

STONE JAGUARS IN ISTHMIAN HOUSEHOLDS

Ursula Jones

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the decorated metate of prehispanic Lower Central America, and specifically the use of the jaguar motif.

The jaguar is the most powerful animal in the tropical forest region of Central America, and in the iconography of prehistoric isthmian societies the jaguar motif appears abundantly in ceramic, gold and stone artefacts. It is particularly prominently used in the decoration of metates, the grinding stones for processing corn and other foodstuffs.

In Lower Central America people fashioned some of their metates in a highly individual and sophisticated way, both in form and decoration, for a period of at least 1500 years prior to the Spanish arrival. Carved from single blocks of volcanic rock they vary in size from less than 20cm to over 1m in length. Some have simple low-relief decorations only, others appear with fantastically carved panels hanging below the grinding platform or with atlantean figures supporting the grinding top. During the last five or six centuries before the Spanish arrival, effigy metates became popular, with the jaguar appearing as the most frequently represented animal.

It is argued here that the jaguar motif, as used by isthmian societies in the decoration of their metates, was not necessarily bound up with intricate cosmological beliefs as seemed the case in Mesoamerica and Central Andean South America; but that, by using the motif of the most powerful creature around him, man in Lower Central America simply expressed his close link with his environment and perhaps his desire to acquire the potential qualities of the jaguar for himself.

Introduction

In geographical terms Lower Central America (in the following text referred to as LCA) is the isthmus region linking Middle America with South America; it includes eastern Honduras, the southeast corner of El Salvador, and all of Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama (Fig. 1). It should be added that the aforementioned delineation is somewhat arbitrarily based on cultural considerations.

LCA is a comparatively small tropical area, but with an

environment full of variety. An almost continuous chain of volcanoes forms the backbone of the region; some peaks reach altitudes of over 3000m. On the Pacific side a dry narrow plain runs along the coast, and the Caribbean side is dominated by a wide, low and humid atlantic watershed. The line of volcanoes, which borders the Pacific edge of Central America from the Mexico-Guatemalan frontier into Costa Rica and western Panama, is only once interrupted by a granitic intrusion in southwestern Costa Rica, forming the Cordillera de Talamanca. Apart from this granitic area, the most common rocks in the isthmian region are of andesitic and basaltic types (Stevens 1964: 268). These rocks are fine-grained and have a predominance of dark-coloured minerals which are particularly rich for plant nutrition. Precolumbian man in LCA was thus favoured not only with naturally fertile volcanic soils, but also with the best raw material for the production of his grinding tools.

In cultural terms LCA forms the northwestern part of what Gordon Willey (1971: 255) has described as the 'Intermediate Area', the region between the two high cultures of Mesoamerica and Central Andean South America. Cultural traditions of these two areas influenced the evolution in the isthmian region to varying degrees at different times, but evidence indicates that, besides these, important indigenous developments took place producing an essentially LCA cultura (Lange and Stone, 1984). Amongst the rich and varied material culture stone sculpture takes a pre-eminent place.

The region's richly varied environment is reflected in the diversity of cultural patterns within LCA. Different zones with distinct cultural traditions can be identified. For my own purposes I am subdividing the region into six cultural subareas (Fig. 2):

- Northern Zone (NZ)
- Greater Nicoya (GN)
- Central Cost Rica (CCR)
- Greater Chiriqui (CGh)
- Central Panama (CPA)
- Eastern Panama (EPA)

The metate

One of the specific cultural features which defines LCA is the carved and decorated metate. It appears in the archaeological record in all the subareas, with the exception of Eastern Panama. Metate is the name popularly used for the stone grinding slab on which corn and other stuffs are ground with a hand-held stone called a mano. The term metate is of Mexican Nahua origin, but it is used to describe grinding stones of Precolumbian America generally. Metates and manos are subsistence-related tools and, as such, are indicators of agriculture. They have formed part of the standard household equipment in the Americas for thousands of years. They are generally carved from volcanic rock. The andesitic and basaltic types, as referred to earlier, are ideal for grinding purposes, especially as they are on the whole of a vesicular nature.

The two most common metate forms are, on the one hand, those with

rectangular rimless curved-plate grinding tops and, on the other, the rimmed or concave metates which appear in rectangular, oval or circular form. The former type is usually three-legged and associated with the Mexican method of maize grinding: they soak their corn first and then grind it while still wet by rolling it on the metate with a long cylindrical or tapering mano, and forming it into tortillas (Fig. 3).

The other type is used for grinding dry corn into flour, - the traditional method outside Mesoamerica. This latter type appears in a great variety of shape and size which means that the purpose of these metates was not uniform, but that they were probably used for grinding all kinds of stuffs apart from corn: nuts, seeds and beans, and also for crushing and mashing tubers, fruits and berries and for grinding and pulverizing pigments, medicines tobacco etc. I therefore call this type 'multi-purpose metate' in contrast to the Mesoamerican type which is used exclusively for corn grinding and which I call 'special purpose metate'.

In LCA - and apparently only there - people in prehispanic times carved some of their metates in a highly individual and sophisticated manner, both in form and decoration. These decorated metates remained an exclusive feature of LCA for over 1500 years prior to the Spanish arrival and rank among the most extraordinary examples of stone sculpture in prehispanic America. Carved from single pieces of volcanic rock - without metal tools, but with only stone, wooden and perhaps bone tools - they display not only truly remarkable and refined craftsmanship, but also a highly imaginative artistic sense.

The majority of decorated metates show traces of wear from grinding, and we can assume therefore that they were used regularly in the Precolumbian household. There are relatively few without wear marks, or with slight evidence of wear only. In a total of 212 decorated metates which I examined, I found a mere 5% with little or no trace of wear. The very highly ornate metates fall into this category as well as some oversize ones with platforms too thin and fragile for daily usage. This evidence infers a non-utilitarian special function for such metates. It is thought that these were used in ceremonial or ritual contexts.

Some metates have just simple geometric low- and high-relief decorations, whereas others appear as zoomorphic effigies or with human or animal figures supporting the grinding top. The most elaborate ones are those with fantastically carved-out panels hanging below the grinding platforms.

The jaguar motif in the decoration of LCA metates

The jaguar (*Felis onca centralis*) occurs in LCA, as does the ocelot (*Felis pardalis aequatorialis*) and the puma (*Felis concolor*). As they are distinguished primarily by their colouring, it is not really possible to identify one from the other in the mainly grey stone sculpture of LCA. Since the jaguar is popularly recognized as a power symbol in tropical Central America, I will use the 'jaguar' in this paper when referring to the feline motif in the decoration of metates.

The earliest appearance of the jaguar in CCR is on the so-called 'flying-panel' metates which belong to the period AD 1-500 (Fig. 4). Unfortunately none of these elaborately carved objects have been recovered from controlled excavations, except a fragment, i.e. a broken plate belonging to such a 'flying-panel' metate, which was recovered from a cache or burial beneath a habitation floor at the Severo Ledesma site in Atlantic Watershed CR (Snarskis 1984: 155) associated with material with radiocarbon dates between 50 BC and AD 350. It is thought that these metates, with such highly complex carved imagery, were probably used for special occasions only; on the whole they show very slight signs of wear, and the number known of this type is comparatively small.

In the five or six centuries prior to the Spanish arrival, the circular pedestal metate appears to be the successor to the elaborately carved 'flying-panel' metate of earlier times in CCR. These specimens are beautifully proportioned and are often decorated around the rim with jaguar heads (Fig. 5). A particularly fine example of this kind (Aguilar 1972: 122) was found at Guayabo de Turrialba in the early part of this century; it has intricately carved miniature jaguars hanging from the edge of the platform (Fig. 6). A specimen in wood (a considerable rarity in tropical regions), similar to these circular pedestal metates, was recovered from a cache at Retes, Cartago, for which a C14 date of AD 960 was obtained (Stone 1972: 181).

From about the 4th century A.D. onwards, right up to the Spanish arrival, metates appeared often as effigies, carved in the shape of realistic or stylized animals, - birds, alligators, coyotes and jaguars. In GN such zoomorphic effigy metates were manufactured between about AD 300 - 700 in the shape of rimless curved-plate tripods with an animal head at one end, often in highly stylized form (Fig. 8).

In CCR and GCh effigy metates appeared somewhat later, after AD 900, but from then onwards in great abundance. In these cultural subareas the jaguar seems to be the most frequently represented animal. At the site of Las Mercedes in the Atlantic lowlands of CR, hundreds of metates were found in the late 19th century by Minor C. Keith, who was involved with the building of the Old Line railway. He excavated and collected there but, unfortunately, without recording any excavation details. Keith's vast collection of some 16000 CR artefacts was brought to the USA, but finally sadly split up into various museum collections. Fortunately the stone work had been meticulously catalogued earlier by J. Alden Mason (1945) for the American Museum of Natural History. The Las Mercedes metates appear in various sizes and shapes: jaguar effigies, double-headed rectangular metates and circular ones supported by jaguars (Fig. 9). Amongst the effigy metates the jaguar effigies amount to over 70%.

Problems of interpretation

It is tempting to speculate with possible mythological and cosmological meanings of the jaguar motif as used by prehispanic isthmian societies. The jaguar appears not only with metates, but also with ceramic and gold artefacts. A complex system of beliefs undoubtedly once underlay the LCA iconography, but that system is no

longer with us. Neither do we have any documentary evidence from the pre-Conquest period. Compared to Mesoamerica, we have precious little ethnohistoric documentation of the myths and rituals in prehispanic LCA. Furthermore, the majority of the peasant society of today has little in common with the indigenous past. The present day pure Indian population amounts to less than 7% in LCA overall.

Since the jaguar motif is so ubiquitous in the iconography of prehistoric isthmian societies we can assume that it had more than merely decorative meaning.

Reichel-Dolmatoff (1972: 51ff.) believes that it is not suitable to speak of 'feline cults' or of the jaguar as a 'divine' personification in the Intermediate Area. Referring to Colombia he says that "the jaguar motif presents far more simple fundamental characteristics than in the two high culture areas to the north and south where the jaguar motif underwent a much more complex development".

Edmund Leach believes (1954: 103-105) that "the designs of primitive peoples are seldom abstract in any genuine sense". It is true that, in LCA, there are no clear indications of the kinds or levels of complexity that characterize the developed states of either Mexico or Peru. Evidence shows that most of LCA never evolved beyond a low or intermediate chiefdom stage (Lange and Stone 1984: 8). It is a fact, however, that man's basic reaction to experience is the same whatever the social level; it is only when human reaction manifests and expresses itself in ideas that infinite variations occur.

The jaguar is the largest feline in the American continent (its length from nose to tail varies between 120 - 190cm) and it occurs throughout the tropical forest region, where it is the most powerful animal. The jaguar's appetite is catholic - from peccary, deer, monkey to turtles and even cayman and fish. Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971: 212) writes that the Desana of Eastern Colombia, for example, emphasizes that "the jaguar is an animal that lives in a number of different environments; it lives in the densest parts of the jungle, climbs trees, swims in the water, and roams about by day and night. It is then an animal that participates in various dimensions, air, land, and water, and belongs to light as well as to darkness" or, in the words of Helms (1977: 56) the jaguar represents "an anomalous creature which 'crosses' universal segments by living in different environments".

For the historic Bribri of southern CR the jaguar was a "hunter, killer, warrior, clansman, uncle, brother-in-law; a symbol of power and the equivalent to the eagles above and the crocodiles in the water" (Bozzoli 1975: 180).

The Tukano tribes in the Amazon (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1972: 62) talk of hallucinogenic drugs derived from certain plants as 'jaguar's sperm' or 'jaguar seed'. When absorbed they impregnate the user with the 'essence' of the jaguar, its vital energy and fertilizing power. The Tukano also believe that the jaguar's thunderous roar announces the fertilizing rains, and its bright colour represents for them the colour of the East, - the rising sun, - the seminal colour of creation and growth.

Linares (1976: 8) has noted that prehistoric Panamanian artefacts depict most often animals that are dangerous to man; dangerous animals are worthy adversaries, incorporating qualities that warriors should possess (Snarskis 1985: 27). Jaguar effigies and the combination of jaguars and trophyheads in metates seem to express this concept. For isthmian man the jaguar thus became a symbol for power, - a metaphor for chieftainship and warriorship and also of fertility.

Referring to the highly ornate metates Snarskis (1981: 44) has suggested that these may have represented 'badges of office' belonging to tribal chiefs who controlled production, distribution and processing of vital crops. In his opinion the apparent population expansion in LCA around the time of Christ was "the result of a dynamic feedback relationship between improved maize agriculture, new communities and growing competition for arable land, creating an increasing need to obtain land and insure its tenure, to ritualize cyclical agricultural procedures and to administer the redistribution of food and other articles". Consequently ritual corn grinding or ritual processing of other foods could have been an important aspect in ceremonies relating to agricultural cycles. Some of the more elaborately carved metates such as the early 'flying-panel' metate in Atlantic Watershed Costa Rica, and the fine circular pedestal ones of later times, were perhaps the 'property' of such chiefs or, alternatively, the 'public property' of specific tribes or communities who used them in such ceremonies. The relatively limited number of highly decorated metates would support such an interpretation. It is not inconceivable that some of the more solid pedestal metates and some of the tabular metates may have served the dual purpose of grinding implement and seat or 'throne' of tribal chiefs (Fig. 10). In the absence of relevant documentary evidence further speculation would seem inappropriate.

But what about the vast quantity of jaguar effigy metates of the Late Period? I would like to argue that these metates reflect principally man's close relationship with his environment and his desire to identify with the powerful qualities of creatures in the world of nature around him. By linking himself with the most powerful creature of the wild and dangerous world outside, he makes that 'outside' world his own. The jaguar effigy metate and the use of the jaguar motif in the decoration of metates may have been a direct attempt to close the gap between 'here and there'. By carving his foodprocessing tool - the vital utensil for his existence - into the shape of the most powerful animal around him, man linked himself with the jaguar's attributes and counted on absorbing the potential qualities of the feline for himself. In other words, perhaps we should look upon the jaguar motif in the decoration of isthmian metates as representing both a useful and potent status symbol.

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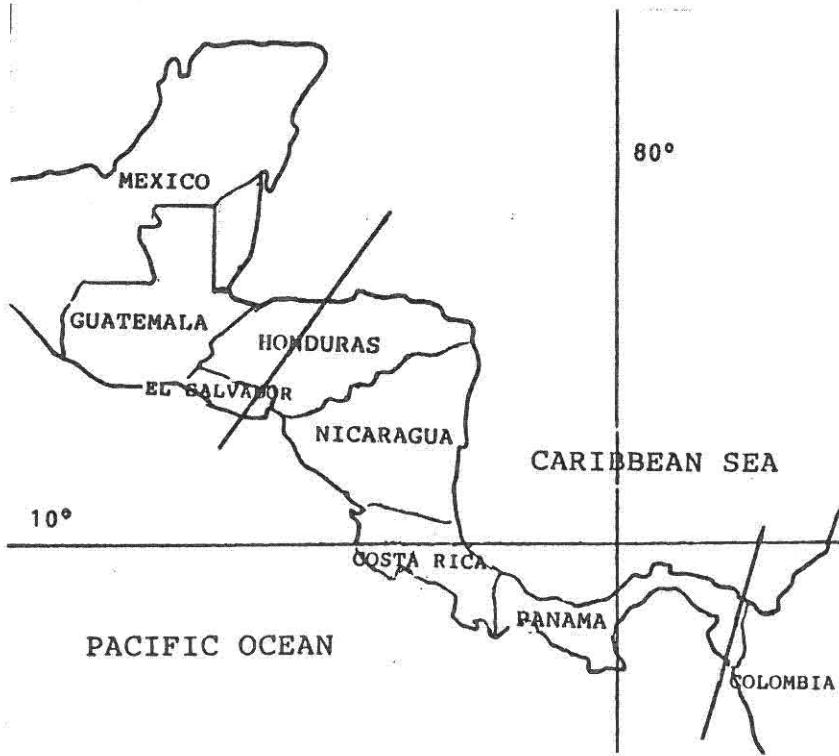


Fig. 1. Orientation Map.

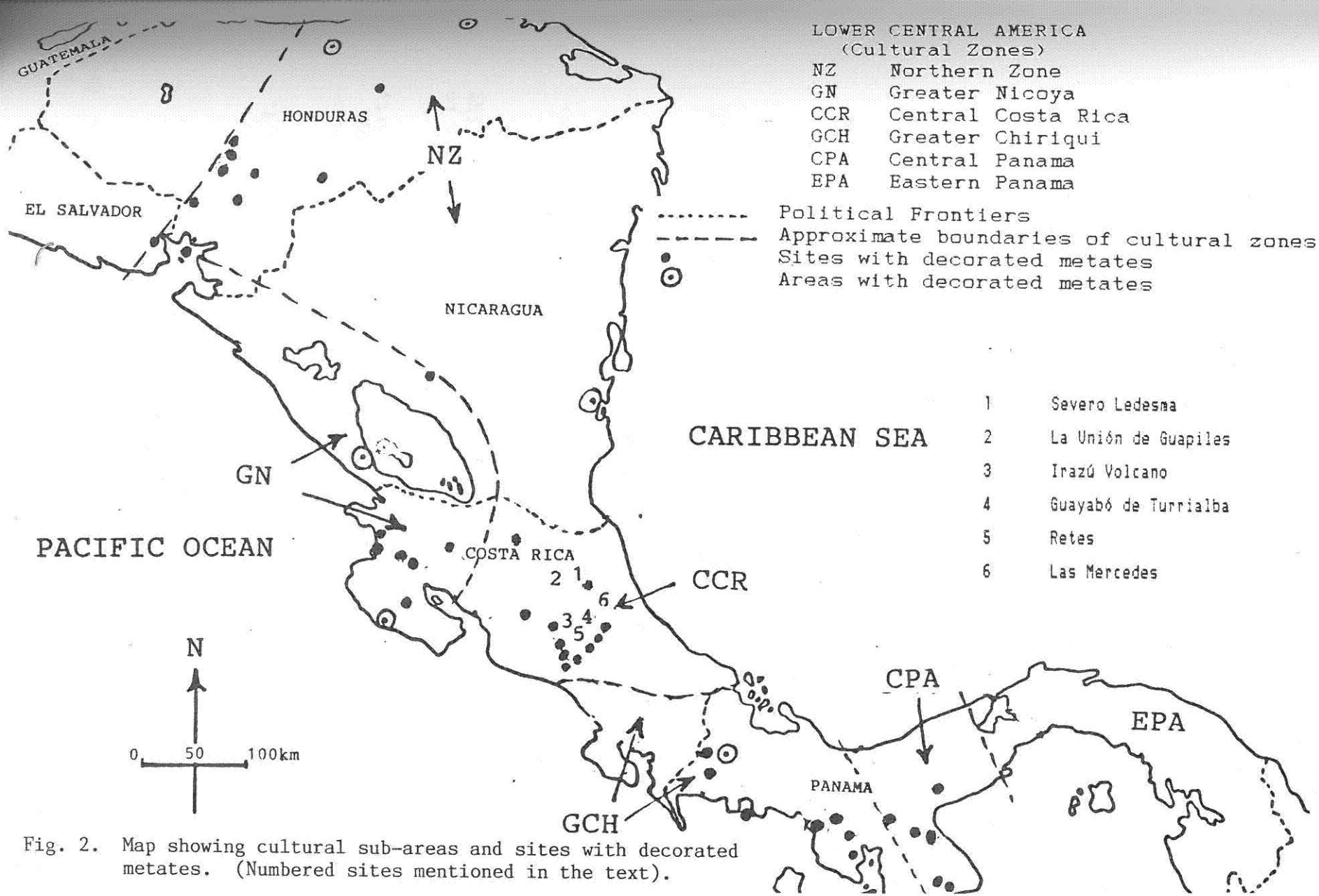




Fig. 3. 'Modo di fare il pane'; (from Benzoni 1572: I: 57).

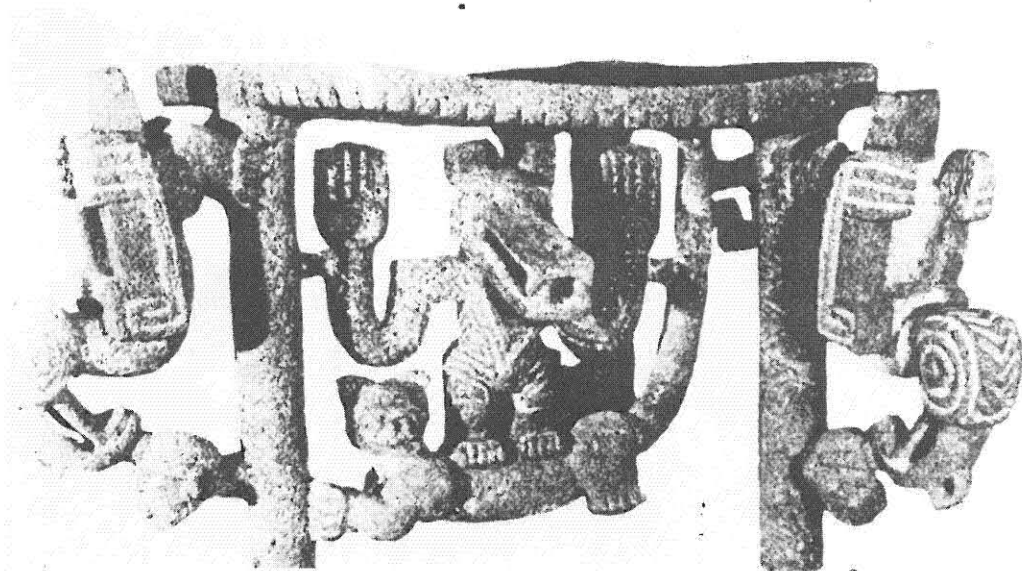


Fig. 4. Flying-panel metate, length: 82cm, Museo Nacional de Costa Rica 73.981; reportedly from La Unión de Gúapiles (from Stone 1977: 173).

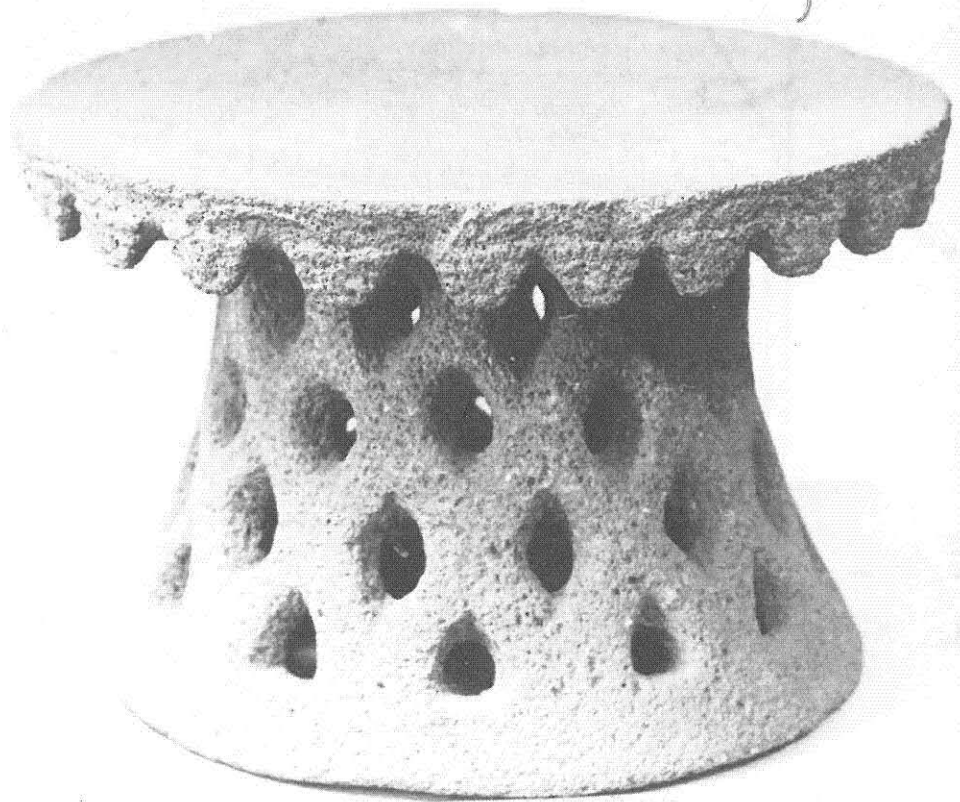


Fig. 5. Circular pedestal metate, diameter: 44cm, Völkerkunden-museum Wien, 61519; reportedly from southwestern slope of Irazú Volcano (photograph author).

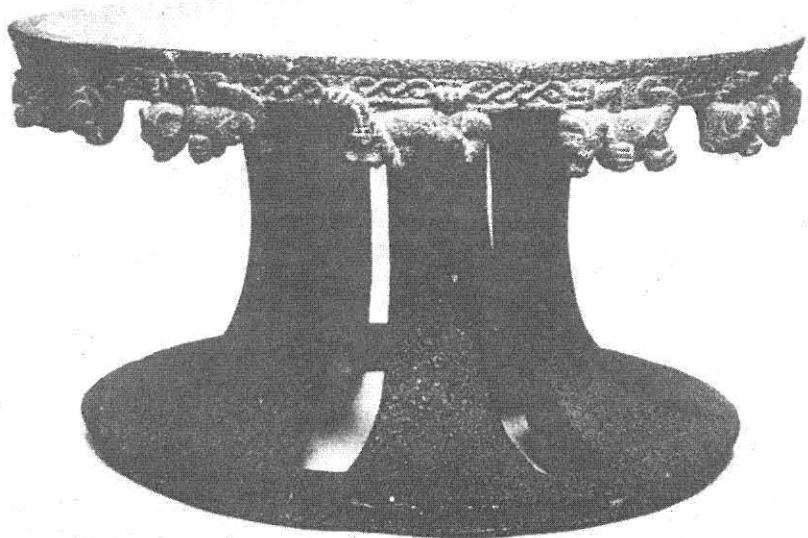


Fig. 6. Circular pedestal metate, diameter: 75cm, Museo Nacional de Costa Rica 108; reportedly from Guayabó de Turrialba (from Snarskis 1981: pl. 53).

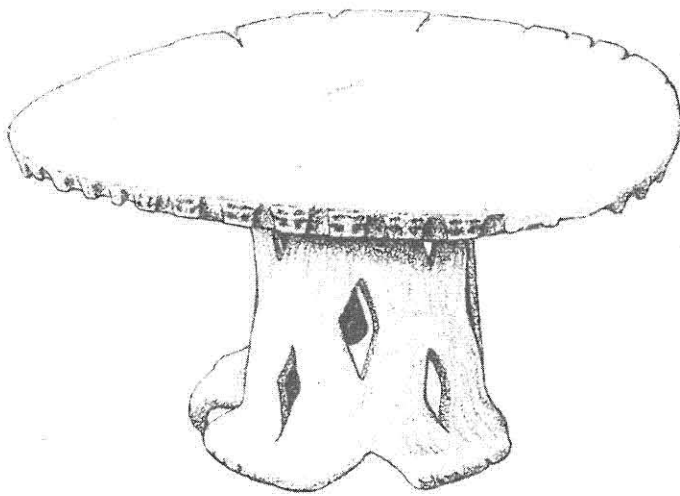


Fig. 7. Wooden table from Retes, Cartago, diameter: 48.5cm, Museo Nacional de Costa Rica 12.606 (from Stone 1972: 181).

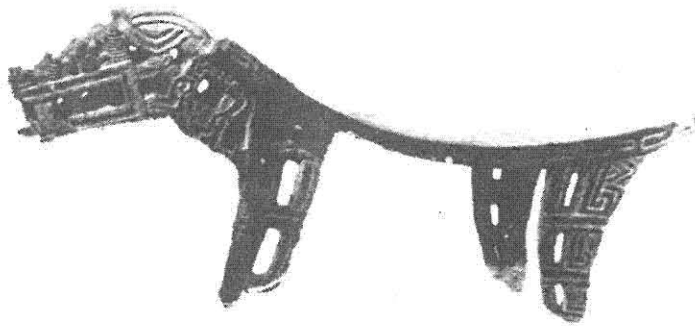


Fig. 8. Effigy tripod metate, length: 82cm, Collection Sra. M.E. Jiménez de Roy (from Ferrero 1977: 278).



Fig. 9. A selection of metates from Las Mercedes (from Mason 1945: pl. 22B, length: 32cm; pl. 20D, length: 45cm; pl. 28C, diameter: 21cm; pl. 21A, length: 51.4cm).

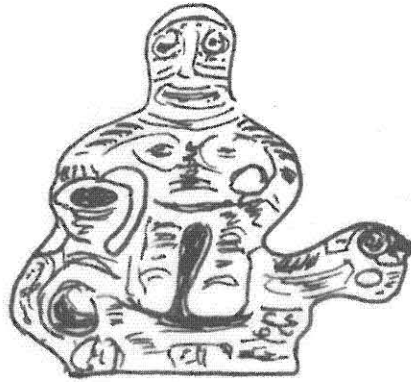


Fig. 10. Human figure with vessel sitting on a jaguar effigy metate; pottery figurine from Diquis CR (after Snarskis 1982: 126).