



Yoke (yugo) in toad form

On display

Title/Description: Yoke (yugo) in toad form

Born: 0300 c. - 0600 c.

Object Type: Implement

Materials: Greenstone

Measurements: h. 130 x w. 400 x d. 432 mm

Accession Number: 446

Historic Period: Classic period, 3rd century, 6th century

Production Place: Mesoamerica, Mexico, The Americas, Veracruz

Credit Line: Donated by K. J. Hewett, 1986

Stone sculptures associated with the ballgame cult, and related to the important Classic period site of El Taj in central Veracruz, are grouped together stylistically as 'Classic Veracruz' (see also nos. 20-21; *cf.* Proskouriakoff, 1954,1971) - These works are carved in an elegant, ornate style often filled with sinuous interlaced scrolls with a double outline that is characteristic of the relief sculpture of El Taj in. This *yugo* is one of the more restrained examples, being deeply carved rather than having minutely detailed surface elaboration.

The function of heavy stone *yugos* or yokes, so-called because their shape resembles an ox yoke, has been the subject of considerable debate. Ekholm (1946,1973), noting a resemblance with belts worn by ballplayers in figurines and in other depictions of the game (see also Scott, 1991: 211-13), suggested that stone *yugos* may have been worn during the game as protective belts. However, the absence of use-wear such as nicks and scratches, as well as their heavy weight, has hindered the acceptance of this suggestion. De Vries (1991) has proposed that stone *yugos* may have served as moulds for leather belts which were then filled with cotton or kapok and worn as protection during the game.

Despite these observations, the complete significance of stone *yugos* remains uncertain. They have rarely been found in secure archaeological contexts; a number have been found in burials, perhaps as trophies or as specific funerary offerings. At Santa Luisa, a site near El Tajin, Wilkerson (1970, see also 1990:164-7, nos. 70-71) excavated an élite burial of a young male found seated directly on a *yugo*. Other examples have been found in contexts as far away as El Salvador.

A game was often performed to obtain a good harvest (Leyenaar and Parsons, 1988: 98-9), and the imagery on these *yugos* may have been related to concepts of fertility. This example is carved with a frog or toad's head in the centre of the curve, with its body and legs shown on the sides. The interior and ends have been left plain. An anthropomorphic face is 'embedded' between the eyes of the amphibian, with the eyes of the former serving as the amphibian's nostrils. Frogs and toads are closely associated with concepts of fertility because of the numerous eggs they lay, and because of their links with the underworld Earth Monster (Scott, 1991: 207-8). *Yugos* with toad iconography are found from the late Pre-classic through to the end of the Classic period (c. 100 bc - ad 900; see Leyenaar and Parsons, 1988: nos. 56, 58; Scott, 1991). A break through the left side of the central face has been repaired.

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997).

Provenance

Formerly in the collection of George de Miré, Paris.

Gift from K. J. Hewett to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia on the occasion of Robert Sainsbury's 80th birthday in 1986.
