

All
the
BALLPLAYER
DECAPITATION
STELAE
of Aparicio,
Vega de Alatorre,
Veracruz
MEXICO

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F.L.A.A.R.

1996



The photograph of the Aparicio stela in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico D.F., was taken with the permission of INAH.

The photograph of the Aparicio stela in the Museo de Antropología, Xalapa, Veracruz, was taken with the permission of the then Director of the museum.

The photograph of the Aparicio stela in the museum in Leiden was taken with the permission of the museum, T. Leyenaar, Curator.

The photograph of the Aparicio-like stela in the Denver Museum of Natural History was taken with the permission of the museum, Jane Day, at that time Chief Curator.

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A SET OF BALLGAME DECAPITATION STELAE from APARICIO, VEGA DE ALATORRE, VERACRUZ

Abstract

The site of Aparicio,¹ outside the town of Vega de Alatorre, Veracruz, has produced several well preserved stela-like sculptures which picture single ballplayers with snake-blood² issuing from their neck. Covarrubias labels the sculpture as from “Vega de Aparicio” (1957:caption of his fig. 81). Since the word Aparicio takes fewer keystrokes than vega de Alatorre and since no one has used the term “Vega de Aparicio” for the site except for Covarrubias, I will employ the site name of Aparicio on the grounds of practicality with typing. Wilkerson suggests that the other names are incorrect in any event.

Even though this remarkable site has produced at least four well preserved portraits of ballgame sacrifice I do not know of any monograph dedicated either to the site or to the entire set of sculptures as a group. Indeed, until 1994, it was entirely unknown to scholars outside of Mexicans

1. S. Jeffrey K. Wilkerson indicates that the only proper designation for the site is Aparicio, and that Vega de Alatorre is the name of the town, not the site (personal communication, 1995). Since Wilkerson has lived in the state of Veracruz for several decades, is one of the few archaeologists who has actually visited the site, and is a specialist in the archaeology of this area, I accept his designation as the preferred one.

2. “Snake-blood” might also be called “blood-snakes,” per individual preference. This term is being defined in this series as the blood which flows from the neck in those cases where the blood is pictured as snakes (primarily of sacrificed ballplayers)

that another Aparicio ball Player sculpture was still in Mexico (Felipe Solis, personal communication 1994). Furthermore, it was not widely Known to most Mesoamericanists until recently that still another potential Aparicio sculpture was on exhibit in the Denver Museum of Natural History (Jane Day 1995, paper presented at the annual BCC+ FLAAR symposium).³

Although the monuments from Aparicio are among the most important non-Maya ballplayer stelae that exist in Mexico, no professional drawings have been published of the Leiden stela nor either of the two rediscovered monuments. The oft-published drawings of the Aparicio stelae in the Mexico City museum, Known from Tozzer, Covarrubias, etc., is incomplete and thus needs to be redrawn to professional standards, both in style and in content.

No inventory or complete description of the Aparicio stelae appears in any of the international ballgame symposia. At the 1985 Tucson conference Wilkerson pictures one monument, but his focus is on El Tajin (1991: 51 and fig. 3.6 on p. 57). At Leiden of course the Leiden stela from Aparicio is pictured in the museum's catalog, twice indeed, but in the proceedings it was used only incidentally as a symbolic illustration (Leyenaar 1991:fig. 1). No description was provided of the site or of the provenance and history of the stela. At the 1990 Sinaloa ballgame conference only the poorly preserved monument from the National Museum of Anthropology is pic-

3. Day has presented this important monument in lectures since 1987/1989, referring to it as "in the style of" the other Aparicio stelae. I must admit that I did not know of this monument, and how close it was to the other Aparicio sculptures, until Day's paper in Florida in 1995.

tured (Uriarte, editor, 1992:26). As a further example of how forgotten these ruins are, I know no site plan or even description of Aparicio in the recent international literature.⁴

Location of the Site

Maps of the state government of Veracruz show the town name as being vega de Alatorre. No ruins are indicated on the map, indeed larger maps of the state often omit towns this small (not to mention ruins of which virtually nothing is left but a few mounds). Vega de Alatorre is about halfway between the city of Veracruz and the El Tajin area, south of Nautla to be more precise. The old coastal highway runs directly alongside the town of vega de Alatorre. It is worth pointing out that the ruins of Las Higueras are just a mile or so away from Aparicio. Three of the mural segments of Las Higueras show ballgame decapitation, in some cases with the player seated directly on the ball (specifically a skull ball).

History of the stelae and the Site

Four stelae from Aparicio share essentially the same scene—a seated indi-

4. It would be hoped that site plans and descriptions exist in local Mexican publications, but if so, they are not widely known and not cited in the major reports on the ballgames of Veracruz.

vidual ⁵ dressed as a ballplayer whose head has just been chopped off. This image has been included countless times in books on Mesoamerica from Covarrubias's time onward (Tozzer 1957,XII:fig. 475; Covarrubias 1957:fig. 81) According to Tozzer this drawing stems from Garcia payon, 1948-1949. At least one of these monuments gets routinely included in books which are fully dedicated to the ballgame.

In 1993 Felipe Solis, head of the archaeology section of the Mexican national museum, mentioned that another Aparicio ballgame decapitation stela had been sent on loan exhibit to a museum in Toronto (do not know which museum, or whether a catalog was issued; the Royal Ontario Museum is the premier Mesoamerican museum in Toronto, perhaps it was here). In 1994 I saw this stela in the basement of the museum, returned from Canada and still in its partially opened wooden packing crate. It apparantly resides in the basement. From the quick glance at it, it looked more or less the same as the one upstairs on exhibit. To my Knowledge, this "fourth" Aparicio ballplayer stela was not known to any ballgame specialist outside of Mexico. I have never seen it mentioned, inventoried,

5. It is presumed the figure is a male since all other sacrificed ballplayers on monumental sculpture and on Tiquisate pottery are definitely male. Females are known to have a role in the Maya ballgame but the nature of their role in this game is not yet understood. Day reminds me that the other Aparacio figures have occasionally been captioned as "female" due to their dress. In this important question it would help to compare the "skirt" with the outfits worn at El Tajin, where it is easier to distinguish between male and female. I would also need to ascertain the sex of the several victims pictured on the Las Higueras ballplayer murals. The FLAAR. Photo Archive has color photographs of all three Las Higueras ballgame murals but the paintings are pockmarked, faded, and faint. I need to photograph them with a digital camera and study the figures in an imaging Software, such as Adobe Photoshop, to see the details. If those Post Classic victims are female then this question needs to be reopened for the Aparacio victims. If the Las Higueras victims are male then this suggests the pattern in Veracruz was to picture only males as ballgame sacrifices.

cataloged, or in any way recognized in any publication which discusses any of the well known Aparicio stelae (Xalapa, Leiden, or the one upstairs in the Mexico City museum on public exhibit) outside of an exhibit catalog of Marcia Castro-Leal (1986:No. 51, page 64). Castro-Leal knows the museum holdings intimately since she is a present curator and former director; she is a widely known Mexican specialist on the ballgames of Mexico. This 1986 book is her comprehensive catalog to a ballgame exhibit in the Museo Nacional de Antropología. Obviously there are lots of local Mexican publications that never reach foreign libraries, so I would welcome citations to other published instances of this “fourth” stela that all of us have overlooked.

Then at the 1995 ballgame portion of the annual BCC + FLAAR symposium, Jane Day mentioned in her presentation that her museum had another Aparicio-like stela on exhibit.⁶ The difference was that this Denver Museum of Natural History ballplayer was standing up rather than sitting down. A month or so later I had an opportunity to photograph this “fifth” Aparicio ballplayer stela, so now its image can be presented to the public for the first time with close-up photographs in published form.

6. Although this stela is clearly patterned after those of Aparicio, the Denver one is unprovenanced. Day and I agree that it could have come from any other site in the area. Thus my inclusion of this stela in this report is not a statement that the sculpture came specifically from Aparicio. Since the term Aparicio-like or “Aparicio area” is rather awkward, it is easier just to call it the “fifth Aparicio stela,” since it is certainly part of the series no matter where or when it was sculptured. Technically correct is Day’s designation as “in the style of” Aparicio.

To summarize the inventory for Aparicio. Two of the stelae are in the Museo Nacional de Antropología (Mexico City) one each are in the Museo de Antropología (Xalapa) and the National Museum of Ethnology (Leiden, Holland). The Denver stela (the “fifth” ballplayer monument) is the only one where the ballplayer is possibly standing up rather than sitting. The Leiden stela can be distinguished because it is broken horizontally completely across the middle. The Leiden and Xalapa players face right. Both the ballplayers in Mexico City face left. This means that two complete pairs exist. What complicates the issue is the standing player in Denver-where was this situated relative to the placement of the other four stelae?

Ted Leyenaar (and Wilkerson since he lives in the state of Veracruz) are among the few ballgame specialists that have ever actually visited this crucial site. I am not familiar with any site map, excavation report, or even survey that describes the physical layout of the site, though again, there may well be internal INAH reports or Veracruz state archaeology reports that describe the site. Until these reach outside their local area, however, such reports are not terribly educational. It would seem that the excavation of this site, and its ballcourt, would be a useful contribution to knowledge. The site must actually be rather near the main highway that goes down the coast of Veracruz near the town of Vega de Alatorre. I have occasionally noticed the name of the town as I drive towards the Maya area further south.

One of the few personal observations on the site by an archaeologist who has been there is by Wilkerson, 1991 :51, indicating that the ballcourt is

large, he compares it to that of Yuhualinchan (a site with El Tajin style architecture high in the mountains to the northwest. Aparicio is on the coastal plain). Wilkerson also indicates that Aparicio is an extensive site, seemingly large enough that he would have expected it to have more than just a single balicourt. In 1995, Wilkerson told me that fragments of sculpture known to be from Aparicio include unusual features. I got the impression from his comments that the sculpture from this site included features not known to archaeologists because evidently these fragments are not published in sources which are in an average archaeology library. Indeed Wilkerson's mention of these fragments was the first I ever heard of there being more sculpture from the site besides the known complete decapitation stelae. Clearly this site needs to be excavated thoroughly.

Dating the Stelae

Most Mexican publications have not ventured a date. Leyenaar and/or Parsons suggest A.D. 400-700 (1988:caption for no. 150, p. 205). Palmas tend to be late, so A.D. 800 or after would be more likely than A.D. 700 and before. The palms pictured in the murals of Las Higueras are dated as Terminal Classic or later (my impression from discussions with various Veracruz archaeologists, including Juan Sanchez B). The palms of Chichen Itza certainly post-date A.D. 800. Until the Aparicio site is excavated and thus securely dated I venture a date estimate as no earlier than 800 and no later than 1200. I deliberately fudge so that the statistical chances are that the date which is eventually decided is sure to fall somewhere within this

span. A date before A.D. 700 would have so many unlikely implications for pre-Columbian archaeology that it would take an entire Ph.D. dissertation to justify. Wilkerson says: "Aparicio, a major Late Classic and Epiclassic center south of El Tajfn (and Tajfn's possible political rival)... (1991 :51) This assessment matches my style dating on the basis of the presence of a palma, namely after A.D. 800, and probably post A.D. 900.

THE APARICIO STELA (#1)⁷

ON EXHIBIT IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MEXICO CITY

Condition

The frame has been chipped away on the upper 15% of the stela and is battered along the bottom right half. A chunk is also missing from the frame at the bottom left corner. The sides are correspondingly chipped, which means that most of the meandering scrolls there are not well preserved. The front is in better shape except for several of the snake heads.

Previous Publication

This monument is not pictured in either of the two early coffee table books on the treasures of this museum (Bernal 1967; Ramirez et al. 1968) I could not find it pictured in any of the smaller museum catalogs by Bernal either. Actually it was not until I checked Castro-Leal 1986 (No. 50) did I find it in a museum publication at all. Subsequently it appeared in the Proceedings of the Sinaloa ballgame conference, on p. 26 (Uriarte, editor, 1992), as an incidental decoration. Because of the chipped condition of the outside frame it is not surprising that this monument is seldom published.

7. I am now aware that anyone has attempted to number these monuments. Thus I offer a set of numbers here. I still, though, prefer to name them after their current location, the "Xalapa stela," the "Leiden stela," the "basement stela," and the "exhibited Mexico City stela."



Museo de Antropología, INAH.

THE REDISCOVERED APARICIO STELA (#2)

IN THE BASEMENT NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MEXICO CITY

Previous Publication

I know of only one instance that this monument has been published in a major work (Castro-Leal 1986:no. 51) No photographs are readily available. The stela is stored in the basement of the national museum.

Condition

The frame is in considerably better condition than that of its mate upstairs on exhibit in the museum but there are chips along the bottom. The front is evenly eroded with several of the snakes being badly pitted. At least one of the snake heads is almost totally obliterated.

Peculiarities

This player has a number of features that distinguish it from the others. First, the palma is almost parallel to the knee. This is because the legs are unusually long. On all the others there is considerable empty space between the palma and the player's thighs and knee. The handstone is difficult to see though that is also a result of erosion and lighting. The seat

(or architectural unit, potentially even a side of the ballcourt, see the Las Higueras mural) has a middle support; this space is empty on all the others they have supports just at each end. On the bottom tier of the architectural unit (the bench or seat) the side “legs” run together with the step in the middle.

THE APARICIO STELA (#3)

IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY MUSEUM OF XALAPA, VERACRUZ

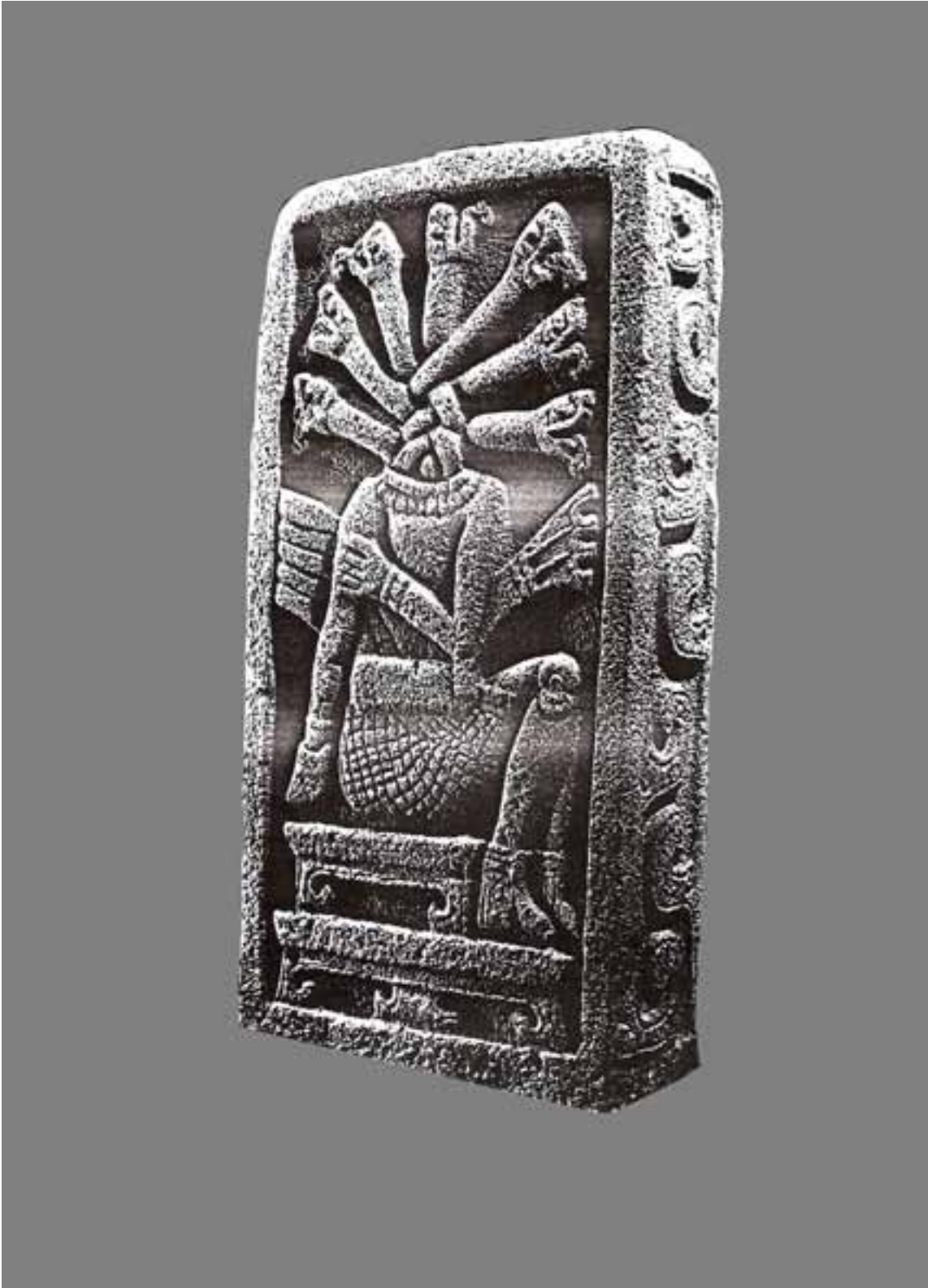
Condition

This might be considered as the best preserved of all of the Aparicio stelae, especially on the sides, where the scrolls are nicely presented. This state of preservation allows distinguishing this stela from the others. The feet have more space; on the exhibited Mexico City monument the feet are jammed into the edge of the frame.

Previous Publication

This stela has been published so often that it is difficult to keep track of it. I therefore list just a few of the instances (Medellfn 1983:91; Vizcaino 1988:75; Sanchez 1992:148). Tozzer's drawing is probably the most accessible (1957,XII:fig. 475).⁸ The Aparicio drawing used by Tozzer is cited as coming from Garcia payon 1948-49:fig. 1 (the caption of course is incorrect that the scene is on a palma). I presume this drawing is the source forthat in Wilkerson (1991:fig. 3.6) and elsewhere. This drawing is incomplete and inaccurate in details and needs to be replaced by a more professional

8. In Tozzer's book, the drawing next to the Aparicio stela is from Cadex Telleriano Remensis. This codex shows that the concept of snake-blood (blood being pictured as a snake) continued even to Aztec times (Tozzer 1957,XII:fig. 476).



Museo de Antropología, Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico

illustration. still, the Xalapa specimen is the most frequently published of the Aparicio stelae.

The Monument

This stela in Xalapa can be distinguished from that in Mexico City (upstairs on exhibit) due to its better condition plus the fact that the player faces right. The drawing used by Covarrubias faces left. There are differences in the throne as well, that of Xalapa has no middle support under the top throne. Under the bottom throne the curls are reversed as opposed to those in Mexico City. The two stelae in Mexico City can be distinguished from one another because that upstairs on public exhibit is actually the worst preserved of the entire lot. That in the basement has a complete frame except just at the bottom.

Details and Differences

The Xalapa stela, as with the “basement” stela, both seem to lack a pronounced diagonal feature above the ankle. The limbs on the exhibited Mexico City stela and that of Leiden both have a set of double forms or lines going diagonally across the lower leg. But all it takes is lighting from a different angle and the diagonal form appears on the Xalapa specimen as well, visible in the photos used by Medellin and by Sanchez but not in the photograph used by Vizcaino. Is this a rope? And is it comparable to the diagonal band across the stomach of the xalapa player (or is that diagonal

form at Xalapa the hem of the continuation of the cloth as on the exhibited Mexican stela?).

THE APARICIO STELA (#4)
IN THE ROYAL MUSEUM OF ETHNOLOGY,
LEIDEN, THE NETHERLANDS

This monument has long been in the collection of the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden, The Netherlands, curated by Ted J. J. Leyenaar, a well known specialist in the modern survival of the Mesoamerican ballgame. I have not yet photographed it other than in incidental snapshots because in the 1970's-1980's it was installed inside a small exhibit case crowded with other ballgame art. There was no way to illuminate it without getting shadow from the case. It was not possible even to get a backdrop behind it. I get the impression from Leyenaar's comments at the 1995 annual BCC+ FLAAR symposium that the monument was now exhibited in a considerably better situation. Museum catalog number is 3576-1 .

Condition

The monument is progressively eroded towards the upper third especially, yet the entire figure is still plainly visible. The monument is broken completely in half, at the knee. This could have been to facilitate its



Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden, The Netherlands.

unfortunate removal from the site. I am not familiar with any specifics whatsoever on this aspect of the history of the monument, or even in what year(s) this took place. The break, at knee level, has not been restored.

Previous Publication

Leyenaar 1978:fig. 18; Leyenaar and Parsons 1988:fig. 1 and pl. 150; Leyenaar 1991 :fig. 1)

Relief showing seated decapitated ballplayer with yugo, two palmas, knee pad, and manopla in right hand. Seven interwined (sic) serpents sprouting from neck suggest dedication to Chicomecoatl, or Seven Serpent, goddess of fertility. (Leyenaar and Parsons 1988:caption for pl. 150, p. 205).

Surprisingly this Important stela was not pictured at all in the book Masterpieces from the National Museum of Ethnology (van Dongen, Forrer, and van Gulik 1987

THE APARICIO-LIKE STELA⁹

IN THE DENVER MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

Previous Publication

At the time of writing this report (summer 1995) to my knowledge this monument had not yet been formally published elsewhere. Jane Day, Head curator of the Denver Museum of Natural History, where the stela is exhibited, has included this monument in papers and slide lectures since 1987 or 1989.¹⁰ For most of us attending the 1995 BCC+ FLAAR annual Maya Symposium, however, Day's paper was the first time we were aware that this monument existed.

The monument is listed in the museum records as: *Stone stela depicting a decapitated ballplayer. Veracruz, Mexico, c. 800-1000 A.D., Crane Collection, # 11,601, Denver Museum of Natural History.*

9. It is premature to label this as "Aparicio stela 5" since we do not know if the monument came specifically from the site of Aparicio.

10. Day has retired from the position of Head Curator and now (1996) remains as curator of the pre-Columbian section of the museum.



Denver Museum of Natural History



Denver Museum of Natural History.

Condition

The torso, neck, and snake knot are well preserved. The snake heads and upraised hand are poorly preserved. The rest of the monument is chipped away.

Authenticity

There is nothing immediately fake-looking about this monument and therefore I at first presumed it is most likely authentic. However as you spend more time looking at its detail, as you notice that the bottom portion may not have been finished. Day has suggested a viable alternative, that the figure is not necessarily standing (personal communication). If the figure were intended to be seated then the mass of stone is his rump, or his seat, rather than between his legs. She also agrees that the monument is potentially unfinished. One alternative consideration is that when the sculptor attempted to vary from the Aparicio conventions he had no easy model to guide him. Either standing, or sitting, the lower half of this monument is quite distinct from the others. Even if it had been finished the lower half would never have looked similar to the others. Any of this could be explained by this being a latter, or earlier sculpture, or from another site, or from uncertainty of a sculptor doing his best not to copy known stelae quite so obviously. His wishes evidently exceeded his dedication, since he appears to have been as confused then as we are still today with the results.

As you compare the neck area and the snake mass with the four Aparicio stela, further questions arise. No other Mesoamericanist has voiced any major doubts, but it is proper to indicate that inclusion of this monument in this report is not a certification that this monument is of any specific date, ancient or modern. Equally well, the questions raised are not intended to certify that the monument is modern, since no Mesoamericanist has documented any specific uncertainty. At this point the stela is considered as probably ancient until further evidence can be obtained, a stone analysis and comparison with the known Aparicio stone, for example.

Several of the other items in the Denver collection came from a couple (now deceased) who apparantly obtained their material from Stendahl Galleries in California. This gallery is well known and has a record for authentic art. Day kindly provided background that the monument was originally in the Jay Leff Collection, before passing into the Crane Collection. The Leff Collection is well known also, and rated as consisting primarily of authentic pre-Columbian art. It is curious, though, that this stela is not pictured in any of the major exhibits of the Leff Collection, nor was it sold publically at auction, as was much of the rest of the collection.¹¹ Courtesy of Day this monument can now be available to scholars and students.

11. If this monument was exhibited, and Published, this report is totally missing from my library, plus the libraries of anyone else working in this area.

The most curious feature of the monument is the entire bottom half. There is no way this can be a finished sculpture, since the legs would be impossibly thick. His crotch would exceed the dimensions of even the most well developed male athlete if all that mass of stone was between his legs inside his pants. The legs of all the known Aparicio players are long and lean. This player appears to have elephantiasis. The necklace is noticeably thinner than that of any of the Aparicio stelae. Furthermore, none of the other monuments have any neck area on the body-the snakes issue from behind the necklace. Also noticable is the fact that the mass of snake bodies does not form a convincing knot.

A final problem is the frontal skull-like form. Hachas in the shape of skulls are widely known, but mainly from Guatemala, not Veracruz. Furthermore hachas tend to be thin; even when thick, they are not frontal like this. Actually only a palma would be expected to be this wide. Although stubby palmas are known, it would be a challenge to find an actual artifact of precisely these proportions. The entire area under the elbow is "unfinished" as well, because not even a Bilbao yoke would be that thick. The only way to ascertain for sure that this Denver stela is authentic is to analyze the stone and then to compare this analysis with the stone of the other four stelae. I maintain a neutral position on whether the monument is ancient or not. In the meantime it is important to publish these photographs so that other scholars will have an opportunity to review the data and come to their own conclusions. If this stela is authentic then it is a fascinating object of pre-Columbian art-its enigmatic features are sure

to engage art historians in debate for decades. Wilkerson has indicated that Aparicio has produced some unusual monuments, and that “strangeness” per se would not rule out an origin from Aparicio, on the contrary, unusual monuments typify the local eclecticism. Another reason for the monument being different would naturally be that the stela could have come from a nearby site, other than Aparicio itself.

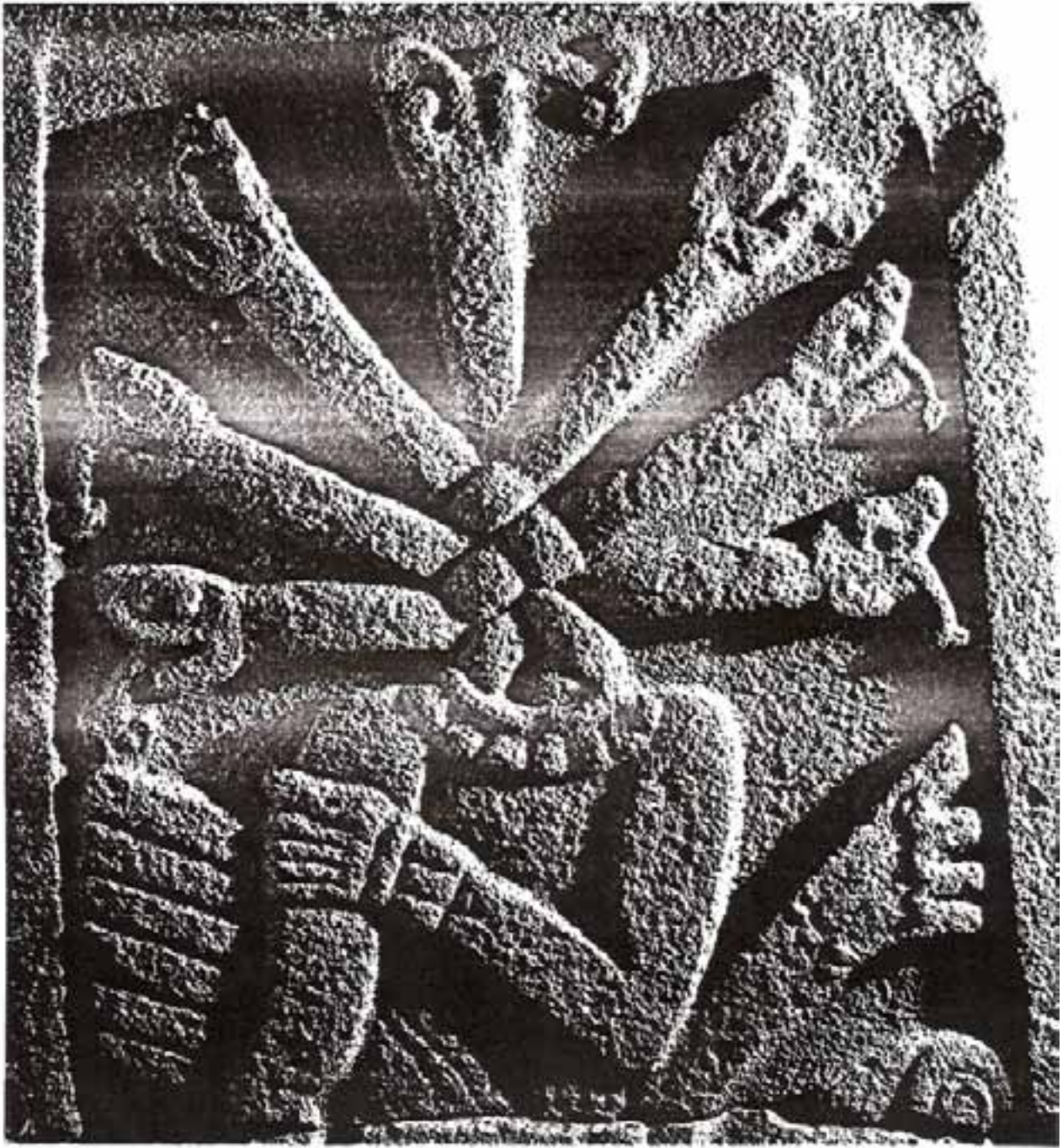
COMPARING THE VARIOUS FEATURES OF ALL THE MONUMENTS

The Snakes

On all four traditional Aparicio stelae the snakes lunge out thrusting for vengeance, forming a veritable Medousa. On the Denver stela the snakes peek out in a more subdued fashion. Also, for the third snake on the right, its head is not in total coordination with its body. Overall the intertwined bodies do not form a realistic mass of knots but rather a pile of independent segments. The exhibited Mexico City snakes are closest in this aspect. The appearance of the snake mass, however, is influenced by the angle of the light and shadows, a result of the angle and intensity of the photographic lighting.

On all four Aparicio stelae the snakes issue directly from behind the necklace. No section of upper chest (or lower neck, depending on how you look at it) is noticeable between the necklace and the snakes. On the Denver sculpture, however, there is a wide section of lower neck, shown as rather thick. The snakes issue only then, from behind this neck section.

The bifurcated tongues stick out furthest on the two Mexico City stelae. The mouths of these snakes are ominously open. Certain lighting angles reveals the thick lips, most easily seen on the xalapa stela. The eye or eye frame is also raised. I cannot detect any ventral scales but this area of the body is usually in dark shadow.



Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden, The Netherlands



Museo Nacional de Antropología, INAH, Mexico City (upstairs).

Tozzer is actually the scholar who shows that snake-blood is used in situations other than ballgame decapitation, Telleriano Remensis 15¹² and Fejervary-Maver 41 (Tozzer 1957,XII:figs. 476 and 477). The context for the latter is a sacrificed warrior, no ballcourt or associated symbolism is anywhere nearby. The items on his knees are normal knee jewelry, not athletic knee-pads.

The Palma

The actual palma sticks precariously out from the yoke. We still have no idea how these palmas were attached. No sculpture other than possibly Edzna Stela 6 shows a palma in use, and that Maya monument is eroded at that point. More likely it is an hacha, since palmas would not be expected at Edzna. This means that so far all scenes with palmas are execution ceremonies: Chichen Itza, El Tajin, Aparicio, and especially the murals of Las Higueras, where the victim sits on a skull ball. The palmas are clear to see at Las Higueras (Sanchez 1992:149)

This Aparacio palma is clearly the same size and shape as those artifacts of stone.

12. Folio 15, both verso and recto, have no such figure, so this must be a mistake in Tozzer's caption.



Museo Nacional de Antropología, INAH, Mexico City (upstairs).



Museo de Antropología, Universidad Veracruzana, Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico

The back Feathers

I interpret the mass sticking up from the back of the body as feathers or comparable back decoration, as typical of Mesoamerican costumes. These features are unlikely to be a second palma. The ones on the Mexico City players are too large to be a palma.

The Yoke

The player on the Las Higueras murals wears a palma (of indeterminate material) on a yoke that is unlikely of stone. I believe the Las Higueras player wears a leather band as a yoke substitute.¹³ These Aparicio players, however, appear to wear the traditional stone yoke. If so it must be open at the back, since the palma grips on the front. The alternative is that the palma springs precisely from the open portion and that a wooden securing device is wedged into this open span. Arguing against this apocryphal concept is that the base of a yoke is notched to fit against something; it is not shaped to stick into something. The rediscovered Mexican player has an inexplicable blip both above and behind the yoke just past the butt of the attached palma. All the Aparicio yokes are plain. This makes it all the more difficult to tell which end is which. Normally we would expect the back to the open.

13. I write this before I have analyzed the Las Higueras monuments in intimate detail. They are locked up in the basement of the xalapa museum and thus it is not possible to study them at leisure.

The Handstone

Wilkerson has suggested that a comparable item in the hand of players at El Tajin is specifically to open up the chest to get at the intestines. He bases this assessment on a scene at El Tajin, from the columns, and then transfers this conclusion to the ballplayer scenes on the South Court, and from there to the accouterments on this Aparicio stela.

An alternative assessment is called for on several grounds, namely that the disimbowling pictured on the Tajin columns is not necessarily the specific sacrifice of an actual ballplayer. True, Thirteen Rabbit does wear a yoke, elsewhere on the columns, but there he is not sacrificing anyone. If we wish to conclude that everything on the columns is related to the ballgame, that still does not mean that it is ballplayers who are being sacrificed. No Aztec sculpture, and no Toltec sculpture either, pictures an actual ballplayer being killed. All the Aztec victims are generic individuals, none have ballgame gear. No Classic Maya sculpture yet found shows a person attired as a ballplayer being killed, since the victims at Yaxchilan and Seibal are not attired as athletes. The scenes at Chichen Itza are not in the running since they are non-Classic and late; their prototypes are from Tiquisate, Izapa, Los Horcones, or Veracruz-no blood snake ballplayer sacrifice has yet been found at a traditional Classical Maya site.

Secondly, there is no need to invent a new tool for Veracruz archaeology, since we already know that ballplayers routinely carry a ballgame hand-

stone. Hundreds of handstones, of every imaginable size, shape, and form have been found throughout Veracruz, even in the Maya areas elsewhere. No special knife of this size and shape has yet been found archaeologically. If one was known, Wilkerson, who knows Veracruz artifacts well, would surely have pictured one. Thus, on the basis of the laws of probability alone, this object is most likely a local form of handstone.

The Kneepad

The rediscovered athlete has the knee area which is easiest to study. His pad seems to be about two inches in diameter, and placed at the side (whether this is artistic license or not will need to be decided later). This is the pattern for the players at Tajin; they seem to have pads on both knees. * Whereas the players in the South Ballcourt execution scene have a full set of kneepads, the players on the fragmentary decapitation panel (in the museum) wear no knee protection whatsoever. The Las Higueras player seems to have a strip of cloth or leather around his knee, decorated with a symbol. No round patch is present. On the xalapa and the Leiden players the knee area seems to have a disk over the actual knee, but reading the light and shadows is like reading an ink blot test. What is curious on the Xalapa/Leiden legs is that no specific strap can be seen.

No arm padding is seen on any of the Aparicio players. What is on the wrists of El Tajin players would seem to be a normal bracelet and not an

armpad. The hand of the Las Higueras Player seems to merge into a snake head so , presume his hand is in or bound up with a handstone, as the costume for Bilbao ballplayers.

The Skirt

Specialists in textiles of ancient Veracruz will need to decide whether these shorts are of net weave or a thicker material with this pattern on the surface. Leather is actually expected. Most of the Players at El Tajin have net weave material on their athletic outfits though the overall shape of the entire outfit is different on the exhibited Mexico City stela the net weave seems to go diagonally up past the YOke but this may be a diagonal band not an extension of the skirt because on the Xalapa and Leiden athletes only a diagonal band goes across that part of the body. The skirt definitely ends before the Yoke. You can see this clearly in some lighting angles even on the exhibited Mexico City specimen. The exhibited Mexico City athlete has an enigmatic vertical segment of segmented material between his handstone and his rump; this goes up above the level of the top of the skirt, up to the base of the yoke. Since nothing like this is present on the Xalapa example I am unable to judge its meaning.

Jewelry

All five players wear essentially the same necklace. This consists of a band from which hang repeated adjacent flaps. All four Aparicio necklaces have

a thick, rope-like strand and thick flaps. The Denver necklace has a thin strand and thin flaps.

Unusual Sandals

The sandals have subtle features in several places. At least four horizontal bands decorate the ankle itself. Above this an additional diagonal band may be seen, faint on the Xalapa specimen but more visible on the exhibited specimen in Mexico City. It almost seems as though he is wearing a “sock” with a diagonal top portion, dipping down to the level of the upper portion of the sandal. or, this diagonal accessory for the lower leg may be a local Veracruz form of the highback sandal. Additional close-up photography will be required to document whether these players’ foot gear includes a cover over the superior part of the foot, on one, or both, feet.

The Body

All four Aparicio players are long and lean, not short and stocky as the prototypical pre-Columbian native. If these individuals stood up they would almost be as elongated as the attenuated figures on the Las Higueras murals. Evidently this was the stylistic norm for coastal Veracruz during these centuries. The body of the exhibited Mexico City player is the least sophisticated of the series; it is for good reason that this sculpture is almost never pictured in guidebooks to the Museo Nacional de Antropología

On all four Aparicio stelae the shoulders have a natural droop. On the Denver body the shoulders are slightly raised, as though he is wearing 20th century shoulder pads.

The Thrones

Although these look like a throne or seat in fact the player may be sitting on the edge of the court. Compare the size, shape, angles, and stepped aspect of these Aparicio "seats" with the context of the seated figures in the various El Tajin scenes. These Tajin attendants are clearly perched on top of the court. The execution in the Las Higueras mural (Sanchez 1992:149) seems to take place in the court alley (as at El Tajin). The sides of the Las Higueras alley appear as well; their lower platform is straight up (as on other Veracruz representations). Here it helps to have the monumental architectural compendium of Taladoire to check the profiles of actual courts. The actual court architecture at Tajin also has straight sides for the initial level. The Aparicio players almost seem to levitate above the throne and floor, since neither their buttocks nor their feet actually rest on any surface.

Summary and Conclusions

There may still be shavings from the butts of these stelae at the locus from which they were so rudely removed. If the monuments are all com-

plete (they are probably of a size which could be moved without trimming) then no shavings will be at the site but the pits from which these monuments came may still be there. Or, if these were inset panels (as at Seibal, La Amelia, Itzan and elsewhere in the Maya area) then the insets may still be at the ballcourt (or wherever these monuments were removed from). Since these stelae are rather thick, and as their sides are completely decorated, they were probably free-standing, and not set into a wall. No field reports are readily available so I am simply presuming they came from around the court area.

Another tack would be to ask in the local village. There may even be older people still alive who can remember what the site looked like before the stelae were taken away. Any site that was large enough to have four or five stelae associated with a single ballcourt must certainly have been reported upon in some obscure explorer's report, or a local newspaper report. Mexican archaeologists could render a considerable scholarly service by tracking down such notices and publishing them in INAH's new *Arqueología* magazine, or in the INAH bulletin series, or in a comparable journal, such as *Mexicon*.

When there were only three monuments known their placement would seem easier to estimate, but now there are definitely four, and then the possible fifth one. Thus two on each side of the court, with the Denver monument somewhere in the middle? If there is one monument, with a standing player in the middle perhaps there is another stela with a stand-

ing athlete that was on the other side? Or was the standing monument at one end only? It is equally possible that the Denver sculpture is not from Aparicio itself. We simply do not know where, and when, it was carved, but it certainly deserves to be published.

A valid question is whether the Aparicio victims are women (either because they are supposedly wearing a skirt or because they are supposedly Chicomecoatl), or, if men, whether they are representing the goddess Seven Serpent. Specialists in Mexican deities might address this problem, since on the basis of physical characteristics, plus tradition, there is little chance that females would be pictured in this particular sacrifice. The Aparicio stelae are not isolated, the theme was not locally invented. A tower of snakes in the form of blood can be found as early as the 5th to 6th centuries A.D. on the Tiquisate plain of Early Classic Guatemala. Seven serpents rise from the neck of these early victims. It would be a challenge to document the presence of a specific deity Seven Serpent in that time and place. It is not enough to classify the Aparicio victims as females on the basis of clothing which was rather uni-sex in this particular instance. If these individuals are a female deity then this needs to be documented by illustrating known cases and showing how the Aparicio individuals look the same and appear in an acceptable context. There is a constant problem in Mesoamerican iconography where judgements are made on content (in this case a set of seven serpents) without reference of the context (in this case a ballgames sacrifice where the victims are always male).

For example, in the Aztec era, Chicomecóatl is clearly a female. Furthermore, the snakes issue from the lower half of her body. Also, she carries a specific object in each hand and wears a distinctive headdress. None of the Aparicio ballplayers share even a single feature of the known Chicomecóatl of Aztec time and place. If there is a local Veracruz ethnohistoric reference to Chicomecóatl with snakes instead of a head then this case should be reopened, but this would also require renaming as Chicomecóatl the several victims in Aztec codices where snake-like blood is issuing from a severed neck. I do not remember any of those individuals as having even a solitary trait of the known Chicomecóatl.

The above evidence is not intended to remove Seven Serpent from the ballgame myth, because certainly any educated inhabitant of ancient Aparicio would have been aware that the snake blood was similar to the snakes issuing from below Chicomecóatl. This section is intended to suggest that iconography has to be rigorous. Names cannot be applied to figures unless the evidence is available, and if it is available it ought to be presented visually. Since I am not a specialist in Aztec deities, it is possible that I have overlooked some image that would require reopening the case of sexual identification of the Aparicio ballplayers, but for the moment they can be classified as probable males. Plenty of ballplayers at El Tajin could be construed as wearing “skirts” but all these characters are seemingly male. Actually this is the first time, in English at least, that the sexual identification of the figures has been discussed in detail. I thank Jane Day for bringing to my attention the fact that in the literature there

were instances where it had been thought the victims were female. Since a female is rather out of context here I must admit I had never even considered the possibility. I now consider it, and, after review of the lack of evidence, suggest that the ballplayers are safely male.

The four Players from Aparicio wear no hacha. The fifth player (Denver) has an incompletely defined object on the front which is potentially an hacha, based on size. In the Veracruz area, however, there is a continuum of size and shape between hachas and palmas. Some short squat palmas clearly look like hachas, and some "hachas" look like prototypes for palmas. The object worn by the Denver player is wide enough to be a short stubby palma, indeed it is rather thick to be an hacha, though Veracruz hachas are considerably wider than hachas from Guatemala which are truly "thin stone heads." On the Denver Player the item at his back is more likely his feather assemblage rather than his palma, though some may prefer to conclude it is a palma. A palma, however, is clearly not present on the back of the actual Aparicio Players, since their palma is definitely in front. Plenty of stone palmas of the size and shape (of this item sticking out the front of the Yoke) are known as actual artifacts. A spray of feathers issuing from the back is a centuries-old tradition in Mesoamerica, being found on the earliest ballplayer decapitation scene, at Izapa. The Xalapa player has 5 Plumes, the Leiden and the rediscovered Mexico City player have 6 Plumes; the exhibited Mexico City player has 8 Plumes. No palma is this large, no palma is in this arrangement, and if he already has a definite palma on his front then he does not really need one on the back. If the monument

were earlier then perhaps an hacha would be possible on the back. Even though hac has are usually at the front or side, in fact hacha-like accessories may be found at the back. The Tiquisate ballplayers almost always have an hacha-like head on the back of their yokes.

If the item on the front center of the Denver player is a short wide palma, perhaps someday that may allow specialists to suggest a style date based on the evolution of size and shape of palmas.

The FLAAR program to inventory all depictions of the ancient Mesoamerican ballgames from the Maya, veracruz, Oaxaca, and central Mexican areas (Teotihuacan, xochicalco, Toltec, Aztec and related) has resulted in photographing several Maya sculptures which were not widely recognized to be ballplayers, such as a stela at Edzna,¹⁴ at Calakmul, and at Itsimte. Now we can report the “discovery” of two additional Aparicio ballplayer stelae, one in the basement of the Mexican national museum (that local Mexican scholars knew about but which was totally unrecognized by anyone outside Mexico) and one in the Denver Museum of Natural History, which remains to be authenticated. I certainly hope that someone else besides all the INAH people in Mexico knew about the “basement stela” but I had never seen it illustrated, have never heard it mentioned in any of the international ballgame conferences, and get the

14. Although stela 6 has long been known as a ballplayer, that Stela 2 was also a ballplayer was not recognized until Jeff Kowalski mentioned this fact at a ballgame symposium. stela 2 was sub-sequently professionally photographed by F.L.A.A.R. with night lighting and has been published in detail in the concurrent F.L.A.A.R. series.

impression it was actually totally unknown to most of us. I would greatly welcome any citation of this basement stela in any publication outside of Mexico, or, from Mexico, any paper in addition to that of Castro.

The Denver stela is a similar case, obviously most scholars in Denver knew about it, plus anyone who attended Jane Day's lectures on the ballgame. But the Denver stela was never mentioned in any outside publication to my knowledge.

We hope that professional quality line drawings can be prepared and that the site of Aparicio itself can receive the long overdue attention that it merits. Ted Leyenaar has recently visited the actual site, perhaps he, or Wilkerson, or INAH, will be able to provide a site map and details of the architecture of the ballcourt.

Aparicio and las Higueras

Although the murals of Las Higueras, Veracruz, are known by everyone who has visited the wonderful museum in Xalapa, it is not widely realized that three of the mural segments feature a ballgame decapitation. I thank Juan Sanchez B. for showing me these segments and the staff of the museum for permitting me to photograph all three.

The importance of the Las Higueras ballplayer murals lies in the fact that the site of Las Higueras is practically a suburb to the site of Aparicio. I

have never seen this mentioned, or pictured on any map. This lack of geographical awareness of the location of these two sites comes from the fact that no modern publication exists on either of them, indeed the murals are only known from recent fragments in fancy coffee table books on El Tajin (far to the north). The original monograph on Las Higueras is in a Mexican publication which is not available in hardly any but the absolutely largest (and wealthiest) libraries. The FLAAR library, for example, lacks the Mexican monograph on this key site.

I must admit that I was totally ignorant of the fact that Las Higueras was so close to Aparicio until I xeroxed a Mexican highway map to illustrate this report on Aparicio. Much to my surprise, the name of Las Higueras (the town, not the ruins, but the ruins are just off the main highway, before the village) was directly next to Vega de Alatorre, the town next to the ruins of Aparicio.

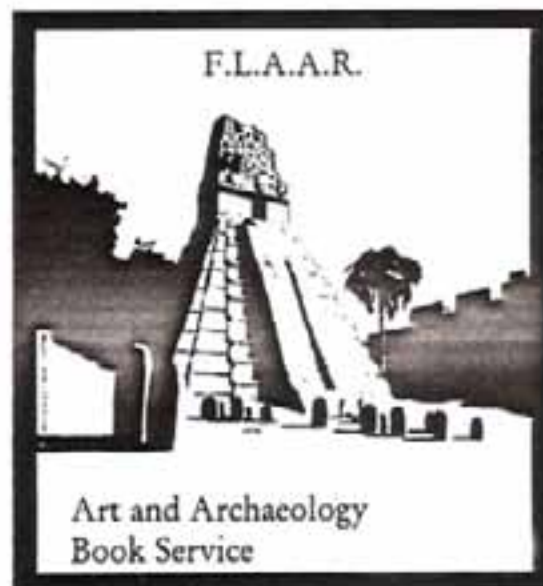
Sanchez dates the murals of Las Higueras to the early Post Classic, which is in line with suggested dates for the Aparicio decapitation stelae. This would mean that the probable palmas of Las Higueras are the last known in Mesoamerica.

We had originally intended to invite Sanchez to give a paper on the Las Higueras murals at the symposium, but when neither BCC nor FLAAR received adequate funding, we were unable to invite any other out-of-country speakers. Since Sanchez has worked with the Las Higueras murals

for two decades, I did not wish to present them without him being at the conference.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

With over 15 volumes on the ballgame under preparation it would be an ecological sin to reproduce essentially the same bibliography for each report. To save paper (and wear and tear on the author) a master bibliography has been prepared as a separate volume. As this volume is several hundred pages long we felt that most people would prefer to avoid the cost of paying for it. For individuals who are keen for the bibliographical data, however, they can purchase this volume separately at the symposium.



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