

COUNTERFEIT STONE ZEMIS FROM THE FT. LIBERTE AREA, NORTHERN HAITI

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Résumé

Des nombreuses pièces en pierre imitant des zemis préhistoriques de la culture Taino - et qui auraient été trouvés à Fort Liberté (district de Ouanaminthe) - au NE de l'Haiti, ont été récemment vendues à Port-au-Prince en mélange avec de vraies pièces. L'examen détaillé de ces "zemis" révèle qu'ils n'ont aucune d'affinité avec les traditions préhistoriques et qu'ils sont des faux. L'article est ici présenté dans le but d'avertir la communauté scientifique internationale sur ce danger.

ABSTRACT

Numerous small stone carvings imitating prehistoric zemis of the Taino culture supposedly found in the Ft. Liberté - Ouanaminthe district of northern Haiti have recently been sold in Port-au-Prince, mixed with authentic stone celts and ceramic pottery lugs. Careful examination of the zemis indicates they have no affinity with prehistoric traditions and are of recent manufacture by skilled artisans.

Mots clés - Faux Zemis. Zone de Fort Liberté. Haiti.

Key-words - Counterfeit zemis. Fort Liberté area. Northern Haiti.

This paper prepared for members of the Cayenne Meeting of I.G.C.P. Project 274, Section 3, "L'occupation humaine entre l'aire Caraïbe et l'aire amazonienne," was presented to call attention to a remarkable group of false artifacts that have suddenly appeared in the Port-au-Prince market as a result of widespread socio-economic disturbances in the Republic of Haiti. They represent a stylistic form

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and quality of artistic execution that is superior to anything that is authentically prehistoric. These small stone carvings involve a mixture of deities and animal subjects having no known counterparts in the Taino ethnographic tradition. As a result of consultation with members of ORSTOM and visiting specialists attending this symposium, we conclude the zemi sculptures represent a serious attempt to defraud. Since the quality of workmanship on most of these objects is quite good and they have been mixed with authentic celts and ceramic pottery lugs, it is important to notify the archaeological community of their existence.

Figure 1 indicates the size and style of some representative specimens taken from a collection numbering in the hundreds. These stone carvings are purported to have been recently recovered from caves in the Ft. Liberté - Ouanaminthe district on the north coast of Haiti, near the border with the Dominican Republic.

All have been made from carefully selected riverbed cobblestones that were naturally preformed to a considerable extent. The stones chosen were all hard metamorphic and igneous rocks eroded out of the central batholith area of this island. None of the specimens examined has been made from the more easily worked and readily available limestone. The laborious carving necessary to produce these statuettes was done by a variety of techniques. A microscopic examination of the unpolished surfaces shows that some specimens have numerous non-parallel striations made with a sharp edged instrument (chisel?). Others show evidence of sculpting by a "pecking" technique in which a partially pointed hammerstone, or similar tool, was repeatedly struck against the surface to remove excess material. Some "zemis" exhibit even further finishing to produce a polished (in some cases highly polished) surface that must have been prepared by using a very fine-grained commercial abrasive. The left-hand zemi shown in Fig. 1 is rather roughly prepared on the sides where evidence of electric power tool marks can be seen. It was in fact this specimen that alerted the symposium specialists to the possibility the artifacts are indeed "neo-Taino".

It was suggested by the Regional Director of Archaeology for Guadeloupe, Martinique that certain features of these zemis have been copied directly from the illustrations to be found in the monograph by Fernandez Méndez (1979) but a subsequent careful examination of this publication makes it clear that nothing in the collection analyzed for study has its inspiration from illustrations in this source. Neither have I been able to locate even vaguely similar authentic zemis

from earlier publications such as those of Rainey, et al. (1941), Loven (1935), Krieger (1932), Harrington (1921), or Fewkes (1891, 1915). Therefore, the inspiration for the multitude of stone carvings that have suddenly appeared does not seem to come from any single previously published report as was the case in the notorious falsification of the Mexican "Porrua skins".

From an analysis based on six zemi statuettes in hand and excellent color photography of 32 others, it is possible to reach the following conclusions : 1. They are the product of at least three different sculptors. 2. The animal figures have been made by someone with a masterful knowledge of specific morphological detail. 3. Stone material colors were matched to the subject (i.e. loggerhead turtles are appropriately brown, a frog from pale greenstone). 4. The author(s) of these carvings were aware of the importance of stone collars used by prehistoric ball-game players in the Caribbean and included them on some figures but in the wrong position and/or shape. 5. Inappropriate clothing (a modern-looking hat) was included on one rather poorly executed anthropomorphic figure. 6. The collection contains at least one zoomorphic figure (of a highly realistic, scaled snake) that could not have been known to the prehistoric Taino of Hispaniola, hence it must be a deliberate fabrication.

It is important to note that mixed with these counterfeit pieces are numerous authentic petaloid stone celts (Fig. 2, coarse axe heads and broken ceramic pottery lugs which add greatly to the impression that the collection as a whole is prehistoric when in fact the spectacular pieces are all modern fabrications. While these authentic items present no problems, we are still faced with the puzzling subject of present authorship of the highly artistic, well executed "zemis."

The most logical explanation is to look within the present day Haitian art community. No longer are these artists entirely of the untrained "primitive" school of recent decades. Today there are Haitian artists (and presumeably sculptors) who have studied abroad and acquired the most sophisticated techniques. I believe the falsifications are from members of this group who are experimenting in a different metier for motives that may not involve confounding archeologists.

The mixing of these art forms with authentic prehistoric artifacts is more serious matter. As of this writing (1990) the traffic is small scale, but in a country notoriously impoverished in natural and cultural resources, it is necessary to discourage the practice, unless these carvings are correctly identified and represented as modern sculpture, for which they can indeed stand on their own merits.

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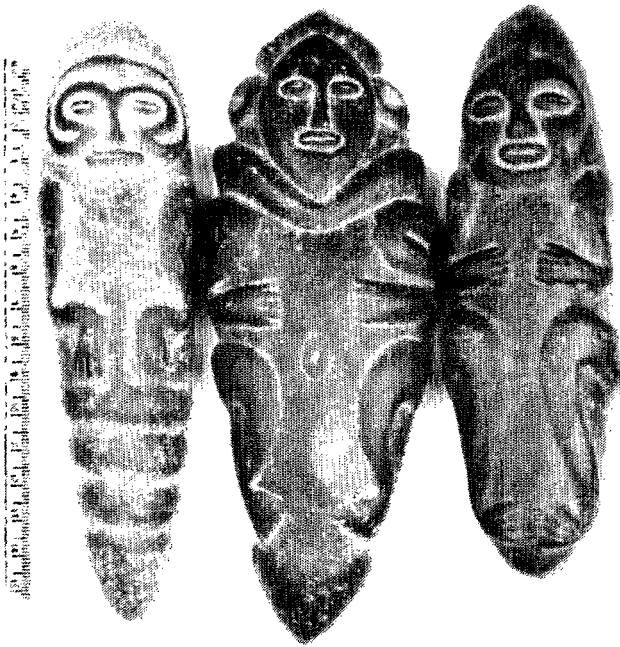


Figure N°1
Counterfeit Stone Zemis

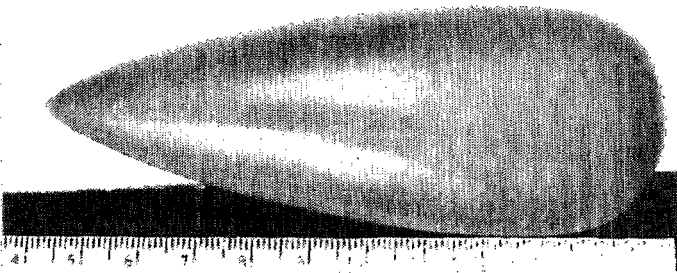


Figure N°2
Greenstone petalloid celt