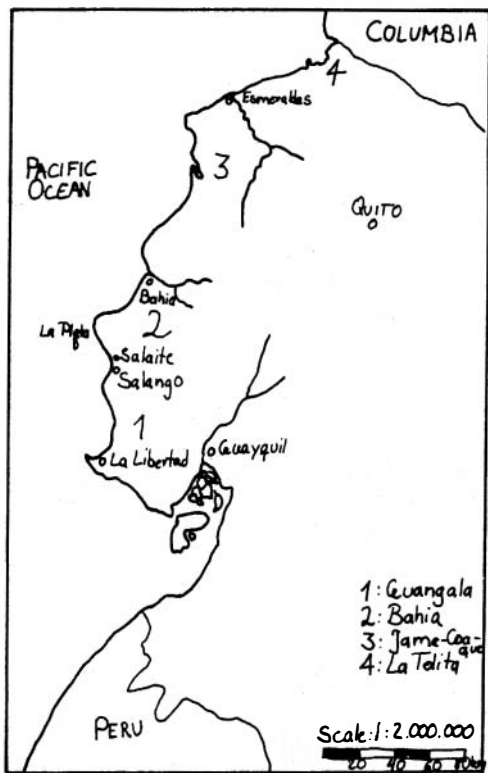


The Tusk-Shaped Stone Figurines From Coastal Ecuador.

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In this short paper I shall present some of the central points of my forthcoming Ph. D. on tusk-shaped stone figurines and the artifacts associated with them. The figurines discussed here all come from the Bahia phase of the Regional Development Period (500 B.C to AD 500) of Ecuador. They were probably in use in the other contemporary coastal Ecuadorian phases of Guangala, Jama-Coaque and La Tolita as well, as I shall try to demonstrate later in this article.



Map of Ecuador

This very unusual type of stone figurine was discovered in Ecuador as early as the end of the last century by G.A. Dorsey and subsequently published by him in 1901, following his extensive excavations along the coast (Dorsey 1901). Other archaeologists discussing the Regional Development Period in coastal Ecuador like Savills (1907), Bushnell (1951), Estrada (1957, 1958) and Meggers (1966) also describe these figurines briefly. However, in all these accounts the figurines are seen as no more than

a purely local exception of the Bahia culture, not playing any important role in the ceremonial or religious contexts of coastal Ecuador.

The figurines have slight differences in style, but can be typically described as follows (see also figs 1 and 2): 90 % of the sample is made of a soft volcanic tuff found within easy travelling distance from the sites (<1 day). The rest are made of limestone, shell (including *Spondylus princeps*), green-stone, marble, whale-tooth, bone, coral and ceramic (placed in the order of frequency they appeared in my sample).

The average length of the figurine is between 10 to 15 cm and it is almost always shaped in the form of a tusk or horn and incised with anthropomorphic features in a rather abstract way. Eyes, nose and mouth are generally depicted by short horizontal lines; the face is set off by single or double triangular lines and another set of single or double parallel lines represent the arms and sometimes the waist. When hands are either indicated or clearly depicted they are folded as in a praying fashion in front of the chest.

There is no indication of whether the figurines generally represent males or females. Although 11 figurines (1%) can clearly be interpreted as female and one as male, no conclusions can be drawn about the rest of the sample.

A small percentage (6%) of the stones are perforated in the back of the neck apparently for suspension, suggesting use as pendants and so indicating a special function for these particular stones.

The different styles that seem to be represented in my sample vary mainly in the degree of naturalism which is used to represent the anthropomorphic features. One style dominates, which I have named 'Geometric' for its appearance (see fig.3) and which represents nearly half of all the figurines of the sample. This style is almost completely dominant in at least 2 of the 7 sites (Salaite and Joa) from which my data comes.

The main characteristic of the Geometric style is the triangular cross-section of the stone, as opposed to the oval shape most common in the other styles. This creates a vertical line down the centre of the front body (i.e. the line from the nose through the naval), also the line of one of the corners of the triangle, dividing the front body into two sides. The back, the third side of the triangle, is left undecorated.

All of these figurines are shown wearing what I call a crown, which is depicted by a band of 1 to 3 parallel, horizontal lines that encircle the top of the figurine's head. The facial features are stylized to a minimum and the body features consist of more bands of double or triple parallel lines encircling the body horizontally or diagonally. This geometric treatment is typical of the style, hence the name 'Geometric'.

The sample of tusk-shaped figurines on which my work is based, comprises just over a thousand figurines. These include all the stone figurines found at the site of Salango (described below), the stone figurines stored at museums in Ecuador, most of the figurines in private collections in Ecuador, the figurines stored in the Field Museum in Chicago (Dorsey's collection) and in the Museum of the American Indian in New York. I believe that my archive of data represents nearly all relevant figurines unearthed at the present.

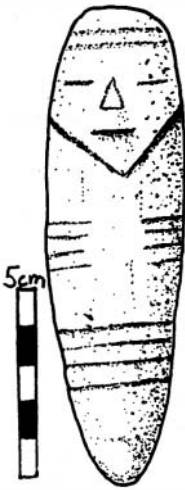


Fig. 1

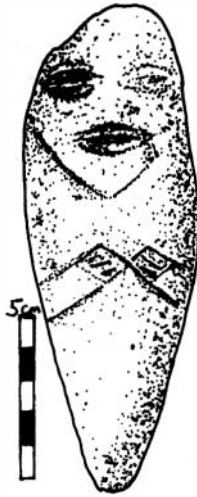


Fig. 2

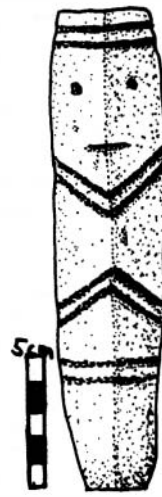


Fig. 3

Fig. 1 Tusk-shaped stone figurine from Salaite. Mus. Banco Central Guayquil

Fig. 2 Tusk-shaped stone figurine from Joa. Mus. Banco Central Guayquil

Fig.3 Geometric tusk-shaped figurine from Salaite. Mus Banco Central Guayaquil



Fig. 4 Ceramic Bahia figurine, Los Esteros. Mus. Banco Central, Quito. No. 2-26-66

Most of the material in the sample comes from illegal excavations by 'huaqueros' (so-called grave robbers) and therefore very little is known about their original context, although we are provided with the name of the sites they apparently came from. The only reliable source of information about contexts comes from the site of Salango (Norton 1984). (See map)

Salango was inhabited continuously from Valdivia times (3500 B.C.) until it was abandoned at the beginning of the 17th century. Today a fishing village stands on the site. Different activity areas can be distinguished within the site: habitational, industrial and administrative /ceremonial. The complexity of this site and its continuous use over more than 5000 years, makes it not only unique in South America but also very valuable in understanding the archaeology of the area.

The stone figurines so far excavated in Salango were all found in small deposits, dating to the Bahia phase, in the borders of the ceremonial area. These deposits are situated in clusters away from other contemporary contexts such as burials or ceremonial structures. It looks as if there were special small areas designated purely for the burial of figurines.

The figurines were buried upright in small holes specially made for them. The holes were quite shallow and just big enough for the figurine to fit in. Often the top (head) of the figurine protruded from the hole. Whether the hole was filled with dirt around the figurine at its time of deposition, or through time is difficult to judge from the excavation results. Generally a figurine was buried in a deposit, but in some cases up to 13 figurines were buried together. Other artifacts were also found placed in the hole along with the figurines, such as disks or plaques made of the same material, green beads or pottery sherds. From this evidence we can deduce that there was some kind of ritual accompanying the deposition of the figurines.

The figurines appear to have been deposited during a period spanning two consecutive building phases at the site approximating a time span of 120 years (pers. comm. R. Lunnis, excavation field director). As all different styles encountered in my overall sample were represented in Salango, it would have been interesting to find a chronology regarding the styles for that period; but the Harris Matrix employed to show the chronological order of all the contexts excavated, places the different styles of stone figurines in use throughout the phase. This means that there is no definite relationship between style and age of the figurines in Salango.

Because of the variety of styles present among the stone figurines of this site I also have to rule out any strict relationship between style and region. So we can conclude that a variety of styles of this type of figurine was in use simultaneously along the coast over a period of time during the Regional Development Period.

I can only associate two thirds of my sample with the sites in which they were found and these are all located on the coast of Manabí and on La Plata, an island off this coast. Not all are beach sites like Salango, but the sea is never far away. The only two figurines found outside of Manabí were from the site of La Libertad (G.H.S. Bushnell 1951) which is on the Santa Elena Peninsula and associated with the Guangala phase (Regional Development Period). Although no other stone figurines can be directly associated with areas outside of Manabí and therefore the Bahia culture, there

is plenty of indirect evidence that these tusk-shaped stone figurines were widely used all along the Ecuadorian coast.

Tusk-shaped pendants are represented and clearly identifiable on the ceramic figurines of several cultures of the Regional Development Period. Studying these ceramic figurines from coastal Ecuador (see fig. 4), we can learn not only about the distribution, but also more about the use and age of the stone figurines.

Many of the ceramic figurines are clearly depicted wearing tusk-shaped, anthropomorphic figurines around the neck or held in the hand (see fig. 4). The dress and posture of these particular ceramic figurines indicate that they might represent priests or shamans. The dress is elaborate and seems ceremonial, the subject is always a male and sitting either on a throne or cross-legged in a formal position. The use of drugs is indicated in the majority of cases by a lime pot held in one hand and lime stick in the other, both of which are paraphernalia for coca use. The dazed look and half open mouth in all the cases suggest the influence of the drug (Siegel 1978).

The Regional Development cultures from Guayas in the south up to Esmeraldas in the north, show what I believe to be, shamans or priests wearing anthropomorphic tusk-shaped pendants from the early to the late phases of this long period. However, this seems to limit itself to within the borders of modern Ecuador as none are known from Peru or Columbia.

If tusk-shaped figurines were obviously produced along most of the Ecuadorian coast, why are they not represented in any of the collections? Two problems seem evident. The first is the result of the way in which they were disposed, i.e. they were buried in small deposits away from other larger structures and so could have been easily missed during excavation. Secondly, most of the figurines were unearthed by 'huaqueros' who often did not bother to sell them due to their poor value and threw them onto the rubbish heap. I was able to confirm this during anthropological research among the 'huaqueros'.

The proportion of stone to ceramic figurines, 30 to 1, found to be from the same period in Salango, affords us an idea of the huge quantities of idols that must have been in use. The museum archives are bursting with ceramics but the fraction of stone figurines unearthed is clearly not representative in size. This does not mean that the large quantity and proportion of stone figurines found in Salango, a major ceremonial centre, can be taken as a rule but rather should be seen as an indicator of what is possible.

The figurines were important during the Regional Development Period not only because of their quantity but also for their symbolic meaning deduced from the way in which they were disposed and their use as pendants.

An anthropomorphic figurine worn as a pendant or amulet in a ceremonial/ritual context could indicate that this artifact represents some sort of an 'idol'. If it had been worn for purely decorative reasons it would have been made of a more valuable material, e.g. shell, (there are a few examples of these figurines made from shell). There are many decorative shell ornaments and pendants in the archaeological record of Ecuador but these seem to have been worn by a wide range of people of different social status as seen from the ceramic representations, but above all they didn't

have any clear secondary function such as the ritual burial of the tusk-shaped figurines. The frequency and consistency of the representation of this particular pendant on the ceramic figurines is unique.

We have to distinguish between artifacts made for decorative purposes and those made for ceremonial reasons which therefore have an added symbolic meaning (F. Boas 1955). The ones made for a specific purpose, e.g. ceremonial, did not have to be beautiful in their formal elements although this did not diminish the high regard in which they must have been held. Some decorative artifacts had little function other than having to be beautiful. We must not use the modern concept of beauty as being of relative importance when symbolic meaning is involved.

Another argument supporting the idea that these figurines were idols is the material of which they are made. Stone has always had a special ritual significance as is widely believed and documented in the ethnographic record: it could be inhabited by spirits and therefore used as a medium to contact them. Stone, as opposed to any other material, has some sort of life in the mythical sense making it ideal for use as idols.

As mentioned earlier 6% of the total sample of the tusk-shaped figurines are perforated and these consequently had at least two functions; to be worn and for burial. Only one third of these perforated figurines, representing 90% of the overall sample, is made of tuff. So the majority of the pendants were made of more valuable materials, as listed above, but they were only used for 3% of the non-perforated ones.

There are several reasons for this: firstly, volcanic tuff is a very soft and somewhat brittle stone and therefore not very durable. It is consequently less suitable for use as pendants, although it was evidently feasible. Secondly, a stone idol used as a pendant had a double purpose and it should therefore look 'decorative' as well. A finer material was not only nicer to look at but could also be carved into a finer object. This is confirmed by the higher quality of the sample of perforated figurines.

The tusk-shaped anthropomorphic stone figurine was the only one consistently worn as a pendant by priests or shamans along the coast during the Regional Development Period and is the only type of figurine known to be deposited by itself in a ritual burial. While the neighbouring cultures within that period have distinct differences these idols are common to all. The stone figurines must have been central to the ceremonies and rituals and of prime importance to the religion. However, it is too dangerous at this time to speculate on the nature of these ceremonies and the symbolic meaning of the tusk shaped figurine. It is hoped that further research will throw light on this mystery.

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