

THE FIRST TIKAL-

A STONE SCULPTURE FROM WEST MEXICO

By KEITH A. DIXON



Low relief carving reportedly from near Tepic, Nayarit, but actually a fake. The design area measures 20 by 41 cm. The low relief sculpture does not appear to be weathered; instead, tool marks seem crisp and fresh. At least part of the work may have been done with quick strokes of a sharp metal tool, judging especially by fine lines parallel to and extending beyond the framing lines, as though a chisel had not been carefully guided. While this does not prove the sculpture to be fraudulent, proof is clearly found in the design.

The sculptured area is not flat and does not seem to have been purposefully prepared; the surface slopes away from a low central ridge that runs the long way down the center of the stone. The basalt block, which measures 30 by 53 cm., is about 10 cm. in maximum thickness. The back is flat and unworked. The bottom edge has been broken off, but the side and top edges appear to have been trimmed with large percussion flakes; the top left corner has been broken away, perhaps to lend an air of authenticity.

INSPIRED FAKE

At Tikal, Guatemala, over the past ten years, the University Museum's excavations have turned up some of the most spectacular and beautiful Lowland Maya remains ever discovered. These range from vast architectural complexes and large sculptured monuments to some of the finest examples of the potter's art, down to tiny, intricately fashioned mosaic ornaments and jade jewelry.

It was therefore inevitable that some of these choice objects, especially those which have had the most publicity, would eventually be the source of inspiration for still another flood of fakes and falsifications, which of course would wind up as valued parts of private collections or as museum donations. The only question was when and where they would first appear.

In 1965, while returning to California from field work in the Valley of Mexico, I chanced to visit the Museo de Antropología e Historia in Tepic, Nayarit, in western Mexico, without a thought of distant Tikal in my mind.

The Tepic museum's excellent collections of large pottery sculptures, clay figurines, and stone carvings almost completely overwhelm the eye and mind. But amidst this wealth of examples of West Mexican regional styles, one object caught my attention simply because it did not fit.

The intrusive piece was a small block of dark basalt, a material not otherwise represented in the collection as far as I could see. It was carved in low relief with a design so tumultuous and complex it resembled nothing from western Mexico. On close inspection, I made out what appeared to be a chain attached to a ring that was held in a human hand.

This was enough to excite my curiosity to a high degree, because the linked chain is extremely rare anywhere in the New World south of the Arctic area. Recognition of the "chain" called to mind one of the only other examples I happened to know in Mesoamerica, and of course that was the famous Stela 31 at Tikal—this monument has a priestly figure holding what may be a series of jade discs tied together, giving him almost the appearance of an itinerant ear ornament seller.

As I looked at the Tepic museum's little sculpture again with Stela 31 in mind, it became immediately obvious that the two were nearly identical in basic composition. Without a doubt, one was the copy of the other, or both were copies of some third sculpture.

In this case, the solution to the problem is neatly and instantaneously obvious on stylistic grounds alone.

Thus, although Stela 31 itself shows some influence from the central Mexican civilization of Teotihuacan, perhaps even recording an event of Maya contact with representatives of that culture, it is nevertheless typically Early Classic Maya in its basic style, expert craftsmanship, and long glyphic inscription. It was without doubt carved at Tikal, around A.D. 500.

The Tepic carving, on the other hand, is inexpertly done. In fact, although the carver spent much time and effort, the workmanship is sloppy and he obviously did not understand the composition he was copying nor the canons of Maya art style. Comparison with Stela 31 shows that while he included the main elements (however crudely), he confused or omitted much of the detail and filled in spaces with meaningless busy-work. Since the priest's face on Stela 31 was partially destroyed in prehistoric times, the Tepic specimen's carver missed it entirely and may not even have realized he was copying a human figure. He seems also not to have understood the shape of the stela itself—his left-hand framing line leaves much awkward blank space, far different from what one would expect in a complex Mesoamerican art style. But the most amusing aspect of this is that the blank space is in exactly the same proportion as the *shadow* cast by the stela in the photograph which the carver must have used as his model. It is interesting to speculate that because of European art traditions he may have been unconsciously predisposed to seeing the shadow as part of the composition, which would then have had more pleasing or "normal" width. His failure to think of anything to do with that blank space is a most un-Mesoamerican attitude.

Although it is certain that the Tikal stela was the original, one may legitimately ask if the Tepic copy may not be prehistoric, a kind of portable stela brought to Nayarit; after all, a small clay stela copy was actually found at Tikal (see the article by William A. Haviland in the Spring 1962 number of *Expedition*). In such a case, my interpretation of the blank shadow area would have to be wrong, and the inept copy perhaps could be attributed to an unskilled non-Maya. But the answer to this problem is also clear.

Stela 31, as presently known, is a fragment. When originally carved in the Early Classic about A.D. 500, the stela probably stood in front of a small temple on the south edge of Tikal's North Acropolis. In the Late Classic, around A.D. 750, the stela was apparently broken (or "killed") and the upper two-thirds fragment was reset in the temple's back room. Soon after this terminal ritual, the Maya completely covered over the Early Classic temple and its contents with a far larger structure. The Stela 31 fragment was therefore hidden by the new temple for over 1,200 years, until it was re-discovered by Edwin M. Shook of the Tikal Project early in 1960. When the carver made the Tepic copy, he depicted Stela 31 only down to the present broken lower edge, with the face already smashed, and did not attempt to reconstruct the bottom third of the monument.

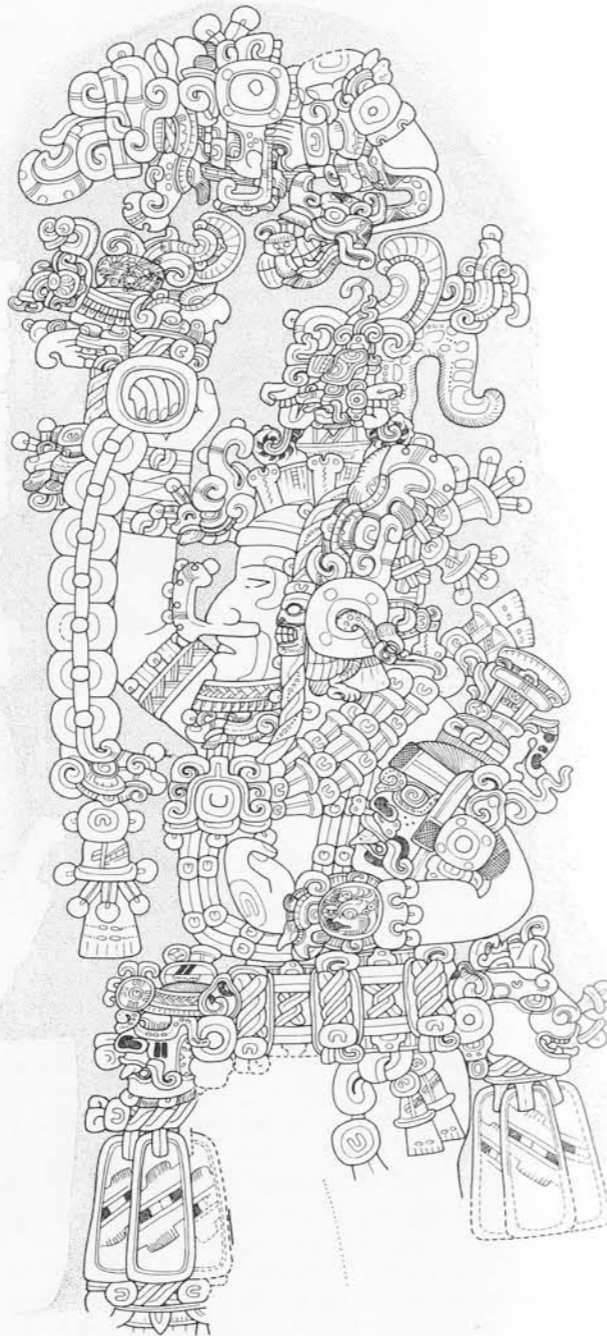
Therefore, the Tepic copy must have been made either at about A.D. 750, in a time period that may have been only a few hours after the stela-breaking ceremony, or else sometime after the stela's re-discovery early in 1960. The earlier date is obviously highly improbable—why copy only part of a freshly broken stela and under such circumstances? Furthermore, the early date can certainly be discarded if one gives weight to the erroneous inclusion of the stela's shadow as part of the copy's design.

So far, then, we have proved that the crime was committed, and when. There remain three questions: opportunity, motive, and the identity of the culprit.

The opportunity can be clearly established. Photographs of Stela 31 have been published often in the United States in *Expedition* and other journals, both popular and scholarly, as well as in England, Germany, Guatemala, and several times in Mexico. The most widely-distributed illustration in Mexico and the only one which includes the stela's cast shadow was published in *Life en Español* (October 2, 1961, p. 56). This is so clear that it is the ignorance of the carver that must be blamed for his poor results.

The motive cannot be demonstrated so

Drawing of the face of Stela 31, Tikal, Guatemala, depicting a priest in elaborate costume, holding what appears to be a string of jade discs; what may be an ancestral god looks down upon him from above. On the sides of the stela are sculptured what may be two Teotihuacan warriors, and on the back is a Maya



inscription in which 213 glyphs are still preserved. Present height, about 7 feet.

EL GRAN ENIGMA MAYA



Un sacerdote gobernante, con el perfil desfigurado y un penacho regio, sostiene una cabeza en el gancho de la mano izquierda. De una cadena suspendida de la mano derecha cuelgan otras cabezas.

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En el intrincado relieve del monumento de la izquierda aparecen símbolos criptográficos que quizás contengan la clave de la indescifrada escritura de los antiguos mayas. Recién descubierta junto con otras preciosas reliquias en las ruinas de Tikal—majestuosa y enigmática metrópoli localizada en un laberinto de la selva guatemalteca (*Life en Español*, 3 de noviembre de 1958, y 16 de noviembre de 1959)—esta enorme piedra fue tallada hace más de 1.500 años, probablemente en memoria de uno de los sacerdotes más ilustres que gobernaron el país, y cuyo esqueleto fue descubierto en las cercanías (*derecha*). La estela fue tal vez obra de los artesanos que vivían alrededor de las imponentes pirámides de la vasta ciudad-templo. Y los descendientes de los mismos escultores que la labraron fueron quizás los que intentaron destruirla, pues el monumento fue deliberadamente roto y manchado con fuego, y el rostro del sacerdote, desfigurado. Los arqueólogos del Museo de la Universidad de Pensilvania que la hallaron, no saben si la estela fue rota conforme a una ceremonia simbólica especial, o durante un levantamiento de campesinos. Cualquiera que haya sido la causa, dan gracias de que así haya ocurrido. Rota la estela, la parte superior—dos tercios del monumento—fue trasladada de su sitio, frente al templo, a un recinto aparte. Allí, mientras la erosión destruía otras estelas, ésta se conservó casi intacta a través de los siglos; y los jeroglíficos que adornan su parte posterior (*abajo*) son los más legibles que se han encontrado hasta la fecha.



El arqueólogo Edwin Shook limpia el reverso de la preciada estela, que data del año 445 d. de J.C., bello criptograma de una extensión poco común, pues comprende más de 200 extraordinarios jeroglíficos.

El esqueleto de un sacerdote, de 1,40 m. de altura, presenta un extraño color rojizo. Su cuerpo fue pintado con cinabrio y el pigmento tiñó los huesos. Las conchas simbolizan la jerarquía del muerto.

CONTINUA

easily as the opportunity, but it can safely be assumed to be money, which of course is the usual motive in prehistoric art faking (ego or pride of craftsmanship could hardly apply in this case). However, our knowledge of the history of the piece since it was carved is too incomplete to learn whether money changed hands.

Señorita Amparo Salazar of the Tepic museum, who very kindly aided me in photographing and studying the specimen, informed me that the carving was brought to the museum by a person from Ixtlán, who donated it. It was stated to have been found near Zacualpa, Municipio of Compostela, south of Tepic. It is hard to believe that money did not change hands at some point—perhaps before the donor acquired it, some collector had purchased it, decided it was a fake, and discarded it.

The culprit is also unknown. Several colleagues who are especially familiar with the faking of archaeological art in Mexico did not recognize the copy as the work of any of the known individuals or regional styles of the faking industry. Perhaps it is the effort of a novice just getting into the business, in Nayarit or elsewhere. When further examples of his work turn up, the question will probably be solved.

Interest in publishing an analysis of this fake goes beyond its obvious amusement value, for reasons well expressed by Gordon F. Ekholm in his article "The Problem of Fakes in Pre-Columbian Art" (*Curator*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1964). The archaeologist, the museum curator, and the artist must all be constantly on guard against fraudulent prehistoric art objects.

This illegitimate industry has been a high-volume, high-profit business for well over a century in Mexico alone. So expert are the fakers at their trade that only the most naive persons will accept at face value assurances of authenticity from the sellers of antiquities no matter what their reputation, whether sophisticated dealers or clever *campesinos* (it is rather like buying a luxury wristwatch at a low price in a dark alley, on the promise that it was stolen—more often than not, it turns out there is either a very cheap movement inside the case, or no mechanism at all). Positive assertions of authenticity most frequently can be traced to the self-interest of the seller, and the ego-involvement or wishful thinking of the collector.

Therefore, unless a piece was excavated by scientists under controlled conditions, the object must speak for itself—it must have inherent within it the *proof* of its authenticity or falsity, or forever remain in doubt as a probable fake.

Falsity is the easier to demonstrate; but faking has become so expert that authenticity can rarely be *proved*, even though in all respects of style and workmanship the piece cannot be challenged.

In the article mentioned above, Ekholm points out how rarely "a fraud has been completely and absolutely exposed through the analysis of its design." As one example he cites a Mexican onyx jar of excellent quality—which turned out, however, to be a proven fake when Ekholm demonstrated that the carved design had had to be copied from some mural paintings over doorways at Mitla which were in their present partially destroyed condition when they were copied by the faker.

The Tepic copy of Tikal's Stela 31 thus is another good example of a fraud exposed by the internal evidence of its own design.

One can only wonder when and where the next Tikal-inspired fake will appear—for others will surely follow. Let us hope they will be as easily detected. . . .

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SUGGESTED READING

WILLIAM R. COE, "Tikal: Ten Years of Study of a Maya Ruin in the Lowlands of Guatemala," *Expedition*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1965.



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