

NEW RECORDS OF MUSHROOM STONES FROM GUATEMALA

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SUMMARY

A number of mushroom stones are described from Guatemala for the first time. The interpretation is supported that these sculptures were probably associated in Mayan culture with religious ceremonies wherein hallucinogenic fungi played a major role. It is probable that at least some of these stones may have been linked to a fertility cult.

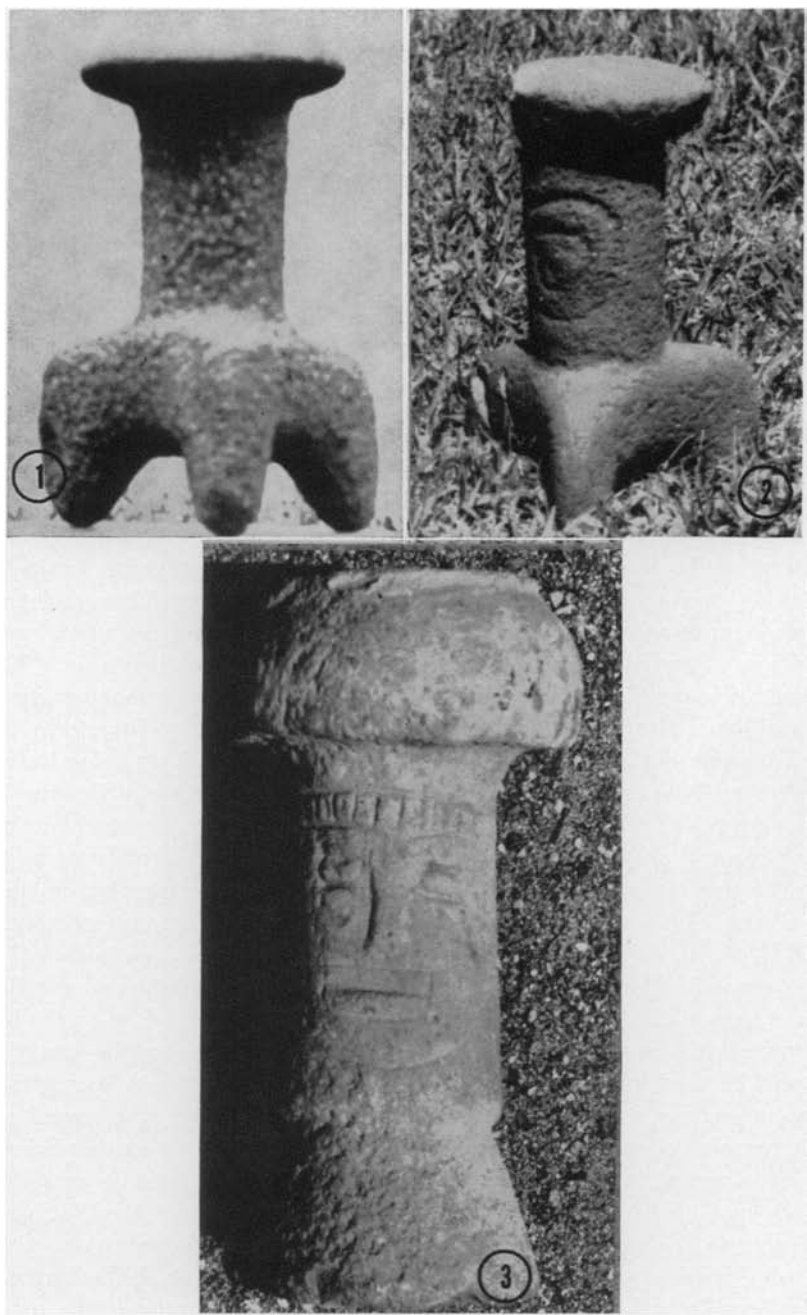
At the turn of the century, when the artifacts now known as mushroom stones first came to the attention of archaeologists, little beyond the surmise that they may in reality have represented mushrooms was then put forward. Sapper (1898) was the first to suggest this in a short paper entitled "Pilzförmige Götzenbilder auf Guatemala und San Salvador." Prior to this time, the few specialists whose attention had been drawn to these curious sculptures were inclined to interpret them as phallic symbols. For what appeared to Sapper to be obvious morphological reasons, he opposed this interpretation. Brinton (1898), a few months after Sapper's observations appeared, published a still briefer note suggesting (redundantly, in my judgment and that of Dr. E. M. Shook) that the stones probably represented mushrooms. Mushroom stones have been found to be relatively common in Guatemala (a few have also been reported chiefly from El Salvador and Mexico), and they appear to be confined in their distribution to the Highlands and the Pacific slopes. None has been reported from the Petén, and in my recent inquiries there I found no evidence to the contrary. It is noteworthy, however, that with the few exceptions to be cited, the precise original locality of the stones is unknown. The principal reason for this is that most of them have been uncovered accidentally by laborers or other individuals unskilled in archaeological practices. Some of these stones have found their way into art or novelty shops where they are offered for sale to the general public. Consequently, reliable information regarding the exact source of such treasure is difficult or impossible to obtain. As with other artifacts, apart from any aesthetic

value that these objects may have for us, the question of deeper concern is the significance they might have had for the society that produced them. In searching for answers, we are on uncertain ground. Mushroom stones are not depicted in the few remaining known Maya codices (although mushrooms occasionally are and these are generally shown in ceremonial use), nor have I found any reference to them in post-conquest chronicles. In Zaculeu (Department of Huehuetenango) on July 3, 1970, I examined and photographed a codex in the possession of Sr. José Mariano Galindo y Jimeno. To my surprise, I found on one panel a painting which included the representation of an individual who is holding with both arms outstretched what appears to be a mushroom of great size. I wish to emphasize that the authenticity of this document has not yet been confirmed, but it is offered here provisionally nevertheless in view of its considerable potential interest. Mushrooms are depicted in other codices (as in Fig. 6, p. 24 of the Codex Vindobonensis) but are not common. Obviously, should this still undescribed codex prove to be genuine, it would further support the contention that some mushrooms played a truly significant role in the lives of the Maya. Referring to a different culture in another age, Wasson (in "Soma, divine mushroom of immortality," Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1969) has proposed the theory that soma, the divine plant so frequently mentioned in the Rig Veda, was *Amanita muscaria* (L. ex Fr.) Pers. ex Hooker, and J. M. Allegro (in "The sacred mushroom and the cross," Doubleday & Co., Inc., New York, 1970) suggests the rather more remote possibility that contemporary Judeo-Christian tradition may be traced to primitive fertility cults associated with the adoration of the same agaric.

Villacorta and Villacorta (Figs. p. 122, 125, 1927) published two illustrations of mushroom stones with anthropomorphic effigies, but we find no comment about their presumed meaning. Kidder, Jennings and Shook (1946) refer to the mushroom stones as "objects of unknown use," but the illustrations in their paper call attention to a number of mushroom stones for the first time (Fig. 160 a-h, op. cit.). Three of these are from Kaminaljuyú; two said to be from Ocosingo, Chiapas, Mexico (now in the museum of archaeology in Tuxtla Gutierrez) and three are from unknown localities in Guatemala. Thompson (1948) shows four tripod stones (Figs. 19f and 20b, op. cit.) from El Baúl, Guatemala, and Shook and Kidder (1952) illustrate the now well-known tripod stone with a small jaguar-like effigy (see Fig. 78f and Fig. 13, No. 193, op. cit., 1952) found in tomb I, mound E-III-3 in Kaminaljuyú. For only two other stones do we have such precise data. One

of these, an unadorned tripod (FIG. 1), was excavated in 1968 by Ing. Ismael Tercero (now Director of the archaeological area of Tikal) from a tomb in Kaminaljuyú and was found in association with human skeletal remains about one meter beneath the surface. It is almost identical in style to a stone on deposit in the Museum of Anthropology of Guatemala and to one in the private collection of Sr. Jorge Castillo, who has five effigy and 13 tripod stones, but for which the exact location is unknown. Another stone excavated by the University of Pennsylvania archaeologists (FIG. 2) is also from Kaminaljuyú but was found at or near the surface in Zone 7, Area 12, Section 116, San José No. V (data from Dr. J. Michels). It should be stressed that with the exceptions cited, mushroom stones cannot be assumed to have originated from burial sites.

In a discussion with Dr. E. M. Shook in Antigua in June, 1970, I learned that in the 1940's he had considered the possibility that mushroom stones might have been used as land markers. It is a novel idea and should be mentioned as an alternate possibility to the more likely interpretation toward which most of the evidence now points, namely that the mushroom stones had ritualistic significance possibly associated with a mushroom cult that disappeared in Guatemala centuries ago. During a previous mycological collecting tour in Guatemala in 1963 (and again in 1970) I stopped at the museum in Quetzaltenango to visit a colleague, Prof. Salvador de Leon Toledo, who is its Director. In the museum is a series of 11 paintings on wood panels illustrating interpretations of various aspects of life in Mayan society. One of the panels (all are about 45 cm square) depicts a Maya worker engaged in the task of surveying land, and he is shown driving a stake into the ground. At his feet is an unadorned tripod mushroom stone serving as his marker. Since stones of this size (most fall within a range of about 30–35 cm in height) are readily portable yet substantial enough (weighing about 7–9 kg) not to be easily overturned, they might presumably have been put to such use. If this possibility is admitted, it might be inquired why stones with effigies (some of them elaborately carved) would be used for such an apparently mundane purpose. Allowing the major premise, it could be argued that the effigies may have served as the personal property marker of the landholder. Seeking further information concerning this interesting painting, I found that it was the work of Guillermo Grajeda Mena, presently Director of the National Museum of Natural History and Fine Arts. In conversation with Prof. Grajeda upon my return to Guatemala City in July, 1970, I asked him how he had hit upon the idea of showing a mushroom stone used



FIGS. 1-3.

as a land marker and he replied that the inspiration had come from his discussions "in about 1957-58" with the late Dr. Stephan Borhegyi. Borhegyi apparently did not consider the theory sufficiently plausible to discuss it in his subsequent publications on mushroom stones, although he mentioned it parenthetically in his 1963 paper on pottery mushrooms. Another possible explanation for their use, the origin of which cannot be attributed to any single individual, but which has occurred to more than one anthropologist who has had occasion to study these stones, is their use as seats, whether associated or not with sacred ceremonies (see Thompson, 1948, p. 24). But I am not aware of any evidence that would lend credence to this interpretation unless it be that stone seats of different but equally uncomfortable design (judged by our standards) are in use among contemporary African tribes. Neither is there evidence that the stones were used as altar pieces.

The first formal consideration of the possibility that such stones may testify to the existence in the past of a mushroom cult in Guatemala and that there may be "a kinship between such a cult and the surviving divinitory rite of the inebriating mushrooms in Mexico" was made by the Wassons (1957). It was also in this work that Borhegyi's chart (slightly revised in 1961) appeared in which he gave morphological, geographical and chronological data on the mushroom stones known to him at that time and numbering about 50. From my inquiries in Guatemala this number has been increased by about another 50 (only a few of which are illustrated in this paper) and I am convinced that many more remain to be described from the Highlands and the Costa Sur. The hypothesis that mushroom stones are relics of a Mayan past in which mushrooms may have been ceremonially consumed tends to be supported by such evidence as can be deduced from the stones themselves, a few of which may be crucial in providing us with very suggestive, if indeed not convincing clues. One of these, a unique preclassic rectangular-based stone in the Nottebohm collection, reported to be from the Department of Chimaltenango, shows a human head reclining on its right side. The face is striking because of its trance-like expres-

FIGS. 1-3. Mushroom stones. 1. Tripod. Height 28 cm, cap diam 14.5 cm. Monticúlo de I.N.C.A.P. 46-33-339, Kaminaljuyú, found in a tomb about one meter below the surface. Classic. University of Pennsylvania. 2. Tripod with geometrical design. Height 23 cm, cap diam 10.5 cm. 71-12-116, Kaminaljuyú, found at or near the surface. Classic. University of Pennsylvania KJ 70-2724. 3. Primitive anthropomorphic effigy. Height 32 cm, cap diam 16 cm. Dpto. Quiché. E. Crespo.

Where given, here and in the legends that follow, the archaeological periods to which the stones belong are approximations. Preclassic (Early, 2000-1000 B.C.; Middle, 1000-300 B.C.; Late, 300 B.C.-300 A.D.); Classic (Early, 300-600 A.D.; Late, 600-900 A.D.).

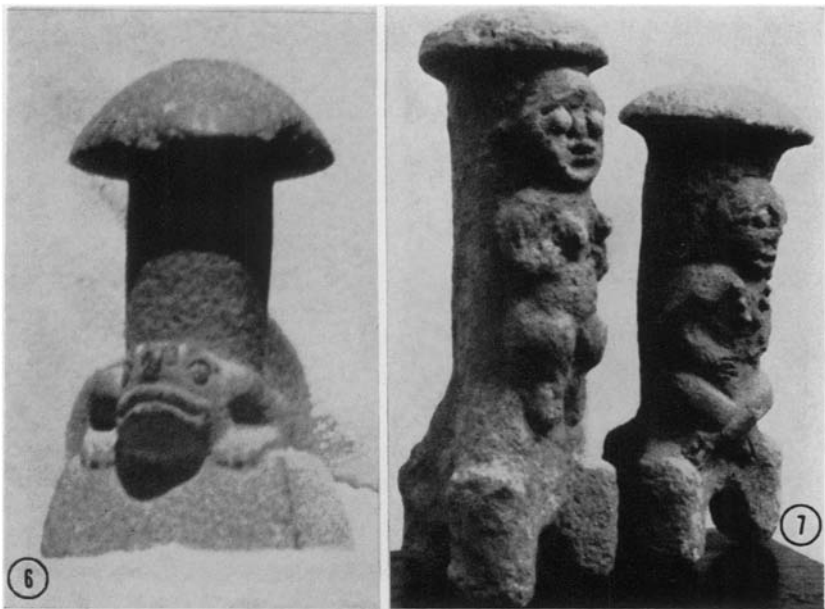


FIGS. 4-5. Mushroom stones. 4. Human effigy. Height 34 cm, cap diam 15 cm. Location in Guatemala unknown. Late preclassic. Carlos H. Nottebohm. 5. Human pregnancy effigy. Height 33 cm, cap diam 15 cm. Location in Guatemala unknown. Late preclassic. Carlos H. Nottebohm.

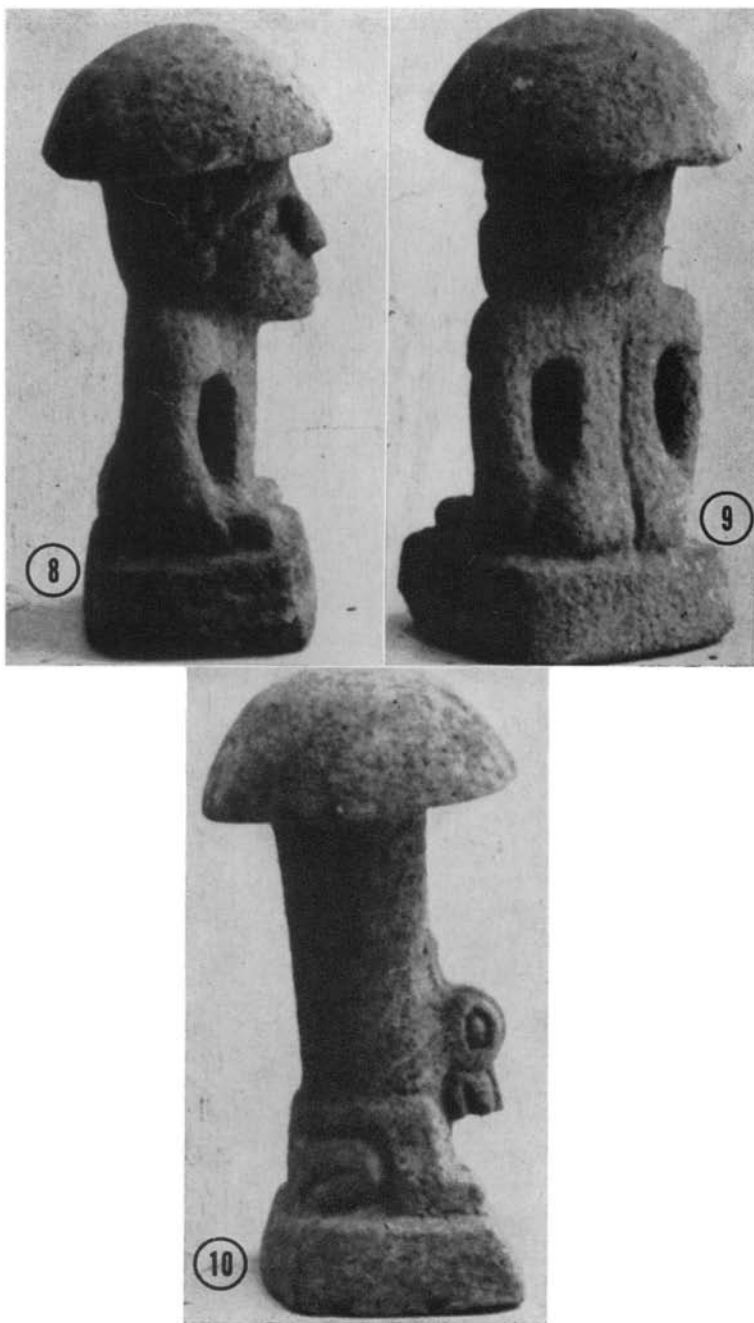
sion and the suggestion cannot escape us that the subject may be dreaming or hallucinating. Another Guatemalan stone, in the possession of Hans Namuth (New York) is provocative, for it bears the figure of a human female kneeling before an inclined metate. Borhegyi (1961) thought at first that the figure represented "an aged woman," but subsequently became convinced that it was a young woman (from R. G. Wasson in correspondence). This interpretation (with which I am inclined to agree) is vital if we are to link the present day employment of a "doncella" or virgin in the task of grinding the mushrooms with a similar (postulated) ancient custom suggested by the figure on this stone. We have a report (Wasson, 1963) that hallucinogenic mushrooms in Juxtlahuaca, Mexico, (*Psilocybe mexicana* Heim) are still sometimes ground on a metate, then mixed with a little water before consumption. A third example is a work of pottery (Wasson's collection) said to be from Tenenexpan, Veracruz, Mexico. It is the figurine

of a woman seated before a mushroom of exaggerated size, with her right hand resting upon the cap. Borhegyi (1963) published four views of this arresting figure, with the comment that it "gives us food for thought as to the pre-Columbian use of pottery mushrooms as objects of adoration by initiated curanderas."

Several of the 23 Nottebohm stones I photographed are of special interest. One of them (FIG. 5) shows a pregnant female (possibly also FIG. 4, although the abdominal enlargement in this effigy is not as prominent). Human fertility is consequently associated with mushroom stones for the first time. FIG. 6 is the first easily recognizable toad effigy that I have seen associated with these stones, although Borhegyi (*in* Wasson, 1957, v. 2, p. 278) "tentatively identified" a stone bearing an anthropomorphic effigy as a toad, because at the base of the stone, quoting Wasson, "the four toes are the sure stigma of the amphibian." Nine tripod stones of the Nottebohm collection are either



FIGS. 6-7. Mushroom stones. 6. Toad effigy. Height 26.5 cm, cap diam 16.5 cm. Location in Guatemala unknown. Carlos H. Nottebohm. 7. Human effigy pair. Female: Height 56 cm, cap diam 18.5 cm (figure alone 34 cm in height); Male: Height 50 cm, cap diam 21 cm (figure alone 30 cm in height). La Nueva Concepción between Tejote and Las Lisas, zona Pipil, south of Escuintla, Guatemala. B. de Méndez.



FIGS. 8-10.

unadorned or have a relatively simple ornamentation of geometrical design of unknown significance and the same may be said of the 13 tripod stones in the Castillo collection. The shortest of these (Nottenbohm) is 22 cm, the tallest 32 cm in height. Unfortunately, we do not have reliable data to indicate whether the plain and adorned tripods were contemporary types or whether one was the predecessor of the other. The effigy stones are preclassic or early classic whereas the tripod stones (with few exceptions) are without effigies and belong to the middle or late classic periods. A trend might be seen here toward simplification, which may indicate a gradual attenuation in the force of the postulated cult itself. One of the characteristics noted by Borhegyi (1961) in his classification, was the presence on some stones of a circular groove along the margin of the cap. This distinctive feature was at that time found to be associated only with effigy stones belonging to the early or late preclassic periods. Consequently, it was of interest to discover a plain tripod (Lowy, 1968) sharing the same peculiarity.

Two tripod stones (FIG. 7) in the private collection of Sra. Bianka de Méndez merit attention because they are of a type not previously seen. Both are exceptionally tall, the stone with the female figure being 56 cm in height and the one with the cross-legged male wearing a seven-beaded necklace, 50 cm. Both stones were discovered together by "a Ladino worker" (reported to me personally by Sra. de Méndez) in La Nueva Concepción between Tejote and Las Lisas, zona Pipil, south of Escuintla. These inevitably remind one of the practice current in Huautla and elsewhere in Oaxaca, Mexico, where the sacred mushrooms are ceremonially handled in pairs, one representing the female, the other the male. An attractive stone of unique design from the Department of Quiché, in the private collection of Don Emilio Crespo¹ of Panajachel on Lake Atitlán is shown in FIG. 3. Crudely scratched into the shaft are the outlines of a human face with an ornamental band across the forehead. The use of this technique in an effigy stone has not been previously observed. The mushroomic cap is evident and though flattened on top this is not unlike the condition found in other anthropomorphic stones that I have seen in Guatemala. The anthropomorphic stone (FIGS. 8 and 9) and the animal effigy stone, probably a coati (FIG.

¹ Sr. Crespo has perhaps an unequalled knowledge of many aspects of his country's history. He is an enthusiastic raconteur and is still in sound enough health to ride into the country on muleback, at the age of 94.

FIGS. 8-10. Mushroom stones. 8. Anthropomorphic. Height 33 cm, cap diam 16 cm. Jalapa. Early preclassic. G. Mata Amado. 9. Back view of FIG. 8. 10. Animal effigy (coati?). Height 34 cm, cap diam 17 cm. Jalapa. Late preclassic. G. Mata Amado.

10), are excellent examples of their kind and are in the private collection of Dr. Guillermo Mata Amado of Guatemala City.

At the Museum of Anthropology in Guatemala City, I examined 17 mushroom stones that had not previously been studied. This number does not include six stones then on exhibit which I had photographed in 1963. Among the 17 stones were two of the "Rietberg" type (the prototype is on deposit in the Rietberg Museum, Zurich) illustrated by Sapper (1898) and Wasson and Wasson (1957) with the head of the human effigy surrounded by a crownlike adornment of triangular rays. Sapper's figure has a rectangular base, whereas one of the Museum pieces (the other "Rietberg" type artifact consists of a head only) has a circular base upon which the human figure is seated, with legs flowing over the front of the base and fingers grasping the margin. The right half of this effigy's face has been obliterated. A stone almost identical to this but with the face intact, is shown in Borhegyi's chart (Fig. 19 in Wasson and Wasson, 1957). In the Museum piece that I examined (it is 20 cm in height) the mushroomic cap is missing and only a fragment of the shaft is evident. Another stone in the Museum group of 17, is one with an approximately circular base about 18 cm in diameter, from which three stubby legs, two of them partly shattered, extend about 3 cm. This stone is 32 cm in height and the cap diameter is 14 cm. The exact places of origin of the 17 stones is unknown.

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