

Aztec Gold: the Fisherman's Treasure

Dedicated to the Memory of Ramón Arellanos Melgarejo (1943-2002), a most pleasant companion along the trail to the past.

The Story

In 1976 Mexican fisherman Raúl Hurtado was searching for octopus at Punta Gorda north of Veracruz City when he discovered something totally unexpected amongst the rocks and sand: Aztec gold jewelry! But, how did it get there? The story began almost 450 years before when Hernán Cortes and his band of soldiers, sailors, and adventurers touched down on the coast very near by in AD 1519. Most of the story, even that since 1976, remains poorly known and published only in relatively obscure sources. Here I will attempt to revive it, freely acknowledging that I do not know the full story and I may not even be aware of some published facts. Nevertheless it is a fascinating sidebar in the long history of Veracruz and its archaeology.



The beach at Punta Gorda near the find spot of the Fisherman's Treasure. Photograph posted by Karchoke on Google Earth.

In October 1976 Mexican newspapers began to carry stories about a local fisherman's chance find of Aztec gold in shallow waters along the rocky bottom at Punta Gorda near the mouth of the Medio river some 20 km (12 miles) north of Veracruz City. The objects he found must have lain on the ocean bottom for 450

years. To my knowledge, there has never been a public disclosure of the true size of his find but the total weight appears to have exceeded 4 kilograms (8.8 lbs)! We do know that he recovered numerous small Aztec-style ornaments, gold ingots marked with the monogram of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, and miscellaneous fragments. He took his finds to a local jeweler who melted many of them down into ingots that he used to manufacture high school graduation rings. As in the case of *The Pearl*, John Steinbeck's memorable novel about Mexico's other coast, it did not take long for word to leak out. In this case jealous neighbors reported the suddenly wealthy fisherman to authorities, who arrested both men and convinced them to cooperate with investigators from state and national agencies.

The authorities seized a total of 60 objects from the two men. The trove included 36 pre-Columbian gold objects, 2 pyrite spheres, 2 Early Colonial gold bars manufactured by Spaniards who, like the jeweler, melted down Aztec objects to create easy-to-handle ingots and 23 gold bars created by the jeweler that weighed 3.5 kilos (7.7 lbs). The Early Colonial ingots account for more than half of the ancient gold by weight. The pre-Columbian objects included one shield pendent, five bracelet fragments, 7 complete bracelets, 6 Eagle Warrior pendants, 2 small gold disks, 9 turtle shell pendants, 1 complete turtle pendent, 6 beads, and a tiny false-filigree vessel.

A team of underwater archaeologists from Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) and the University of Veracruz (UV) spent two frustrating and fruitless weeks fighting bad weather, very poor visibility, sharks, and generally hazardous conditions while searching for additional pieces of the treasure. Despite Hurtado's assistance, they only recovered a few Colonial period potsherds and amorphous lumps of non-auriferous metals. UV team member Ramón Arellanos Melgarejo, my friend and now sadly deceased colleague, wrote a short but concise account of this effort in *Anales Antropológicos*, a short-lived and limited circulation journal published by the Faculty of Anthropology of the University of Veracruz (1986: Tomo I, pages 167-173).

The legal wrangling that followed generated considerable interest in Mexico, culminating in a traveling exhibition with venues in several Mexican cities and a final permanent home for the collection at the Museo Baluarte de Santiago, a Colonial-period fort in Veracruz City. Here it may still be viewed when not out on loan to international Aztec exhibitions at major world museums such as New York's Guggenheim or the British Museum in London. Published illustrations of a few of the items can be found in the catalogue for the latter exhibition (Colin McEwan and Leonardo López Luján [editors], *Moctezuma: Aztec Ruler*, the British Museum Press, 2009, pages 276-277). A complete account of the find and detailed study of the collection accompanied by excellent color photographs

was published by Luis Torres Monte and Francisca Franco Velazquez in the book *Orfebrería Prehispánica* (Corporación Industrial Sanluis, Mexico, 1989 (ISBN 968-39-0336-3). Another useful account is found in *El Oro Precolombino de Mexico* by Felipe Solis and Martha Carmona M. (Americo Artes Editores, S. A. de C. V., Mexico, 1995, ISBN 968-7279-07-9). Unfortunately both are rather hard to find in North American libraries. Thank you Warwick Bray for alerting me to these crucial sources. The only publication in English is an article in *National Geographic* (Vol. 158, # 2, August 1980) by S. Jeffrey K. Wilkerson.

Many questions remain unanswered but invite speculation.

How did these objects end up in their rocky sand resting place? One ornament was stamped with a Spanish C for “Carlos”, the reigning monarch of Spain and the Holy Roman Empire at the time, and both gold ingots had XX stamped into their surfaces. This suggests they were part of the “Royal Fifth”, the 20% of all precious metals set aside for the Spanish Crown, and that they were part of a shipment headed to Spain on a ship that sank very close by during the years during or immediately after the Aztec defeat in AD 1521.

Does more Aztec gold remain to be found in the immediate area? I believe that any shipment to Spain would have included much more than the few pieces accounted for so far. The missing pieces may be widely scattered and/or deeply buried and probably include many more ingots than actual Aztec objects.

How much did the Hurtado actually find? Newspaper writers talked about many kilograms of gold but if so, most of it probably was melted down by Hurtado’s jeweler friend. There certainly was no upsurge in Aztec gold objects for sale in the antiquities market in the years since his finds.

How many Veracruz high school graduates are wearing commemorative rings fashioned from Aztec gold? I suspect more than just a few.

What ever happened to the fisherman? I am not aware that he served time in jail. The legal case was extremely complicated, depending on which laws he did or did not break. However, Solis and Carmona M. report he became such a celebrity that his church and civil wedding ceremonies aired on Mexican national television with the Governor of Veracruz state serving as Godfather (Padrino). I always suspected that Mexican politicians are just as publicity-hungry as their US colleagues.

The Images



1. The Aztec considered gold to be *coztic teocuitlatl* (Nahuatl) ,”yellow divine excrement”, literally the excrement of the sun, a substance uniquely appropriate for adorning the gods and their most highly anointed earthly representatives. For them, it embodied holy qualities. For the Spaniards who invaded this unknown world in AD 1519, gold was the source of all worldly wealth, the only cure for a uniquely Old World disease. Above we see an Aztec necklace composed of tiny hollow-cast gold turtles and tear-drop shaped hollow bells. This was not part of the Fisherman’s Treasure but somehow survived the Spanish scouring of Mexico for gold objects to melt down and cast into easy-to-manage bars and ingots. *Dumbarton Oaks Library and Collections, Washington, DC.*



2. Cortes is reputed to have told Motecuhzoma that his people suffered from a malady that only gold could cure. Motecuhzoma's comments were not recorded but I can imagine him saying in his own mind, "Yes, we have already heard of your illness and lengths you will go to in order to cure it!" This drawing from the 16th century *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* depicts Cortes, seated on the right with his multi-lingual Indian interpreter/mistress Doña Marina (La Malinche), in their first meeting with the Aztec Emperor.



3. Although metallurgy had been practiced in Mesoamerica for only a relatively few centuries, Aztec and Mixtec artisans were superbly skilled in crafting small delicate objects from gold, copper and silver alloys. Using relatively simple smelting techniques combined with the very complex “*cire perdue*” (lost wax) casting process, they produced exquisite ornaments and other luxury objects prized more for their meaning than their intrinsic value as metal. In this drawing from the early Colonial period *Florentine Codex* we see Aztec artisans smelting gold or copper by forcing air through the bottom of a ceramic vessel loaded with charcoal.



4. Spaniards came from a world where gold was a very rare commodity, valued as money and a medium of exchange, rather than a raw material. Conquistadors, largely illiterate members of the Iberian lower classes, viewed Aztec gold work as potential bullion rather than as beautiful objects to be valued and preserved in their existing form. Thus they melted down and cast into ingots or bars, the vast trove of ornaments and sacred objects that Motecuhzoma's predecessors had accumulated over more than century. Only a very few Aztec creations were saved as curiosities to show stay-at-home Spaniards the skill of the Aztecs artificers. These two bars were recovered by the fisherman. Together they weigh 1,615 grams, about one half the total weight of the preserved ancient objects. One is stamped with a **C** (Carlos) and both bears the symbols **XX**, indicating they were part of the Royal Fifth, the portion set aside for the Spanish Crown. *Photograph from Solis and Carmona M., 1995.*



5. Only nobles were permitted to wear metal jewelry in Aztec and other Mesoamerican societies. The basic technologies of metallurgy were invented in the South American Andes and slowly spread northward, not reaching modern Mexico before ca. 600 AD.

Like much Aztec “gold”, this pendant, recovered from the ocean floor by Sr. Hurtado, is made of a gold-silver-copper alloy. It measures 10.5 x 8.5 cm (4.25 x 3.5 inches) and depicts a round decorated shield backed by five horizontal spears or darts, a common element of warrior’s costumes. Eight hollow bells dangle from the bottom. It may well have served as a high ranking official’s symbol of office or a warriors’ medal for actions on some battlefield. A small letter **C** was hammered into each of the two top flanges suggesting this piece was part of the “Royal Fifth” set aside for Carlos I, King of Spain, simultaneously known as Carlos V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Photograph taken from Solís Olgún, Felipe, 2004, *The Aztec Empire: Catalogue of the Exhibition*, page 78, Guggenheim Museum, New York.



6. People and deities are shown wearing what appear to be gold bracelets and anklets in Aztec codices, sculptures, and other depictions but these three pieces from the Fisherman's Treasure may be the only actual examples known to survive the great Spanish melt-down of Mesoamerican metal objects. They all share the same intentionally twisted design and motifs, suggesting they originally formed part of a functional set. Felipe Solís has suggested they are part of the ritual attire of Ehecatl, the Wind God.

Photograph taken from Solís Olguín, Felipe, 2004, *The Aztec Empire: Catalogue of the Exhibition*, page 78, Guggenheim Museum, New York.



7. This exquisitely detailed pendant depicts a bi-conical vessel, perhaps a ceremonial brazier of the type commonly used at Aztec temples. Four hollow tinklers or “cascabeles” hang from its base. The photograph is taken from Torres and Franco, 1985.



8. These turtle carapaces with hanging tinklers may well have been part of a necklace like that shown in Image 1. Photograph taken from Torres and Franco 1985.