A000-Am,C-Taino-Vessel-Bicephalic Zoomorphic Cemi Heads-Canoe shape-Terra cotta-1000 BCE

 





Figs. 1-7. Am,C-Taino-Vessel-Bicephalic Zoomorphic Cemi Heads-Canoe shape-Terra cotta-1000 BCE

Case No.: 18

**Accession No.**

**Formal Label:** Am,C-Taino-Vessel-Bicephalic Zoomorphic Cemi Heads-Canoe shape-Terra cotta-1000 BCE

**Display Description:**

This bicephalic zoomorphic cemi ceremonial vessel embodies Janus themes, suggesting a certain timelessness of simultaneously looking forward and backward in time. This is appropriate for the shamanic flight as induced by the hallucinogentic cohoba. Since the ceremonial pestle is rare among the Taino, their ownership was probably restricted to prominent *Bohiques* and *Caciques.* Cemi bicephalism was important to Taino cosmological inquiry. They were associated both with the afterlife and the future and in this respect Behiques would seek their aid during hallucinogenic ventures.

These vessels are invariably fashioned from coarse-grained local terra cotta. Their subject matter ranges between anthropomorphic spirits to aviform spirits with large concave eyes, perhaps of owls. This suggests that these vessels were used in ceremonies invoking the Taino Cemis as embodiments of thehidden god, YaYa. YaYa was believed to be an immaterial spirit and whose name is a double superlative of the Arawak *Ia*, “spirit, essence, primary cause of life” or IaIa or YaYa, which can be translated as Spirit of Spirit (C. H. de Goeje, *The Arawak language of Guiana,* Amsterdam, 1928, pp. 45, 142, 204), and whom Father Pané says his “name is a name they do not know” (Pané, Account, ch IX). This is a sophisticated approach to a metaphysical entity that simultaneously exists as a primary cause and is unknowable. The Taíno believe that this entity “is in heaven [an Indo-European, Roman Catholic concept which has no immediate cognate in Taíno] and is immortal and that no one can see it and that it has a mother [which means a genesis] but no beginning” (*Relación* 21). This last statement if put in its stark simplicity it would be: “YaYa has a genesis but no beginning.”

**Taíno Cemieism and Taino Religion.** Taíno cosmology, religion and its rituals is described in Fray Ramón Pané’s *An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians*, the most important anthropological document on the Taíno that contains a wealth of information on this extinct culture. His commission from Columbus required him to record the Taíno beliefs and ceremonies as accurately as possible, and to that end he lived among the native Taíno population from 1493 to 1498. However, he was also a product of fifteenth century Roman Catholicism, and his primary goal was to convert the Taínos whom he regarded as heathens and idolaters. “[Some] were inclined to believe easily. But with others there is need for force and ingenuity because we are not all made of the same stuff. Although those people made a good beginning and a better end, there will be others who will begin well and afterwards will laugh at what has been taught them; with them there is need for force and punishment” (Pané p. 38).

Pané was a Catalan a Hieronymite monk of the Order of St. Jerome. These hermit monks lived according to the Rule of Saint Augustine, which stresses chastity, poverty, obedience, worldly detachment, physical labor, fraternal charity, common prayer, fasting and abstinence. Saint Jerome, a fifth-century hermit and biblical scholar, formulated the rules of the order. In the eyes of the Spanish church hierarchy, Pané was a poor Hieronymite hermit, a Catalan peasant not of Castilian origins and was dismissed probably for these social reasons by the Spanish Dominican Bartolomé de Las Casas (ca. 1484– 18 July 1566) as a “simple man” with “limited faculties” (Pané p. 57), whose efforts, “amounted to nothing more than to say the Ave María and Pater Noster to the Indians, and some words about there being a God in heaven who was the creator of things, according to what he was able to teach them with abundant flaws and in a muddled way” (Pané p. 57). However derogatory Las Casas’ criticisms of Pané are, Pané’s *Account* is still the best source of information on the Taíno.

According to Pané there were twelve orders of spiritual entities that exemplified energies of a Supreme Being. These energies were encompassed in *cemís* which were intermediaries, much like Judaeo-Christian angels or Roman Catholic Saints. Since the repertoire of stone artifacts has now been relatively exposed to scientific scrutiny, each of the cemís spirits can be paired with its wood, stone, shell or textile material representation (Arrom 1975). The Taino also had a tripartite cosmos recorded by Pané which encompassed the sky, the earth and a lower world. These layered divisions are indicated on their most prominent artifact, the Three-pointed Sculpture.

**LC Classification: F1909**

**Date or Time Horizon: 1000 CE**

**Geographical Area: Caribbean**

**Map:**

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Fig. Major cultural groups in the Caribbean, ca. 1492 (after Reid 2009: T-p.).

**GPS coordinates:**

**Cultural Affiliation: Classic Taino**

**Medium: terra cotta**

**Dimensions:**

**Weight:**

**Condition: original**

**Provenance: from an old 20th c Fort Lauderdale collection via Schaffer Jewelers**

**Discussion:**

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