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Pendant in the shape of a vampire bat

Costa Rica, Diquis culture, 13th – 16th century A.D.

Gold

4.6 x 3.9 x 1.5 cm

FGA-ETH-AM-0230

Provenance

Galerie Heidi Vollmæller, Zurich

Then collection Madame D. Geneva, 1991

Acquired at the Hôtel des Ventes Piguet, Geneva, 21 May 2019, lot no. 377

Unpublished



Like a bat out of Hell

The current pandemic has shed some light on the potential part played by a usually discreet animal: the bat, especially in its blood-sucking variant... an animal which plays a crucial part in mankind's fantasy. This somewhat gory notice is devoted to a small piece of jewellery pertaining to the Diquis culture, which shows once more how observant artists were, in this case goldsmiths, and the weight of the intriguing and magical animal world surrounding them, in spite of sometimes complex relations.

A Desmodus rotundus at the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art

The artefact under study is a cast gold pendant made by Central American goldsmiths; it pertains to the Diquis culture of Costa Rica, and can be dated to a period reaching from the 13th to the 16th century A.D. (*fig. 1*).

Like the axolotl scrutinized a few months ago, this is a tiny piece, but it is nonetheless filled with energy, thanks to the skills of the goldsmiths who captured the main traits of the animal. It is a pendant with a suspension ring at the back (*fig. 2*). It depicts a flying bat, shown full-face with spread wings. With its high rounded ears, leaf nose, pellet eyes and wide-open mouth showing a row of long and sharp teeth, our animal is a blend of fancy and realistic features. Symmetrical wings in the shape of sickle-blades are attached to its raised front legs, forming a kind of corolla around the chiropter. With its body shown full-face, small round breasts perhaps suggesting a female and spread rear legs, it rests on its four-toed feet, between which hangs a triangular tail.

This is what our *Desmodus rotundus* looks like. Also known as 'common vampire bat' or 'Azara vampire bat', this bat haunts the skies and myths of Central America (*fig. 3*). It lives in these areas since the Pleistocene, as fossil bones of these vampires, although bigger, have been uncovered on several sites¹. In a way, this animal comes straight out of prehistory.

Conduct and behaviour of the vampire

Is the vampire so common?... Not at all: it displays a series of peculiarities which make it a unique creature (*fig. 4*). First, it feeds exclusively on blood, rather than fruit, flesh or insects. It is therefore the only parasitic mammal, strictly speaking. Then, it is the only bat which feels as comfortable on the ground as in the air: it flies at night, but it can also use its legs to walk, run or leap. To increase its efficiency, the vampire bat can also combine leap and flight.

What about the animal's teeth? They are few, but a lack of enamel makes them extremely sharp². Its wrinkled leaf nose forming bulges above the nostrils, its ears with wide auricles, as well as its eyes provide the animal with a powerful visual, hearing and olfactory acuity. Like some nocturnal rodents, it can see in the dark. And like other bats, it uses echolocation

¹ GREENHALL *et al.*, "Desmodus", p. 1.

² GREENHALL *et al.*, "Desmodus", p. 4.



to detect its prey, emitting low frequency sounds while flying, so that the echo of the sound on the obstacle comes back to its large ears³. The strong natural smell emitted by some of the future victims also plays a part in the choice of the menu⁴.

Once its targets are located, whether domestic or wild (livestock, wild pigs, deers, tapirs, ...), the vampire strikes: heat sensors located in its nose enable to detect blood vessels appearing underneath the prey's skin. With its razor-sharp teeth, it cuts the animal's skin to let the blood spill and delight in it, a feast during which several bats can feed from the same wound, one after another⁵ (*fig. 5*).

A reservoir for germs

Its saliva contains an anticoagulant enzyme; moreover, this saliva is rich in viruses of all kinds, with which the bat lives in perfect symbiosis. Among these are the infamous coronaviruses, as well as the rabies virus, which can be transmitted to humans and animals by biting⁶. The latter can then transmit it to those living from the hunt, dogs and hunters, and in the case of livestock, to those who live nearby. Even a few cases of archaeologists bitten by the vampire have been reported⁷. So, even with its pretty fur and ravishing smile, we must admit that this bat does not do its bit to guarantee its survival.

What about the taste of blood?

Babies learn the taste of blood from their mother: they are suckled up to an age of 300 days, but starting in their second month, they are also fed mouth-to-mouth with regurgitated blood. This goes along with the development of their flying capacities. From their fourth month, they accompany their mother to the prey⁸, which gives them a first idea of their future meals (*fig. 6*). "Is it good, dear eaters, is it good, the taste of blood?" "Sweet. Sweet! You shall never know how sweet it is, herbivore!": these verses of the poet Norge could perfectly emanate from the bloody lips of a vampire bat...⁹

This charming, very surprising and complex animal, whose behaviour is now fully understood by zoologists and ethologists, must have frightened or at least intrigued those who lived nearby and suffered this annoyance.

³ GREENHALL *et al.*, "Desmodus", p. 2-3.

⁴ BAHLMANN, "Use of olfaction", *pass.*

⁵ GREENHALL *et al.*, "Desmodus", p. 4.

⁶ BROWN, *Vampiro*, p. 68-73.

⁷ BROWN, *Vampiro*, p. 63.

⁸ GREENHALL *et al.*, "Desmodus", p. 3.

⁹ After Géo NORGE, "La faune", final verse: « Est-il bon, chers mangeurs, est-il bon, le goût du sang ? » « Doux. Doux ! tu ne sauras jamais comme il est doux, herbivore ! ».



Unclassifiable bats

Bats represent a vast topic in pre-Columbian America. The Mayas classified bat (*sotz* in the Mayan dialects) not among mammals, but among birds¹⁰, which is why they were depicted with a bird's tail. Whether frugivorous, carnivorous, insectivorous or hematophagous, bats play different parts in the imagination and the myths, depending on their nature. It is therefore a polysemous animal, seen sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. In its positive aspect, the bat could be a messenger of the gods; it was also a divine creature in charge of the pollination and fertilizing, and was then associated with the hummingbird¹¹. Maleficent, it is closely related to the world of witchcraft¹². The species considered is then precisely the *Desmodus rotundus*, which never ceased tormenting mankind. According to popular traditions in Guatemala, for instance, bats are sorcerers, and their appearance in a house is a deadly omen, probably due to the fact that the animal is a carrier of rabies and other illnesses¹³. In the Maya narrative known as *Popol Vuh*, the *Camazotz* ("death bat") is a deity of death by whom one of the hero twins is beheaded. As a nocturnal animal, the vampire naturally had a funerary aspect to which I will come back below.

The question is now which part it played in the native American mythic and lyric mind.

In the time when "animals were humans"

This time is the era of the myths dear to Claude Lévi-Strauss, of the tales recorded by missionaries and ethnographers who met Native Americans. These mythical tales explained the history before history, the "the how and the why" of their world. The vampire bat plays unexpected parts, along with several animals like the jaguar, the ray, the owl, the monkey or the alligator... Curiously enough, the vampire bat is related to laughter and blood in myths telling more or less the same story, which is found in various populations of Central and South America, such as the Arawak, Bororo, Kayapo, Apinayé, etc.

But what was to be explained in these tales? Well, simply the reason why vampire bats and humans are forever deadly enemies, and why the first take their revenge by tirelessly harassing the second.

Gruesome giggles

The vampire bat thus provoked the first human hysterical laughter: not a joy laughter, but a lethal one, despised by the native warrior as "unworthy of his position" and "only good for women and children"¹⁴. To sum up a myth of the Kayapo (Amazonia), when a humanized bat and a man once met, the bat was unable to speak the human language, and showed the man

¹⁰ LOIS, "Gender Markers", p. 273. The same embarrassment in classifying these flying mammals appears in Western thought: for Pliny the Elder (*Natural History*, X, 83), the bat is a bird, although the only viviparous one, see TUPINIER, "Les tribulations", p. 26.

¹¹ BRADY, COLTMAN, "Bats", *pass*.

¹² BRADY, COLTMAN, "Bats", *pass*.

¹³ BRADY, COLTMAN, "Bats", p. 233-234; BROWN, *Vampiro*, p. 93.

¹⁴ BANNER, "Mitos", p. 60-61; LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Le cru et le cuit*, p. 130-131.



its affection by caressing him with its little claws, which tickled him and made him laugh. When the man entered the animal's cave – the floor of this shelter was covered with droppings, but its walls were full of paintings –, the other bats welcomed him in the same way with their sharp claws. This tickling brings the man to the apex of laughter, to the extent that he faints. This kind of mechanical laughter has nothing funny nor healthy. It is rather the sign of a dark omen.

The myth goes on with the punitive raid of men in the cave: the bats are smoked out and fly away through a hidden exit. This is how vampire bats and humans became deadly enemies forever. Among the Arawak, another version of the story explains that as a revenge, vampire bats would suck the blood of their animal or human victims¹⁵.

A vampire with blood on its claws

According to an Aguaruna myth, the first vampire bat was born from the blood of the family of the demon Aétsasa, slaughtered by the people whom the demon would decapitate¹⁶, whereas for the Apinayé, bats were enemies of men and the only ones to possess ceremonial stone axes which they used to crush skulls¹⁷, a brutal opening which would spill blood. So the purpose of the myth is achieved: explaining why vampire bats make the blood spurt to feed. Among the Kogi in Colombia, women's menstruation was symbolically attributed to the bite of a vampire. "Did the bat bite you?" was thus a way of asking a woman if she was on her period¹⁸.

Sleeping upside down in a hollow space

The vampire bat is not only unable to speak a human tongue, it does everything the other way round: sleeping during the day, hanging upside down and holding on with its claws from the ceiling of their shelter which, in myths, is always a hollow and dark place, but rich in treasures. It can be a small cave, filthy but covered with paintings, a cavern where vampires keep precious axes and pieces of jewellery, or even a hollow tree with a bulging trunk, where they keep the skulls of the men they could defeat¹⁹. And if you try to smoke them out of their shelter, they will fly away through a hidden exit at the apex of their shelter, unbeknown to humans.

And keeping watch in the dark

A confined and dark shelter, where vampire bats protect treasures which only they can see, thanks to their capacity of seeing in the dark: this is where they dwell and feel comfortable. Along with its taste for blood, this feature also struck human imagination. So, on several

¹⁵ BROWN, *Vampiro*, p. 93.

¹⁶ LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Du miel aux cendres*, p. 329.

¹⁷ LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Le cru et le cuit*, p. 131.

¹⁸ LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Du miel aux cendres*, p. 329.

¹⁹ LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Le cru et le cuit*, p. 131.



Maya vases and codices, a bat deity is depicted holding severed heads dripping with blood (here on *Codex Vaticanus B*, *fig. 7*). Its wings are sometimes adorned with eyes, probably because of its ability to “see” in darkness and, by extension, in the darkness of the beyond²⁰.

What can we expect from a vampire bat pendant?

Let us return to our small pendant. Like all other gold and *tumbaga* pendants found in museums worldwide, it comes from a tomb. This piece of jewellery adorned the deceased during his sojourn in the afterlife. Many pendants of the Diquis (*fig. 8*), Sinu (*fig. 9*), Chiriqui or Tairona (*fig. 10*) cultures represent a shaman during his transformation into a vampire bat; the bat that looks more animal than human, like our exemplar, is more seldom found²¹. Artists would often underline the teeth, bulging eyes and nose-leaf of the animal, as well as its wings, which can also be depicted in a more or less fancy way²².

Considering the fact that the animal was supposed to see in the dark, one can imagine that its main function was to guide the dead in the mist of the underworld. Human cleverness thus benefitted from a specific ability of this mysterious but somewhat nasty animal.

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Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, February 2021

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²⁰ BRADY, COLTMAN, “Bats”, p. 230.

²¹ KING, “Gold”, p. 50-51.

²² KING, “Gold”, p. 52-53.



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Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

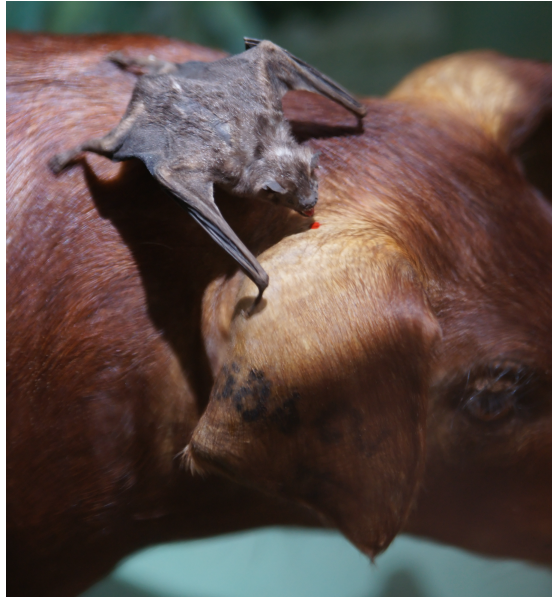


Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

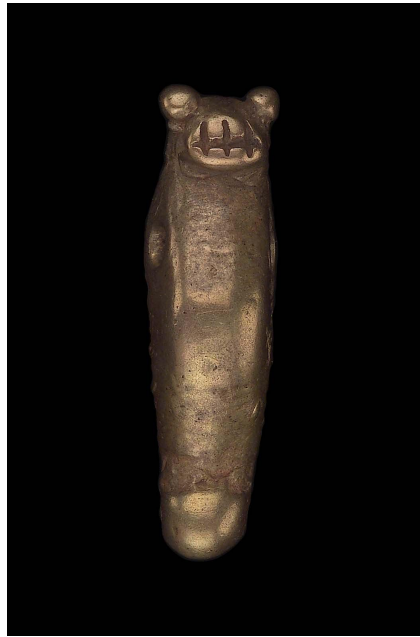


Fig. 9



Fig. 10