

ON SOME POTTERY, FLINT WEAPONS, AND OTHER
OBJECTS FROM BRITISH HONDURAS.¹

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I need hardly remind the meeting that the Colony of British Honduras is only an arbitrary division of the great Peninsula which bounds the Gulf of Mexico on the south, and that it has no separate geographical or ethnographical unity of its own apart from Yucatan, Guatemala, and the other Hispano-Indian States which divide among themselves what was once the seat of a great, a powerful, and a civilized race. The objects which I have the pleasure of bringing to the notice of the Society this evening, which I owe to the kindness of my friend the Hon. Henry Fowler, Colonial Secretary of British Honduras, should be examined therefore in connection with the history of that region as a whole, and with no special reference to the corner of it that they happen to come from. The people that painted the beautiful frescoes of Chichen-itza, that reared the monuments of Palenque and Copan, that invented and used the elaborate and complicated hieroglyphics which still defy interpretation on so many half buried monuments, were a race, in some respects, far beyond the stage of advancement represented by such stone weapons as are before us. It would have been impossible to execute with them the really elegant carvings drawn by Catermole, and of which a specimen has been recently brought to England by Mr. Maudsley. Their splendid temples, their elaborate ritual, the power of their priests and monarchs, their knowledge of astronomy, shewn by the Calendar stones and by the accuracy

¹ Read at the Monthly Meeting of the Institute, May 3, 1883.

of their lunar cycles, their graceful fresco paintings,¹ all appear to me to indicate great advances in the arts, such as no people have ever made while limited to the use of flint for their tools and weapons; and we are driven to the conclusion either that these objects, if recent, are the evidences of an immense decline in the arts since the Spanish Conquest, that is to say, in about three centuries and a-half, or that they date back to a period long anterior to that event, and to an earlier race than the civilised people whom the Spaniards found in possession of the land.

The first of these suppositions appears to me inconsistent with the excellence of some of these stone implements as such. They show a mastery in the art of cleaving and chipping the material such as comes of long practice and progressive improvement, a race which once possessed copper or other metallic tools, and lost them by conquest and reduction to a state of slavery, would not, as it appears to me, if driven by necessity to the use of flint, recover in a century or two such a lost art. There is among these objects a fine lanceolate weapon of yellow flint $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches long, which resembles the blade of a sacrificial knife preserved, with its handle, in the British Museum. These are probably examples of the continued use of flint knives for sacred purposes, long after the discovery of metals, of which we have familiar instances in Exod. iv, 25 and in Herodotus (Euterpe lxxxvi) and do not prove that metals were unknown to the priests. It is of course a possible thing that side by side with the civilised Azteks there may have existed Charib races never reclaimed, and who never abandoned the use of stone; representatives of such races exist still, for we have the evidence of several recent travellers that spears, arrow-heads and axes of that material are in use among the Candones or unbaptized Indians of the interior of Guatemala; but I have seen no evidence that they employ them extensively, or exhibit the skill evinced in the manufacture of some of the objects on the table. Moreover there is a curious evidence that the wearers of

¹ These are not represented by Catermole, an example will be found in the Proceedings of the American Antiquarian

Society, 1878, in a paper by Mr. S. Salisbury.

the rude ornaments that accompany the weapons were not unacquainted with copper, for three of the beads or cylinders of shell before you are lined with that metal; and we know from John de Verrazzano that at the period of the Spanish conquests this metal was much esteemed.¹ It is more likely to have been put to such a use before than after that epoch.

In *Pottery* we have here—

1, 2. Two perfect vases of coarse red clay perforated at the bottom, probably for burning incense. (Pl. No. 8.)

These are of graceful shape, with a plaque or boss on one side only, representing a human face wearing an expression more or less of agony, which is characteristic of Central American and Mexican art.

3, 4. These are portions of two other similar vases.

5. A bowl of very thin clay of elegant shape, covered with a rude design. It was much broken, but has been since imperfectly cemented together.

All these are from a cave in the neighbourhood of Garbutt's Falls on the River Belize, and near the present boundary line. (Lat. 16° N.; Lon. 89°). The one covered with a coating of limestone, "I found," says Mr. fowler, "in a large cave along side of a pile which once had served as an altar. The deposit had evidently accumulated from the lime contained in the drippings of the roof, and requires for its formation a considerable period of time." Mr. fowler entered this cave a long way. He thought half-a-mile, but estimates of distance under such circumstances are apt to be very deceptive.

6. A curious small idol in a sitting position with a perforation which acts as a whistle on being blown into. Probably a child's toy. (Pl. No. 9.)

This is from the banks of the River Ulloa in Spanish Honduras.

¹ "Among whom (the Indians of some Southern region) we saw many plates of wrought copper which they esteem more than gold, which for the colour they make no account of, for that among all others it is counted the basest: they make no account of azure and red."

"The arrows which they use are made with great cunning, and instead of iron they head them with flint, with jasper stone and hard marble, and other sharp

stones which they use instead of iron to cut trees."

"The land is situated in the Parallel of Rome in 41 degrees and 2 terces," p. 362.

"We saw many of them have bead-stones of copper hanging at their ears," p. 363.

The relation of John de Verrazzano, a Florentine, 1524, Hakluyt. 4to. edit. 1810, vol. iii, p. 357.

7. Leg and foot of a sitting figure with numerous other broken fragments ; animal heads, &c.

These were found on the bank of the Belize river, some half dozen miles lower, evidently at a place of interment. A human body was also found here which had been buried in a sitting position with the chin on the knees, and facing south. The bones fell to pieces on an attempt to remove them.

Many of the obsidian knives were found here, with some of the beads and fragments of pottery. Some of the latter, from the glaze upon them and their ornamentation, would appear to be old Spanish, rather than native, perhaps of the sixteenth century.

With these were found several resinous lumps, apparently copal, which is the product of several species of *Hymenæa* (Order *Cæsalpinieæ*), natives of Central America, and was much used by the Indians in their worship for incense.

8. A vessel of good shape, but very coarse pottery, which holds about $2\frac{1}{2}$ pints. The peculiarity is that it will not stand of itself, but must be supported on a stand or held in the hand, the bottom being coned down to a diameter of little over two inches, while the body is seven inches across. There were, in more convivial days, decanters in use which had the same form, but one hesitates to associate this vessel with the cult of any Indian Bacchus.

Among the beads are several of a green mineral susceptible of a high polish, evidently much prized, which has been pronounced by my friend, Professor Maskelyne, to be *jadeite*. It differs from jade in being slightly harder and heavier, and is in fact another mineral, first discovered in this very region. The greater part of the beads are cut out of the thick part of some large shell, probably the conch, and imperfectly rounded, or left as elongated prisms. There is one of rock crystal, and there are two of large size (one inch in diameter) of some heavy mineral substance not identified. It is of a chocolate colour, with a metallic lustre, and these, as well as the crystal bead and some of the green ones, are so well polished and regular in form that they might have been turned on a lathe, but the boring is very rude. One of them has been shaped into a conventional resemblance

ANTIQUITIES FROM HONDURAS

1-9 ONE THIRD LINEAR



REAL SIZE

to the human hand, which was a tribal or national emblem of some of the early American races. Lastly, there is a thin square plate of jadeite rounded at the angles and highly polished, perforated with two holes, evidently for the purpose of attaching it to some article of dress or ornament; it measures 1.1 inch across.

To these objects must be added about thirty ovoid stones, deeply grooved at the opposite ends, they weigh from $1\frac{3}{4}$ ozs. down to less than $\frac{1}{4}$ oz. and were, as I conjecture, used in some way in weaving.

The way in which the shell cylinders, which are excessively hard, have been perforated is, by boring straight holes from the opposite ends, which do not always meet exactly. (Pl. No. 10.) Some of them are lined with thin copper tubes, for no reason that I can imagine except to enhance their value. It did not in any way enhance their beauty, not being visible externally. Copper utensils and weapons, as I need hardly remind the meeting, occur not unfrequently in the burial mounds of Ohio and Mississippi; the metal was procured in great abundance on Lake Superior, but it was undoubtedly very rare in Central America.

Mr. F. Boyle in his interesting paper on the Ancient Tombs of Nicaragua (1866) remarks that the ancient inhabitants of that region do not appear to have been acquainted with the use of any metal.¹ On the other hand the anonymous Portuguese cavalier called the Knight of Elvas, who has left an account of De Soto's expedition (1539-43) says that the Spaniards saw copper axes in the hands of the Indians of Florida. The observations relate to different epochs and perhaps to different peoples. All that I infer from the present examples is that a high value was attached to it at the epoch when these ornaments were made.

Reverting to the stone weapons, the most interesting of these are blue flint spear heads, beautifully formed, with shanks for their attachment to the handle from two to two and a-half inches long. One of these, shank and all, is eight inches long, and has been formed not by slow and laborious chipping or flaking, but by a few bold and masterly blows, cleaving it, as if on natural planes, to the

¹ *Archæological Journal*, vol. xxiii, p. 48.

required shape. (Pl. No. 2.) These were found at the mouth of the Belize river, at a spot now submerged one or two feet below low water. It may be observed that some of them have portions of oyster shells and serpulæ attached to them. It would, perhaps, be hazardous to assume that the land has subsided some two or three feet since they were lost or buried, but this is at least an open question; their number is such that they can hardly be the result of the casual upsetting of a canoe. Mr. Fowler informs me that there are many indications that the land has subsided in this quarter, and if that be indeed the case we may accept it as evidence of considerable antiquity, because subsidence at the most rapid rate known is rarely perceptible in so short a period as two or three centuries.

The weathering on the surfaces of many of the arrows and axes as compared with the fresh appearance of the fractures on others is also, I conceive, a sign of antiquity; and the fact that we have among them hammer stones is against the accumulation being the casual result of the upsetting of a canoe.

We have next some elegant scrapers or spears of a different form and a different quality of flint, of a yellow tint and texture approaching hornstone. (Pl. Nos. 3-6.) These resemble objects found in Denmark, and have been formed by skilful chipping. They are from the estate of Regalia on the river Sittu, about 60 miles south of Belize. The smaller arrow or spear heads with shanks of a transverse form (Pl. No. 6-7) are from different plantations in the northern part of Honduras towards Yucatan. These are of a material approaching agate. They appear to be too heavy for arrow heads,² but not heavy enough for spears. They might do for darts, but these are not used. If the former they imply strong bows and stout arms. I must not, however, omit to point out a dainty arrow-head of obsidian almost fit for Titania. There is one good specimen of a flint pebble laboriously rubbed down to a "neolithic" celt.

Among these articles are knapping stones for making arrowheads, and a quantity of imperfect weapons, broken

¹ The three lightest weigh respectively 149, 157, and 172 grains.

specimens, and flint flakes. These are from a spot near the coast, where there was evidently a manufactory.

There are also stones, probably more modern, used in the preparation of food, a pistil and some fragments of trachyte worn smooth by friction, and two stones which, from the grooving upon them, were apparently used for sharpening bone needles.

The colony of British Honduras having been very little explored, and prehistoric remains from it being more rare as yet than they are from other parts of Central America, I have thought that this notice might not be unacceptable to collectors. I am not among those who expect a key to be found to the Maya hieroglyphics, or much information of a directly historical character to be derived from the few documents preserved, if they ever are deciphered. The number of elementary forms employed in making groups or characters, and the varieties of their arrangement in combination, appears such as to preclude the idea that they were alphabetical. Certainly Bishop Landa's so called alphabet carries us but an infinitesimally small way towards the end; and all that we know of the mode of preserving the national annals among other Indian races by knotted strings, belts of wampum and the like, points to a mnemonic system, assisted probably by association of ideas, an imperfect picture writing, of which the secret was in possession of a priestly caste alone, and perished with its last living depository.