



Fig. 19. Thin stone head, probably Veracruz, Mexico, 9th to 10th Century A.D. 19 cm. long. Catalogue number 54-36-1. Note the constant orientation of the carved facial designs.

## A THIN STONE HEAD FROM MIDDLE AMERICA

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Justifiably famed in the field of Precolumbian Mexican art are various types of related sculpture whose origin appears to have been Veracruz. The Museum has a few specimens in a style best termed "Classic Veracruz" (popularly, "Totonac"), but has long lacked superlative examples. However, recent acquisition of the splendid piece shown here greatly helps to improve this portion of its Middle American collection.

Made of compact limestone, this near life-sized human head is an exceptionally fine representative of what are non-committally called "thin stone heads." Often, though, one hears them referred to as "*hachas*," the Spanish for "axes." Surely by mere coincidence the general form vaguely resembles that of an axe. This old feature is to be seen here, for, in cross-section, there is a decided taper towards the face as well as a flattened back surface. The crested scroll head has been symmetrically carved on both sides. Facial contour, mouth scroll, pronounced brow-line, forehead ornament, and complicated raised element on the cheek are all diagnostic traits reappearing singly and in combination on other known thin stone heads. Non-depiction of pupils and teeth is less specific but in a way still distinctive. A fairly common motif in such sculpture is an exotic, zoomorphic headdress. This piece conceivably possesses one.

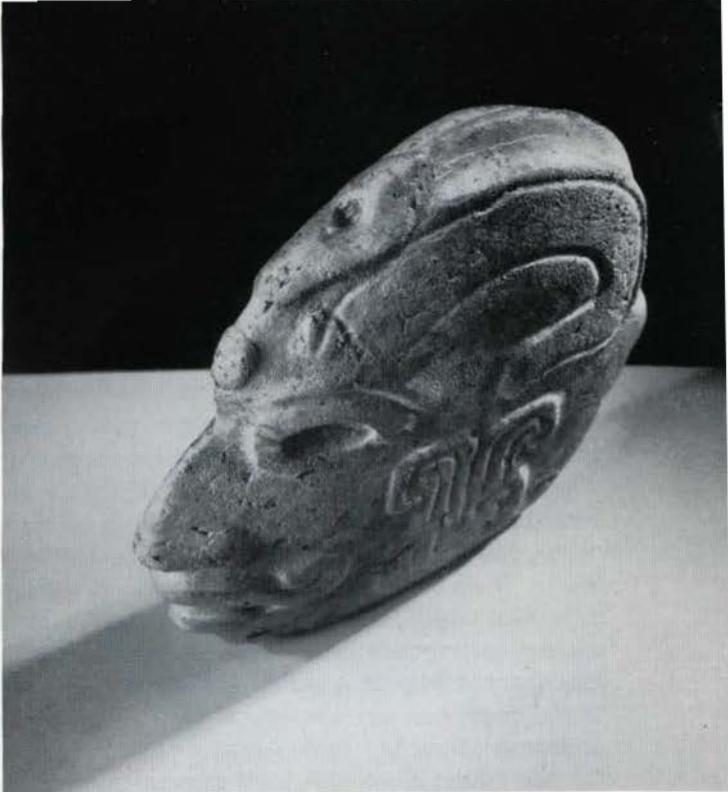
The distribution in Middle America of thin stone heads ranges from Central Mexico southeast to western El Salvador. But there can be little doubt that Veracruz on the Gulf Coast was the primary center of their manufacture as well as the source of their diffusion. The Pacific Coastal region of Guatemala might well have been a second center. Heads from there, however, are in some ways different from those known to be from Veracruz. These distinctions, analyzed by Tatiana Proskouriakoff, Gordon Ekholm, and others, point with fair certainty to Veracruz as the

original home of the Museum's thin stone head. Yet, it very possibly was found far from its true source.

Even rough dating of the carving is not easy. Most *hachas* seem to belong to the Middle American Classic period—an era usually but by no means confidently considered to fall between A.D. 300 and 900 to 1000. Miss Proskouriakoff distinguishes between heavy and thin specimens, assigning the latter to the late Classic Period. Our specimen's approximate two inch thickness thus suggests that it was carved during this period.

Beyond problems of provenience and dating is the question of function. This particular carving shows neither a rear deep notch nor a well-defined tenon found on many other recorded thin stone heads. Still, it does possess what might be considered a minimal or vestigial tenon on its back surface. This is mentioned because slight but good evidence has been collected by Gordon Ekholm for the wearing of such heads as ceremonial ornaments on the person. A clay human figurine, illustrated by him, from Los Tuxtlas in Veracruz, has what appears to be a thin stone head projecting forward from a broad belt. The exact method of attachment remains speculative. This is especially true for the Museum's specimen. Mere insertion in something else which was secured to a belt would not have sufficed to hold it in place, and binding or hafting necessarily would have obscured much facial detail. One should note, however, the small depression above the forehead. Possibly this and utilization of the crest would have helped to attach the head. On the other hand, its base is sufficiently squared for it to stand free and vertical with only slight rocking.

Fine as this piece is, we can only tentatively assign positions for it in time and space and, with less confidence, point to its possible use. However, it does have important associations, forming part of an outstanding sculptural complex centered in Veracruz. In many respects, this complex ultimately relates to the famed local site of Tajín. In addition to thin stone heads, it includes beautiful and famous closed and open stone "yokes," which were elaborately carved with humans, animals, interlaced scrolls, and other elements. These decorative features also appear on the associated *palmas*—vertically oriented, notched-base sculptures, long sought after for their wonderful lines and depictive content. And then there are the delightful pottery figurines known aptly as "Laughing-faces." The production of all these coincided in the Late Classic Period. The



Figs. 20-21. Views of head illustrating its thinness and the animalistic quality of the headdress. The forward depression may have helped secure the head.

distribution of these latter components of the complex never seems to have equalled that of thin stone heads.

Although made of limestone, hard, dark, angular inclusions occur throughout the piece. This is a geological oddity that might prove of use in eventually pin-pointing the head's exact place of origin.

The Museum's new addition possesses a particularly interesting feature, namely, the puzzling design on its cheeks. No ear is present and the design is conceivably a substitute for that organ. It might represent a facial tattoo or scarification. If glyphic, its meaning is unknown. Something quite comparable, though, is to be seen on the face of another *hacha*, illustrated by Pál Keleman in his *Medieval American Art* (Plate 66a). A long-nosed deity, with earplug, stylized teeth, and pendant bifurcated scrolls, is evidently depicted there. The design on the Museum's carving corresponds in line and execution, and shows the forked scrolls. Elsewhere in Middle America this bifurcated element is a serpent symbol. Facial devices of any sort appear to be relatively rare in Classic Veracruz sculpture. Someday their meanings may be realized as data grow, and, for that reason alone, this head deserves recording.

Few have failed to equate the degree of artistry seen in Veracruz carvings with that achieved by the Maya to the southeast. It is hoped that the Museum may be able, slowly and carefully, to accumulate a small but excellent representation of typical objects from this Veracruz region. They are products of an important American culture about which relatively little is now known, but they are products which can be immediately appreciated as masterpieces of American Indian art. Without such acquisitions, there can be little hope of ever adequately illustrating in our Museum the diversity, profundity, and, in a sense, unity of Middle American cultures.