

Ceramic Idol from the East Coast of Quintana Roo, Mexico

by Trygve B. Sletteland

Introduction

While in Playa del Carmen, Quintana Roo, Mexico doing astroarchaeological research in 1984, I and two of my assistants were secretly shown what was purportedly a recently discovered Maya artifact. It was in the possession of a local diver who had known us for several weeks and believed he could safely confide in us. His express purpose in showing us the artifact was to learn more about it. One of my party was allowed to sketch it (see Figures 1 and 2).

Discussion

We were told that the artifact was taken from a grotto somewhere in the vicinity of Xcaret, located nearby as shown on Maps 1 and 2. If, as seemed likely, this claim was true, the object may have served as a decorative element on an altar where the Maya made offerings to the gods.

At one time, idols in cave shrines were common in the region. Thompson (1970:188) writes of a hundred clay idols being found in a cave in the Yucatan. They were mass produced for trade during the Late Postclassic period (A.D. 1250 - 1519), as indicated by the enormous quantity of idols destroyed by the Spaniards in the years following contact. Seams also indicated mass production, allowing the idols to be built of interchangeable parts (Thompson 1954, 1970). This permitted tailoring of the final product to individual specifications. Our idol had a seam where the jaguar/quetzal headdress was attached to the Maya likeness below. "Idols not destroyed by the Spanish campaigns against paganism were often hidden in caves, but since the Maya now fear such things, believing they are malignant and wander around at night, they usually smash any they find, so not many have survived". (Thompson, 1970:188)

Rather than being sculpted in the round, our example was molded in relief and apparently attached with mortar to the wall of an altar, another object, or the grotto itself. This method of construction was also used on nearby Cozumel Island to affix the statue of *Ix Chel* to the wall of her famous shrine at San Gervasio (Lopez de Gomara in Wagner 1942:29).

Interpretation

The jaguar is a common element in ancient Mesoamerican art. In the study area defined by Map 2, jaguars are found in a mural on the isolated shrine at Chakalal (see Figure 3, this report, after

Mason 1927). Also, feline figures in stucco were recorded at Xcaret in outlying Groups R and S (Andrews and Andrews, 1975:46). A jaguar pelt motif divides the panels of a fresco in the Temple of the Diving God at Tulum. Yucatec Maya for jaguar is *balam*, a name which was also given to priests and certain guardian spirits (Roys, 1960:6). In Yucatan, the four protectors of the village and the *milpa* were called *balam*; they guarded the cardinal directions (Thompson 1939:159). Our jaguar, which was probably placed in a grotto facing at least generally east, could be interpreted as a guardian of that sacred direction.

The jaguar god is also a deity of caves and the interior of the earth. He is closely associated with the underworld, land of darkness, and the night sky (Thompson, 1970:293). Here, however, he appears to have been associated with the dawn and the place of return of the sun and the moon from the underworld. The Lacandon Maya believe the world will end when jaguars ascend from the underworld to eat the sun and the moon (Thompson, 1970:293).

It is also possible that the cave is associated with *Ix Chel*, in her role as goddess of water. Elsewhere in the Maya area, the cave at Bolonchen witnessed a ceremony at the start of the dry season thanking the water deities. "The cave is named 'Hidden Lady' and probably refers to the moon goddess" (Back, 1981:273; Stephens 1963).

Conclusion

The authenticity of the artifact considered here is supported by at least two pieces of independent evidence:

1. Its similarity to artifacts from Cintla and elsewhere in Tabasco (MacDowell, 1984), an area with strong ties to the east coast during the Late Postclassic period (Landa, 1938; Roys, Scholes, and Adams, 1940); and
2. The correspondence of the claim of its origin near the Late Postclassic site of Xcaret with an expert opinion that it originated somewhere on the east coast during the Late Postclassic (Coggins, 1985).

The idol or mask may have been part of an incense burner (Thompson, 1954: Plate 27), or vase (Coggins, 1985), funerary urn, or altar. The author hopes the piece will eventually find its way into a museum, if it has not already. In the meantime, this brief report will serve to document its existence.

Editor's note (for use in publication): Trygve Sletteland is CEO of the Pacific Rivers Council in Eugene, OR.

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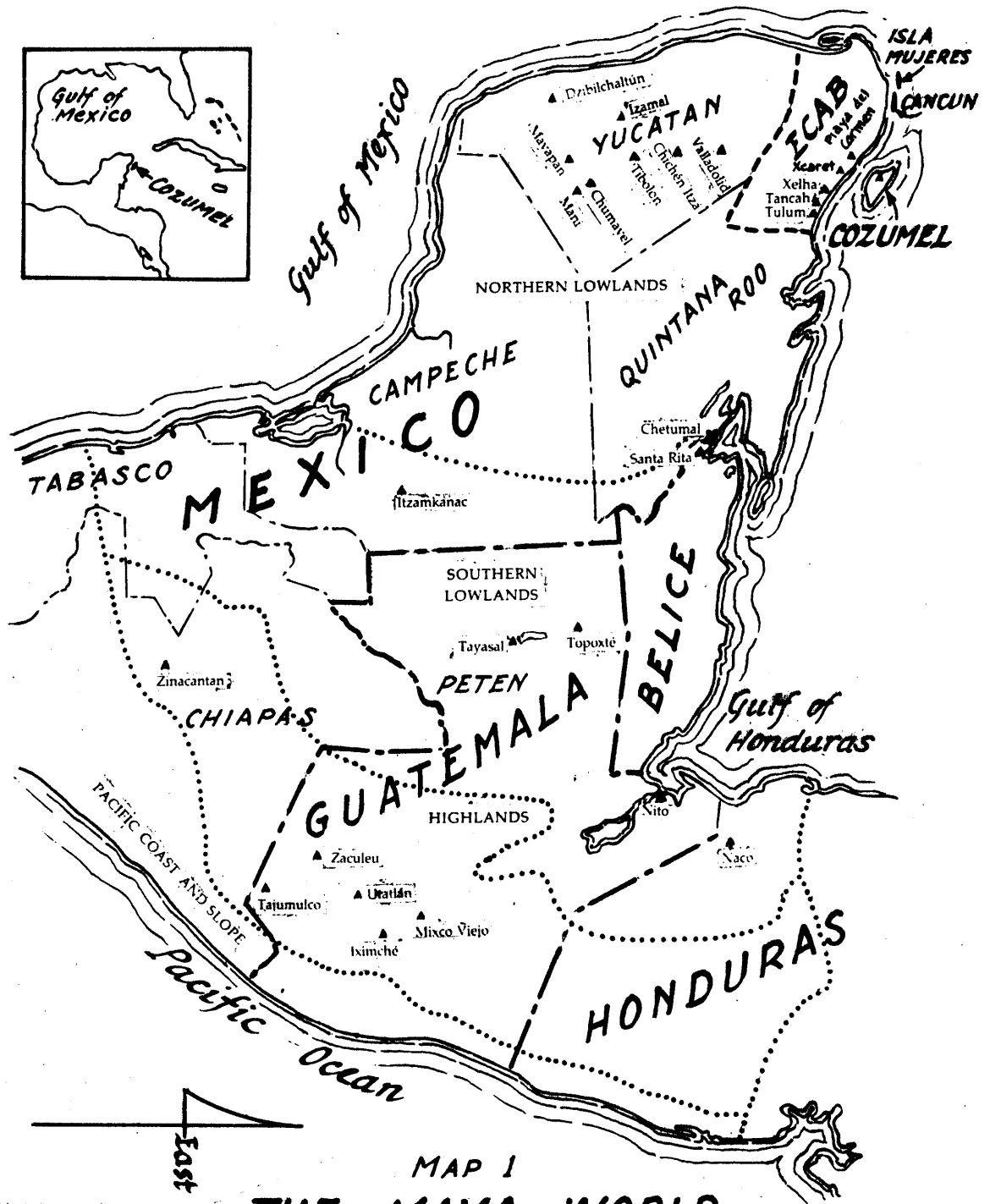
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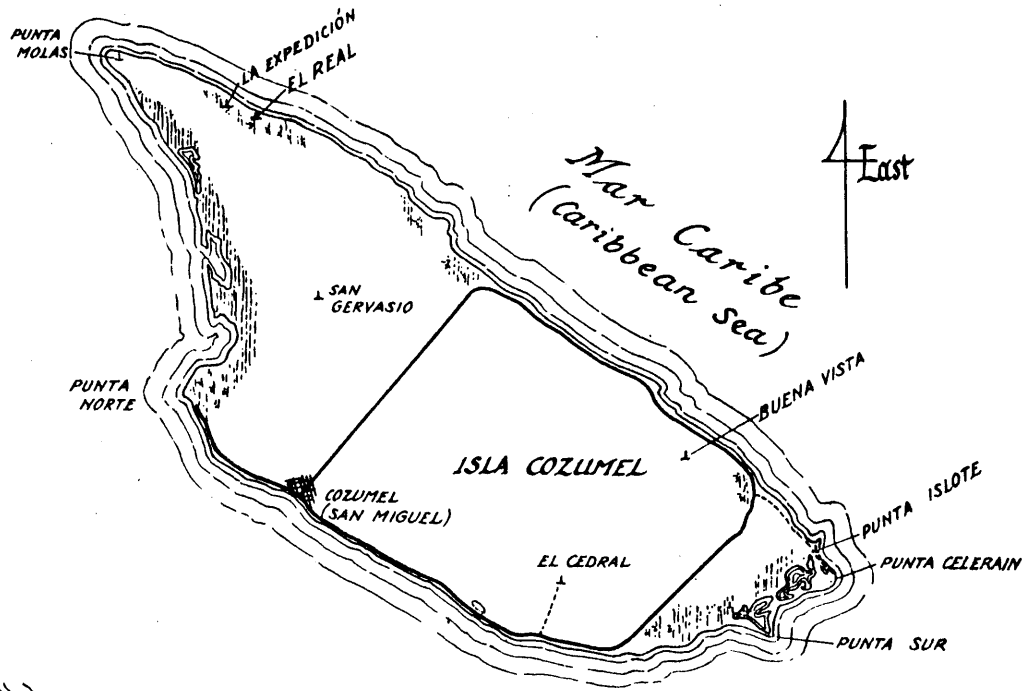


MAP 1

THE MAYA WORLD

- LEGEND:**
- ▲ Major Postclassic Settlements
 - Geographical Divisions
 - Approximate boundary of Province of Ecab
 - .-.-.- Modern Political Boundaries

0 100 200
Kilometers



MAP 2
THE RESEARCH AREA
 ⊥ Archaeological Sites

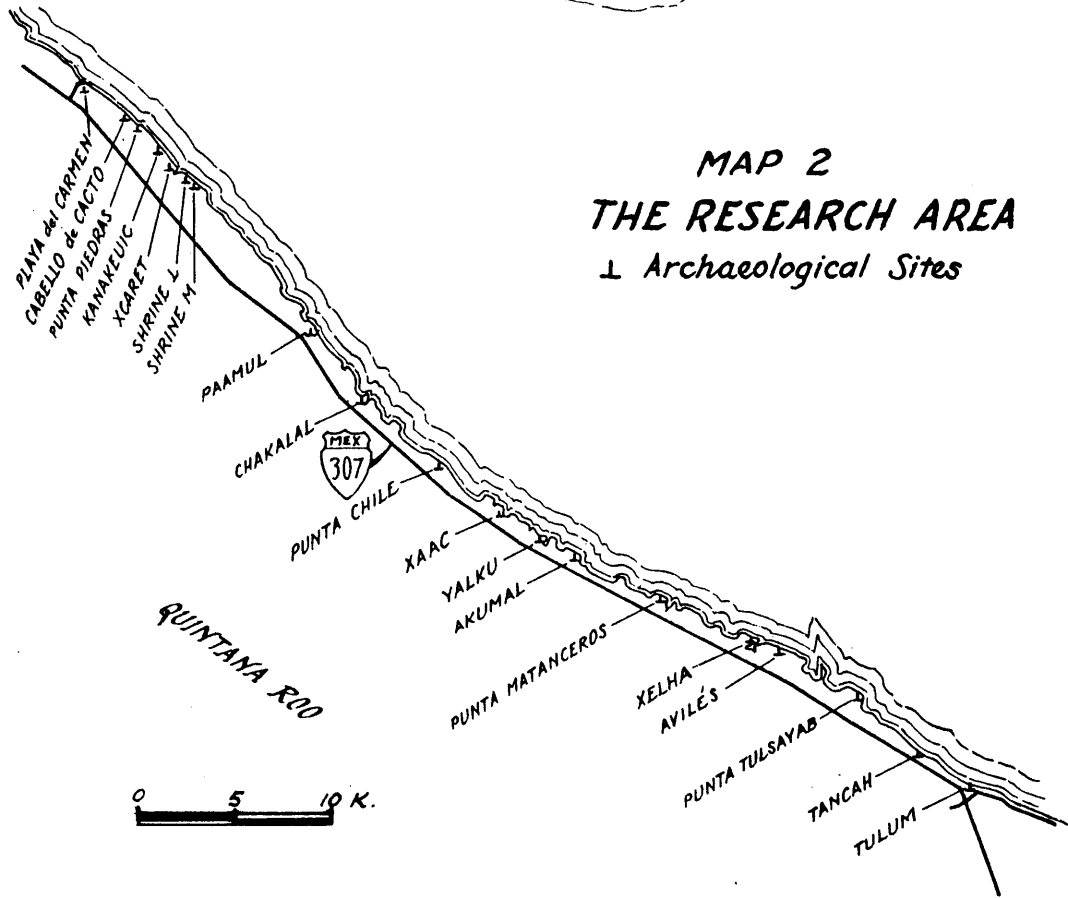




Figure 1: The ceramic idol - photo of color drawing



Figure 2: The ceramic idol - profile sketch

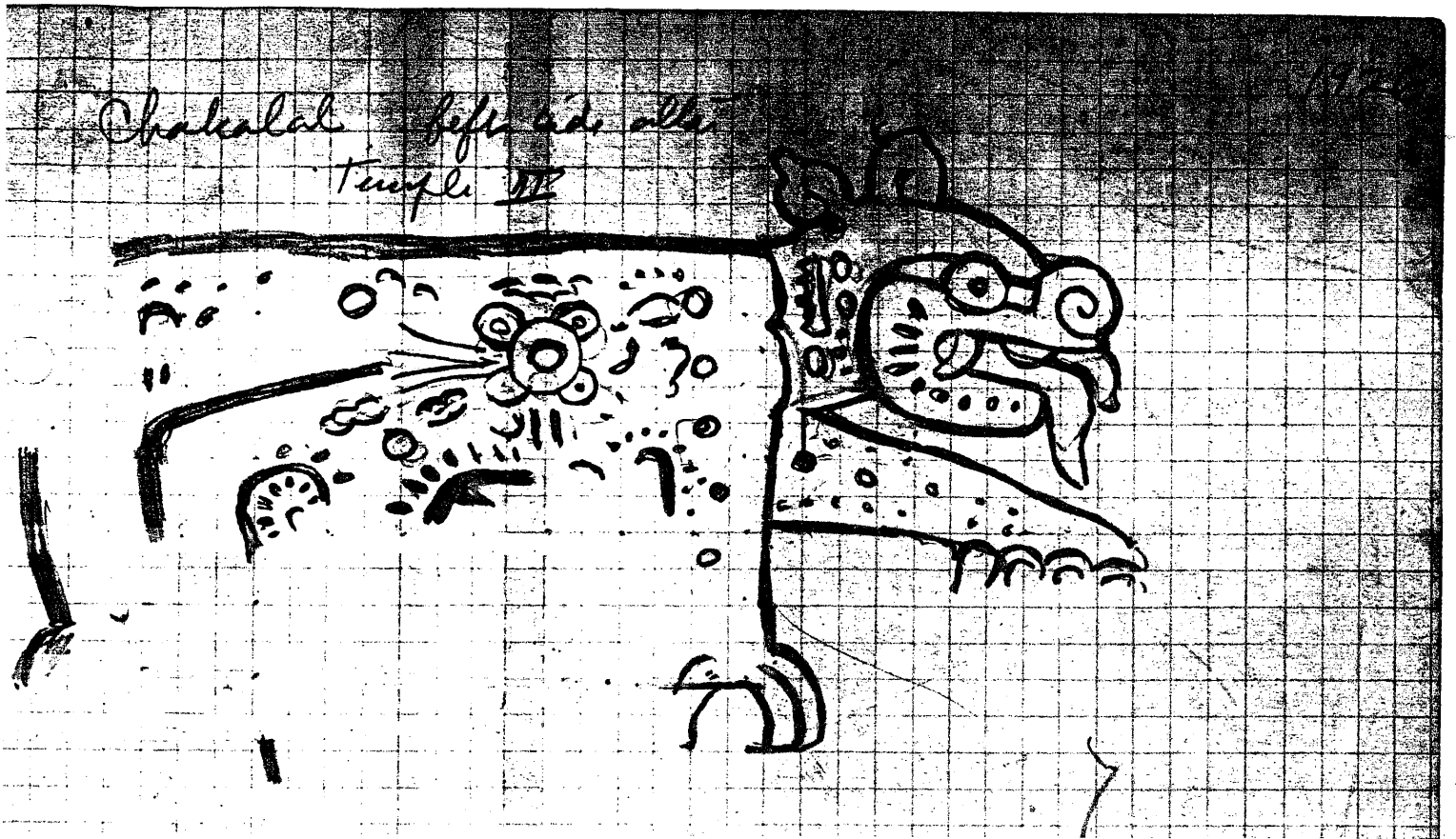


Figure 3: Jaguar mural at Chakalal, after Spinden, n.d.

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MURAL PAINTING IN CALETA
SHRINE AT CHAKMAL, PUBLISHED
IN MASON, 1927