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GOLDEN RELICS

FROM CHIRIQUI.

A PAPER READ BEFORE

The Numismatic and Antiquarian Society

OF PHILADELPHIA,

On Thursday Evening, October 5, 1865.

BY

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GOLDEN RELICS FROM CHIRIQUI.

THE curious and interesting relics which I have the pleasure of exhibiting this evening, are part of a large lot that was found in 1859, in one of the numerous huacas or burying grounds in the province of Chiriqui,* (New Granada), about 180 miles southwest of the city of Panama.

There are nine specimens, varying in length from $1\frac{5}{16}$ inches to 3 inches, and weighing from 130 to 1338 grains; they vary considerably in color, some of them being bright yellow, while others are apparently alloyed more or less with copper.

No. 1. A human figure with the head of a monster; the mouth open, and horns projecting from the end of the nostrils, the head surmounted by a sort of crown, projections from which on either side, form an ornamental framework around the whole figure. Size, 2 inches wide, $1\frac{7}{8}$ inches high. Weight, 1 oz. 4 dwt. 14 grs.

No. 2. The representation of an animal not described in the books; large globular projecting eyes; mouth open; the legs spread out horizontally, flattened into plates, each one terminating in a dolphin's head; two tails, each terminating in an arrowhead. Size, $2\frac{3}{8}$ inches wide, 3 inches long. Weight, 2 oz. $6\frac{1}{2}$ dwts.

No. 3. A frog, with large protruding eyes, the fore-legs terminating in rings. Size, $\frac{3}{4}$ inches wide, $1\frac{1}{8}$ inches long. Weight, 5 dwt. 10 grs.

No. 4. An obscene human figure, with the head of a monster, and a tail pointed at the end, extending over the head in the form of a hoop, and held by both hands. Size, $1\frac{1}{8}$ inches wide, $1\frac{5}{16}$ inches high. Weight, 6 dwt. 4 grs.

* David, the capitol of Chiriqui, is in about $8^{\circ} 17' N.$, by $82^{\circ} 30' W.$

No. 5. The head of an alligator, evidently designed for a bell, being hollow, and having inside a ball of gold $\frac{3}{8}$ inch in diameter; the mouth open, and the lower and upper jaw each furnished with eight long teeth, so arranged as to prevent the ball from falling out. The eyes are oval, large and prominent; upon the extremity of the nostrils is a large projection; under the lower jaw is a ring, not soldered on, but made in the original casting, which is the case with each one of these nine pieces, some of them having two rings, while others have only one. Size, $\frac{1}{8}$ inch wide, 2 inches long, $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches high. Weight, 2 oz. 15 dwt. 18 grs.

No. 6. An alligator, the tail bent up and resting upon the back; the forelegs terminating in rings. Size, $\frac{5}{8}$ inch wide, 2 inches long. Weight, 6 dwt. 6 grs.

No. 7. An obscene human figure, with the head of a monster; large projecting ears; the mouth open, and holding two balls in place of teeth; holding in its left hand (perhaps) a stick; each leg terminating in a brush. Size, $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch wide, 2 inches high. Weight, 9 dwt. 9 grs.

No. 8. The head of a bull, having large flat plates projecting from the nostrils, and ornamental scroll-work above the head on each side. Size, $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches wide, $1\frac{3}{8}$ inches high. Weight, 10 dwt. 4 grs.

No. 9. A bird with outspread wings and tail; having an eagle-like head, with curved beak and large projecting eyes, and surmounted by two long crooked horns. Size, $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide, $2\frac{1}{8}$ inches high. Weight, 1 oz. 7 dwt. 16 grs.

In connection with these specimens, I have thought that the following account might prove interesting to the members of the Society, even if not new to all of them.

For such information as I have been able to obtain respecting them, I am indebted to a volume entitled, "Antiquarian, Ethnological and other Researches, &c., &c.," by William Bollaert, F.R.G.S., London, 1860, and to papers by F. M. Otis, M.D., and by Mr. E. G. Squier, published in Harper's Weekly, in 1859.

That these relics date back to a very early period, there

seems to be but little doubt, not only from the fact that the present Indian tribes of Central America have no knowledge of these huacas, nor of the art of making the images found in them, but in the "History of New Granada" by Col. Joachin Acosta, mention is made of a discovery by the Spaniards as far back as the 15th century of similar treasures at Zenu, in the Province of Antiochia, New Granada. After speaking of the discovery of the riches in the Indian burial-grounds at Zenu, the historian proceeds with the following description: "The cemetery of Zenu was composed of an indefinite number of mounds of earth, some of a conical form, and others more or less square. When an Indian died, it was the custom to dig a hole capable of containing his arms and jewels, *which were placed on the left hand side of his grave, looking towards the east*, and around these were placed earthen vases containing chichi and other fermented drinks; also Indian corn, and stones to pound the same; also his wives and slaves (if he was a principal man), which last, thoroughly intoxicated themselves previously to the interment; and then the whole was covered over with a species of red earth brought from a distance. Then the mourning commenced, which lasted as long as there remained any thing to drink, and in the meanwhile the mourners continued to throw earth upon the grave; thus it was elevated according to the ability of the individual or family to provide a greater or less quantity of liquor. Jewels of gold in large or small quantities were found in all the tombs. In some were golden figures representing every class of animals from man to the ant, and sometimes in amount to the value of ten, twenty, and even thirty thousand dollars."

They all have little rings at their backs for suspension; and were doubtless designed as pendants either for the nose or ears, or were to be worn on the breast of their ancient owner. Farther to the southward, in Peru, the aborigines were remarkably skillful in working the precious metals. They cast them in moulds, soldered them, inlaid them, and reduced them into leaves. They were generally cast hollow, and with such perfection as often to leave no trace of the joints of the mould.

They sometimes cast objects combining gold, silver, and copper, in alternate bands, so well inlaid and united as to appear to form one mass. Occasionally in vases and other open vessels, they embossed figures on the outside by hammering from the interior.

In the latter part of June, 1859, 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 swathings 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 also might 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 pounds weight of these images. Not exactly confident, however, of the quality and value of the metal, he disclosed to his neighbors his discovery; and 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. This is the substance of the information in regard to the discovery of these ancient relics, brought to the city of Panama by two natives of Bugalita, who substantiated their statements by bringing also with them, in their canoe, seventy-five pounds' weight of golden images for sale. They also reported that there had been so great an excitement among the inhabitants for many miles around the huacas, that towns and flourishing estates were wholly deserted; and that, in consequence of so great and unexpected an influx into that region, there had already come to be a great dearth of provisions, and that considerable suffering had been the consequence.

The Governor of Chiriqui, in a letter to the Governor of Panama, stated that considerably more than \$100,000 worth of images had been taken up; that over 4,000 graves had been rifled, and that as there were innumerable graves in the vicinity still untouched, there was little doubt but that immense wealth would be eventually realized therefrom.

The portion of the treasure which had been received at Panama, consisted of small images of gold, which had evidently first been cast in clay moulds, and afterwards hammered to the requisite degree of smoothness. The workmanship of many exhibited no little mechanical skill and ingenuity. Quite a large proportion were of virgin gold, while others varied in purity from 15 to 20 carats fine, owing undoubtedly to the artificers being ignorant of the art of separating the baser metals from the gold in its native state. The most frequent alloy was of copper.*

Objects found in the tombs made of gold of low standard or alloyed with copper, were called guanin, or gianin and tumbaga; † this class of metal was known as far as Honduras; its sp. gr. is 11·55. It was assayed in Spain, and found to consist of 63 gold, 14 silver, and 9 copper. A recent analysis of gold from Titiribi in Columbia, gave gold 76·41, silver 23·12, and copper 0·3. In size these images varied from 3 penny-weights to 6 ounces, representing wild beasts, birds, fishes, reptiles, and semi-human monsters, hideous to the last degree;

* "Life of Columbus," by Irving, ii., 177. In 1503, Columbus, when on the Mosquito coast, says, "there was no pure gold to be met with here, all their ornaments were of guanin; but the natives assured us that in proceeding along the coast, the ships would soon arrive at a country where gold was in abundance. On the coast of Veragua, the Spaniards met with specimens of pure gold for the first time; the natives wearing large plates of it suspended around their necks by cotton cords; they had likewise ornaments of guanin, gold of low standard, an alloy with copper, or a natural metal, rudely shaped like eagles."

† Velasco, i., 31. Tumbaga or pucacuri (bad gold), is an alloy of gold and copper. It is found in a natural state in the mines of Patia de Popayan and Villonaco de Loja. This guanin is first mentioned by Columbus as forming the ornament of a chief, when coasting along the south side of Jamaica, in 1494.

in very many, if not all the graves were found three plates of gold, from three to twelve inches in diameter, each pierced near the centre by two holes. But little reliable information could be gathered as to the condition in which the graves and their contents were found, except that on the left hand side of every grave, looking toward the east, were the jars containing one or more golden images.

According to Mr. E. G. Squier, the discovery of these relics is earlier than above stated; he says in 1859 that "large quantities have been taken out from time to time, for many years past; and I was informed by the late Governor of the Bank of England, that several thousand pounds worth were annually remitted from the Isthmus, as bullion, to that establishment," he adds, "as to the origin and date of these relics there is no doubt." Columbus when he discovered Chiriqui Lagoon, in his fourth voyage, found all the chiefs and important people decorated with these and similar ornaments, which, as he says in his relation, gave him "great promise of the richness of the country in gold and silver." Hence he named the district Castilla del Oro; and hence the coast came to be known as Costa Rica, or rich coast, a name still preserved, as that of the State of Central America adjoining the Isthmus. He mentions particularly among the ornaments worn by the chiefs, great plates or mirrors of gold suspended on their breasts, "which they would neither sell nor exchange." These plates were from three to twelve inches in diameter. Columbus adds that the Indians cast gold with some degree of skill, "but in no way equal to the Spaniards." He says, also, that "in all the regions around Veragua, the Indians inter with their chiefs, when they die, all the gold which they possess."