

REPLY TO PETER SCHAAF AND GÜNTHER A. WAGNER'S "COMMENTS ON 'MESOAMERICAN EVIDENCE OF PRE-COLUMBIAN TRANSOCEANIC CONTACTS' "

Romeo H. Hristov^a and Santiago Genovés T.^b

^aDepartment of Anthropology, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131, USA

^bInstituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 04510 Mexico, DF, Mexico

Abstract

In the present "Reply . . ." we discuss a correction of the thermoluminescence (TL) age limits of an apparently Roman terracotta head found in Mexico (Hristov and Genovés 1999), as well two recent objections to the reliability of the find: (1) that the artifact may have been imported to the New World after A.D. 1492; and (2) that the head was "planted" at the archaeological site during the excavation. The corrected TL age limits oscillate from 2870 B.P. to 730 B.P. (cal. 875 B.C.–A.D. 1265), which excludes the possibility of Colonial manufacture of the artifact and makes the hypothesis of its Roman origin and importation into Mesoamerica applicable. However, an examination of the political and economic relationships between the Aztecs and the Matlatzincas, as well as the circumstances of the discovery, make highly unlikely the suggestion of post-Columbian importation of the artifact into Mesoamerica (and especially into the Central Mexican Highlands), and of the "planting" of the figurine at the archaeological site. Finally, we summarize some recent finds of Berber, Phoenician, Egyptian, and Roman objects and inscriptions in the Canary archipelago that strongly support the possibility of a few sporadic, perhaps accidental, transatlantic voyages from the Mediterranean to Mesoamerica in antiquity.

Schaaf and Wagner's "Comments on 'Mesoamerican Evidence of Pre-Columbian Transoceanic Contacts' " contains an indispensable and important correction of the thermoluminescence (TL) age limits of the apparently Roman terracotta head found in Tecaxic-Calixtlahuaca, Mexico (Hristov and Genovés 1999). Schaaf also claims that Hristov has (1) used data without authorization that has only been "internally discussed"; (2) included Schaaf's and Wagner's names as co-authors, without their agreement and without acknowledging them; and (3) cited an erroneous bibliographical reference regarding the TL age range of 1780 ± 400 years B.P. These allegations are neither necessary nor are they free of inaccuracies. For this reason, our original intention was simply to drop them from the discussion and send a letter of explanation to the Editorial Office of *Ancient Mesoamerica*. Regrettably, it does not take much time to realize that these allegations have been used by others to question our objectivity in reporting the rest of the data. For this reason, the allegations will be considered briefly in the response that follows.

From late 1996 to late 1998, the TL age limits in question (i.e., 1780 ± 400 years B.P.) were not only "internally discussed" but also submitted for publication in *Science* and *Archaeometry* in two articles co-authored by Schaaf, Wagner, Ziles, Pernicka, Hristov, and Genovés. In both of these articles, the TL age limits were referred to in the same way as published in *Ancient Mesoamerica* (i.e., as 1780 ± 400 years B.P.) and explicitly presented as definitive results, and the manuscripts were mailed personally by Schaaf

to these journals. In the first version of the article submitted to *Archaeometry*, the significance of the find as well as the TL age limits were questioned by two of the three reviewers, but during a meeting at Instituto de Geofísica, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (IGF-UNAM), Mexico City, in May 1998, Schaaf informed Hristov that the revised manuscript would be sent to *Archaeometry* with the same TL age limits. Schaaf and Hristov also agreed to stay in contact and to inform each other of the progress of the articles submitted to *Archaeometry* and *Ancient Mesoamerica*. This agreement notwithstanding, Schaaf did not inform us about any corrections to the TL age limits of the artifact until early December 1999. By that time, the article was in print, and it was too late to make changes to avoid this embarrassing situation, but Hristov and Schaaf agreed to prepare, as soon as possible, a joint letter with the corrected TL age limits for *Ancient Mesoamerica*.

In Schaaf and Wagner's "Comments . . ." it is unclear that two samples for TL age tests had been taken, the first in early 1994 and the second in early 1995. After the complementary analysis of the second sample in early 1996, Schaaf assured Hristov that the TL age limits could be reasonably well established between the second century B.C. and the seventh century A.D., with an average age of 1780 years B.P. He also suggested preparing two co-authored articles by Hristov, Genoves, Schaaf, and Wagner—one concerned principally with the archaeological data and the other with the results of the TL age tests and their interpretation. We (Hristov

and Genovés) gladly accepted the invitation, but due to the highly controversial character of the research, Hristov requested a copy of an official TL age-test report signed by Wagner. Schaaf informed him that the final precision of the TL age limits was available only in informal letters from Wagner, but he gave Hristov a copy from the preliminary TL age-test report that suggested a TL age of the artifact of around 2000 years B.P.

In late August 1996, when basically the same version of the article published in *Ancient Mesoamerica* was ready, Hristov gave a copy of it to Schaaf and invited him to make all the changes, corrections, and comments he considered necessary. Hristov also asked Schaaf to send a copy of the article to Wagner, and Schaaf assured him that he would do so. In the following years, Hristov twice sent a copy of this article to Wagner by e-mail. After its definite acceptance for publication in *Ancient Mesoamerica*, Hristov again informed Wagner by phone and e-mail. In the meantime, we did not hear any objection from Wagner about our co-authorship or the way in which the TL age limits were cited until late November 1999. In confirmation of this, copies of personal letters, manuscripts, and the TL authenticity test report signed by Wagner were mailed to the Editorial Office of *Ancient Mesoamerica*.

Schaaf's commentary about the apparently incorrect citation seems to involve a misunderstanding. Schaaf et al. (1996) is cited as a reference for "a preliminary discussion of the [TL] procedure," not for the TL age limits (cf. Hristov and Genovés 1999:208).

How and to what degree could the corrected TL age limits change the hypothesis of Roman origin and importation of the head, as suggested by Hristov and Genovés (1999)? The lack of an age plateau and the extension of the TL age limits from the ninth century B.C. to the middle of the thirteenth century A.D. considerably reduce the value of the TL data as an argument for the alleged chronology of second to third century A.D. That notwithstanding, as Schaaf and Wagner point out, the TL test results exclude the possibility of Colonial manufacture of the head and make the hypothesis of Roman origin applicable. Also, three of the four TL ages shown in Table 1 of "Comment . . ." oscillate between 1490 ± 333 ; 2115 ± 415 ; and 2399 ± 473 B.P., which points to the beginning of the Christian era as the most probable manufacturing period of the artifact. However, it is important to keep in mind that in both cases—those of the incorrectly and correctly reported TL age limits—the final precision of the chronology can be based only on stylistic analysis. In this regard, the opinion of Bernard Andreae, a well-known specialist in Roman art and archaeology and current president of the German Institute of Archaeology in Rome, deserves to be cited. In an interview with the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* (Domenici 2000:29), Andreae states that:

[The head] is without any doubt Roman, and the lab analysis has confirmed that it is ancient. The stylistic examination tells us more precisely that it is a Roman work from around the second century A.D., and the hairstyle and the shape of the beard present the typical traits of the Severian emperors period [A.D. 193–235], exactly in the "fashion" of the epoch. About that there is no doubt.

I am considering it as absolutely possible that the Romans arrived in the Americas. I consider that possible even without the find of the small head. Obviously, this must have been a voyage with no historical consequences, such as a sunken ship.

One involuntary voyage from Lanzarote to Mexico is perfectly credible, as has been demonstrated by historic cases of accidental or experimental crossings [of the Atlantic Ocean]. However, I think that the question regarding the small head will never have a complete answer. (Translated by Romeo Hristov and Maura Mariani)

In May 2000, after examining high-resolution color photographs of the artifact, Andreae informed Hristov that this opinion was "definitively correct" and might be cited as such, as long as we made clear that Andreae was not involved in any way in the research and that he was not completely convinced of pre-Columbian importation of the object (personal communication to Hristov, May 8, 2000).

The publication of the complementary research of the apparently Roman head found in Tecaxic-Calixtlahuaca, Mexico (Hristov and Genovés 1999), has generated much controversy and has been discussed in publications in at least 16 languages, as well in several radio and television programs. Two of the recent objections to the reliability of the find deserve special attention. The first is that the artifact, although it seems to be Roman, could have been imported into the New World by some European visitor between 1492 and 1510 A.D. and somehow found its way to Central Mexico (Down 2000:24–25). Concerning such a possibility, we must provide a reminder that, during this period, the Matlatzincas were under the Aztec domain, so the artifact would have come to the Toluca Valley most probably through the Aztec *pochtecas*—but, in any case, with Aztec knowledge. In the context of the otherwise detailed and reasonably reliable late Aztec historical tradition, however, the lack of the slightest reference to any encounter of the Aztecs or their vassals with Europeans is inexplicable. And such silence makes the proposed idea highly improbable if we bear in mind: (1) the deep religious and political meaning of the Aztec belief that bearded foreigners coming westward from the Atlantic would conquer and destroy their kingdom; and (2) how fast Moctecuhzoma II was informed about the Spaniards' arrival in Veracruz in 1518 and the great impact of this event among the Aztec rulers.

The second objection is that the head was "planted" as a joke directed at José García-Payón. Similar situations surrounding unique or sensationalist finds have arisen in the past and probably will do so in the future, as well. For this reason, we believe that it is a good idea to keep in mind such a possibility, if personal impartiality and prejudices are not confused—or pretend to pass—for respectable scholarly precaution.

In an informal letter to the Editorial Office of *Ancient Mesoamerica* dated March 6, 2000, Paul Schmidt of the Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas at UNAM, Mexico City, suggested such a possibility. What follow are a few paragraphs from his letter, which are self-explanatory:

The citing of the unpublished TL date without the author's (Schaaf's and Wagner's) permission reflects Hristov's well-known unethical approach to life. We had plenty of problems with him while he was here [at IIA-UNAM] as Santiago's [Genovés's] protégé.

. . . [T]he figurine was planted in Don Pepe's [José García Payón's] díg, the saying goes, by Hugo Moedano. Don Pepe took it so seriously that no one had the heart to tell him it was a joke. This I remember having been told by John Paddock . . .

Taking into consideration Hristov's known unethical behavior and the obvious controversy that would result from the publication, I find it extremely hard to believe that two of the three serious and professional referees . . . would support the article.

In late 1996, Schmidt informed Hristov that "everybody knows that the head is Colonial" and that García-Payón was not present during the excavation, so surely somebody had "planted" the head as a joke. The previous (incorrect) and revised TL age limits and the excavation report do not support the suspicion of Colonial manufacture or intrusion of the artifact into the apparently pre-Hispanic archaeological context (see Hristov and Genovés 1999:208–210). In 1997, Hristov personally asked Fernando García-Payón, José García-Payón's son, whether he knew anything about the second objection. His response was that, during the 1960s, his father frequently was asked whether he had been present during excavations, and he always assured them that he had.

A few months later, Hristov asked Schmidt again whether he could remember the source of his information about the "planting" of the head, and Schmidt informed him that he believed he had heard from John Paddock that Hugo Moedano had "planted" the head. By that time, both Paddock and Moedano had passed away. Therefore, the only option we had was to ask several of the respectable and usually well-informed Mexican scholars of the older generation. None of them had ever heard such a story, neither from Hugo Moedano nor from John Paddock (Román Piña Chán, Angel García Cook, Luis Torres Montes, Carlos C. Navarrete, and Jorge V. Angulo, personal communication to Romeo Hristov 1997). At that time we stopped further investigation of the allegation. Recently, however, Romeo Hristov asked Fernando García-Payón whether he knew anything

about a possible "planting" of the artifact by Hugo Moedano. His response was that Hugo Moedano "had never been present during the excavation" and that this was just "nonsense" (Fernando García-Payón, personal communication April 4, 2000).

Finally, we emphasize once again that in their most fundamental aspects—such as domestic plants and animals, knowledge and use of metals, writing and language systems, and religious beliefs, among others—the Old World and New World civilizations until the early sixteenth century were firmly different and, consequently, independent from each other (Hristov 1998:237; Hristov and Genovés 1999:52–53). That notwithstanding, there are also some data of various kinds and levels of credibility that suggest the existence of a few sporadic, most probably accidental, inter-hemispheric voyages before Columbus, which apparently had very limited—if any—cultural and biological impact. The find of an apparently Roman head in Tecaxic-Calixtlahuaca, Mexico, seems to support the occurrence of one such voyage across the Middle Atlantic, possibly in the first centuries of the Christian era. On the other hand, recent archaeological research in the Canary Islands has proved that not only Romans (Atoche Peña et al. 1995) but also Phoenicians and Berbers reached and colonized at least two of the islands (Tenerife and Lanzarote) as early as the sixth or fifth century B.C. (Behrmann et al. 1995; Atoche Peña et al. 1997). The implications of these discoveries in the discussion of possible pre-Columbian transatlantic contacts are obvious, and it is not entirely unreasonable to expect in the near future that systematic archaeological studies in the Caribbean, Central America, and Brazil may provide more—and more conclusive—data related to small-scale transatlantic voyages before 1492.

RESUMEN

En la presente "Respuesta . . ." discutimos la corrección de los límites de edad establecidos por medio de la termoluminiscencia, de una cabecita de barro de apariencia romana hallada en México (Hristov and Genovés 1999), así como dos recientes objeciones acerca de la confiabilidad del hallazgo: (1) que el artefacto fué importado al Nuevo Mundo después de 1492 d.C. y, (2) que la cabecita fue "sembrada" en el sitio arqueológico durante la excavación. Los límites de la edad establecidos por medio de la termoluminiscencia oscilan de 2870 a.p. hasta 730 a.p. (875 a.C. hasta 1265 d.C.), lo cual excluye la posibilidad de manufactura colonial del artefacto y hace la hipótesis de manufactura e importación romana factible. Por otro lado,

la examinación de las relaciones económicas y políticas entre los matlatzincas y los aztecas durante el lapso mencionado, así como las circunstancias del descubrimiento mismo hacen sumamente improbable las sospechas de importación postcolumbina del artefacto en Mesoamérica (y, especialmente, en el Altiplano Central) o de intrusión reciente de la figurilla en el sitio arqueológico. Finalmente se resumen unos hallazgos recientes de objetos e inscripciones berberis, fenecios, egipcios y romanos en el archipiélago canario, los cuales decididamente apoyan la posibilidad de algunos viajes transatlánticos accidentales del Mediterráneo a Mesoamérica durante la antigüedad.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank John Wheeler of Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas; Emily McCorkle and Molly Morgan of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee; and Tom Cabot of the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque

for corrections of the English text. Maura Mariani of Southern Methodist University in Dallas kindly assisted us in translating from Italian to English.

REFERENCES

- Atoche Peña, Pablo, Juan Paz Peralta, María Ramírez Rodríguez, and María Ortíz Palomar
 1995 *Evidencias arqueológicas del mundo romano en Lanzarote, islas Canarias*. Servicio de Publicaciones del Excmo. Cabildo Insular de Lanzarote, Arrecife.
- Atoche Peña, Pablo, José Martín Culebras, and María Angeles Ramírez Rodríguez
 1997 Elementos fenicio-púnicos en la religión de los mahos. Estudio de una placa procedente de Zonzamas (Teguise, Lanzarote). *Eres (Arqueología)* 7(1):7–38.
- Behrmann, Rodrigo de Balbín, Primitiva Bueno Ramírez, Rafael González Antón, and María Carmen del Arco Aguilar
 1995 Datos sobre la colonización púnica de las islas Canarias. *Eres (Arqueología)* 6(1):7–28.
- Domenici, Viviano
 2000 Il parere dell'archeologo Bernard Andreae: ha i tratti tipici dell'arte del secondo secolo dopo Cristo. "Non mi stupisce che siano arrivati in America." *Corriere della Sera*, February 27, p. 29.
- Down, Kenneth
 2000 A Roman Head in Mexico. *Archaeological Diggings* 7(3):23–25.