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Amphibian-shaped pendant (axolotl?)

Panama or Costa Rica, Xth – XVth century AD

Gold and copper alloy

1.8 x 1.2 x 3.4 cm

FGA-ETH-AM-0221

Provenance

Former private collection, France, 1960s

Acquired at Rennes Enchères, Rennes, 25.02.2019, lot no. 298

Unpublished

A puzzling Mexican amphibian

This is the smallest object in our collections: with its 3 cm in length and 1 cm in width at the shoulders, it nearly requires a magnifier to be fully appreciated in detail. Let's face it: this modest animal is somewhat sketchy. But it's all in the details, and under its dull aspect, it raises a number of questions. (read more)

Minute

Between the IXth and the XVth century AD, goldsmiths of pre-Columbian Central America produced thousands of pendants similar to this small animal-shaped piece of jewellery made of hollow gold (*fig. 1*). Animals (jaguars, toads or frogs, monkeys, crocodiles, birds and turtles) were an inexhaustible source of inspiration for craftsmen of the Coclé, Calima, Diquis, Chiriquí, Veraguas, Sinú and Tairona cultures¹.

The present piece was attached to the necklace by the front legs, the ends of which are curved so as to form a small ring, as is the case for pendants from Panama or Costa Rica and pertaining to the Chiriquí or Veraguas cultures. Like all these animal-shaped pendants made of gold or *tumbaga* (a gold and copper alloy), our little beast adorned the neck of a deceased person in order to ensure their symbolic protection.

But what kind of animal are we dealing with? Who is this tiny quadruped? It is not a feline, as it does not have a cat nose, nor a crocodilian, as it does not display the typical long toothed snout and wide nostrils: the outline of this long thin body, with short legs and long tail, is rather reminiscent of an amphibian (*fig. 2*). A very specific one though, because along with small pellet-shaped eyes, the top of the head shows two curved appendages: this is a kind of salamander with a wide flat head and a friendly big mouth.

The axolotl, a siredon

Far from being the fruit of the imagination of a pre-Columbian goldsmith, this pendant is certainly meant to depict an axolotl, a charming little urodelian amphibian (urodelians keep their tail as adults) dwelling in the lakes of the highland plateau of the Valley of Mexico. An unclassifiable being, neither flesh nor fish, which until 1865² was considered sometimes as a fish or eel, sometimes as a lizard. In the XIXth century, it was also described as a "siredon", a term based on the Greek word for

¹ In Tairona goldsmithery (Colombia), amphibians – mainly toads – are by far the most often depicted animals: LEGAST, *El animal*, p. 22 and p. 63-74; see also COOKE, BRAY, "The Goldwork of Panama", p. 35-45.

² RENARD, "L'axolotl", p. 22; ROJAS RABIELO, *La cosecha del agua*, p. 79-80.

the Siren and designating the larva of a salamander³. A strange creature, which gave rise to an abundant literature, both scientific and fantastic⁴, and became one of the symbols of Mexico⁵.

What a sweetheart!

With its adorable look, the axolotl (*Ambystoma mexicanum*) is a salamander larva which, in real life, is characterized by a frill consisting of three pairs of external gill stalks on the upper part of the neck, as well as a translucent dorsal fin (*fig. 3*). Its small, lidless marble-shaped eyes protrude from its wide elliptical flat head, at least for individuals remaining in their larval phase. And in its leucistic variant, it is as cute as a baby (*fig. 4*) ...

Although Mexican folklore is not really receptive to its unusual appeal (according to a Mexican saying, a particularly ugly person would “look like an axolotl”)⁶, it is a wonder of nature: due to the cold temperatures and lack of iodine of the Mexican highland lakes, which prevent it from reaching adulthood, it usually remains in its larval phase – a phenomenon called ‘neoteny’ –, which does not stop it from mating and laying eggs. Brown in the wild, it is usually depigmented when bred in captivity. If conditions allow its metamorphosis, it will lose its fin, but not its tail⁷ (*fig. 5*).

Mexican to the gilltips

Indeed, the biotope of the animal is geographically very delimited: the lakes of the Mexican highland plateau, an environment which has been constantly shrinking, notably because of the galloping urbanization of Mexico City. The axolotl of Lake Xochimilco is also threatened by the arrival of invasive species, such as the African tilapia.⁸ Its population has decreased drastically, going from 6,000 individuals per square kilometer in 1998, to less than 100 in 2008⁹. Unfortunately, this trend does not seem to be reversing, so that nowadays, most axolotls live in captivity and in Europe, where the first ones were imported in Paris as early as 1864¹⁰.

³ VELASCO, “Descripción, metamorfosis”, *pass.*; quoted in BARTRA, VILADELÁNGEL, *Axolotiada*, p. 169-200.

⁴ For the scientific literature, see: VOSS, WOODCOCK, ZAMBRANO, “A Tale of Two Axolotls”, p. 1134-1140; for the fantastic literature: Robert ABERNATHY, “L’Axolotl”, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, January 1954; Julio CORTAZAR, *Final del juego. Axolotl*, Mexico, 1956; Philippe CAZA, “Axolotls”, *Métal Hurlant*, 78, 1982, p. 37-46; summaries and presentation of the works in RENARD, “L’axolotl”, p. 27-30; BARTRA, VILADELÁNGEL, *Axolotiada*, *pass.*

⁵ BARTRA, VILADELÁNGEL, *Axolotiada*, *pass.*

⁶ SMITH, “The Mexican Axolotl”, p. 593; RENARD, “L’axolotl”, p. 25.

⁷ RENARD, “L’axolotl”, p. 20.

⁸ ZAMBRANO, “La extinción del axolote en Xochimilco”, in BARTRA, VILADELÁNGEL, *Axolotiada*, p. 238.

⁹ VOSS, WOODCOCK, ZAMBRANO, “A Tale of Two Axolotls”, p. 1135.

¹⁰ SMITH, “The Mexican Axolotl”, p. 594.

Present where least expected, but not seen in Mexico

However, although it fascinated the Aztecs, the amphibian does not seem to have left archaeological traces in Mexico. The axolotl of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, which is the first spotted in archaeological collections, does not come from this region and only displays a single pair of gills, two rather curious facts. Maybe the goldsmith who produced it had never seen an axolotl, as the object comes from an area of Central America where the amphibian was not present. Perhaps the animal, which was common among the Aztecs, was depicted by craftsmen of a neighbouring culture, and recognized as a protecting animal by its people? Or maybe there was another kind of salamander larva, similar to the axolotl, which lived further south?

Two other pieces can be added to the file of this travelling axolotl, i.e. two gold necklaces pertaining to the Calima culture (Colombia, Ist – VIIth century AD). The first is made of sixteen tiny stylized quadrupeds, of decreasing sizes¹¹ (*fig. 6*). With their round head, small flat body and their tail, and above all with three pairs of small flat rectangles on both sides of the body (two pairs of legs and one pair of gills?), they might be axolotls. The second one, which shows thirty-six strictly identical animals, is preserved at the Metropolitan Museum¹² (*fig. 7*). Thus, in the Calima culture, the axolotl ensured the protection of the deceased in the form of pendants attached to funerary necklaces.

A delectable flesh

The Spanish Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún (1499 – 1590) was the first Westerner to observe this weird little beast. He describes its hybrid aspect, and notably mentions that it is “very good to eat”, and that it was “a food of lords”¹³. After the conquest, Indians and Spanish would eat it fried or cooked in a saucepan, sometimes seasoned with chili¹⁴. It was a noticeable source of food, since a mature axolotl can be 15 to 25 cm long. If it was reputed to provoke lust, this was not taken too seriously, as its delicious flesh also has the capacity of healing liver obstruction¹⁵.

Xolotl, the rebel

But it was above all a small animal whose metamorphosis abilities had been observed by the Aztecs. Its name stems from nahuatl *atl*, meaning “water”, and *xolotl*, which notably designates the

¹¹ I thank Jean-Christophe Argillet for drawing my attention to this piece, which belongs to a private collection in Monaco.

¹² Metropolitan Museum, Inv. 1979.206.503.1-36.

¹³ “Es muy bueno de comer; es comida de los señores”: DE SAHAGÚN, *Historia general*, XI, iii; SMITH, “The Mexican Axolotl”, p. 593.

¹⁴ ROJAS RABIELO, *La cosecha del agua*, p. 81.

¹⁵ For ancient sources, see ROJAS RABIELO, *La cosecha del agua*, p. 80.

“dog”¹⁶. And in the Aztec tradition, the dog has a funerary aspect, as it was supposed to guide the dead in the afterlife. The axolotl is therefore a “water-dog”.

But Xolotl is also the name of a god mentioned in the myth of the “Birth of the Fifth Sun” (*fig. 8*). This Aztec myth recorded by Bernardino de Sahagún describes the creation of the world. Seeing that the sun is remaining still after its birth, the gods decide to sacrifice themselves so as to feed the sun with their blood in order to set it in motion. Xolotl is the only one who refuses to die, showing quite a spirit of rebellion¹⁷. This twin brother of Quetzalcoatl (the Feathered Serpent) escapes and first finds shelter in a maize field where he takes the shape of a maize plant with two stalks, but he is discovered; resuming his race, he then turns into a kind of agave. Discovered once again, he jumps in the water where he turns into an axolotl, but is soon captured and put to death by his pursuers¹⁸. He was thus sacrificed to ensure, with his blood, the food and motion of the Sun.

The Aztecs would then associate the small transforming amphibian to one of the shapes of the god Xolotl, who was also keen on changing shape. By taking the form of an axolotl, Xolotl went from the terrestrial to the watery world, thus acquiring a funerary aspect. This is why he would escort the sun every night to the underworld and the soul of the deceased to Mictlan, the abode of the dead.

The invincible Axolotl

The other characteristic of the axolotl, which is also the reason of its success in labs, is its uncanny ability to regenerate its damaged tissues, or even to regenerate an additional limb¹⁹. Did the Aztecs witness this phenomenon? Hard to say, but in any case, they would consider the little axolotl not only as an avatar of a god escorting the dead into the afterlife, but also as a powerful protector.

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Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, November 2019

Traduction : Dr Pierre Meyrat

¹⁶ SMITH, “The Mexican Axolotl”, p. 593; BARTRA, VILADELÁNGEL, *Axolotiada*, p. 35.

¹⁷ DUVERGER, *La fleur létale*, p. 89-90.

¹⁸ DUVERGER, *La fleur létale*, p. 90.

¹⁹ VOSS, WOODCOCK, ZAMBRANO, “A Tale of Two Axolotls”, p. 1136.

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