

“Jaguar Face” sculptures found in El Salvador

SAN SALVADOR/BERKELEY (Paul E. Amaroli/Karen Olsen Bruhns). During the construction of a new school in cantón Tapalshucut Norte, about 1.5 km to the north of Izalco in western El Salvador, a find was made of a series of stone sculptures, apparently in situ. According to the school director, Mrs. Morena Méndez, in February, 2002, construction workers cutting a narrow north-south foundation trench encountered a line of 7 sculptures at a depth of only about 50 cm. The find was made on the weekend and by the time the director arrived on Monday, two of the sculptures had been stolen. She insisted that the remaining pieces be locked up in the tool shed to protect them from disappearance as well, despite opposition from the workmen.



Fig. 7. One of the three “jaguar head” sculptures at Tapalshucut, Izalco. (Height: 64 cm).

The remaining sculptures consist of three abstract “jaguar heads”, a type of sculpture assigned to the Late Preclassic Period. This dating is based on the very few of these sculptures to have been found more or less in situ, those from Chalchuapa and Santa Leticia (Anderson 1978, Demarest 1986). Although commonly identified as jaguars (Richardson 1940), the less stylized heads (some 20 are known in total, virtually all of them without provenience) appear more serpent like (Fig. 7).

The other two sculptures encountered in Tapalshucut Norte are of a type previously unknown although perhaps related to the pedestal sculptures of the Pacific Piedmont. These consist of a cylindrical base crowned with a head. In one case this is a crude human head (Fig. 8). The head of the other sculpture appears more like a very stylized serpent, and while it admittedly bears resemblance to Tlaloc (the Mexican rain deity), such an identification is considered unlikely given the dating of this find (Fig. 9).

The school is located in an area of coffee plantation along one of the long ridges that descend in a southerly direction from Izalco Volcano. Examination of the schoolyard revealed the remains of a low platform in the area where the heads were found. It is possible that the heads were aligned along one side of this platform, although, given the lack of investigation, which side is in doubt. Two other platforms were noted in the coffee plantations across the road and behind a large cattle corral south of the school. Of the few sherds collected, one can be classified as belonging to the Cutumay ceramic group



Fig. 8. A cylindrical sculpture crowned with a human head from Tapalshucut. (Height not recorded, but similar to that of Figure 9).

as identified at Chalchuapa (Sharer 1978). The head of a clay figurine encountered in the vicinity is of the Gómez type, assigned in Chalchuapa to the period of about 600–350 BC (Dahlin 1978). Thus, it seems likely that the Tapalshucut Norte site dates to the Middle-Late Preclassic, although earlier and later occupations are, of course, possible.

To date, no investigation has been done at the Tapalshucut Norte site and the school is in use with no attempt being made to protect the remains of the platform in the school yard.

FUNDAR (Fundación Nacional de Arqueología de El Salvador) recorded the site and advised CONLCULTURA to immediately protect the sculptures, to seek recovery of the two stolen sculptures and to conduct investigations at the school yard. CONLCULTURA subsequently removed the sculptures to the Museo Nacional “David J. Guzmán” in San Salvador where they are now housed. The two stolen sculptures have not been recovered, and the site has received no further study.



Fig. 9. The other cylindrical sculpture from Tapalshucut, with what appears to be a stylized serpent head. (Height: 62 cm).

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The Maya ruins of Xkipche, Yucatan, Mexico

BONN (Michael Vallo and Iken Paap). From the well-known Maya ruins of Uxmal in the Mexican state of Yucatan, a now paved road is heading south to the small village of San Simon. Along the road, several smaller Maya