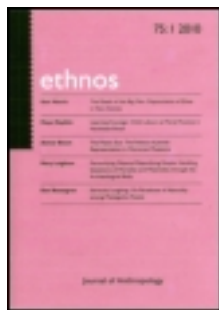


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An unusual effigy flute from Quelepa, El Salvador

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An Unusual Effigy Flute from Quelepa, El Salvador

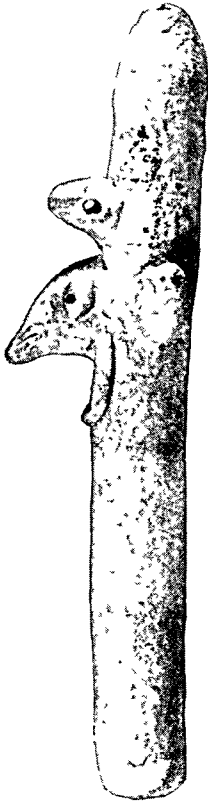
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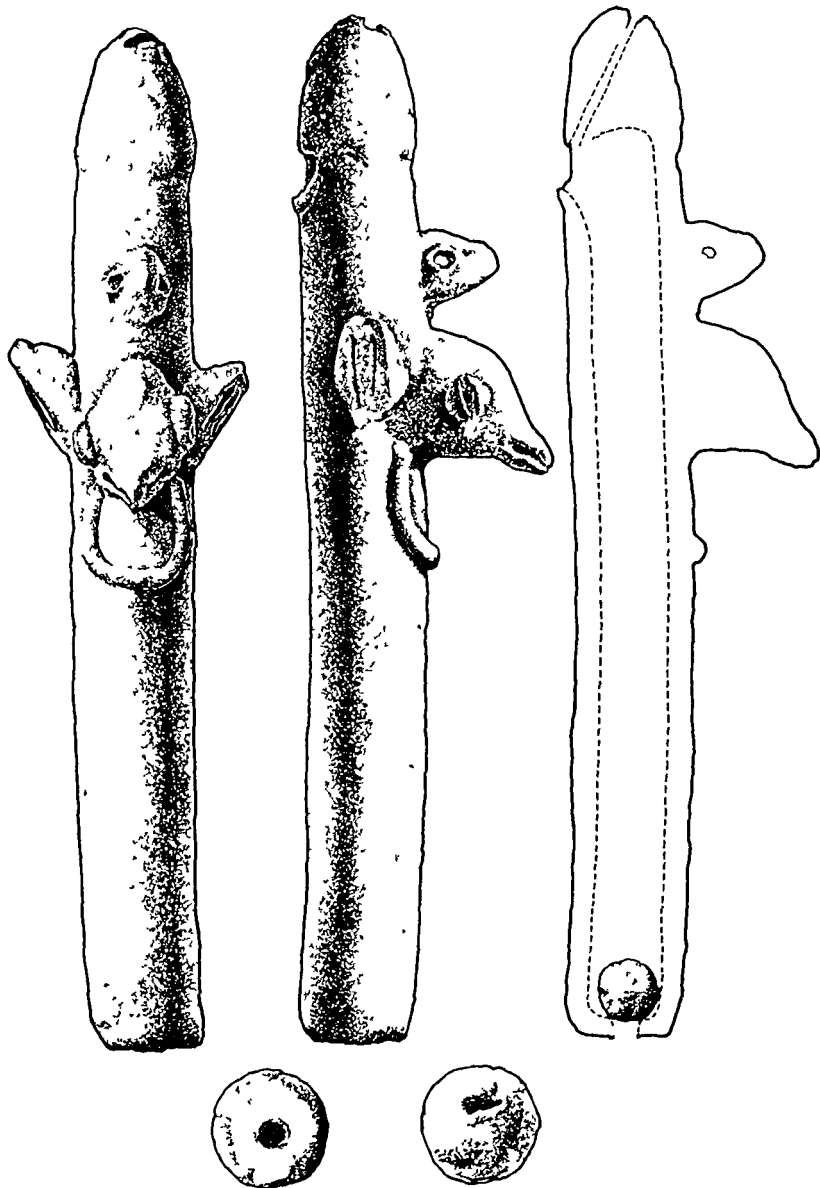
The archaeological zone of Quelepa is located about eight kilometers to the northwest of the town of San Miguel, in eastern El Salvador. The site has been recognized since the early part of the twentieth century as the largest and possibly the most important east of the Lempa River, with a ceremonial center of over one half a square kilometer. During the summer of 1967 and the dry season of 1968=1969 the author was engaged in excavations at this site. Quelepa has produced a continuous architectural and ceramic sequence extending from 500=300 B.C. to about A.D. 900 or 1000, when the site appears to have been abandoned. The final report on these excavations is in preparation (Andrews, n.d.).

In September 1969 Mr. Theodore Foley, a friend of the author, purchased an effigy flute from an inhabitant of the municipality of Quelepa, from which the site derives its name. Although the exact provenience of the artifact is not known, the person who sold it to Foley said that it came from the surface, about two or three hundred yards south of the Rio San Esteban, which marks the southern boundary of the known architecture at the site. This would place it about three or four hundred yards south of the Late Classic ceremonial center, in an area over which are scattered large numbers of sherds and fragments of obsidian. Burials occur frequently in this area, and it is possible that the flute was washed out of a burial exposed by plowing. The excellent condition of the artifact suggests that it had not been exposed to erosion for any great length of time. It is presently in Mr. Foley's collection.

The flute is a clay cylinder, 18 centimeters long, with an average diameter of about 2.3 centimeters. Two modeled appliqué bird heads

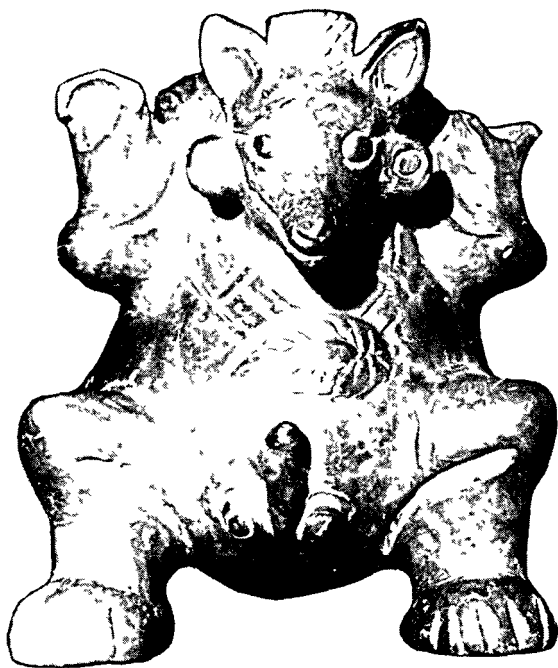


are attached to the shaft about one-third of the way down the cylinder from the rounded end. The other end is flattened. (See Figure 2 and Plate 1.) The inside of the flute is hollow and contains a clay ball which blocks the passage of most of the air beyond its position in the tube. By holding the flute horizontally with the heads facing down, so that the ends of the tube are slightly higher than the center, and blowing through the rounded end, one creates a sound of variable tone, depending on the ball's position in the tube. When started, the ball tends to roll the entire length of the tube, but a bit of practice on the part of the native musician probably resulted in good tonal control. The hole at the flattened end of the cylinder, when covered, functions as a stop, as on conventional whistles.



Doña Maria de Baratta, a noted Salvadoran musicologist, looked at the flute. Figure 1 illustrates Mrs. Baratta's estimation of the tonal range of the instrument. *A* shows the modulation produced by the rolling ball when the flute is blown strongly and weakly, and *b* shows the single tone produced with the ball at the proximal end and the half note produced when the stop at the proximal end of the instrument is covered. Mrs. Baratta also suggested that the modulated sound is similar to the song of a Salvadoran bird commonly called "*dichoso fui*" or *ruiseñor*. This bird is probably *Catharus aurantiurostris bangsi* (Rand and Traylor 1961:231). In view of the modeled bird head on the shaft, this suggestion seems noteworthy.

The other interesting characteristic of this instrument is its clear resemblance to an erect human penis. This likeness is suggested by its overall form, the shape of the two end openings, and the bulging tapered area at the distal end. This last modeled feature would seem to indicate circumcision.



Evidence for circumcision is rare in this area. Shepard illustrates two plumbate animal effigy vessels with erect members (1948, Fig. 15, a, b). The first of these I have rephotographed (Plate 2).

The flute is of a fine-paste clay classifiable as Obrajuelo Plain, the major Late Classic plain ware at Quelepa. The surface is an unslipped dull orange with visible polishing marks. In the protected areas where the bird heads join the shaft of the flute, traces of white paint are evident. There is a light blue painted stripe on the shaft of the flute, and traces of this same paint appear around the two heads. The original owner of the piece has sold other small clay objects with the same blue paint on them, and since no blue paint has been found on excavated material from Quelepa, I am quite sure this decoration is recent. The two bird heads are of a common Late Classic Quelepa type, as are the incised wings of the lower bird, which has a coarse appliqué necklace below the head. Stylized but more carefully shaped heads of the upper type are found on Late Classic jars with low vertical or insloping necks. This upper head may have been a loop for suspension, although it was never used as such. I have not been able to isolate an Early Postclassic phase at Quelepa, and it is very unlikely that the flute was made later than A.D. 1000.

I know of no similar musical instrument in Mesoamerica. Late Classic whistles, although not common, do occur at Quelepa. These, however, are typically squat, small animal or human effigies with one or two holes for stops.

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