

MESOAMERICAN EVIDENCE OF PRE-COLUMBIAN TRANSOCEANIC CONTACTS

by¹

Romeo Hristov PhD and Prof. Santiago Genovés PhD

Summary

In this article we discuss the results of the re-examination of a terracotta head of supposed Roman origin, found in a Pre-Hispanic burial offering near Mexico City. A stylistic analysis of the figurine by Bernard Andreae, a well-known specialist of Roman archaeology and director emeritus of Deutschen Archäologischen Institut in Rome (Italy) has confirmed its appearance as a Roman artifact from the second to the third centuries A.D. The thermoluminescence (TL) age test carried out in 1995 in FS Archäometrie in Heidelberg (Germany) sets the age limits of the artifact from 2870 B.P. to 730 B.P. (cal. 875 B.C. to 1265 A.D.) which, notwithstanding the chronological gap makes the Roman origin hypothesis applicable. On the other hand, the revision of the circumstances of this discovery does not reveal any sign of possible Post-Columbian intrusion of the figurine, and permits the acceptance of the object as the first hard evidence from Mesoamerica, relative to Pre-Columbian transoceanic contacts.

THE ISSUE of Pre-Columbian transoceanic contacts between the Old and New Worlds has generated more controversy among professional anthropologists than any other area of American anthropology. Although for different reasons, the subject has been of great interest to nonspecialists. For historians, anthropologists and archaeologists the importance of the problem lies in the theoretical implications that the answer holds

for the comprehension of the mechanisms and hidden impulses that have originated the appearance of new concepts of values and lifestyles in Pre-Hispanic societies. For instance, if can be proved that between the beginning of the Neolithic age and the fifteenth century A.D., sporadic contacts occurred between cultures from the Eastern and Western hemispheres, a series of significant cultural similitude between them

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could be explained satisfactorily as a result of cross-cultural interaction (Alcina Franch 1969; Ekholm 1964; Heine-Geldern 1964, 1969; Kirchoff 1964; Meggers 1975; Sorenson 1971, among others). Conversely, if it is assumed that the oceans that surround the American continent -the Atlantic and the Pacific- represented an impenetrable barrier during the same period, the solution must be sought within other paradigms, such as the duplicated invention derived from the universal mankind psychic unity and/or from the impact of similar ecological, social and technological conditions.

IN THE PROBLEM of this sort it is essential to recognize the existence of (and distance ones self in explicit terms from) certain fantastic speculations that have perturbed scientific studies of pre-Columbian contacts from sixteenth century A.D. to the present day. We are referring to several hypotheses that have tried to explain the populating of America and the apparition of the High Amerindian civilizations as a consequence of arrivals of immigrants from Atlantis, the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, the flotilla of Alexander III the Great, and so forth (Bernal 1979: 21-36; Willey and Sabloff 1974: 23-26). Derived originally from the Judeo-Christian canon law this dilettante hypothesis have been converted at the basic reason for the laypeople. Regrettably, this marginal aspect also has resulted an efficient tool used to discredit the subject of transoceanic contacts, identifying it with the sort of science fiction literature mentioned above. Such considerations of possible interactions between the Old World and the Pre-Columbian cultural systems have not been debated in serious terms, even with the appearance during the last decades of a considerable amount of encouraging and competent research, whose authors are among the most distinguished Americanists, such as Betty Meggers, David Kelley, José Alcina Franch, Gordon Ekholm, Paul Kirchoff, John Sorenson, and Paul Tolstoy (Sorenson and Raish 1996).

THE PURPOSE of this paper is to present the results of the re examination of a terracotta head once believed to be of Roman origin (Heine-Geldern 1961), found in the Central Mexico in 1933. It is a mould-made piece measuring 2.5 cm of height, 1.7 cm of length, 1.9 cm of width. Judging by the break of the neck, it must have been part of a larger figurine. The piece represents a male person with nonindigenous facial features, a beard and moustaches, wearing a truncated cap (Figure I A, B). In stylistic terms the find has no known parallels in the pre-Columbian art, and Ernst Boehringer, a specialist in Classical archaeology and ex-president of the German Institute of Archaeology has argued for Roman origin. He determined that the head was made between the second and third centuries A.D. (Heine-Geldern cited in García Payón 1961: 2).

BECAUSE this object was discovered during controlled excavation and within inside a Pre-Hispanic context without traces of alteration (García Payón 1961:1, 1979: 1,1979: 204-206), it meets the criteria for acceptance as a reliable evidence of Pre-Columbian transoceanic contacts between the Old and the New Worlds. However, the difference between the supposed age of the piece and that of its context, the absence of a more reliable chronology, and above all, the poor reputation of the studies of possible Pre-Columbian contacts, have given rise to certain doubts concerning the origin and time of manufacture of the figurine. Since 1992 we have carried out a careful revision of the circumstances of its discovery, and this study has not demonstrated any sign of a possible Post-Columbian introduction. An additional stylistic analysis of the head by Bernard Andreae, a respectable specialist in Roman art and archaeology and director emeritus of the Deutschen Archäologischen Institut in Rome (Italy), has confirmed the suggested Roman origin and chronology from the second to third centuries A.D. (Andreae cited in Domenici 2000: 29). In 1995 also the

thermoluminescence age test of the find has been carried out in the FS Archäometrie in the Max Planck Institut für Kernphysik in

Heidelberg (Germany), which sets the age limits of the head from 865 B.C. to 1265 A.D. (Schaaf and Wagner 2000 in print,



Figure 1a, b: Frontal and lateral views of Tecaxic-Calixtlahuaca head.
(Photo Romeo H. Hristov, 1993)



Hristov and Genovés 2000 in print). Notwithstanding of the chronological gap the cited age limits makes the suspicions of Colonial manufacture of the object untenable and are consistent with the Roman origin hypothesis. These findings permit the acceptance of the terracotta head as the first hard evidence of transoceanic contacts between the ancient Mediterranean and Mesoamerican civilizations.

The find: research background

AS A RESULT of an agreement between the Dirección de Monumentos Prehispánicos (today Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia) and the Gobierno del Estado de México, exploration and restoration works were performed from 1930 to 1938 in the archaeological zone of Tecaxic-Calixtlahuaca (Calixtlahuaca 1968: 11). The site is located in Toluca Valley, approximately at 65km to the West of Mexico City. Its main center is the summit and Northwestern slope of Tenismo or Calixtlahuaca Hill, with coordinates 19° 20' 35" latitude north and 99° 41' 22" latitude west (Figure 2).

According to the associated pottery, the earliest cultural deposits may be dated to the Middle Preclassic period (1300-800 B.C.; see García Payón 1941: 214-218) and the site remained occupied until the end of the Late Postclassic period (1250-1521 A.D.). Between the seventh and ninth centuries A.D. the Matlatzincas, an indigenous tribe whose language pertains to the Otomí-Mazahua linguistic family, re-populated the zone and inhabited it until 1510 A.D., when it was conquered and destroyed by the army of the Aztec emperor Moctecuhzoma II Xocoyotzin. Since then, the settlement has remained abandoned, with exception of some areas to the northeast used for maize and maguey cultivation from Colonial times to the present day.

THE TERRACOTTA head was found at the end of 1933, during the excavation of Mound 5. This mound as well as Mound 6 are erected on artificial terrace on the Northwest slope of Tenismo or Calixtlahuaca Hill (Figure 3). The exploration of these structures was started with Mound 6, which turned out to be a pyramid of three superimposed levels, built with uncut stones set with mud (García Payón 1979: 204, Figure 4). Only the north and the west comers of the first level could be identified; all of the outlines of the second one remained; of the third one only the foundation remained (García Payón 1979: 204). Following the initial excavation, the paving was removed from the inner patio that separates Mound 6 and Mound 5, and at dept of 0.5-0.7m under the level of the paving "a total of 37 secondary burials" were discovered (García Payón 1979: 205). The next step was an excavation of Mound 5 which, after the removal of the surface soil also turned out to be a pyramidal structure of three levels (Figure 5), similar to Mound 6 but in a better state of preservation. Archaeologist José García Payón, director in charge of the excavation in the zone, described it in this way:

"...decidimos hacer una excavación interior desde la cima, para ver si era posible encontrar los vestigios de las estructuras superiores que pudieran hallarse sobre el piso correspondiente a la primera y segunda épocas. Durante estos trabajos vimos que la superficie de la plataforma de la tercera época estaba formada de dos pisos sobrepuestos y separados entre si por unos veinte centímetros, y formados con piedra pomez triturada, aplanada y recubiertos de cemento

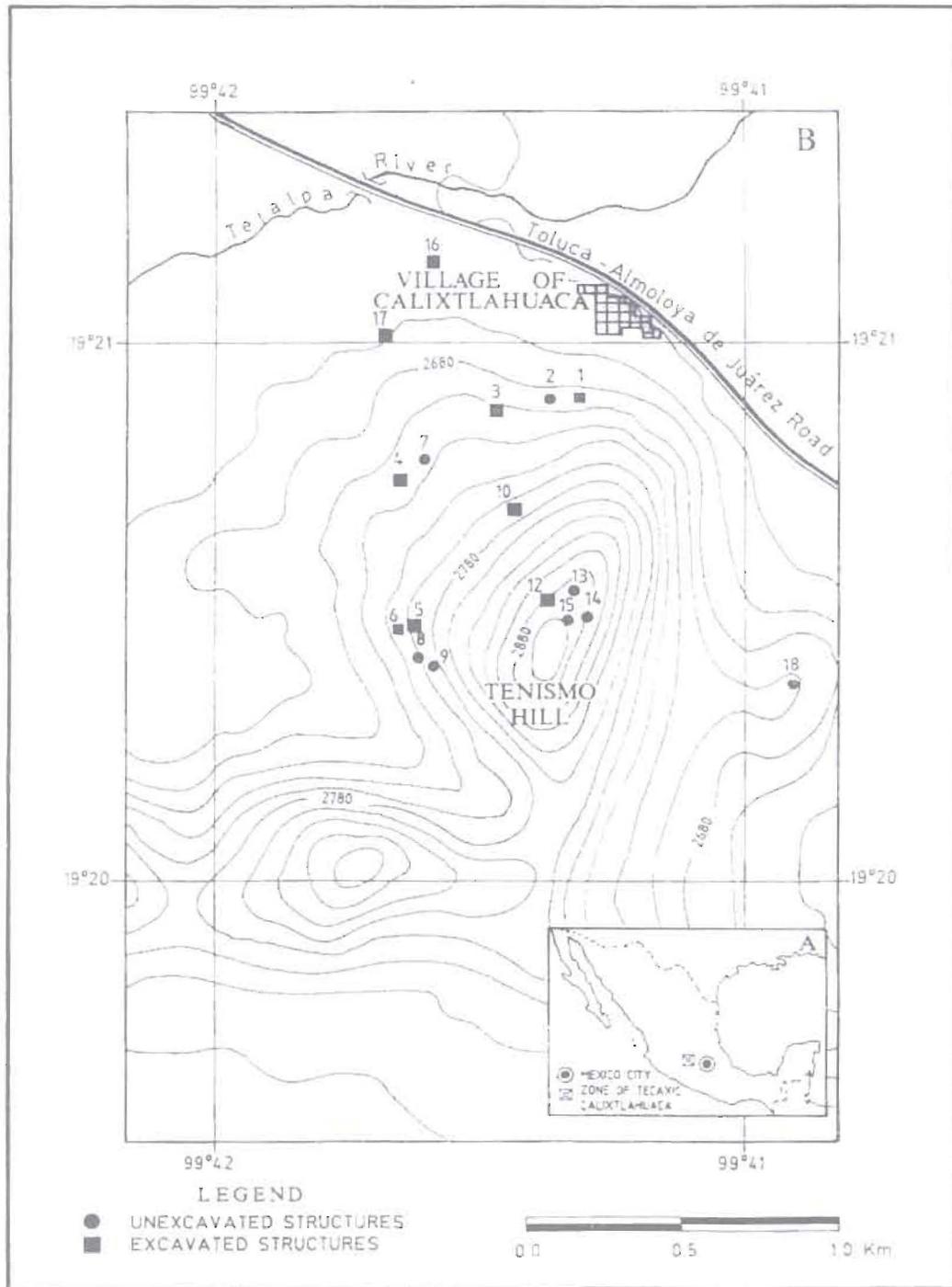


Figure 2: Location maps of the archaeological zone of Tecaxic-Calixtlahuaca in Mexico (inset) and structures in the zone (after García Payón 1936: 18).

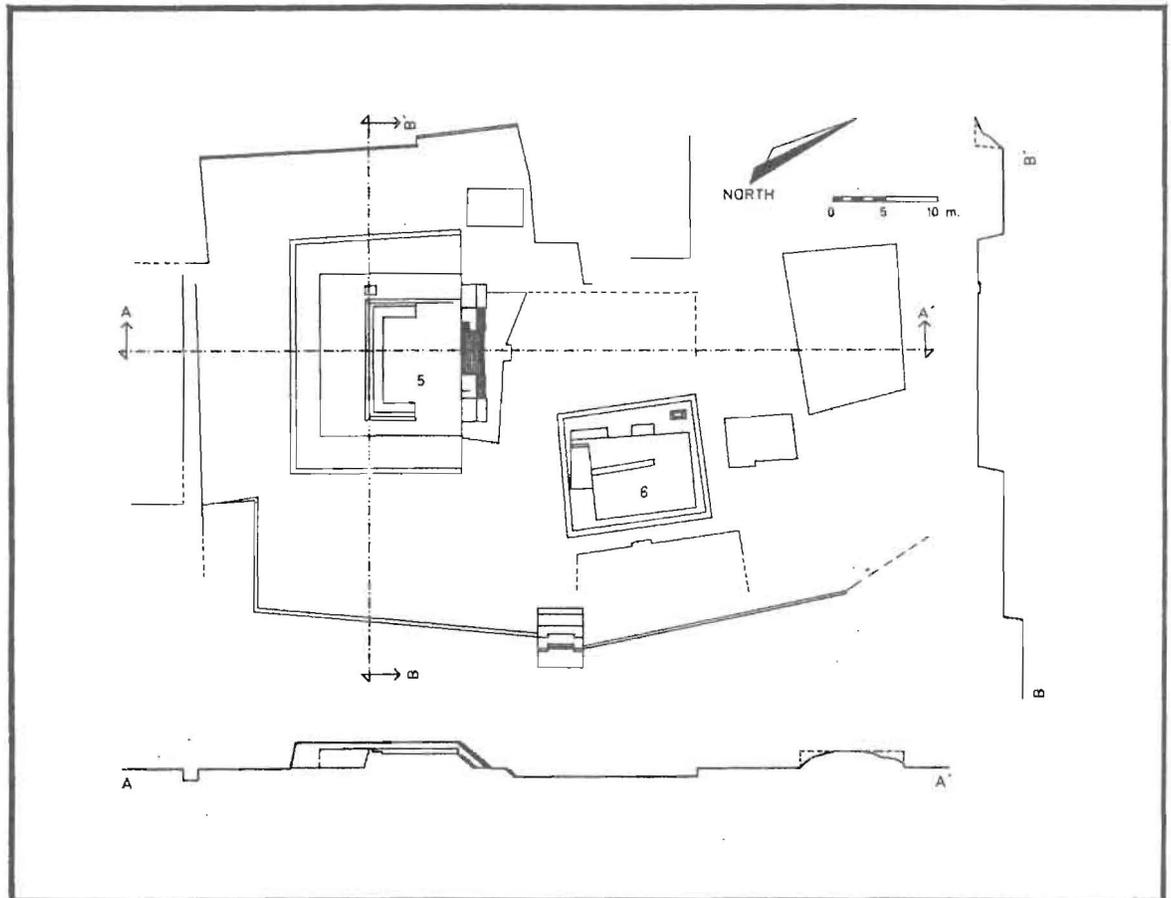


Figure 3:
Topographic plain of terrace with the Structures 5 and 6.
(after García Payón 1981: Plain 10)



**Figure 4: East view of the structure 6
(Photo Romeo H. Hristov, 1996).**



**Figure 5: East view of the structure 5
(Photo Romeo H. Hristov, 1996).**

(mezcla de cal y arena) (Véase Foto núm. 79); debajo de éstos, pero atravesando el piso de la segunda época que estaba formado de cemento y el de la primera que lo era de *laja* y *tepetate* encontramos dos entierros de huesos quemados (Véase Plano núm. 1) que posiblemente correspondieron a dos principales personajes y un buen número de piezas culturales pertenecientes al último periodo, esto es, al azteca-matlatzinca. Además de varias piezas de cerámica, se encontraron dos brazaletes de concha (Lámina CXXXVI), un pectoral del mismo material (Lámina CXXXV), cuentas de azabache, y cuatro de barro recubiertas con una fina lámina de oro (Lámina CXI, núm. 13 y 14), cuentas de cristal de roca y cabeza de ocelotl del mismo material (Lámina CXI), una pipa (Lámina CXXX, núm. 11), una plaquita de oro (Lámina CXI), un trozo de tubo de cristal de roca (Láminas CX, núm. 22 y CXI, núm. 19), restos de mosaico de turquesas (Lámina CXI, núm. 17), cabecitas de cobre (Lámina CXXXIX, núms. 9-11), dos sellos (Lámina CXXVIII, núms. 1 y 6)² y

una cabecita de barro que considere extraña a la región [cursivas nuestras]. Todos estos objetos estaban esparcidos, como si hubieran sido tirados, y algunos de ellos, especialmente el pectoral que se halló formado de tres manojitos, fueron bañados, ya en el agujero, con copal derretido." (García Payón, 1979: 205-206).

"We made the decision of starting the excavation from the top of the interior, to see if it was possible to find vestiges of upper structures that could be found over the floors corresponding to the first and second epochs. During the work we saw that the surface of the third epoch platform was made of two superposed floors standing twenty centimeters apart, made of ground pumice stone covered with cement [mixture of lime and sand] (Photo No. 79); under them, but passing through the floor of the second epoch, that was made of cement, and the first one that was made of *laja* and *tepetate*, we found two burials of burned bones (Plain 1) that probably corresponded to two important persons and a large quantity of cultural pieces which belonged to the last epoch, that is, the Azteca-Matlatzinca. In addition to several pottery pieces, there were found two shell bracelets (Plate

2) La mayoría de las láminas, los fotos y los mapas citados fueron extraviados durante el terremoto en México, D.F. en 1985 (Fernando García Payón, comunicación personal de Romeo Hristov 1996), y solo la Foto 79 viene publicada, bajo el mismo número, en García Payón (1981).

CXXXVI), a pectoral of the same material (Plate CXXXV), jet beads, and four clay beads laminated in gold (Plate CXI, 13 and 14), rock crystal beads and an ocelot head of the same material (Plate CXI), a pipe (Plate CXXX, 11), a small gold plaque (Plate CXL), a parts of a tube of rock crystal (Plates CX, 22 and CXI, 19), rests of turquoise mosaic (Plate CXI, 17) some small copper heads (Plate CXXXIX, 9-11), two seals (Plate CXXVIII, 1 and 6)³ and *a small clay head that I considered as foreign to the region* [our italics]. All of these objects were spread, as if they had been thrown, and some of them, especially the pectoral, that was made of three sections, were dipped with melted copal." (García Payón, 1979: 205-206).

TWO ASPECTS of this discovery require special comment. The first concerns mound in which the head was found. García Payón (1961: 1,-2), in the only work about it published during his lifetime, reported that the head belonged to the burial offering found in Mound 6. He cited as a source the unpublished second part of his manuscript about the zone of Tecaxic-Calixtlahuaca (the first part was published in 1936 and reprinted in 1974). In this second part (published in

³ Most of the plates and maps from García Payón's manuscript on the Tecaxic-Calixtlahuaca archaeological zone were lost during the earthquake in Mexico City in 1985 (Fernando García Payón, personal communication to Romeo Hristov 1996). Of the photographs, plates and maps cited in this paragraph, only Photograph 79 can be found in García Payón (1981) under the same number.

1979), however, he stated that the head was found in Mound 5 (García Payón 1979: 204-206), and the description of the place of the finding corresponds with that mound, which we have been able to confirm during the several visits made to the zone. This precision although not of crucial importance, must be taken into account.

THE SECOND POINT is relative to the chronology of the burial offering in which the head was found. Heine-Geldern (1961: 117) dated the burial offering to the twelfth century A.D. However, the one which corresponds to the twelfth century A.D. is not the offering itself, but the building level under which it was buried (García Payón cited in Marquina 1951: 224). The pottery of the Aztec-Matlatzinca period, which was incorporated in the offering, is considered as belonging to the period A.D. 1476-1510 (García Payón cited in Marquina 1951: 224), that is, between the first conquest of Tecaxic-Calixtlahuaca by the Aztec Emperor Axayacatl (Chimalpain 1889: 148 cited in García Payón 1936: 198) and the destruction of it by the last Aztec Emperor Moctecuhzoma II Xocoyotzin (Códice Mendocino, Ixtlilxóchitl 1891: 332, Tezozomoc 1978: 626 cited in García Payón 1936: 215). Therefore, the burial and the offering should have been deposited some time between the mentioned dates, that is, between A.D. 1476 and 1510.

With regard to the fate of the piece after the discovery, García Payón (1961: 2) wrote:

"Durante varios años conservé esta cabecita en mi poder y solo la mostré a contadas personas que la tomaban como una curiosidad; durante el año de 1959 se presentó en México Dr. Robert Heine-Geldern del "Instituto für Völkerkunde" de la

Universidad de Viena, quien me pidió que le mostrara la citada cabecita y se llevó a Viena unas fotografías de ella.

Posteriormente en ocasión de la Reunión del último [XXXIV] Congreso Internacional de Americanistas que se verificó en Viena en 1960, me envió una carta solicitando la cabecita de barro, la que fue llevada a Viena por el Dr. Ignacio Bernal.

Posteriormente supe de viva voz por el Dr. Ignacio Bernal que dicha cabecita había sido presentada por el Dr. Heine-Geldern en la última reunión de dicho Congreso, y en la Revista "Archaeology". Vol XIII, No 4, 1960, p. 228 apareció una simple nota mencionando su presentación y que se consideraba dicha pieza como de origen romano."

For several years I had that small head in my possession and I only showed it to few people who took it as a curiosity. During 1959 Dr. Robert Heine-Geldern from the "Institut für Völkerkunde" from the University of Vienna came to Mexico. He asked me to take a look at the mentioned small head and carried some photographs of it to Vienna.

On a later occasion at the last [34th] International Congress of Americanists that took

place in Vienna in 1960, I received a letter from Dr. Robert Heine-Geldern requesting that the little head be sent to Vienna. Subsequently, Dr. Ignacio Bernal took the head to Vienna.

Later I personally learned from Dr. Ignacio Bernal that the small head was presented by Dr. Heine-Geldern during the last reunion of this congress, and a short note was published in the *Archaeology*, Vol. XIII, No. 4, 1960, p. 288 mentioning its presentation and that the piece was considered of Roman origin."

DURING THE DECADES following this discovery it has been cited and discussed in many publications (Azcina Franch 1969: 16-17, Genovés 1972: 32, Gordon 1971: 68-69, Jett 1971: 30, Kelley 1971: 60, Prem 1980: 16, Sorenson 1971: 223, Riley et al. 1971: 450, Wuthenau 1970: 51) but without any reference of its whereabouts. After some difficulties in 1992, we were able to locate the head (Hristov 1994: 68), which is kept in storage in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City (Catalog No. 20-1416). Since then we have carried out exhaustive research about the find (Hristov and Genovés 1998a, Hristov and Genovés 1998b) that, since the beginning of 1995 has been part of the project *Registro y fechamiento de las posibles evidencias arqueológicas de Mesoamérica, relativas a previos contactos transatlánticos* co-directed by Santiago Genovés T. and Romeo H. Hristov, and sponsored by the Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología de México (CONACyT).

In a preliminary study of the piece Hristov (1994: 69) attracted attention to the fact that a reliable dating of the piece could resolve the controversy about its age and, in part, about its origin. In 1994 we discuss the methods available to obtain a more accurate chronology of the find with Günther Wagner, Director of the FS Archäometrie of the Max Planck Institut für Kernphysik in Heidelberg (Germany), and the geologist Peter Schaaf from the Instituto de Geofísica at UNAM in Mexico City (Mexico). The small dimensions of the head made it extremely difficult to take enough of a sample to date it, either by thermoluminescence (TL) or accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS). As an alternative solution Günther Wagner suggested the thermoluminescence (TL) age test which, although less accurate than a routine dating, required a sample of only 100-150 mg of drilling powder, that was taken from the broken part of the neck, without affecting the artistic value and the integrity of the figurine. The sample was taken by Peter Schaaf and Romeo Hristov, and delivered personally by Schaaf to FS Archäometrie. On basis of the obtained data four thermoluminescence (TL) age values were calculated (956 ± 226 , 1490 ± 333 , 2115 ± 415 , and 2399 ± 473 years B.P.)⁴ which established the age limits of the artifact from 2870 B.P. to 730 B.P. (cal. 865 B.C. to 1265 A.D.). The technical details of the procedure are described in Schaaf and Wagner (2000, in print), and a summary about the implications of the established age limits in the polemic of the origin and the chronology of the head can be found in Hristov and Genovés (2000, in print).

Discussion and conclusions

THE PUBLICATION of the complementary research of the apparently Roman head discovered in Tecaxic-Calixtlahuaca (Hristov and Genovés 1999), has generated much

⁴ Sample K-717; the cited age limits include 1σ error bars.

controversy, and has been discussed in publications in at least sixteen languages, as well in several radio and television programs. Three of the objections against the reliability of the evidence deserve especial attention.

The first one, formulated before the TL analysis, is that the terracotta head is a Colonial-period object, introduced in an unclear way in a pre-Hispanic context; in fact, it is catalogued as such in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City. This supposition, however, is not based on any concrete fact. On one hand, the three undisturbed floors under which the burial was found, and above all, the gold pieces of the offering are sufficiently clear indications that the context did not suffer any alteration during the Colonial period. On the other hand, the result of the thermoluminescence (TL) age test clears up any doubts that the piece was manufactured at least two century before the celebrate voyage of Columbus in 1492.

THE SECOND objection is that the artifact, although seems to be Roman could have been imported by the Spaniards during the firsts decades after the Conquest, and re-used in funeral context dating to the early Colonial period. This idea is more consistent than the previous one, but neither is supported of any data in the description of the excavation. As mentioned previously, the settlement was destroyed and abandoned in A.D. 1510, that is, about a decade before the Spanish Conquest. If we assume that the burial dates to Colonial times, we would expect to be find traces of clear intrusion through the three superimposed floors of the pyramid, under which the offering was deposited, especially if we bear in mind that complete repairing probably was not performed, due to the disuse of the structure. Another possibility is that the head could have been imported into the New World by some European visitor between A.D. 1492-1510, and somehow found his way to Central Mexico (Down 2000: 24-25). In this regard we must remind

that during the mentioned lapse of time the Matlatzincas were under Aztec domain, so the artifact would have come to the Toluca Valley most probably through the Aztec "pochtecas", but in any case with Aztec knowledge. In this context, however, the lack of the slightest reference about any encounter of the Aztecs or their vassals with Europeans is inexplicable in the otherwise detailed and reasonably reliable late historical tradition in Nahuatl. And such silence makes the proposed idea highly improbable if we bear in mind: (1) the deep religious and political meaning of the Aztec belief that bearded foreigners coming westward from the Atlantic would conquer and destroy their kingdom and, (2) how fast Moctecuhzoma II was informed about the Spaniards arrival in Veracruz in 1518, and the great impact of this event among the Aztec rulers.

THE THIRD OBJECTION is that the head was "planted" as a joke to José García-Payón. Similar situations have happened in the past (Buttrey 1980: 13), and probably will happen in the future as well. For this reason, we believe that it is a good idea to keep in mind such a possibility, if personal impartiality and prejudices are not confused -or pretend to pass- for respectable scholarly precaution. In an informal letter to the Editorial Office of *Ancient Mesoamerica* dated from March 6, 2000, Paul Schmidt from the Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas at UNAM, Mexico City, suggested such a possibility. Below are a few paragraphs from his letter that are self-explanatory:

"...the figurine was planted in Don Pepe's [José García Payón's] dig, the saying goes, by Hugo Moedano. Don Pepe took it so seriously that no one had the heart to tell him it was a joke. This I remember having been told by John Paddock....Taking into consideration Hristov's known unethical behavior

and the obvious controversy which would result from the publication, I find it extremely hard to believe that two of the three serious and professional referees ... would support the article."

IN LATE 1996 Schmidt informed Hristov that "everybody knows that the head is Colonial" and that García-Payón was not present during the excavation, so surely somebody had "planted" it as a joke. Neither the thermoluminescence (TL) age limits, nor the excavation report supports the suspicion of Colonial manufacture and intrusion of the artifact into the apparently pre-Hispanic archaeological context. In 1997 Hristov personally asked Fernando García Payón, José García Payón's son, if he knew something about the first objection. His response was that during the 1960s his father frequently was asked if he was present during the excavation, and he always assured them that he had been.

A FEW MONTHS later Hristov asked Schmidt again if he could remember the source of his information about the "planting" of the head, and Schmidt informed him that he believed to have heard from John Paddock that Hugo Moedano "planted" the head. By that time both (Paddock and Moedano) had passed away. Therefore, the only option we had was to ask several of the respectable and usually well-informed Mexican scholars of the older generation. None of them had ever heard such a story, neither from Hugo Moedano nor from John Paddock (Román Piña Chán, Angel García Cook, Luis Torres Montes, Carlos C. Navarrete, and Jorge V. Angulo, personal communication to Romeo Hristov 1997). At that time we stopped further investigation of the mentioned allegation. Recently, however, Romeo Hristov asked Fernando García Payón if he knew something about a possible "planting" of the artifact by Hugo Moedano. His response was that Hugo Moedano "...had

never been present during the excavation", and this was just "nonsense". (Fernando García Payón, personal communication to Romeo H. Hristov April 04, 2000).

Without going into the thorny theme of the possible cultural impact that such finding implies, the discovery of this piece raises the following main questions: 1) Where and when was the head manufactured? (2) How did it arrive in the central Mexican highlands? (3) How is it possible that an object 1,500 years old was found in an archaeological context, dated between the last quarter of the fifteenth century A.D. and the first decade of the sixteenth century A.D.?

WITH REGARDS to the first question, Heine-Geldern (1961: 117) based on the opinion of Ernst Boehringer suggest that the head "comes from the Hellenistic Roman art circle. Its explicit naturalism make us think it can be dated at about second century A.D." One and a half decades later Melgarejo Vivanco (1975: 89), when referring to the metal objects found in the offering, stated his doubts concerning the reasonableness of dating the figurine as previous to the eighth century A.D. Hristov (1994:69), taking into account the imprecise chronological placement of the context in which the piece was found, explored the possibilities of relating it with a probable arrival of Vikings to the Atlantic coasts of Mesoamerica between the tenth and eleventh centuries A.D.

It seems, however, that the discussion will return to Heine-Geldern's proposal of Hellenistic-Roman origin of the figurine. Three of the four cited thermoluminescence (TL) age values oscillate between 1490 ± 333 , 2115 ± 415 , and 2399 ± 473 years B.P., which points to the beginnings of the Christian era as the most probable manufacture period of the head, and made applicable the hypothesis

of Roman origin and chronology. A further support of the aforementioned hypothesis is coming from Bernard Andrae, a distinguished scholar in Roman art and archaeology who states:

[the head] is without any doubt Roman, and the Lab analysis has confirmed that it is ancient. The stylistic examination tells us more precisely that it is a Roman work from around the second century A.D., and the hairstyle and the shape of the beard present the typical traits of the Severian emperors period [193-235 A.D.], exactly in the "fashion" of the epoch. About that there is no doubt.

I am considering it as absolutely possible that the Romans arrived in the Americas. I consider that possible even without the find of the small head. Obviously, this must have been a voyage with no historical consequences, like a sinken ship. One involuntary voyage from Lanzarote to Mexico is perfectly credible as has been demonstrated by historic cases of accidental or experimental crossings [of the Atlantic ocean]." (Andrae cited in Domenici 2000: 29; translation by Romeo Hristov and Maura Mariani).

THE SEARCH for answers to the second question has not been free of controversy either. Heine-Geldern (1961: 119), in emphasizing the remarkable artistic similarities between the civilizations from Southeast Asia and Mesoamerica, was

inclined to think in a probable Trans-Pacific re-importation of the figurine between the third and the seventh centuries A.D., by means of a Chinese or Hindu ship. He also observed, however, that "... we cannot exclude, of course, the possibility of an importation, perhaps accidental, by means of the Atlantic Ocean" (Heine-Geldern 1961: 119). This second alternative was thoroughly examined by Alcina Franch (1969: 16-17) who considered it "... much more logical ..." than the first one. The hypothesis of the Trans-Atlantic importation is supported by the Mediterranean origin of the find, and by data from Classic sources (Cary and Warmington, 1963: 43-72, 111-131), concerning ancient voyages in the east part of the Atlantic, between the second half of the first millennium A.D. and the first centuries of the Christian era. We must also take into account the recent discovery of a Roman settlement dated between the first century B.C. and fourth century A.D. in the Lanzarote island, Canary Archipelago (Atoche Peña et al. 1995), thus confirming that during the period of manufacture of the head there had been attempts of exploration towards the west of the middle Atlantic. Several ocean currents that reach the Antilles and the Mexican Gulf have their origin in the zone of the Canary archipelago, and as Pericot (1962: 17 cited in Alcina Franch 1969: 16) points out "... it is perfectly credible to think that at one time, during those centuries, a Mediterranean ship could have been swept away from the Canary Islands, Madeira or Cape Verde to the American coasts." One of such unintentional voyage was recorded in the eighteenth century A.D. (Gumilla 1741: 327-328, cited in Alcina Franch 1955: 878) and it is not only credible, but also rather probable that some others had occurred in ancient times. Since the 1970s there has not been any mentioning of the supposed incapacity of the ancient Mediterranean ships to carry out Trans-Atlantic voyages; it is the right moment, however, to recall that even the more rudimentary crafts (such as the papyrus

raft) have at least a 50% probability of successfully completing an Atlantic crossing (Heyerdahl 1971; Genovés 1972a, 1972b).

How could the head, once it arrived on the American coasts reach the Matlatzincas in Tecaxic-Calixtlahuaca? From historical sources, we know that during the rule of Aztec emperor Moctecuhzoma Ilhuicamina (1440-1469 A.D.) the Matlatzincas were Aztec allies during two military expeditions, one in the area of Mixteca Alta (what is now the state of Oaxaca, Mexico) and the other in the Huasteca namely the area of the Gulf Coast of Mexico (Tezozomoc 1878, Chapter XXIX and XL cited in García Payón 1936: 173-176). During the later expedition the Matlatzincas were especially distinguished and returned with a rich booty (García Payón 1936:175-176). If the idea of a Trans-Atlantic importation is accepted, it is not illogical to think that the head (or the complete figurine) was taken to Tecaxic-Calixtlahuaca as a part of the booty from Huasteca.

The most persuasive explanation for the discrepancy of more than a thousand years between the manufacturing date of the piece and when the offering was placed is that it is one of the various Mesoamerican cases of re-use of objects from earlier eras. Between the 1940s and 1980s about two dozens of such findings were reported (see summary in Navarrete 1982: 159-162), from the Mayan area, the coast of the Gulf of Mexico and Valley of Mexico. This practice is derived from the function of such objects as symbols of a particular descent group (real or invented) that formed part of identity patterns through which the elite differentiated itself from non-elite, thus justifying its position of authority (Matos 1979: 17). From Central Mexico, the most relevant examples are some Olmec, Teotihuacan and Toltec pieces found in Aztec burial offerings inside the Great Temple of Mexico-Tenochtitlan. We especially emphasize the little Olmec mask from green stone, which come from the

Offering 20 and is considered as "three thousand years old object in a five hundred years old context" (Matos 1979: 17).

Besides the Tecaxic-Calixtlahuaca's head, García Payón (1961: 2) informs us about two other similar heads. The first one "it is said to be in the Museum of Chicago" and the second one is cited as "being found in Querétaro [and] is propriety of Mr. Victor Blanco Labra". In 1993 Romeo Hristov checked in detail the collection of pre-Columbian terracotta figurines of the Field Museum of Chicago, but it was impossible to identify any piece similar to the one found in Tecaxic-Calixtlahuaca. There is no such artifact in the Pre-Columbian collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, according to Richard Townsend, Curator of the Department of Asia, Africa and the Americas (personal communication to Romeo Hristov 1993).

The second piece was found in 1952 in the excavated of a pit in the basement of Victor Blanco Labra's house in the city of Querétaro, Mexico. It was a terracotta figurine with a height of about 2-3 cm, and represented a female face with bun hairstyle. As far as Blanco Labra could remember (personal communication to Romeo Hristov 1993), the object was associated with human bones and pottery sherds. The head was lost in 1985, and a more detailed speculation, based only on the above mentioned information does not seem prudent. Judging by a drawing of the artifact that Blanco Labra showed us, however, the identification of it as being of Roman origin seems incorrect. The information concerning the context of the discovery (as far as we know) cannot guarantee that the object is from Pre-Hispanic times.

As final remarks we would like to emphasize, once again, that in its fundamental aspects such as domestic plants and animals, knowledge and use of metals, writing and language systems, and religious beliefs,

among others, the Old and the New World civilizations until the early sixteenth century were firmly different and, consequently, independent from each other (Hristov 1998: 237, Hristov and Genovés 1998: 52-53). However, there are also some data of various kinds and levels of credibility that suggest the existence of a few sporadic, most probably accidental, interhemispheric voyages before Columbus, which apparently had very limited -if any- cultural and biological impact. The find of an apparently Roman head in Tecaxic-Calixtlahuaca, Mexico, seems to support the occurrence of one such voyage across the middle Atlantic, possibly somewhere in the first centuries of the Christian era.

On the other hand, notwithstanding that the Canary Islands were discovered around 1334 A.D., the highly probable contacts between the ancient Mediterranean world and the Canaries were confirmed only a decade and half ago with European and African objects found in the archipelago in archaeological context prior to fourteenth century A.D. In 1987 a Roman settlement dated between the first century B.C. and the fourth century A.D. has been discovered in the Lanzarote island (Atoche Peña et al. 1995), and more recent archaeological research has proved that not only Romans but also Phoenicians and Berbers reached at least two of the Canary islands (Tenerife and Lanzarote), as early as the sixth or fifth century B.C. (Behrmann et al. 1995, Atoche Peña et al. 1997). The implications of these discoveries in the discussion of possible Pre-Columbian Trans-Atlantic contacts are obvious, and it is not entirely unreasonable to expect in the near future that systematical archaeological studies in the Caribbean, Central America and Brazil may provide more -and more conclusive- data related to small scale Trans-Atlantic voyages before 1492.

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Resumen

En el presente artículo se discuten los resultados de la re-examinación de una cabecita de terracota de supuesto origen romano, encontrada en una ofrenda funeral prehispánica cerca de México, D.F. La apariencia de la figurilla como artefacto romano del segundo o tercer siglo d.C. fue confirmada de Bernard Andreae, un respetado especialista de arqueología romana y director emérito del Deutschen Archäologischen Institut en Roma (Italia). En 1995 el FS Archäometrie en Heidelberg (Alemania) llevó a cabo una prueba de edad por medio de la termoluminiscencia (TL) y estableció los límites cronológicos del artefacto entre 2870 a.p. y 730 a.p. (875 a.C. hasta 1265 d.C.). Estos resultados, no obstante del considerable margen de error, hacen la hipótesis de origen romano aplicable. Por otro lado, la revisión de las circunstancias del descubrimiento no ha revelado indicio alguno de posible intrusión postcolumbina, y permite la aceptación de la cabecita como la primera evidencia mesoamericana, relativa a contactos transoceánicos precolombinos.

Correspondence address:

Romeo H. Hristov PhD
Department of Anthropology
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM 87131, USA
Phone.: 001-(505)-277-1536
Fax: 001-(505)-277-0874
e-mail: rhristov@unm.edu

Prof. Santiago Genovés PhD
Instituto de Investigaciones
Antropológicas – UNAM,
Ciudad Universitaria s/n,
Delegación Coyoacán
Mexico City 04510, Mexico, D.F.
Phone.: ++ (525)-622-9522
Fax: ++ (525)-622-9651 or 665-2959