

**PREHISPANIC MONUMENTS IN FRONT OF THE RECTORY
BUILDING
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN CARLOS, GUATEMALA**

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At the center and in front of the north esplanade of the Rectory Building of the San Carlos de Guatemala University, a prehispanic monument about which little is known was placed. The goal of this work is to make a summary of the data obtained. The first version of the document appears on page 361 of Villacorta's work (1926b), with a caption that reads: "*Giant head of Gucumatz, the Nahua Quetzalcoatl, found in ancient Kaqchikel lands*" (Figure 1).



Figure 1. First photograph of monument taken in 1926.

One year later, the same picture appeared on page 110 of another publication (Villacorta and Villacorta 1927), with the following caption: "*Giant head of Gucumatz, the Nahua Quetzalcoatl, a stone sculpture found at Molino de la Sierra, property of*

Sr. D. Francisco Sosa, *Dept. of Chimaltenango*". Subsequently, page 120 reads, literally:

"due to the celebration of the fourth centennial of the foundation of Iximche, the Spanish capital, the Townhall of Tecpan exhibited several other archaic objects found in that area, such as vessels, flints, etc., though none of them provides an idea of the degree of civilization the Kaqchikel had achieved when they were conquered, but thanks to the zeal of Don Francisco Sosa, owner of Molino de la Sierra, located at Patzum, near Iximche, who owns in the city of Guatemala a peculiar and vast collection of archaeological objects of that culture found within the boundaries of the said establishment, which undoubtedly is found in the territories of the ancient Kaqchikel kingdom. We may now have some notion of the degree of progress achieved by those people, as observed in the brief description we shall shortly provide regarding some of them, with the warning that among such objects there are many of carved stone, others of coarse and fired clay such as vessel remains, etc., others made of jade, beads and chalchihuites, and still some others made of silver. Among the pieces there was a huge serpent head with open jaws and the human face of Gucumatz appearing between them, with the line of teeth of the upper mandible of the serpent on the God's forehead, showing as well eyes adorned with scrolls and frets. This serpent head resembles another one discovered at Quirigua" (Villacorta and Villacorta 1927). This work is the first to mention the serpent head monument of Quirigua.

As little information is known about this monument, we shall now present some data about it. The issue of when was it discovered and by whom would be the first mystery to unveil. The data obtained may be summarized by saying that the head in question, called *"Monolithic Animal or Serpent Head"* by several authors, shown in photographs of pages 8 and 9 (Villacorta and Villacorta 1927), are unfortunately no longer at the site. The map of the Ruins of Quirigua (Morley 1936) shows that the monument rested at a side of Structure 3, and later, on page 173, this author refers to what he calls an Altar (being the sole author to describe the piece as an altar). This was located on the north edge of the Main Plaza, and is now at the Peabody Museum, Harvard University. The monument is described as a crocodile head with open jaws, showing at the inside a finely executed human head. On the other hand, no information was found on how, when and who was given authorization to move it to the museum where it is supposed to be presently stored, in the United States.

In his work, Thompson (1948) dedicates several paragraphs on pages 29 and 30 to provide data on the Quirigua monument, saying that in former explorations and maps drawn at the site, this piece was not mentioned. And no reference appeared in the Hewett map of 1911. That is why Thompson attributes Carlos Villacorta the initial information and illustrations published. In the scheme of the Quirigua site, Villacorta and Villacorta (1927) refer to this serpent head on page 6, as indicated as well by J.A. Villacorta (1926a). The iconography observed in the pictures shown in Villacorta's and Morley's works shows iconographic characteristics that resemble those of the monument that today stands in front of the Rectory building.

Again, Villacorta (1938:177) presents an identical photo of the monument, with the following information: *A monolith representing a Kaqchikel deity, "La Aurora Park", Archaeology Museum, Guatemala.* This museum was inaugurated the 28th of June, 1931, in what today is known as the Tea House at finca La Aurora (Díaz 1934:497). In 1930, the author of this article is seen in a photo by the monument (Figure 2), showing that the monument was already at the park before the museum was inaugurated.

In turn, Franz Termer (1931) notes that *"among the few remains he found there was a beautiful and large monument that seemed to represent a feathered serpent with Gucumatz's face. This was found at Molino La Sierra, on the road that communicates Patzizia and Patzun.* He states that *it comes from some ruins known by the name of Santa Teresa, and that it was likely transported with great difficulty from the ruins to the mill, due to its large size* (the dimensions of which he provides). According to this, it is believed that the data of the monument in front of the Rectory building are consistent, as well as its approximate weight of around five tons.

Different and very brief information that provides no new data is present in Miles (1985), who notes that: *"the Late Classic ballgame courts were furnished with marker tenons representing serpent or jaguar effigies. Possibly, the most important sculpture of this type is the Patzun head with a large serpent that shows the tri-lobed eye with a beautiful face that emerges from the open jaws"*.



Figure 2. The author at the front of the monument, year 1930, finca La Aurora.

Like already noted, today the monument rests at the center of the anterior part of the plaza that surrounds the Rectory Building of the University of San Carlos. The precise date of when the monument was moved from La Aurora to its present setting has not yet been established. Several engineers and architects involved in the design and construction of the Rectory building were consulted, but none of them recall any information about the moving. Architect Roberto Aycinena was the only one to report that when he was in charge of the museographic section of the Institute of Anthropology and History of Guatemala, the master Guillermo Grajeda Mena decided to move the monument to its present location (Figure 3). As seen, there is a remarkable lack of information in regard to the monument (Cabrera 1996).



Figure 3. Monument in front of the Rectory Building, USAC, with visible damage caused by micro-flora and the environment.

Master Julio Urruela Vásquez, at the time of decorating the Reception Hall at the National Palace of Guatemala in 1942 and 1943, and in the large window known as “Maya History”, included in the fourth lower window a Maya sculptor carving the fine piece we are referring to here (Figure 5, Luján 1996).

The monument has been recorded at the Department of Records, Institute of Anthropology and History of Guatemala, with number 1:3.4.1. Number 1 indicates its present location and refers to the department of Guatemala; number 3 indicates it belongs to a government collection; number 4 defines this is the fourth governmental collection, and the additional number 1 corresponds to the record number of the University of San Carlos collection (there is no number corresponding to the USAC collection).



Figure 4. Dimensions and approximate weight of 3.2 tons, equivalent to 71 quintals.



Figure 5. Stained-glass window of the Reception Hall, National Palace, large window of the Maya Culture, lower portion of fourth window, by master Julio Urruela.

THE PLACE WHERE IT APPARENTLY WAS FOUND

Almost all the reports originated in the descriptions made by Villacorta and Villacorta suggest it belonged to Sr. Francisco Sosa, owner of the finca Molino de la Sierra. Therefore, it probably was discovered somewhere close to the finca or at the finca itself, as its huge volume and weight must have made it very difficult -mostly at that time and in a mountain landscape-, to move it at a long distance, a very difficult though not impossible task. It is said that it probably was related to Iximche because of its closeness to this site. The majesty of the monument, its great weight and its exquisite carving suggest it came from a major site.

A very brief report on an exploration reconnaissance at the Chimaltenango Department refers to the localization of a significant archaeological site called Chirijuyu, between Texcpan and Patzun, very close to the finca Molina de la Sierra, where Villacorta notes that Sr. Francisco Sosa found the monument (Lothrop 1933). The existence of the site of Chirijuyu has recently been confirmed, with a scheme of a plan site and with the mention of another site called Molino de la Sierra, but with no plan (García 1992). Therefore, it is presumed that Chirijuyu is the place of provenience of this monument (Figures 6, 7 and 8).



Figure 6. Close-up to more clearly observe the details, bifid tongue and eye with a V-shaped incision.



Figure 7. Close-up to appreciate face details.



Figure 8. Detail of lateral view. Probable molars may be observed, a slightly opened corner of the mouth, an eye with a tear, a trifoliate feature, and a scroll.

DESCRIPTION OF MONUMENT

The monument is 2.10 long and 0.79 m wide, decreasing until it achieves that which constitutes the tenon. Its height varies: the front is 1.17 m high, the head finishes at 0.90 m, and the tenon is 0.80 m high, with an approximate weight of 3.2 tons equivalent to 71 quintals. The material used to sculpt it is basalt (Figure 4).

This kind of sculpture is known as tenon sculpture, and is often found in the South Coast and the Central Highlands of Guatemala. Several scholars have defined all the tenoned monuments as Ballgame markers, though not all of them fall under that category. One example of that type of markers is the one found *in situ*, in an archaeological context, in one of the Ballgames of Mixco Viejo, of a much smaller size and poorer quality than the monument we are examining now.

But in the present case, and because of its large dimensions and weight, the disproportion of the head and the cut of the anchoring tenon suggest it was not pending from a wall. Therefore, it has been deduced that one portion rested on the plaza floor where it was placed, and that the tenon was anchored to a wall or sloping panel. Other possible uses of them should be considered, possibly related to the Ballgame, though not precisely as a marker.

As to the iconography, there are other tenoned monuments of smaller dimensions which represent an identical scene: a face emerging from the jaws of a monster. Whenever it is presumed that they were hanging from a wall, the tenon was longer and the proportion between head and tenon was better distributed. Some scholars refer to this type of monument as Vision Tenons.

The interpretation of iconography, as mentioned throughout this work and quoting different authors, is complex. Most researchers denominate them Serpent Head, except for Morley (1936), who believes them to be crocodile heads. However, they are not believed to represent a serpent or a crocodile. Because of their iconography they may be assumed to be the representation of an *Anthropomorphic Monster of the Underworld*, which fuses different beasts and iconographic features. The precise and well defined style may be also observed in other sculptures.

- The open jaws of this huge head resemble somehow those of a serpent, as well as the bifid tongue clearly seen in the lower frontal part of the monument, where the lower portion of the face emerging from the open jaws is resting.
- At the sides, at mid-height, it features rounded sunken eyes with a V-shaped incision, opening forward, representing the pupils of a serpent.
- The jaws, opened in their anterior portion (upper maxillary), show a row of possible teeth (incisors), with which the upper part wherefrom the face emerges, is formed. The representation of these anterior teeth does not correspond to those of a serpent.

- The line of teeth ends at the sides of a huge fang split into two and making contact with that which could probably be the lower fangs. The lower fangs are additional features which do not represent those of a serpent.
- At the sides, the corners of the jaws are not opened. All beasts, when opening their jaws, open them completely.
- This region shows a series of probable molars, which are not serpent traits either.
- The lower maxillary has no decoration.
- The thick lips are visible on the lines that demarcate the open jaws.
- On the upper maxillary, at the center, there was an object, now missing due to breakage, insinuated as a nose whose base extends upwards at the center and then backwards, like a crest, being the tallest part of the monument.
- Above the eyes it presents a scalloped, thick eyebrow projected upwards and ending with a scroll.
- Backwards, and following the corners of the eyes, it bends downwards and turns forward, to end in another scroll placed behind the corner of the mouth.
- A human face, well proportioned and defined, emerges from the jaws.
- On top, and well framed, are the fangs as well as in the lower part on the base of the bifid tongue.

These observations have led us to disagree with those views according to which this a colossal *Serpent Head*. It would be interesting that an expert in iconography could accomplish the study to identify with accuracy the character represented in this monument (Figure 6).

CHRONOLOGY

Because of the association made in most reports with Iximche and its surrounding areas, it has been said that it dates to the Postclassic. But when studying its iconography, one may observe the great quality of manufacture, design and the well defined style. I would say it could correspond to the Classic or to the Terminal Classic period, at the latest. Morley (1936) also suggests that because of its manufacturing techniques it could be older than the other monuments of Quirigua. Until the precise place of the finding is not established, and the context ceramic examined, the period to which it belongs cannot be defined. There are other samples with this style dated to the Classic, with iconography similar to that of the Highlands and close to the place of the presumed discovery.

CONCLUSIONS

This monument is the very best and the only one example so complete and well preserved of this kind. It is of a remarkable beauty, skillfully manufactured and with large dimensions. A professional and comprehensive study of it needs to be done. It would be important to conduct a thorough iconographic analysis to exactly ascertain what beast or character this zoomorphic piece is representing, and to what period does it correspond. Its magnificent integrity, which unfortunately is undergoing deterioration, should be protected, as there where it presently rests, the piece is exposed to acid rains, microorganisms, etc., that are affecting the stone. In addition, the monument is subjected to actions accelerating its decay, such as graffiti, the placement of objects on top of the monument, and other kinds of damages.



Figure 9. Another aspect of the monument's position in front of the USAC's Rectory Building.

A transparent domo could be built to protect it, and it could be placed in one of the water mirrors in front of the Rectory. One important recommendation would be its relocation inside the Rectory building, where it should be housed (Figures 9 and 10). For all of this, the authorities of the University of San Carlos are suggested to review the problem and find some method to preserve and make known this magnificent jewel of the archaeological heritage.

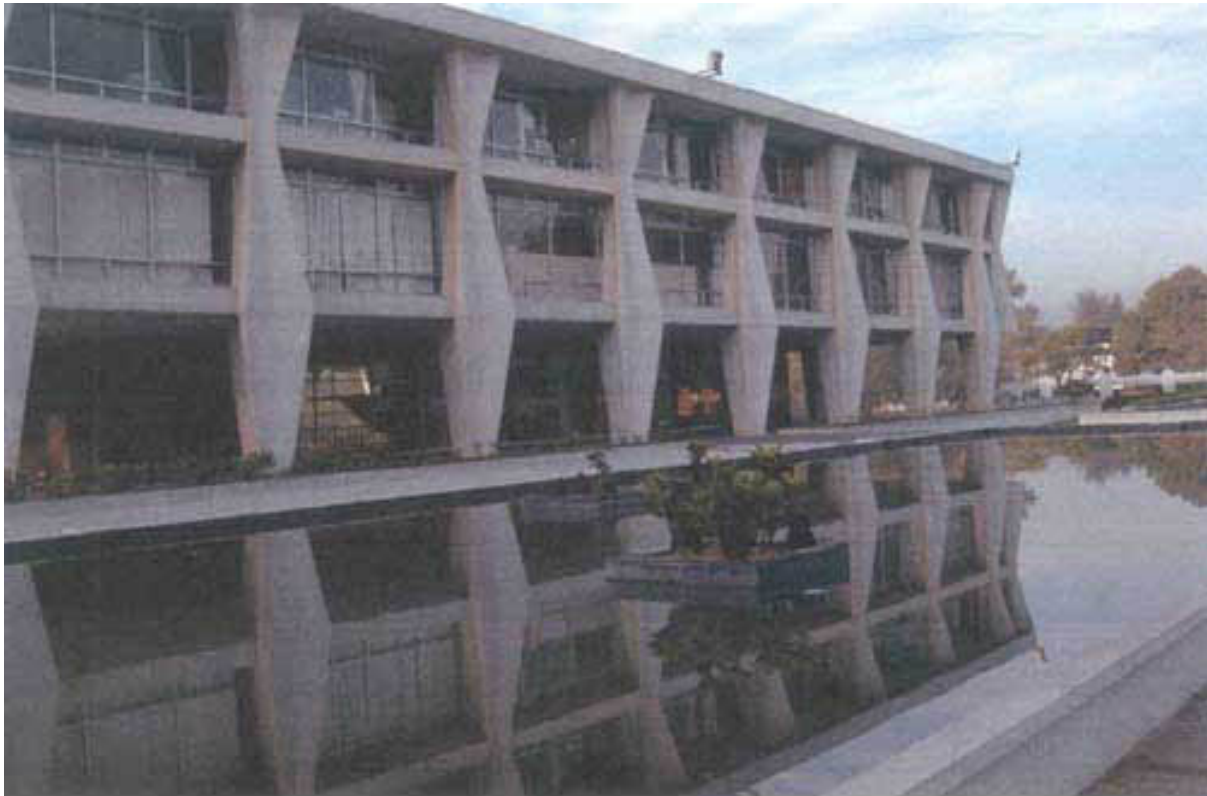


Figure 10. Possible placement on an isle in this water mirror. With a transparent dome, for protection.

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