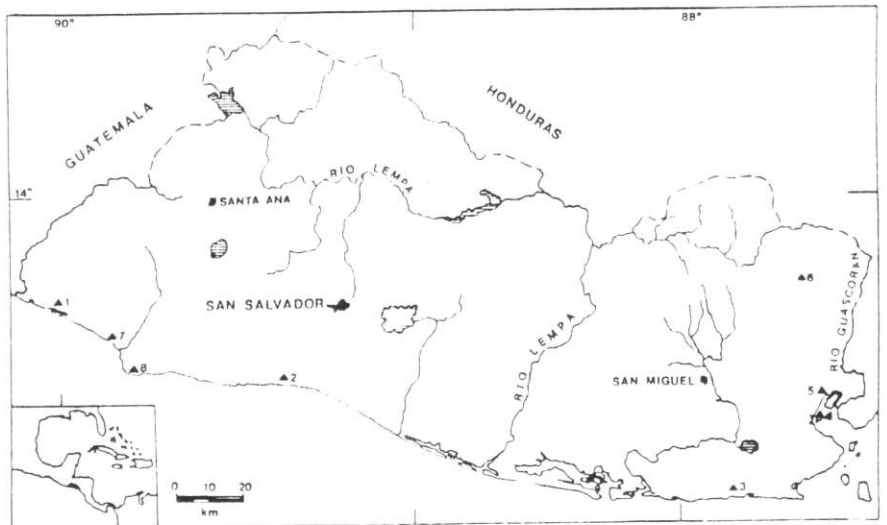


A Pottery Cayuco Model from El Salvador

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Until four years ago, no archaeological specimen had been reported in El Salvador which could be recognized as even indirect evidence of a pre-Columbian boat. At that time, however, an itinerant peddler sold a small (length remaining 12.4 cm), incomplete pottery model of a dugout canoe or



Map of El Salvador showing positions of coastal archaeological sites and a few modern towns: Preclassic — El Huiscoyol (8); Classic — El Madresal (9), Asanyamba (5), El Periquito (4); Postclassic — El Cajete (1), Atalaya (7), La Pitaya (3), El Majahual (2); Modern — Nueva Esparta (6).

ETHNOS, 1983:3-4

cayuco to Mrs. Salomé Imery de Ruiz in San Salvador. The specimen was said to have been acquired in the northeastern part of the country in the vicinity of Nueva Esparta, La Unión Department, some 40 km north of the Gulf of Fonseca and in the drainage area of the Rio Goascorán.

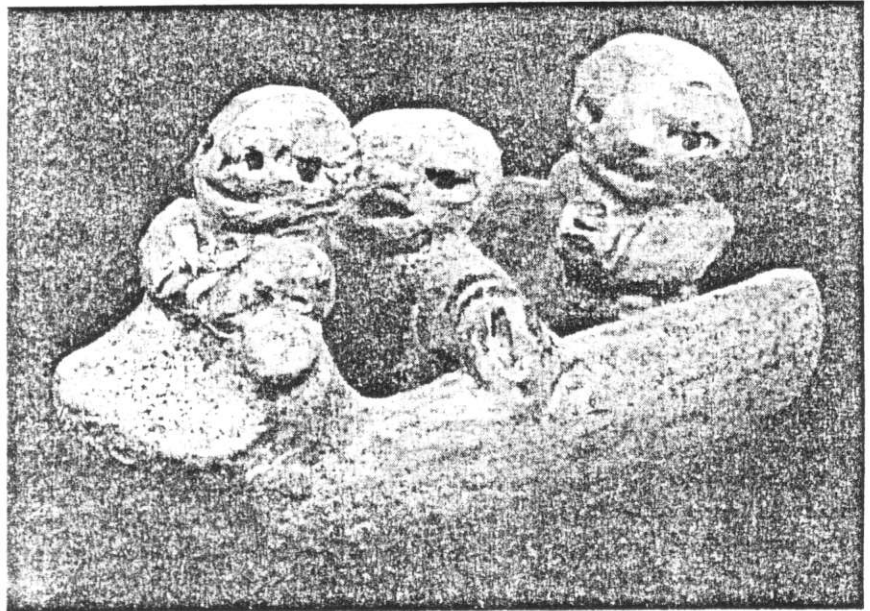


Fig. 1. Cayuco model from area of Nueva Esparta, La Union Department, El Salvador. Length remaining = 12.4 cm.; Width = 6.3 cm.

When the model was examined in the El Salvador National Museum and compared with other pottery specimens from that area, it became quite clear that it was a genuine antiquity which relates to certain Late Classic figurine types of eastern El Salvador. The paste and the stylistic character of the human-effigy figurine passengers in the miniature boat are related to figurine types of western Honduras and contiguous El Salvador, an area inhabited by Lenca speakers in early colonial times.

The basic form of the boat portrayed in the model is a hollow, broad half-cylinder with a rounded, blunt end and a short, broad, shelf-like horizontal projection from the prow. The missing stern may have been similarly shaped and extended sufficiently to accommodate one or more additional passengers

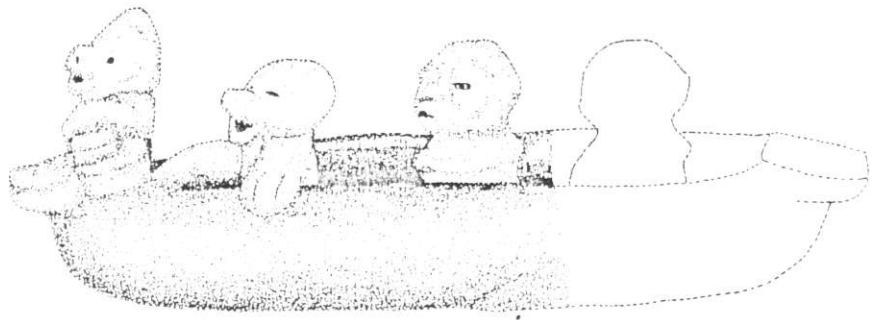


Fig. 2. A suggested restoration of the model.

or crew¹. Inside, the model is poorly finished. The exterior is well smoothed but shows longitudinal striations. Indeed, much of the surface is slightly irregular and was not carefully buffed.

The process of the model's manufacture must have included fashioning it from moist clay and then, before it was totally dried, adding the figurines, two or more standing upright and clearly passengers, the other seated on the prow platform and holding something with his hands, possibly an oar now broken in two. The clay is of a red tone while the slip is a thick cream-colour, very much the same as that covering eastern "head-boards" figurines which have been recovered in good condition. Finally, certain details on the figures have been overpainted with thin black colorants on the wrists — two parallel lines — and red on the torsos.

Any physical evidence of pre-Columbian maritime or riverine transportation along the Pacific littoral of Central America is eagerly sought by archaeologists, but thus far no direct traces have come to light. Since whatever conveyances may have been used must certainly have been fashioned from wood, reeds or other such perishable matter, only some unusual manner of preservation may eventually allow discovery of the boats themselves. Possibly dredging operations in mangrove swamps will lead to such a discovery. This being the present situation, however, indirect evidence culled from boating scenes in ancient murals such as those from the Temple of the Warriors in Chichén Itzá, archaeological finds elsewhere in Central America², ethnohistorical mentions of early colonial boats and boating³, and the finding of deep sea faunal remains in inland sites, are standard reference points for treatments of aquatic ventures and trade, although none of this evidence is particularly satisfactory.

With a Pacific coastline well in excess of 225 km, encompassing a large

portion of the Gulf of Fonseca, various estuaries and minor bays, and with abundant evidence of human occupation throughout much of prehispanic times bordering this littoral and partially navigable streams such as the Goascorán and Lempa, there has, however, been very little methodical archaeological exploration of any single portion of it. One brief excavation at the Huiscoyol site in the Los Cobanos area⁴ suggests human settlement as early as the Early Preclassic period, while others, such as the El Cajete site and others mentioned by Haberland⁵, would seem to be almost of Contact times; in between, are tremendous shell-heap rubbish collections such as at Asanyamba and Periquito on the Gulf of Fonseca. Although it appears obvious that much coast-wise trade must have taken place, the true routes followed are seldom at all clear nor even preferential toward maritime as opposed to overland travel.

Today, sea travel frequently continues to be by *cayuco* which, though with pointed ends and flatter bottoms, are still made by hollowing out half logs. These can be made within a short time, and are excellent for riverine boating and in waterways through mangroves. On the open sea, if fairly calm, no trouble is encountered, and within the Gulf of Fonseca this is the commonest conveyance, often with an outboard engine. As many as 50 passengers are occasionally carried, though usually seated or lying rather than standing; upsets are not uncommon in choppy waters.

One may suspect that the ancients used boats such as the present model portrays for both river and sea travel for fair weather short distance voyages.

NOTES

1. A modern Guatemalan *cayuco* of the shape visualized - this made of a palm log, is shown in Andrews, p. 26 top.
2. For example, Healy, p. 4 and Fig. 2b.
3. Vazquez de Espinosa, 665, p. 216: In speaking of the area of Amapala, Honduras, "La tierra es de templa caliente, de mucha montana, y arboleda, y los que van a la provincia de Nicaragua suelen atravesar esta Vaya en Canoas de los indios de la isla; con que ahorran muchas leguas, y cançancio, y yo por Gozar de lo varato el año de 613..... la atravesé en 24 oras, y fui a salir a cinco leguas del pueblo del viejo [León ?] de la provincia de Nicaragua que está tres leguas del puerto Realejo."
4. Perla, for example, p. 12 "conclusiones".
5. Haberland, pp. 24, 28, referring to Majahual and La Pitaya sites.

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