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Prehistoric Stone Objects from New Guinea and the Solomons. *By Carl Schuster, Ph.D.*

Among the objects displayed in the exhibition, "Arts of the South Seas," at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, from February through May, 1946, is a stone head from the Mandated Territory of New Guinea, here illustrated as Plate X. It belongs to the permanent collection (No. 105248) of the Chicago Natural History Museum (formerly Field Museum of Natural History), by whose permission it is reproduced from photographs kindly supplied by the Museum of Modern Art. As the object is not illustrated in the special publication issued in connection with the exhibition¹ and as it is obviously of interest in relation to a whole series of prehistoric stone objects which have been found from time to time in various parts of New Guinea, a list of which has been published in a recent number of *MANKIND*,² this seems an appropriate time and place to make this additional specimen available for comparison.

The head was acquired in 1909 through the late Mr. A. B. Lewis of the staff of the Chicago Natural History Museum by gift from Mr. H. Voodgt of Friedrich Wilhelmshaven. It was said to have been found in the interior north of Cape Arkona on Huon Gulf. The material is basalt, the greatest height being $8\frac{1}{4}$ ins. or 21 cm. The chin and the left ear are broken, and there are a few nicks in other places. Traces of red pigment cover the entire surface, with the exception of the eye sockets, the nostrils, and the top-knot, which show traces of white pigment. The use of the piece is unknown, but it seems likely that it formed the top of a pestle, as a number of these have been found in the mountains of New Guinea.

The stylistic quality of the head is both very striking and very difficult to place. Some of its features can, perhaps, be paralleled in the present-day art of New Guinea. Thus the elongated, tapering head (possibly the stylized exaggeration of an artificially deformed skull?) recalls a similar development in certain wooden sculptures from the region of the Sepik River³; and the bearded profile of the chin recalls a corresponding treatment in certain

¹ *Arts of the South Seas*, by Ralph Linton and Paul S. Wingert, in collaboration with Rene d'Harnoncourt. Colour illustrations by Miguel Covarrubias. Museum of Modern Art. Distributed by Simon and Schuster, New York, 1946.

² The Ramu Stones: Notes on Stone Carvings Found in the Annaberg-Atemble Area, Ramu Valley, New Guinea, by P. R. N. England, *Mankind*, III, 1946, pp. 233-36, Pl. W.

³ See Linton, Wingert and d'Harnoncourt, *Arts of the South Seas*, p. 117, "Male figure from the top of a sacred flute made by the Mundugumor tribe on the Yuat River, Sepik River area, New Guinea; American Museum of Natural History, 80.0-8234."

skull-masks from New Britain.⁴ The motive of the protruding tongue can also be paralleled from New Guinea, but on the other hand it cannot be regarded as a specifically local phenomenon, as it occurs sporadically in a number of native traditions all the way from Borneo to New Zealand.⁵ The treatment of the nose, which consists of hardly more than two enormously expanded, dish-like nostrils (evidently without provision for a nose-style), the staring concavities of the eyes, deepened by heavy encircling brow-ridges, the further concavity of the mouth, and the delicately modelled, faun-like ears are features which contribute to an unmistakable unity of style. The head itself seems almost to disappear behind a series of expanded concavities, in which the interest of the artist was concentrated. Yet this style, or this manner, so strongly characterized in itself, seems to have no true counterpart in the modern arts of the Papuo-Melanesian region in which it was produced. Like most of the other prehistoric stone objects from New Guinea, in so far as they display sculptural features, this head presents us with a stylistic and historical enigma.

Three other prehistoric stone objects in the collections of the Chicago Natural History Museum are illustrated in Plate Y, Figs. 1, 2 and 3. The pestle or pounder, Fig. 1 (height, 25 cm.), bears the museum number 138592-2; the large bowl or mortar with wing-like appendages, Fig. 2 (greatest length, 39.5 cm.; diameter of central depression, 19 cm.), has the number 138592-3; and the smaller, simple bowl, Fig. 3 (diameters, 21 and 25 cm.), is numbered 138592-1. All three specimens are made of basalt. They were collected by Mr. A. B. Lewis of the museum staff near Sattelberg, Huon Gulf, between 1909 and 1913. The pounder with cruciform handle was found together with the large "winged" mortar one day's travel west of Sattelberg, where the natives called the two objects together *nebuaki*. The small stone bowl, found near Sattelberg, was called *losa*. As Mr. Lewis observes in his label for these specimens, "they are not at present used by the natives, but are found on old village sites or in the forest. The present inhabitants know nothing of their origin or use, but regard them as the work of spirits. They are not worshipped, but are regarded as belonging to the spirits, and have individual names."⁶ The cruciform handle of the pestle, Fig. 1, suggests the figure of a bird in flight. That an avian form was intended by the designer seems to be confirmed by the more clearly bird-like form of the handle of another pestle, illustrated by Barton.⁷ That the large "winged" mortar, Fig. 2, was likewise intended to represent a bird is indicated, moreover, by the appearance of a fine specimen of a mortar in the Australian Museum, Sydney, in which the head, wings and tail of the bird are clearly differentiated.⁸

⁴ See *op. cit.*, p. 157, "mask modelled on skull, from New Britain . . . Cambridge, Peabody Museum, 47343."

⁵ See Felix Speiser, "Über Kunststile in Melanesien," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 68, 1937, p. 355, under the heading "Die Gorgo." Speiser cites examples of this motive from the Sepik River region of New Guinea (his reference to Reche should read plate lxxvii instead of plate lxxviii), from the Papuan Gulf, New Ireland, New Caledonia and New Zealand.

⁶ R. Neuhauss, *Deutsch Neu-Guinea*, Berlin, 1911, i, fig. 51, illustrates a mortar and pestle which were found and kept together by the natives, and referred to by them as a vulva and penis of the spirits.

⁷ F. R. Barton, "Note on Stone Pestles from British New Guinea," *Man*, 8, 1908, plate A. Incidentally, the pestle, our Fig. 1, was sketched and reproduced by Neuhauss, *op. cit.*, i, fig. 54. The sketch is crude, having evidently been made from memory after the object had been acquired, as he says, "by a collector from the museum in Chicago" (Mr. Lewis). Neuhauss' sketch is misleading, as the "cross" is rendered without foreshortening.

⁸ E. Bramell, *Australian Museum Magazine*, VII, 40-42, illus. Mortars of this general type, with more or less wing-like appendages, have been published by various writers. See, for example, Neuhauss, *op. cit.*, i, fig. 52; V. H. Shearwin and A. C. Haddon, "A Stone Bowl from New Britain," *Man*, 33, 1933, No. 166; and G. P. L. Miles, "A Stone Pestle and Mortar from the Upper Ramu River," *Man*, 35, 1935, No. 201.

PREHISTORIC STONE OBJECTS FROM NEW GUINEA AND THE SOLOMONS.



1. *Lateral view of stone pestle from Huon Peninsula, New Guinea.* 2. *Front view of same.*
(Photographs by Museum of Modern Art, by courtesy of Chicago Natural History Museum.)

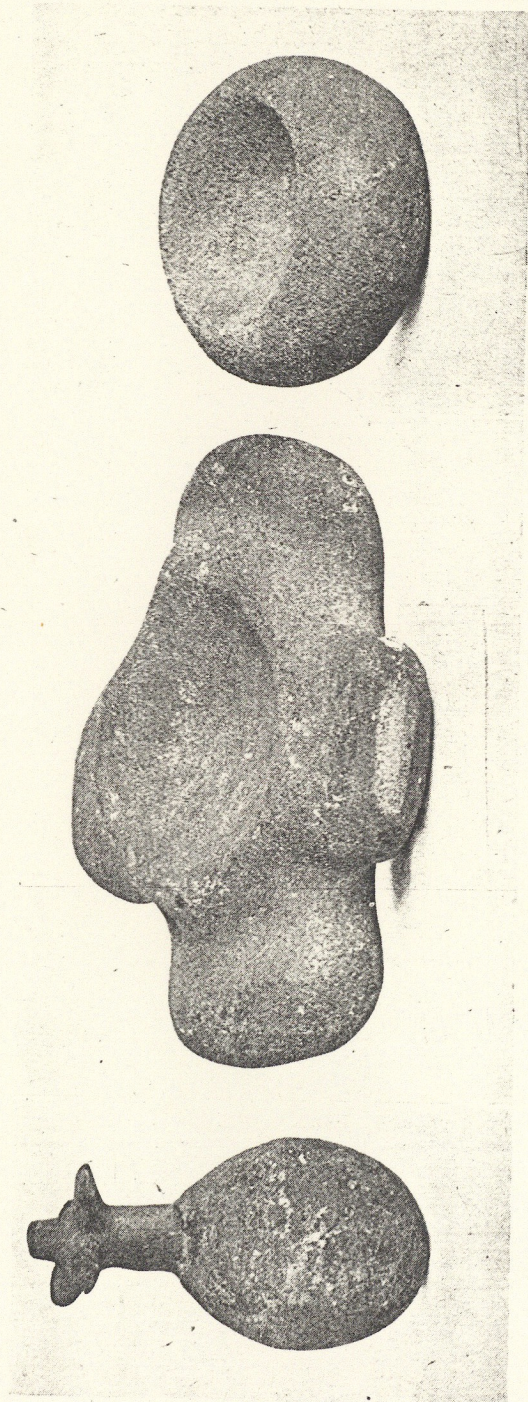


Fig. 1.

Fig. 2.
Prehistoric stone objects from Huon Peninsula, New Guinea.)
(Photographs by courtesy of Chicago Natural History Museum.)

Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.
Stone mortar and pestle, New Georgia,
Solomon Is.
(Photograph by courtesy of Fiji Museum,
Suva.)

The stone mortar and pestle, Plate Y, Fig. 4, are reproduced by courtesy of the Fiji Museum in Suva, where, under the number M156, they form part of the remarkable Solomon Islands collection made by the late Captain A. Middenway of Sydney. Both objects are of basalt, the mortar being 10 ins. (25.5 cm.) high and 7 ins. (18 cm.) wide at the mouth, the pestle 12 ins. (30.5 cm.) long. According to Captain Middenway's notes, the mortar is from Gatukai, New Georgia, where it was called *lotu*. Presumably the pestle is from the same place. Though no further information is available about the pieces, it seems likely that these also, like the stone mortars and pestles from New Guinea, belong to a prehistoric culture, or a prehistoric stage of the modern culture of which there is no clear memory on the part of the present-day natives. The form of the mortar, with slightly bulging sides, a truncated conical base, and rope-like mouldings around the mouth and between the body and the base, is not paralleled, so far as I am aware, in the wooden vessels made by the modern inhabitants of any part of the Solomons archipelago, nor in the modern pottery of Buka. The human face with large ears rendered in flat relief near the bottom of the mortar may be compared with a somewhat similar face, with elaborate ear ornaments, at the bottom of a stone funerary urn on Choiseul Island, as published by Bernatzik, with the caption "The 'spirit's urn,' . . . containing human bones: a last document of an unknown culture (behind the village of Mamarana, Choiseul)."⁹ Though this urn is square rather than round in plan, it is divided by a band or moulding into an upper part, or body and a slightly tapering base, in much the same way as the mortar from New Georgia is divided, with another band encircling the mouth of the urn. The face is sculptured on the base of the urn, that is below the lower dividing band rather than above it, as on the mortar. But this difference may be regarded as a minor one, in as much as the base of the urn, in the interest of the stability necessary for a permanent monument, is made much broader than the tapering base of the movable mortar, so that it provides ample space for the placement of a head, while the body of the urn, somewhat taller, proportionately, than the body of our mortar, is decorated with a full-length figure. After making allowance for differences of scale and function, there still remains enough similarity between our mortar and the Choiseul urn, especially in the placing of the human face, to make a relationship between the two seem plausible. And if the Choiseul urn is, as Bernatzik seems justified in concluding, a remnant of an earlier culture in the Solomons, then it seems quite likely that our mortar belongs to the same prehistoric culture.

CARL SCHUSTER.

⁹ Hugo Adolf Bernatzik, *Südsee. Travels in the South Seas*, London, 1935, fig. 43. and pp. 68-72.