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INDIAN NOTES
AND MONOGRAPHS



A SERIES OF PUBLICA-
TIONS RELATING TO THE
AMERICAN ABORIGINES

VOL. VI, No. 2

NEW YORK
MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN
HEYE FOUNDATION

1919

Publications of the Museum of the
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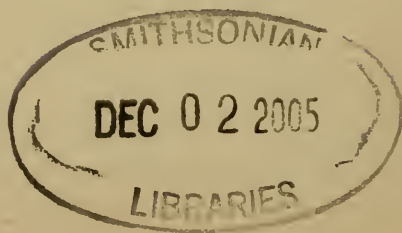
1919

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THE DISCOVERY OF
GOLD IN THE GRAVES
OF CHIRIQUI, PANAMA

BY

S. K. LOTHROP



THE DISCOVERY OF GOLD IN THE GRAVES OF CHIRIQUI

By S. K. LOTHROP



FROM the earliest period of the Spanish exploration of the New World the Province of Chiriqui has been noted for gold; indeed, the north coasts of Chiriqui and Veragua were known as Castilla de Oro. The adjoining coast to the west and north received the name of Costa Rica, also in token of the richness of the inhabitants in the precious metal. The early efforts of the Spanish explorers were devoted to seizing from the natives all available supplies of gold, and we read of large sums being secured with comparatively little effort. Later, attempts to mine gold in this region proved unsuccessful.

Although the presence of gold in pre-historic graves had been discovered soon after the conquest in South America, and laws regulating their exploitation had been passed in the early part of the seventeenth century, yet in Chiriqui the presence of gold in the graves was not detected until the middle of the nineteenth century. The cemeteries of Bugaba, Bugabita, and Boquete were opened in the year 1859, and accounts of the discoveries appeared in print during the following year. However, the earliest account of the discovery of gold in the graves of this region appears in a manuscript report of the travels of the Costa Rican explorer, José Maria Figueroa, of which the following is an extract:

“At that time Morazán¹ was notified that a native of Santiago² and his companion had obtained two arrobas³ of gold from a grave in a cemetery on the Cordillera Madre, and this burial-ground was situated in the midst of pasture land⁴ opposite Cañas Gordas, and was clearly visible from the small hill at David.

“The General determined to investigate the reliability of this report and bade that the companion of the Santiagueño be summoned, as the latter had gone to Santiago. I was a witness of what the companion of the man from Santiago told the General in the presence of the most notable personages of David. This man confessed that he had gone with his companion to cross the Cordillera Madre, and to seek on the farther side the source of the River Terri where they say were the mines of La Estrella, and that in climbing the cordillera they had come to a kind of pasture on the extreme summit, and this pasture was encircled with pillars of stone (columns), some with inscriptions, about ten yards apart, and many burials of the ancient Indians, and in the center of this pasture was a rock in the form of a great mound covered with hieroglyphics, and in the center of the rock was a large star carved in relief; and he and his companion understood that this was a place of burial and they resolved to excavate one of the

tombs, and they were surprised to find a little bowl filled with powdered gold and a lot of figures of gold of various shapes and sizes, and the man said that

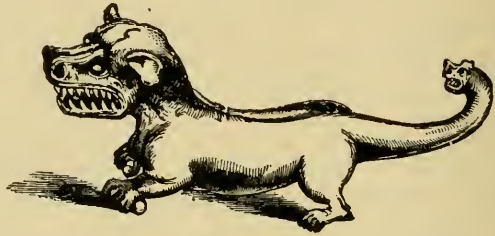
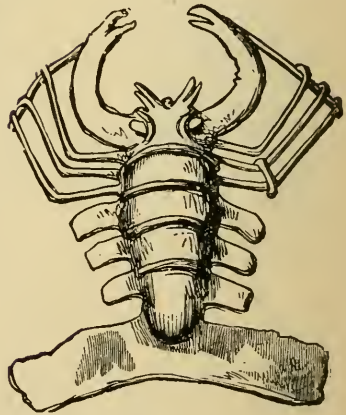
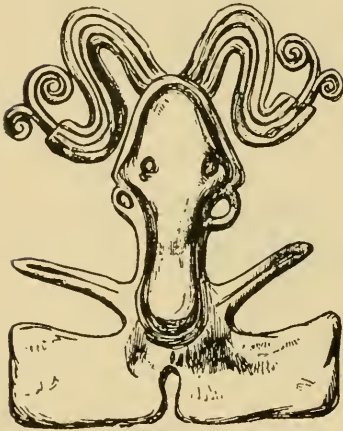


FIG. 1.—Gold objects from Bugubita, Chiriqui.

they did not continue working the excavation of other tombs because they were running short of provisions and because



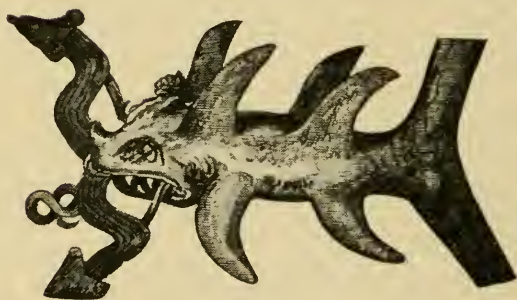
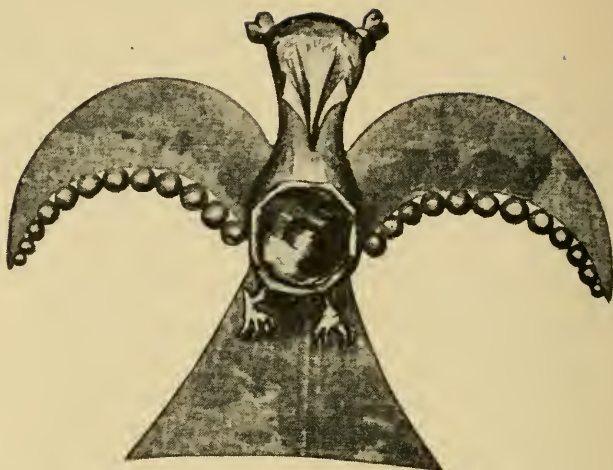
GOLD OBJECTS FROM BUGUBITA, CHIRIQUI

they did not possess the wraps necessary to endure the cold in such an elevated locality, and they therefore determined to descend to the foot of the peak, and, with much labor, lowering themselves over the large rocks and cliffs by means of vines, they succeeded in going down to the less rugged part of the mountain, and thence made their way to David to supply themselves with provisions and to return to the cemetery with sufficient resources to make all possible excavations.

“‘The gold dust,’ said this man, ‘and the pieces of this metal weighed two arrobas, which we divided between us, each retaining an arroba. A part we sold to equip ourselves to carry out this second expedition, taking with us six men to carry provisions and also under contract to work in the excavations. We undertook the journey; arrived at the foot of the Cordillera, we could not find the spot at which we had gone up the first time, and we started to look for that point; for several days we continued

this exploration without being able to discover the ascent; then we had to return, as we had spent a month on the journey to which I refer. Later we undertook two additional trips, always with the same result, until we had expended in travels what we had taken and an equal amount from our own funds.⁵ Finally my companion departed for Santiago, his home.'

"This was the story told by the companion of the man from Santiago; and in spite of the bad result of his expedition, Morazán and all those that heard the above relation became most enthusiastic and thereupon took up the question of forming a company for exploration and excavations in the above-mentioned cemetery, for which purpose they spoke to the deponent and other natives of Chiriqui of those that had accompanied the former expeditions. And I, a young man of twenty years, rendered most enthusiastic by what I heard and by the desire that I had of beholding that spot, offered my services for the journey as a companion.



GOLD OBJECTS FROM BUGUBITA, CHIRIQUI

I was accepted, and all paid their quota for the new expedition, which from that day was organized in earnest. . . .

“We all set forth from David on the twenty-sixth day of July in the year 1840 by the old trail in the direction of Cañas Gordas; thence we penetrated to the mountain in the direction of the Cordillera Madre. Arrived at the mountain, we could not find the trail of the ascent, and the guide, involved in the difficulties of the forest, did not know on which side lay the way up. After six days of tramping in excursions from one side to the other, we resolved to climb to the summit by the way which seemed easiest, but it was impossible, for there were rocks perpendicular as if cut by intent, composed of brittle, rough stone, which one of the young men started to ascend, tore loose a stone which was insecure, and came down in such a way that he was cut and bruised and almost killed. The other young men were terrified and would not risk the ascent; we had to give up the attempt, and we returned,

carrying the injured man in a barbecue, or basket. . . .

“In David we rendered account to the company of the ill-fortune of the journey, . . . but those people persisted in their mania for Indian graves, and finally they obtained their end in the cemetery of Bugabita,⁶ from which they extracted some two millions in gold images and dust.”⁷

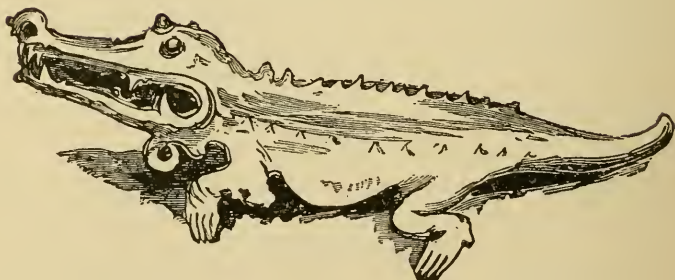
NOTES

1. General Francisco Morazán, the last President of the Central American Federal Republic. Driven from Salvador, he took refuge at David in the Province of Chiriqui. Two years later (1840) he led a revolution in Costa Rica, and was shortly afterward put to death in San José, having angered the inhabitants by attempting to force them to fight for the restoration of the Federal Republic.

2. Santiago de Alauje.

3. Fifty pounds.

4. On the summit of the Cordillera are several large plateaux covered with a short grass which give the appearance of pasture-land. A typical example is the large *paramo* of Las Vueltas, which is some 3000 meters above the sea and covers several thousand acres.



GOLD OBJECTS FROM BUGUBITA, CHIRIQUI ⁶

5. The early *huaqueros* exchanged their gold for an equal weight of silver, which explains the short time it took to expend the treasure.

6. The discovery of gold at this site is described as follows by Mr F. H. Otis (*Harper's Weekly*, August 6, 1859): "On a day in the latter part of June last a native of Bugalita—a small town in the district of Boqueron, in the Province of Chiriqui (New Granada)—while wandering through the forest in the vicinity of his cabin, encountered a tree which had been prostrated by a recent tempest, and underneath its upturned roots he espied a small earthen jar. Upon examination this proved to contain, wrapped in swathing of half-decayed cloth, divers images of curious and fantastic shape, and of so yellow and shining a metal that he at once suspected them to be *gold*. Knowing himself to be in the midst of an ancient Indian 'Huaca,' or burial-ground, he immediately commenced an exploration of the little burial mounds which were on every side, very shrewdly suspecting that they might also contain treasures of a like character. The result was that in a very short time (three or four days) he succeeded in exhuming no less than *seventy-five pound's weight* of these images. Not exactly confident, however, of the quality and value of the metal, he disclosed to his neighbors his discovery; in less than a fortnight over a thousand people were at work, having dug up "more than nine arrobas" (225 pounds' weight)

of images, most of which proved to be of the finest gold."

The illustrations herein are taken from Mr Otis' article in *Harper's Weekly*, having been "drawn with care from originals in the possession of Messrs. ———, of the French bazar in the city of Panama."

7. The exploitation of Indian graves formed the foundation of the fortunes of the Lambert, de Obaldia, and several other rich families of Panama.

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