

## **Gordon Frederick Ekholm- the Maverick of Mesoamerica's Northern Frontiers 1909-1987**



Photograph from  
<http://anthro.amnh.org/anthropology/research/ekholm.htm>

Gordon Ekholm was a true maverick in Mesoamerican archaeology for over four decades. An undergraduate degree from the University of Minnesota, together with an MA and PhD from Harvard should have molded him into an intellectual card-carrying member of the American Orthodox Archaeological Fraternity but he maintained a refreshingly iconoclastic approach to understanding the past all his life. He devoted his entire career to curatorial positions at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. A meticulous field worker, he always preferred to work on the fringes of Mesoamerican rather than in the center where the great civilizations had held sway. He steadfastly maintained an interest in connections between the cultures of northern Mexico and the southern United States, both east and west, when nobody else was much interested. Later in his career he proposed the possibility of connections between Mesoamericans and their Chinese contemporaries, a suggestion tantamount to heresy. Toward the end of his life he freely examined "looted" artifacts for private owners; another activity frowned upon by many of his colleagues but one he felt was part of his responsibility as a Curator at a publicly-supported museum. Finally, he oversaw the creation of the exhibit halls dedicated to Mexico and Central America in 1944 and its complete renovation in 1970, something most modern museum curators seem to consider beneath their exalted dignity.

Ekholm started his career in Sonora and Sinaloa, a true outpost of civilization if there ever was one. His 1937-1940 research at Guasave, Sinaloa, recovered fine examples of Mixteca-Puebla style pottery that showed that even this isolated region participated in the far-flung commercial networks of the Postclassic and also pointed out connections with Paquimé (Casas Grandes) the great trade emporium in Chihuahua and the US Southwest. Then he migrated east to the Pánuco-Tampico region of the Huasteca where he carried out the first stratigraphic excavations. This research enabled him to create the basic

chronology for the region that remains in use seventy years later as well as shed considerable light on Postclassic Huasteca architecture and culture. His 1944 monograph on this research, published by the AMNH, created a high standard that few more recent works have equaled.

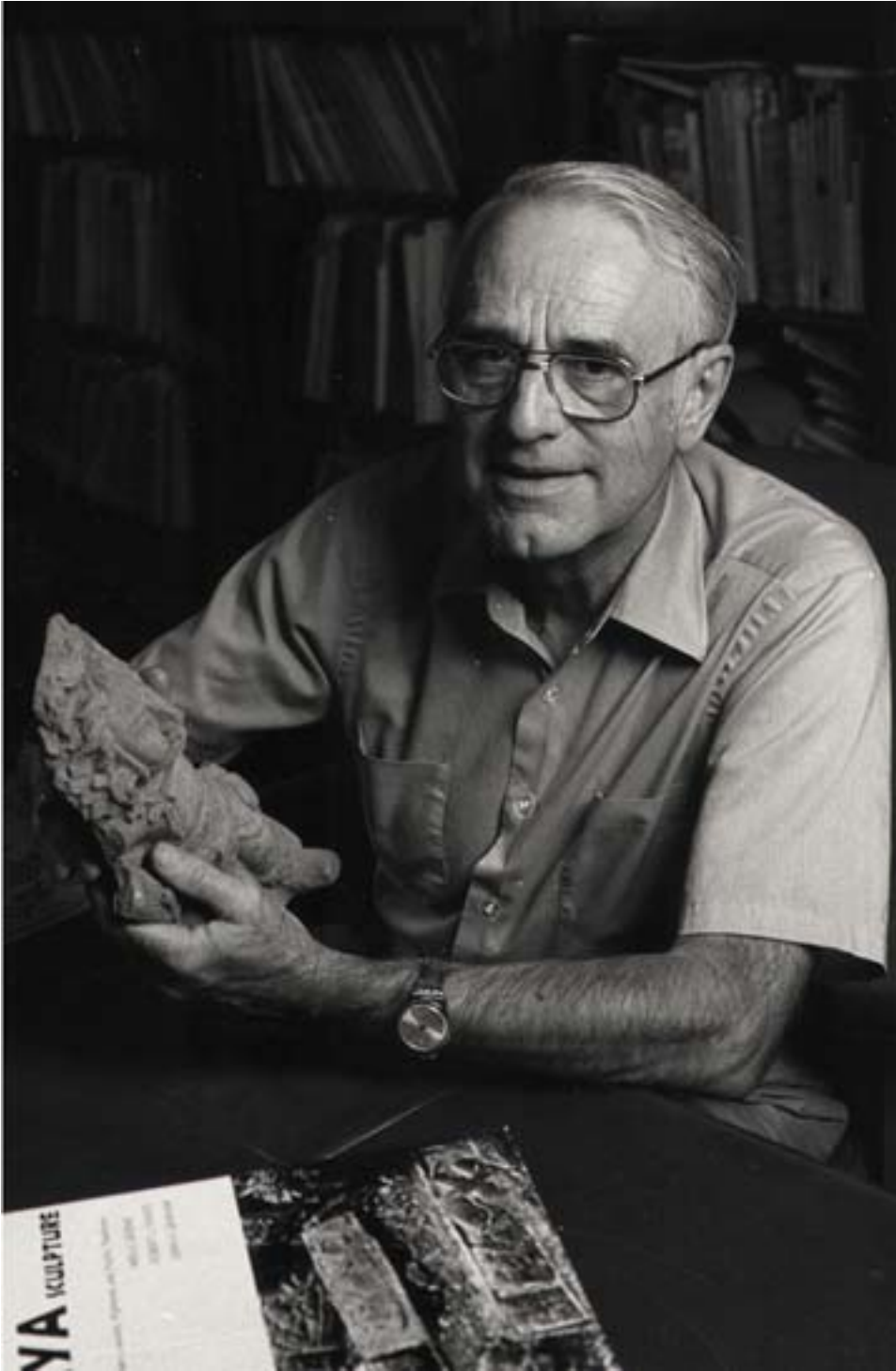
After completing his field research in the Huasteca, Ekholm turned his attention to the possible uses and meanings of some of Mesoamerica's most enigmatic objects, including animal figurines mounted on axles and wheels, and especially the finely-worked stone pieces known as yokes, *hachas* and *palmas*. While individual examples are found throughout a belt of tropical lowlands extending from Veracruz across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to El Salvador, only in central and northern Veracruz do they form a coherent complex. Ekholm faced a problem that still bedevils modern archaeologists: virtually all the known examples are from looters' activities rather than controlled excavations. Nevertheless, he convincingly showed that they are all related in some fashion to the rubber ball game "cult", a ritual activity that was integral to Gulf lowland religion and politics. More recent studies of public art at Tajin and other Gulf lowland sites depict ball players or their impersonators wearing all three objects, demonstrating what Ekholm intuited.



Ball player on a stone stela from El Tajin, Veracruz, shown wearing a yoke around his waist with an *hacha* on the back and a *palma* in front with a ball at his feet. Taken from Miguel Covarrubias, *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1957.

Ekholm served the profession and the academy in many ways during the later part of his life. He was elected President of the Society for American Archaeology in 1952-53, he consistently taught classes at Columbia University for almost three decades and in the 1950s and 60s he shared with Ignacio Bernal the daunting task of editing the two

volumes of the *Handbook of Middle American Indians* devoted to the Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica. . Although he conducted field research at Comalcalco, Tabasco (1956-57), as well as Guatemala, Belize and Honduras, he unfortunately never brought these projects to publication. Beginning in the late 1940s Ekholm became intrigued with the emerging issue of long range diffusion and possible Trans-Pacific contacts between Asia and Pre-Columbian America, especially as evidenced in stylistic similarities between approximately contemporaneous objects in both regions. Together with Robert Heine-Geldern, he organized a symposium on the subject at the 1950 International Congress of Americanists that is still remembered sixty years later as one that “shook up the Archaeological Community”. In what probably was his most important publication on the subject (“Transpacific Contacts”, in *Prehistoric Man in the New World*, edited Jesse D. Jennings and Edward Norbeck, pages 489-510, 1964), he proposed Olmec and Teotihuacan ties with the Shang and Han Dynasties of China as specific examples worthy of detailed examination.



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Towards the end of his life, he increasingly turned his attention to museum matters, serving not only his own institution but also the Museum of Primitive Arts (later

integrated into the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Robert Woods Bliss Collection at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC.

All in all, Ekholm appears to have enjoyed a rich and varied life and career as both a mainline archaeologist who made major contributions to his chosen field and as a maverick who challenged some of his most dearly-held core beliefs.