

## FACTS AND COMMENTS

### AN EXTRAORDINARY COMPOSITE STELA FROM TEOTIHUACÁN

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#### ABSTRACT

In February, 1963, an unusual discovery was made at La Ventilla, less than a mile from the "Ciudadela" in Teotihuacán, Mexico. This find is a composite or sectional stela made up of four superimposed elements that fit into each other by means of stems and orifices. All elements are different in form and are, from top to bottom, discoidal, globular, conical, and cylindrical, the last fitting into a platform base. This piece is unique in Mesoamerican archaeology and seems to have no significant parallels elsewhere. This stela was carved during the Classic period of Teotihuacán. Its function has been clarified through comparison with mural paintings of the Tlalocan in Tepantitla, Teotihuacán, where a ball-game scene is portrayed, and at each end is a stela that is almost identical with that of La Ventilla. It seems evident that the La Ventilla monument is a ball-court stela-marker.

IN FEBRUARY, 1963, a remarkable composite stela was found near the southeastern limits of the town of San Juan Teotihuacán, Mexico. It was uncovered on La Ventilla ranch in an area where agricultural operations have exposed and partially destroyed a typical Teotihuacán habitational area composed of houses, patios, and palaces. This stela is from a locality approximately 1 km. west-southwest of the southwestern corner of the "Ciudadela."

The find was investigated by Ricardo de Robina, Roman Piña Chan, and Luis Aveleyra Arroyo de Anda. As soon as it was authenticated and its scientific value determined, the stela was acquired for the National Museum of Anthropology. It will be placed in the new museum building that is now under construction in Chapultepec Park.

This sculpture (Fig. 1) is a composite or sectional stela made up of four superimposed elements that are joined by means of stems and orifices. Each of the four elements has a different form. From top to bottom the stela consists of a *discoidal* element, a *globular* element, a *conical* element, and a *cylindrical* or *columnar* element. The last also has a stem at its base that served to affix the stela to a masonry platform or an altar. The various stems and corresponding orifices are of different forms and sizes, and they fit together with such precision that it is virtually impossible to combine them in any manner other than that which is shown in Fig. 1. The total height of the stela with its elements joined is 2.13 m. This measurement does not include the lengths of the various stems above the cylindrical element that forms the base.

This piece is of special interest because it appears to be unique in Mesoamerican archaeology. At first glance, it seems to be decidedly foreign to the usual stylistic standards of Mesoamerican art. Nevertheless, there is no question of its Teotihuacán association, and there is also no question about the way in which the four elements were originally combined.

Controlled excavations at Teotihuacán began with the work of Batres at the beginning of the present century. Since then several sculptured elements from composite stelae have been found. Batres (1908, Pls. 15, 23) shows a large clay disc similar to the top element of the stela from La Ventilla, as well as a globular carved-stone element that is almost identical with the globular element in the La Ventilla stela. Gamio (1922, Pl. 22) illustrates two parts from similar composite stelae, one globular, the other cylindrical. However, these are all isolated finds, and until the discovery of the stela of La Ventilla it was not possible to interpret them correctly.

The composite stela of La Ventilla is important because it is one of the rare examples of true free sculpture known in the Teotihuacán culture. The "Water Goddess" in the National Museum of Mexico, generally considered the most representative example of monumental free-standing sculpture, is decidedly architectural not only in its artistic conception but also in its probable function.

The La Ventilla stela is covered with a thick coat of stucco that partially obscures the carved reliefs of each element. The top disc, which is obviously the most important part, presents reliefs that represent a fringe of feathers strung on a cord. These encircle the periphery of the disc. This motif, symbolic of precious feathers employed to emphasize the value or sacred quality of some object or element, is frequently found in the Teotihuacán culture and appears repeatedly in pottery, especially in the small clay discs applied as ornaments to great ceremonial "braziers" or censers. The same circular fringe has also been interpreted as the feathers which encircle the eye of the owl, a bird closely connected with the cult of the rain god Tlaloc.

In the central part of the disc is a cutout design that consists of interlaced spirals and lateral bands which resemble rays. This is reminiscent of the manner in which the longitudinally cut snail shell and the cloud are represented in codices. If this interpretation is correct, the stela may have been dedicated to Quetzalcoatl or to Tlaloc, deities whose cult was so prominent in Teotihuacán.

The remaining three lower elements—globular, conical, and cylindrical—are covered with interlacings, scrolls, and other motifs in the purest and most classic El Tajín style of central Veracruz. The basal column seems to represent a bundle of feathers. These clear influences from the Gulf coast add to the increasing number of elements of Tajín style that have been recognized in Teotihuacán during recent decades.

After this outstanding piece of sculpture was discovered, detailed excavations were made at La Ventilla under the direction of Roman Piña Chan. These excavations have revealed the original position of the stela. It was placed erect on a low, rectangular bench or altar in the center of a patio flanked on its four sides by houses, in accord with the typical Teotihuacán plan. Furthermore,

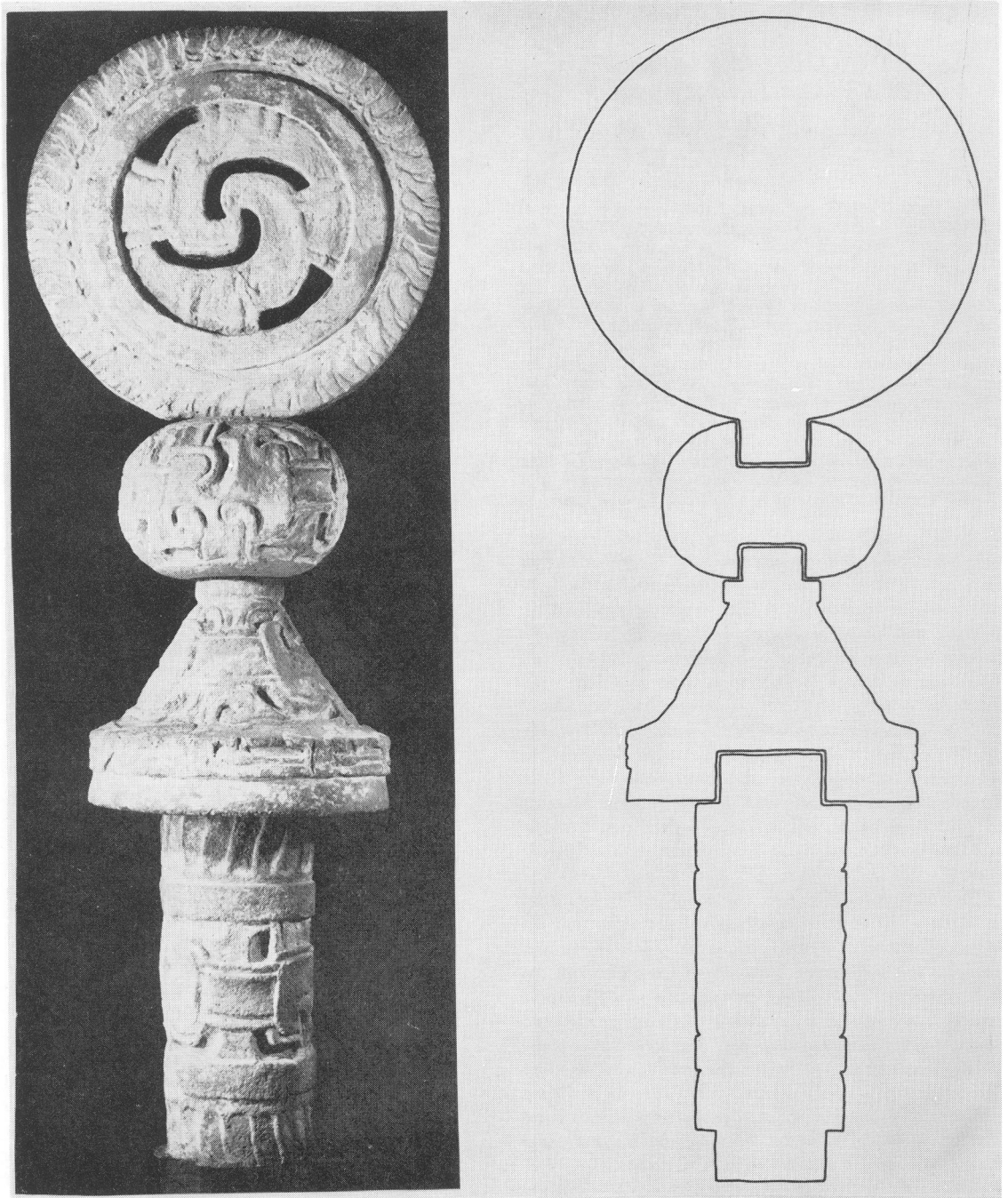


FIG. 1 [AVELEYRA]. Composite stela from Teotihuacán, Mexico. Height 2.13 m.

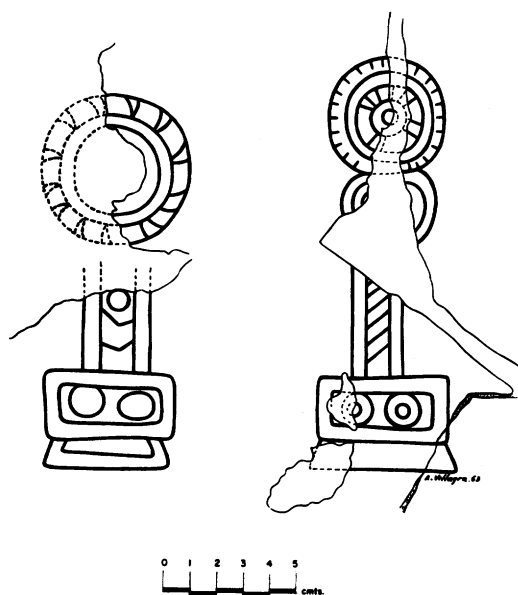


FIG. 2 [AVELEYRA]. Stelae-markers from the ball-game scene at Tepantitla, Teotihuacán.

it has been determined that the stela was carved during the Classic period, the apogee of Teotihuacán, and that it was later moved to the place where it was discovered and was reused during the final periods of this culture by people of mixed ethnocultural affiliations, corresponding to the first contacts with the bearers of the Coyotlatelco-type "Toltec" ceramics.

As for the function of the composite stela from La Ventilla, a remarkable and little-known record exists that seems to resolve this problem. On the north talus of the room where the famous mural paintings of the Tlalocan are found in Tepantitla, Teotihuacán, there is a ball-game scene in which several players carry decorated clubs. This scene has never been published in its entirety, nor has it been described correctly, in spite of its importance in the early history of the ball game in Mesoamerica. At each end of this ball-game scene a stela is clearly painted, and each stela rests on a small altar or platform (Fig. 2). These stelae are made up of four elements and seem to be representations of composite stelae like the stela from La Ventilla. It seems reasonable to conclude that the La Ventilla stela is a ball-game marker dedicated to Tlaloc, the deity who presided over games and ceremonies to which chosen souls dedicated themselves in the Tlalocan, which was the Teotihuacán paradise.

The excavations at La Ventilla also revealed additional evidences of influence from the Gulf coast, outstanding among which are a plain "yoke" fragment in association with a decapitated human skull and an unusual stone effigy of Tlaloc whose sculptured treatment, in the hand and on the back, is identical with that seen in many "hachas" of the Tajin culture.

BATRES, LEOPOLDO

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## THE APPLIED SCIENCE CENTER FOR ARCHAEOLOGY

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### ABSTRACT

The Applied Science Center for Archaeology of the University Museum in Philadelphia is now experimenting with devices that will facilitate the task of precise location and even discovery of cultural strata. The Geohm resistometer and the proton magnetometer are both being used satisfactorily, and further development of a new sonic device has begun. The Center has also been studying new techniques for the determination of trace elements in metals and ceramics, and the thermoluminescence method for dating pottery and other fired objects. In cooperation with the already established radiocarbon laboratory, a project is underway to acquire and date tree samples of very great age. The Center is also gathering and cross-indexing information on completed analyses carried out with the various dating devices and techniques. This information is drawn from both published and unpublished materials.

THE SUCCESSFUL APPLICATION of radiocarbon dating has convinced most of us of the significance of new scientific techniques in archaeology. It opens the way for acceptance of other techniques growing out of unprecedented developments in the fields of nuclear physics, electronics, chemistry, and the engineering sciences. But there is one fundamental difficulty. Techniques developed for industrial, commercial, or military purposes, as a rule, can be adapted to archaeological purposes only with extensive experimentation and considerable cost. Moreover, thousands of research laboratories are now making available innumerable technological advances which may be applicable. It is necessary to discover what they are, and to select the most promising for experiment.

The Applied Science Center for Archaeology, which was established at the University Museum in Philadelphia about three years ago with a grant from the National Science Foundation, attempts to co-ordinate information about such techniques and to experiment with and develop certain of them which, at the moment, appear to be