviated. The distance from navel to penis is exaggerated. On the verso an incised X serves to define the arms and the V below serves to define the legs. It is an exceedingly successful creation. That the figure is naked may have anthropological significance.



2. A bat face. 2.6 oz.

Figure 2.

This artifact was found in the Río Bao at Mata Grande, Provincia Santiago. It is of sandstone 50mm x 50mm. Because of the large ears and general physiognomy it appears to be a bat, but could possibly be the face of a human. Hispaniola has about a score of species of bats each with different facial features. As there were no monkeys in Hispaniola they could not serve as models.

The figure has a prominent coiffure that is wrapped around what may represent two bones. The coiffure is incised on the back of the piece which is otherwise plain and flat. This artifact was apparently not finished as there is a small, shallow hole in front and behind the coiffure that obviously were meant to pass entirely through the piece to make it a pendant.

The most salient feature is the work involved in making the large

(15mm wide) eye sockets. These cavities broadly communicate internally. One might speculate that a large berry were inserted into each eye-socket. Indeed I have experimented with this and the effect is very realistic. I also imprisoned a "cucuyo" (a large click-beetle fire-fly that has strong phosphorescent ~~light~~ organs) behind the translucent berries and it produced a jack-o-lantern appearance. One cannot help but imagine that the maker was moved to experiment thusly -- if indeed the relatively large, hollow cavity was not purposely made to contain something, for it was unnecessary, otherwise to intercommunicate the large eye-cavities -- unless perhaps to make it lighter as a pendant.



3. An incised frog celt.

15 oz.

Figure 3.

This artifact was of great interest to me as a zoologist searching for new species of Hispaniolan frogs! Of double interest, because I was at that time postulating a theory (see beyond) that the West Indian word "maco" is of Arawak origin for "frog" in Hispaniola and by derivation from the word for "eye" or "watchfulness". The frog-stone 80mm x 60mm x 50mm was previously illustrated (Wetherbee, 1986). The least that can be said about it is that it is an incised Taino celt. As the piece is not pierced for suspension, it should not have been called a "zemi". It is the size of a baseball and perhaps it is an artifact associated with the large ballgame courts well known from studies of Taino culture. The piece was found in Restauración.

As a zoologist, I always looked at this piece in the standard manner of illustration in zoology with the head upward. The photographer, however, took the photo in an "upside-down" position with the face in the position of a halow'en pumpkin. The question arises: how would an Amerindian hold this artifact for viewing ?

This artifact was probably always within earshot of the word "maco" one of the words used (only) in Hispaniola, at least in the Dominican Republic, if not also in Haiti, for frog. The other word used here is the Spanish word 'sapo'. In Puerto Rico the word "maco" refers to the eye, especially to the Spanish gesture of baring the eyeball with the index finger to indicate watchfulness and warning. This seems to be endemic to Puerto Rico. In Cuba, only, the word "maco" is used for a species of gastropod mollusk that is eye-shaped, complete with canthus. The Amerindian South American bird "macao" (macaw) and the variations thereof, refers to certain Psittacidae -- of which Ara tricolor of Hispaniola is extinct -- that have bare skin around the eyes exaggerating them. Descourtilz (1809) commented about the frogs in Saint-Domingue (Haiti) that the people there believed that the frogs always warned the crocodyles of the approach of hunters: Watchfulness. In brief, the word seems to be autochthonous to the West Indies and Arawak.

4. An owl face. 3 oz. (not figured)

This is a small sandstone pendant 3.5mm high x 4.0mm wide (allowing for broken-off right side) and 2.5mm thick. It probably represents the face of the barn-owl ("lechusa") Tyto alba as the beard is rather low. If it represents a Tyto, it is likely that it refers to one of the gigantic extinct owls of that genus in Hispaniola. The piece has many pointed features at the top which seem to be feathers. It was a surface find at Boca de Guácará, Provincia Santiago.



5. Two scrapers 6 oz. 3 oz. Figure 5.
The larger of the two is 95mm x 17mm made of hard and heavy greenish stone, tear-drop in shape. It is somewhat more convex on one side than the other and the broad end is sharp for almost all its width. It was obviously held in the hand for scraping, probably hides. While there is only one species of large mammal native to Hispaniola that could have provided hides, there were several large mammals on Hispaniola, now extinct, the subfossils of which are associated with Indian kitchen middens. (Miller, 1916, 1923, 1929), notably the giant "edentate" ground-sloths Parocnus and Synochos and the giant rodent Quemisia. At least five extinct species of large-rat-sized Hutias (Plagiodontia) are extinct in Hispaniola and one still lives. Wetherbee (1986, 1987) has listed 17 species of mammals known in Hispaniola only by fossils.

These scrapers are found very commonly by the rural people who work the soil in República Dominicana and Haiti and are kept in the houses to deter lightning as there is a universal belief here that these streamlined, highly polished stones represent the substance of lightning bolts. Campesinos hunt for them after a close lightning strike and these folk cannot be persuaded that "piedras de rayo" are Amerindian artifacts.

Another probable use of these scrapers was for scraping "cabuya" or "bayonette" or "bois pitre", Frucraea hexapetala for its long strong white fibers. * the manati



6. A hammer-head.

8 oz.

Figure 6.

This piece looks ever so much like a modern peening hammer 105mm x 40mm x 25mm of heavy hard stone (perhaps copper ore, which is native to Mata Grande). It is swollen in the middle and rounded at both ends with a constriction between each end for binding.

7. A circular weight.

20 oz.

(not figured)

This piece is perfectly circular, 150mm in diameter and 60mm thick having slightly and equally convex sides, It has a shallow, broad (20mm) groove completely around the outer circumference and must have been used as a tool as it is rather heavy and the groove must have accommodated a tight cord. If not a tool, perhaps a weight. If a tool, it would not serve for pounding as the material is of fine sandstone. Perhaps it was swung; these people did not have arrowheads. It may also have been used as a weight for fishing with nets.

One cannot help but contemplate that, in as much as the Amerindians drilled holes through many of their artifacts for one reason or another -- if a central hole had been put through this perfectly circular piece, a wheel would have been then and their invented:

8a. A human face.

6 oz.,

Figure 8a.

This piece, also from Restauracion, Provincia Dajabon, is done in reddish sandstone. It has a flat verso and is 85mm x 50mm x 45mm. It is grotesque and "primitive" in appearance, yet shows distinct stylization of the disc around the upper face which includes the eyes and nose; a stylization that compares favorably with many other such pieces. I have seen small baked clay heads and/or faces with similar stylization. While one might comment that the substitution of clay for stone might be a decadence, it might be viewed less judgementally as simply a newer technique. As in our own culture, to-day's synthetic is to-morrow's authentic.



In the mountain villages word spread rapidly that I was interested in seeing stone artifacts. Over a period of several years I have seen more than 200 pieces. Most pieces were of small faces and quite crude. I can only surmise that the making of these "zemi" was a very common pursuit and not at all restricted to craftsmen. One could easily fall into the error of estimating cultural level by pieces that represent only child's play rather than estimating it from the masterpieces. The statuette (See Number 1.), for example, is a work of art executed at a level that no one would expect from examining the majority of artifacts found in Hispaniola.



8b. Another human face. 3 oz. Figure 8b.
This piece 45mm x 30mm x 20mm is representative of the stylization of most of such pieces: note the continuous ridge that forms the forehead, cheeks and nose. This piece is quite unsymmetrical.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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