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Author(s): José J. Arrom

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Taino Mythology: Notes on the Supreme Being

By JOSE J. ARROM

Ancient beliefs were deeply entrenched in the New World when the discovering caravels arrived. Of such beliefs, none was so widely held throughout the entire hemisphere as that in a Great Spirit, invisible and kind, the generous protector of man. That Supreme Spirit is, quite naturally, the first of the gods recorded by Pané. In the opening lines of his report he described The Supreme Spirit in these terms: "They believe that he is in the heavens and is immortal, and that no one can see him, and that he has a mother, but no beginning, and they call him *Yocahu Bagua Maorocoti*."¹ *Father Las Casas* passes on the information in this manner: "The people of this island of Hispaniola had a certain faith and knowledge of a true and single God, who was immortal and invisible so that none could see him, who had no beginning, whose abode and habitation are the heavens, and they called him *Yocahu Bagua Maorocoti*; I do not know what they meant to signify with this name, for when I might well have found out, I did not."² Pané again refers to the same god when he writes: "And that Great Lord, who they say is in heaven as is recorded at the beginning of this book (ordered a chief to feast) . . . and they say that this chief asserted he had spoken to *Yocahuguamá*"³ . . . And Las Casas, echoing Pané's reference, also transcribes the name in this way: *Yocahuguamá*.⁴ The Supreme Being has thus acquired several names, and in them is locked, as in a capsule, the essence of his nature and his symbols, of his functions and his attributes.

Opening the capsule is another matter. Pané, although he seems to understand what the Indians meant by those terms, did not deem it necessary to translate them. And Las Casas, when he wished to do so, found that it was too late. Compounding the difficulties, the variants of these terms in the Pané text and in the versions of the chroniclers who worked with the manuscript appear chaotic. But the confusion is more apparent than real: all the transcriptions converge on those left by Las Casas.⁵ More importantly, they correspond to Arawakan locutions susceptible to structural analysis. Let us begin, then, by attempting to decode the message hidden in these names.

In the term *Yocahu*, *yoca* is the same word which in modern Spanish is pronounced *yuca*.⁶ And *hu* is a nominalizer, frequently used both in Taino and

in other Arawakan tongues, that adds to the general meaning a sense of solemnity.⁷ Thus, in the same way that in present-day Arawak *yawa-hu* means 'forest spirit,'⁸ *Yoca-hu* or *Yuca-hu* would be equivalent to 'Yuca Spirit,' the Cassava Giver, the Immortal and Invisible Being from whom the Taíno requested his daily bread.

The second name, *Bagua*, presents no particular difficulty since both the word and its meaning have been recorded by Ovideo, who notes: "The Indians of this island of Hispaniola call the sea *bagua*; not *baygua*, for *baygua* is that paralyzing substance with which they catch a great many fish, as I have said, but *bagua* is the name for the sea on this island."⁹ If it is remembered that the Taínos were not only skilled farmers but also excellent fishermen and bold seamen, it is not at all surprising to find that this benefactor spirit was also related to maritime activities—activities crucial to Taíno ecology and migrations.

The third term, *Maórocoti*, seems to be made up of the negative prefix *ma*, a characteristic of the Arawakan tongues meaning 'without' or 'lacking,'¹⁰ and *órocoti*, which in Taíno as well as in related Carib and Lokono words means 'grandfather.'¹¹ *Ma-órocoti* or 'without grandfather' is equivalent, as Pané explains, to one "who has a mother, but no beginning."

In *Yucahuguamá*, *guamá* is the same word that C.H. de Geoje records in Lokono as *wama* 'Lord.'¹² Furthermore we know that the natives of Hispaniola called Columbus "the *guamiquina* of the Christians" (that is, *wam(a)-ikini*) because, according to Las Casas, "*guamiquina* was what they called the great Lord."¹³ *Yucahuguamá*, as Pané correctly translated, is then "that great Lord, who they say is in heaven." And so also Las Casas: "the Great Lord who lives in heaven."¹⁴ Summing up, the evidence here assembled seems sufficient to allow the free translation of the names *Yúcahu Bagua Maórocoti* and *Yucahuguamá* as "Spirit of Cassava and the Sea," "Being without Male Ancestor" and "Lord Cassava Giver."

Passing from linguistic deductions to ethnographic reports, we find that other observations by Pané support and widen the foregoing analyses. He declares in Chapter XIX of the *Relación*: "There are several kinds of stone *cemies*. There are . . . others having three points, and they believe that they cause the cassava to grow." Relating this quote to what we have seen previously, we may reasonably assume that these idols, in the shape of stones with three points, which made the cassava grow, are lithic representatives of *Yucahuguamá*. And one might even infer, on confronting these deductions with the paragraph of the *Treatise* which we shall examine below, that the tripointed stones were used in agricultural rites of a propitiatory nature, and that such rites consisted of burying the stones in the cassava patches so that their magical presence might fertilize the fields and multiply the crop. This may be inferred from what happened to six subjects of Guarionex who buried some Christian images in the same manner as they had previously buried

their native *cemies*. The story, as related by Friar Ramón, is as following: Pané, having converted an Indian family to Catholicism, left them certain images so that they might venerate them in a little church which they had built for the purpose. Once the friar had gone, the six Indians carried off the images. And, Pané adds: "Having left the place of worship, they threw the images on the ground and covered them with earth and then urinated on them saying: 'Now your yield will be good and abundant.' And they said this because they had buried them in a cultivated field, saying that the crop that had been planted there would be good."¹⁵ All of this is confirmed in the words of Mártir who, mistakenly calling *ajes* (sweet potatoes) cassava, relates the following: "In the roots of the *ajes* are venerated those that are found among the *ajes*, that is to say, the type of food that we spoke of above. They say that these *cemies* are instrumental in the formation of the bread."¹⁷

Moving on to the archeological evidence, we see that, in light of the foregoing investigations, the lost symbolic meaning of numerous specimens before looked upon as simple artifacts now becomes clear. These specimens are the so-called trigonolites, three cornered *cemies* or tripointed stones. The ones I have examined in the principal collections of the United States, the Antilles and Europe number in the hundreds and are very different in size, form, material and workmanship. A good many of such stones have been described, classified and reproduced in specialized reviews.¹⁷ What had not yet been done was to identify them as images related to the cult of Yúcahu Bagua Maórocoti, to elucidate the specific use to which they were put, and to give due value to the artistic achievements of some of them in terms of their recovered meaning.

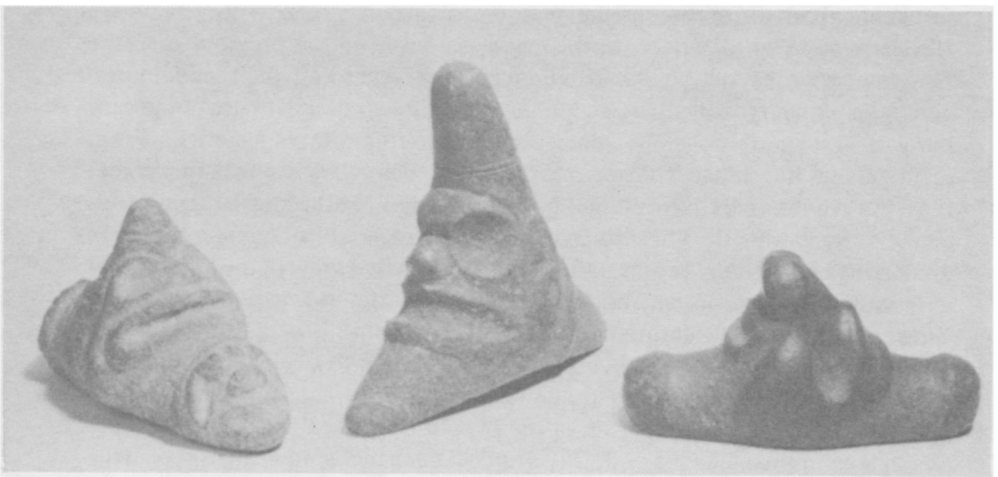


Plate 1

So that readers unfamiliar with the tripointed stones may have an idea of the variety of form which the native craftsmen gave them, I will begin by reproducing three of the best known. They are the ones which appear in plate 1, which I have taken from the recent book by Frederick J. Dockstader *Indian Art in Middle America*. Doctor Dockstader, director of the Museum of the American Indian and an authority in these matters, says of these images;

These finely worked objects, whose function is completely unknown, are believed to have a ceremonial use. The tri-pointed stone carvings, commonly termed *zemi*, have various forms, and usually the head of a human or animal adorns the ends.¹⁸

The evidence set forth in the previous pages suggests that, with the exception of the image on the right (for reasons which will be given in chapter 6) the *cemies* represent the countenance of Yucahugamá, the Great Spirit who made the cassava grow. Beginning, then, with the one in the center, we observe the solemn dignity of the profile and the apparent simplicity with which the carver adapts it to the triangular design of the composition; the strange effect of the large, hollowed out eyes; the ear with pierced lobe for the insertion of a plug of metal alloy called *guanin*; the mouth grossly distended as if avid to ingest nutritious substances to feed the cassava; and, concentrating all the germinative vigor of the image toward the vertex. The eye-catching protuberance which in this example may have meant to signify the swollen bud, about to sprout into a new plant. The result is an idol of extraordinary strength, admirable for its powerful symbolism, its simplicity of line and its exceptional economy of resources.

The image on the left is a variant of the one just described. It repeats the face dominated by the distorted mouth, the large scooped out eyes, and a forehead about to sprout in the budding of a new plant. This vegetative tendency appears to reflect, in this case as well as in the previous one, the fundamental idea of the Amerindian peoples regarding their agricultural gods: the plants graciously given to man are a direct manifestation of the very body of the god, constant renewals of this immortal substance. What distinguishes this image from the one previously described is, in the first place, that the vertex here represents a sort of small anthropomorphic head, elementally outlined. This little head, which we shall encounter again in analogous pieces, may represent a similarly animated view of the sprout: that is, a view of the sprout as endowed with the instinct to make its way to the surface and direct the future transformation of trunk, branches and leaves. And it differs also in that the ends of the base begin to take on an imprecise representational value. These vague shapes will be easier to interpret if we proceed first to the examination of the tripointed stones.

The one reproduced in plate 2 has not yet been included in any specialized publication. It is another tripointed idol, carved in gray stone, which is in the

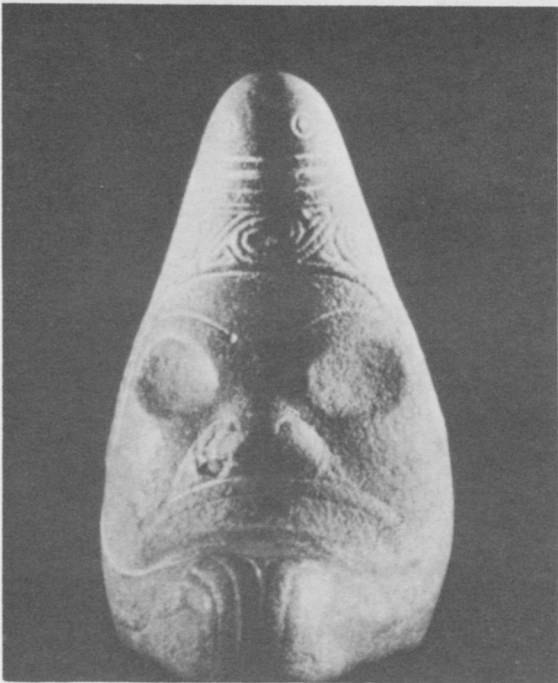


Plate 2

Museo de Antropología, Historia y Arte de la Universidad de Puerto Rico. Once again it appears to represent the solemn countenance of Yucahuguamá adapted to the contours of one side of the triangle, and in it the characteristics previously pointed out reappear. The curious thing about this notable piece is that the Great Lord of Cassava now acquires an anthropomorphic body as a stylized extension of the enormous, bulbous face, and the details of this body are revealed by means of a system of incisions and low reliefs which, within the required triangular design, represent it in a position which would seem to confirm the fertilizing function of the image. It would be hardly reasonable to interpret it, with reference to a religious tradition foreign to the Taino culture, as "a prayer's or supplicant's pose." In the context of the native beliefs which we have been elucidating, it is clear that Yucahuguamá is not praying to a Euroasiatic god; he is, I would say, working the soil beneath the newly planted cassava. It may be observed, in this regard, that the arm ends in fingers which are contracted, the better to dig, and the leg terminates in a stylized foot, with the five toes jointed into a sort of paddle, in order to accelerate underground locomotion. And it may also be observed that the Taino sculptor, attempting to heighten the impression of motion, imaginatively links the limbs to the trunk by means of skillful geometric incisions. These incisions make the limbs appear as if joined to the body by a sort of peg which would allow them free play; and the fact that the limbs are carved in low relief heightens the impression of their independence. This detail makes one suspect that, as in the case of the so-called stone collars (which were not collars but monolithic belts),¹⁹ this type of *cemies* may have been initially carved in wood. If such prior forms existed in wood, the evidence, perhaps destroyed by adverse climatic conditions, has not come down to us. In any event, there can be doubt that the piece represents a being whose dynamism perfectly fits the fertilizing function of the cassava-generating divinity.

The limbs which we have just pointed out in this specimen appear with equal clarity in other tripointed stones. Such is the case in the one reproduced in plate 3. Although there is greater complexity in the general appearance and details, it is evident that it is another representation of the same mythical being: disproportionately large face on one side of the triangle, scooped-out eyes, enormously distended mouth, ears with perforated lobes, incisions which represent an inexact number of ribs. The sculptor undoubtedly had a precise idea of the image he wished to carve. However, within the essential unity of design there appear variations which we ought to keep in mind. For example, the vertex of this one does not end, as in the two previous specimens, in a rounded surface on which is sketched a diminutive anthropomorphic head; it ends rather in a knob which looks even more like a bud or sprout. And what is perhaps of greater importance in this effort at interpretation, the carvings around the god's face are also different: in some of the previous images we saw

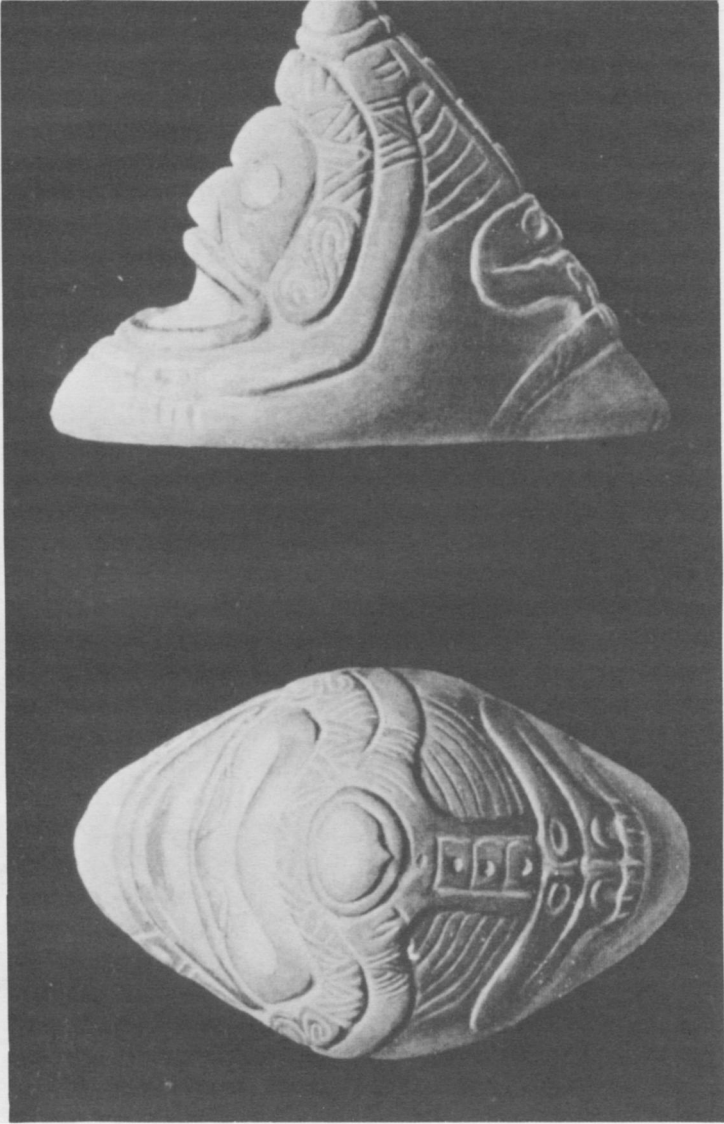


Plate 3



Plate 4

certain grooves in the shape of enveloping spirals or meanders; in this one we have straightline drawings which combine to form triangular designs and end in a sigmoidal figure at ear level. The incipient state of this study does not permit a categorical explanation of these figures.

The specimen reproduced in plate 4 may be a little disconcerting at first sight. Looked at sideways, as in the upper portion of the illustration, it looks momentarily like the head of a fish or amphibian. But it is not so. More careful observation will reveal that the incisions at the right, which seemed to represent the lower outline of the fish's head, in fact represent the flexed leg of the god. This becomes even more apparent when we look at the image from above, as on the left side of the illustration. The complex design which seemed to be the upper part of the head, seen again from above, reveals itself to us as the face, more stylized now, of *Yucahugumà*. And now we see clearly the hollowed-out eyes, the head adorned with a ribbon-like set of incisions, the two little circles which indicate the nostrils--similar here to the snout of a reptile--and, of course, the distended jaws of the great being, the earth swallower and fertilizer of the sown fields.

Let us now examine the tripointed stone reproduced in plate 5. It is evident that its general design is comparable to those seen before. What makes it different is that both arms and legs are extended forward. Since this extension



Plate 5

frees the back end, the craftsman uses it to sculpt a figure which appears to be an indeterminate zoomorphic representation. Above all, this idol is different in that the vertex is formed on this occasion by a strange helmet that covers the head of the god. This head-gear no longer gives the impression of a phytomorphic bud or of a small anthropomorphic head; rather it looks like the head of a turtle. Thus, from the comparisons made of all these icons it is clear that although the central concept presented in them is always one and the same, the artist was free to choose those details which best symbolized specific aspects of the nature and functions of the god.

The specimens we have just examined serve also as a key to the interpretation of the vague forms which were observed before on one end of the base of other tripointed stones. Those forms, compared now with the ones seen in these images, evidently correspond to the extremities of *Yucahuguamá*. And the same can be said of the idols reproduced in plates 6 through 10. The first of these, with a human-like face at one end and the aforementioned limbs at the other, is especially interesting because of the geometric designs which adorn the back. Since these designs are totally different from those previously observed, I do not know what their symbolic meaning may have been. On the other hand, it is evident that the strange intertwining of circles, loops, crosses and triangles is astonishing for its precision of line and calculated symmetry. This amply proves the capacity for visualization and consummate skill of the Taíno sculptor. The other cemies, reproduced in plates 7 through 10, present a series of variations which run from the anthropomorphic to the zoomorphic. The vertex of the icon reproduced in plate 7 represents the fore part of a frog. On the extreme right of illustration 8, we can easily recognize the head of a water bird. Figure 9 shows, at the base of the bulbous trunk, what is probably the head of a manatee. Figure 10 repeats the manatee head and coils a snake around the trunk. I have seen other tripointed stones which clearly portray the heads of iguanas, turtles and parrots. All are, once again, demonstrations of the admirable workmanship achieved by the Antillean artificers when they wished to apply their talents to realistic representation. These artifacts also raise new questions. Were those zoomorphic figures the visible embodiments of the divinity's abstract qualities? Were they held to be messengers of animals sacred to Yucahu, as the eagle was to Jupiter and the owl to Minerva? Lacking definite answers to these questions we can at least recall that in Mexico, as Paul Westheim observes, "the pre-Cortés world by preference has recourse to animals to present, in a tangible, palpable way, its concept of the deity."²⁰ Should ours be a like case, it might possibly be suggested that those animals represent avatars of the god of the sea and agriculture, related to water (frog, water bird, manatee), to the metaphorization of rain clouds (snake) or to animals either beneficial or destructive of the crops.²¹

In addition to the tricornered stones with anthropomorphic faces, zoomorph motifs and complex geometric designs, there are others in which the

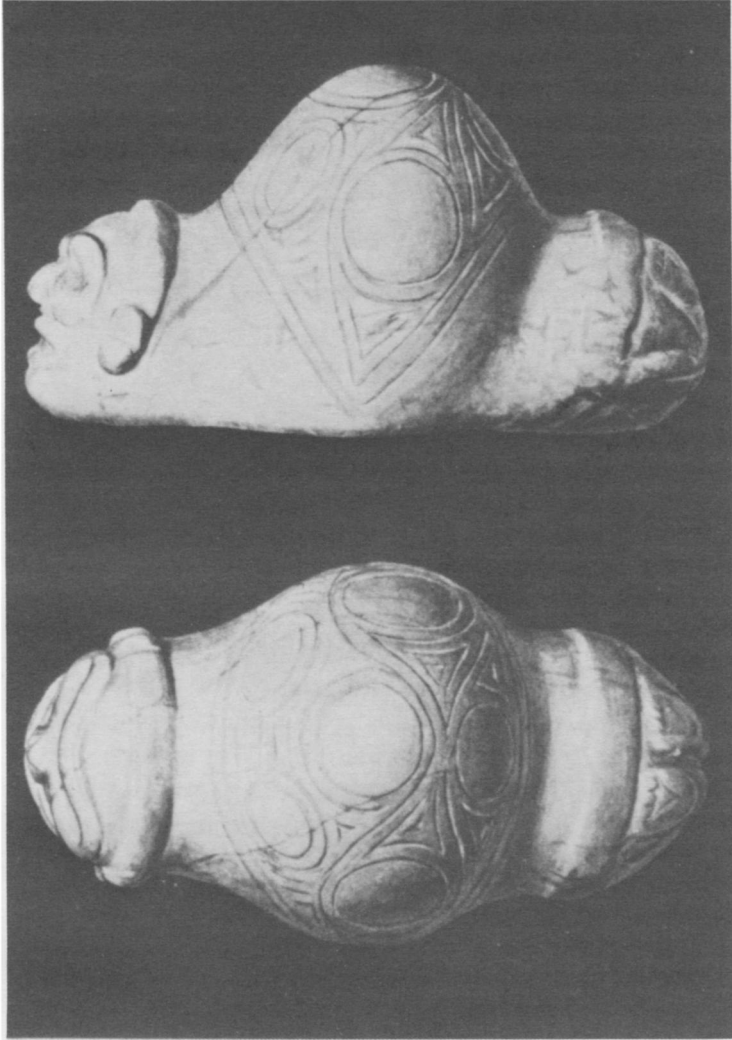


Plate 6

Plate 7

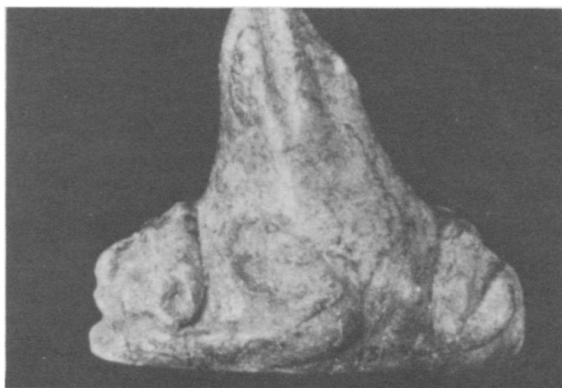


Plate 8

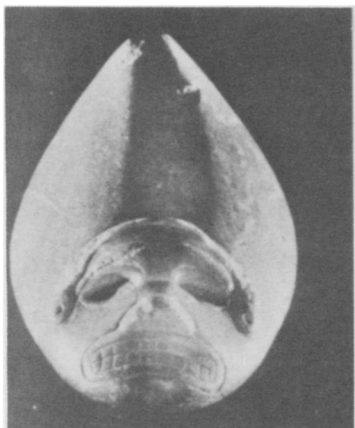


Plate 9



Plate 10

symbolic representations are reduced to their minimal expression. In some of them we can perceive the lapidary's expert hand in the extreme simplicity of the stylizations. Let the one reproduced in plate 11 serve as an example. This specimen, preserved in the Museo de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, is of so functional a design that it may have had a practical part to play in the rite: that of serving as an implement to sow a few seeds. Most of them, however, are modest artifacts, made of any readily available material. Those appearing in plate 12 are average examples. All found in Santa Cruz, Virgin Islands, their dimensions fluctuate between that of the first on the left, which hardly approaches 2 cm., and that of the largest, which measures 9 cm. There are also others made from the calcareous protuberance of the *cobo* (conch shell). Among these, the one reproduced in plate 13 has a series of incisions in the form of dots, rings, circles and wavy lines which are similar to those seen in plate 2. And in recent years in Santa Domingo there have come to light numerous tricuspid objects, made of baked clay, with bases measuring 3 to 4 cm. The variety of materials, sizes and designs, and the extraordinary abundance of all types are eloquent testimony to the common use of these *cemies*. Perhaps each family had its own to fertilize its crops.

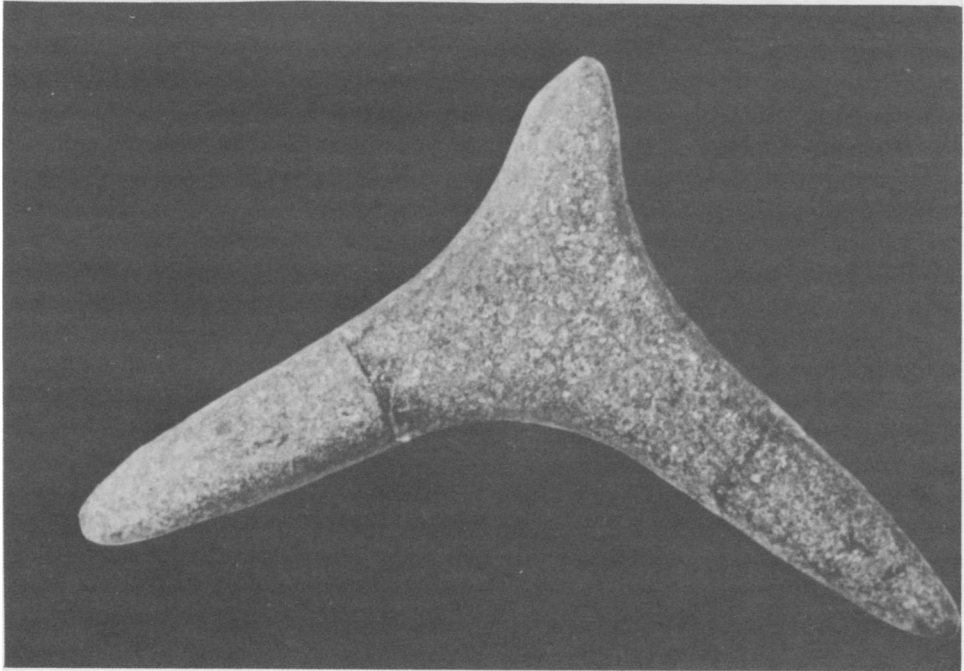


Plate 11

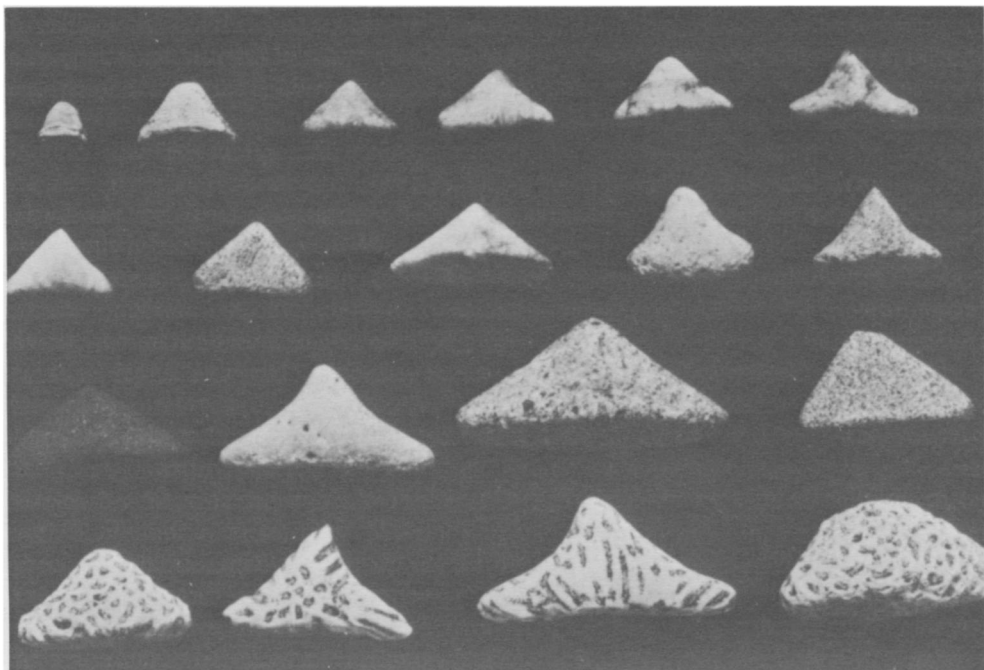


Plate 12

One more item with regard to the cone-shaped figures made from the conch shell (*Strombus Gigas*): Fred Olsen, whose excavations in the Lesser Antilles uncovered no signs of human activity beneath the level where he unearthed his specimens, suggests that their ritual use may have begun with the arrival of the ancestors of the Tainos in these islands. He thus opens up a new archeological perspective for dating the antiquity of this and possibly other West Indian myths.²²

In closing these observations on the Supreme Being, let us look at the story recounted by Pané and reported by Las Casas and other chroniclers. Brother Ramon tells it as follows:

And that Great Lord, who they say is in heaven, as is recorded at the beginning of this book, made Cácihu fast . . . And they say that this chief asserted he had spoken to Yucahuguamá, who told him that all those who after his death remained alive would enjoy their possessions but briefly, for there would come to this land a people wearing clothes who would conquer and kill them, and they would starve to death. They supposed at first that it must mean the cannibals, but then

considering that the latter merely stole and fled, they concluded that the *cemi* must have been referring to some other group. So now they believe that it is the Admiral and his people.²³

And Las Casas, transcribing directly into Spanish what he took from Pané, tells it this way:

Coming back to the chief or lord who had begun that fast, they said, and it was public knowledge, that having spoken to a certain *cemi*, whose name was Yucahuguamá, he had been told by him that those who after his death remained alive would little enjoy their lands and houses, for a clothed people would come who would lord it over them and kill them and they would starve to death; from that day on they believed the invading people must be the Caribs, who were then called, both by them and by us, cannibals.²⁴

It was, then, to Yucahuguamá that the sad task of predicting the destruction of the Taino people and of their traditional way of life was attributed. The reader may recall that, according to other chroniclers, the native gods of Mexico and Peru also announced, in very similar terms, the downfall of their respective civilizations. Was this prophetic warning the expression of an apocalyptic myth created independently in different regions of America? Or did it travel from the West Indies to continental America along with the conquerors? Parallelism of diffusion, the spreading abroad of those sad auguries may well have served another end commonly associated with enterprises of conquest: that of attributing to divine design what is in fact raw human aggression. All this hardly agrees with the compassionate character and beneficial function of Yucahuguamá.

Summing up, we may say that the Supreme Being of the Tainos was not a philandering Don Juan, like Jupiter; nor a demanding and vindictive judge, like Jehovah; nor an obstinate warrior, like Odin. Created by a people living in almost paradisiac islands, without poisonous reptiles or fierce beasts, without harsh winters or oppressive summers, without deserts and without chilling heights, in which a benign nature offered an abundance of birds and fish and fertile land, Yúcahu Bagua Maórocoti was, as were his creators, peaceful and kind. Closely tied to the ecology of the islands, his functions were those of a generous Sustaining Being ruling the creative forces of land and sea. Seen in this light, the myth has a precise meaning with the environment inhabited by the Taino and reflects his character and his world view. Yucahu Bagua Maórocoti, Lord of the Three names, Icon of the Tripointed Stones, brings together the three basic factors which so happily blend in the West Indies: land, sea and man.

NOTES

- 1 Fray Ramón Pané, *Relación acerca de las antigüedades de los indios*, ed. José J. Arrom (Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 1974), p. 21.
- 2 Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, *Apologetica historia de las Indias*, chap. 120. I quote from the text reproduced in Appendix C of the cited edition of the *Relacion*, p. 104.
- 3 *Relacion*, pp. 47-48.
- 4 Las Casas, *Apologetica historia*, chap. 167.
- 5 The reader will find a detailed comparison of the variants in my article "El mundo mítico de los taínos: Notas sobre el Ser Supremo," *Thesaurus, Boletín del Instituto Caro y Cuervo*, (Bogotá) 22, no. 3 (September-December 1967), pp. 381-386, reprinted in *Revista Dominicana de Arqueología y Antropología*, (Santo Domingo) I, no. 1 (January-June), pp. 184-186.
- 6 The hesitation between the vowels *o* and *u*, opening or closing the articulation, was common in the 16th century in the transcription of Indian words (for example, *boniato* and *buniato*, *coca* and *cuca*). In the case of *yoca* and *yuca*, open articulation has been preserved in such words as *tap-ioca*, *mand-ioca* and the South American regionalism *mañoco* or *manioco*, in which *n* + yod is ñ.
- 7 Nancy P. Hickerson records it as a nominalizer in Lokono or True Arawak. See her article "Two Versions of a Lokono (Arawak) Tale," *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 20 (1954) p. 297. And C.H. de Goeje explains: "An object-word without *hu* denotes a definite thing (or things); with *hu*, it denotes the thing in general or in a more solemn meaning." *The Arawak Language of Guiana* (Amsterdam: 1928), p. 75.
- 8 Goeje, *op. cit.*, pp. 46 and 200.
- 9 Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (Madrid: 1851), book XIII, chap. 9; I, p. 436.
- 10 Goeje, p. 59.
- 11 Douglas Taylor records the form *áraguti*, with the meaning of 'grandfather,' among the so-called Black Caribs, whose language is, essentially, of Arawak origin. (*The Black Caribs of British Honduras* [New York: 1951], p. 76.) And Goeje transcribes it as *adakutti*, with the same meaning, in the Arawak of the Guianas. (*Op. cit.*, p. 21).
- 12 Goeje, p. 199, paragraph 166, ff. We can add that *Guamá* was also the name--or possibly the title--of the chief who assumed command of the rebel Indians in Cuba after the execution of Hatuey. (*Colección de documentos ineditos de Ultramar*, 2nd series, vol IV (Madrid: 1888), pp. 168, 217, 254, 308, 325, 353 and 358).
- 13 Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, book I, chap. 91; in the Mexican edition (1951), vol. I, p. 372. In the word *wam(a)-ikini*, *ikini* is really equivalent to 'the only one.' (Goeje, *op. cit.*, p. 92, paragraph 48, ff).
- 14 Las Casas, *Apologetica historia*, chap. 167.
- 15 *Relacion*, p. 53.
- 16 Pedro Mártir de Anglería, *Décadas del Nuevo Mundo*, 1st dec., book IX. I quote from the translation, based on the 1587 Paris edition, which appears in Appendix B of the stated edition of Pané's work.
- 17 The best of the works which study and illustrate tripointed stones is Jesse Walter Fewkes' "The Aborigines of Porto Rico and Neighboring Islands," *Twenty-fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution* (Washington: 1907), pp. 3-220, especially pp. 11-132 and plates XXXII-LIII.
In trying to explain the function of these objects, Fewkes declares: "The use of the tripointed stones is as enigmatical as that of the stone collars or rings. Many authors

have regarded them as idols, while others consider them as decorated mortars" (p. 128). He then formulates this conclusion: "From whatever side we approach the subject, we come back to the conclusion that they were idols, or *zemis*. If they were not actually worshipped, they assumed forms which were duplications of idols that were worshipped" (p. 132). Frederick J. Dockstader takes the same view in the work cited below.

18 Frederick J. Dockstader, *Indian Art in Middle America* (Greenwich: Connecticut: 1964), description of plate 199.

19 Regarding stone belts, their use in ball games and relation to prior wooden belts, see Ricardo E. Alegria, "The Ball Game Played by the Aborigines of the Antilles," *American Antiquity*, XVI (1951), pp. 348-352. Also Gordon F. Ekholm, "Puerto Rican Stone Collars' as Ballgame Belts," in Samuel K. Lothrop *et al.*, *Essays in Pre-Columbian Art and Archeology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1961), pp. 356-371 and 476-478.

20 Paul Westheim, *Ideas fundamentales del arte prehispánico de Mexico* (Mexico: 1957), p. 32.

21 Adolfo de Hostos offers this latter interpretation in "Plant Fertilization by Magis in the Taino Area of the Great Antilles," *Caribbean Studies*, V, no. 1 (April 1965), pp. 3-5.

22 Fred Olsen, "The Arawak Religion: The Cult of Yocahu," *Mill Reef Digger's Digest* (Antigua, West Indies: April 1970), pp. 1-18. Furthermore, George A. Kubler informs me that flint tricornered stones have been found in Maya tombs of the classical period. It is yet another of the unsolved problems relative to the possible relationships between Tainos and Mayas. For further possible relationships and source of influences see Irving Rouse, "Prehistory of the West Indies," *Science*, vol. 144, no. 3618 (May 1, 1964), p. 511.

23 *Relación*, pp. 47-48.

24 Las Casas, *Apologetica historia de las Indias*, chap. 167.