

## A HUARI CERAMIC TAPIR FOOT?

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In 1967, when surveying the central Pampas Valley of Peru, William Isbell and I were given a unique Middle Horizon ceramic vessel (figs. 1a-c) by a man from the community of Pomabamba.<sup>1</sup> He told us he had found it in a road cut which he had helped dig through the nearby archaeological site of Taksa Urqo, which Isbell and I were investigating at the time. Since we had already found a human burial and two caches of five complete Middle Horizon vessels in the same road cut and since both the vessel in question and the vessels from the caches were coated with volcanic ash, a prominent constituent of the site, we had no reason to doubt his claim, although he did attempt to deceive us about other claims.

The rim and sides of the vessel mark it as a Middle Horizon tumbler with a polychrome band design (fig. 2). Menzel has identified it as derived from the Robles Moqo style with a Huari-cult serpentine animal design and assigned it to MH 2A.<sup>2</sup> This age is consistent with most of the ceramic pieces from Taksa Urqo. The bottom part of the vessel, however, is modeled in the shape of an animal's foot. Neither Isbell nor I have zoological expertise, but in our excitement over this unusual ceramic piece and in our desire to describe it to others succinctly, we slipped into the failing of referring to it as a modeled bird's foot. When we perceived that the design on the side clearly included an eagle's head, we changed the vague "bird's foot" into an "eagle's claw." Much to our embarrassment, the identification was wrong; while there is still some doubt as to what particular animal's foot is represented, it can most definitely be said that it is not that of a bird. To our everlasting embarrassment, this erroneous identification was published before we noticed it.<sup>3</sup>

The modeled vessel is not an exact replica of a foot of any known South American animal, though it does bear some resemblance to the front foot of a tapir. The tapir, with the horse and the rhinoceros, belongs to the order of odd-toed ungulates, Perissodactyla. The tapir is peculiar in that it has four digits on its forefeet but only three on its hind feet. While the first and fifth digits are gone from the hind feet, on the forefeet only the first digit (pollex) is missing, with the fifth smaller than the rest. As in the horse, the axis on both the hind and forefeet passes through the middle (third) digit; hence, the tapir's foot is comparable to the foot of an early ancestor of the horse.<sup>4</sup>

Plate II shows the specimen in question (fig. 3) alongside an illustration of a tapir's foot (fig. 4). The reader may draw his (her) own conclusions. The similarities which I see are: (1) the shape of the cannon, (2) the conformity of the pastern and fetlock joint, (3) the look of the coronet in the way it grows over each digit, and (4) the proportionate size of the digits. But the ceramic piece has one extra digit, five instead of four, and the middle digit of the tapir's foot is

long, while the four larger toes of the modeled piece are almost equal in length.

If the Huari artist was attempting to model a tapir's foot, he (she) added an extra toe for some reason. We might suppose that this was done through ignorance or carelessness, but that seems inconsistent in an artist who obviously took so much care in finishing his work. That the toe was added to give the vessel better physical balance or artistic symmetry seems a better explanation. In any case, Huari artists commonly painted human hands and feet with either too few or too many digits. Assuming that the small toe on the modeled piece corresponds to the reduced fifth digit of a tapir's forefoot, the vessel would be an effigy of the left forefoot.

The scalloped cuff which stands in relief around the ankle of the vessel is somewhat puzzling. When this vessel was identified as representing an eagle's foot, the cuff was interpreted as a band of feathers. But if it is the foot of a tapir, the artist may have been attempting to indicate the particular species, i.e., Tapirus pinchaque which has a hairy, almost woolly, coat.

Tapirus pinchaque, or the mountain tapir, is one of three American species of tapir. Today an endangered species, it is found in the eastern Andes from western Venezuela to northern Peru. Its preferred habitat lies mainly above 2500 m. in the stunted trees and shrubs of the cloud forest. However, it does forage in the open grasslands of the paramos and has been tracked in snow at altitudes of 4700 m. Its southernmost known distribution is 6° S. in far northern Peru. But in the past its range may have extended along the cloud forest zone farther to the south.<sup>5</sup>

Tapirus terrestris, the Amazonian species, ranges throughout the Amazon Basin and along the forested eastern slopes of the Andes up to an altitude of 1700 m. This species would have been accessible to Huari peoples in the moist tropical part of the Apurimac Valley which lies but two or three days' walk to the east of their capital. Tapirus bairdi, the Central American tapir, is found south as far as Ecuador in the moist tropics west of the Andes.<sup>6</sup> Of the three species, its distribution is the farthest removed from the known boundaries of the Huari empire.

It is well known that the tapir is a prized game animal of the tropical forest Indians, who hunt it for its meat and hide and have given it a prominent role in their mythology. But its importance to Andean Indians is poorly documented.

In parts of highland Colombia and Ecuador, where the tapir is still hunted, the feet are sold in the marketplace.<sup>7</sup> Among modern tourists they are valued as trophies, but in the aboriginal context they are thought to have medicinal properties,<sup>8</sup> and some people regard them as a delicacy.<sup>9</sup>

Tapir feet are sometimes hung as amulets, but the curative

powers are believed to reside in the toenails, which are ground or pulverized and consumed for a variety of illnesses, including epilepsy and pneumonia.<sup>10</sup> Cobo gives the only reference I have found to their possible pre-Columbian use. He says that the nails of the left forefoot of the tapir were pulverized and taken to cure "mal de corazon," which I take to mean something like heart attack.<sup>11</sup> Cobo does not say whether he is referring specifically to Peruvian Indians, but the practice possibly is analogous to the Aymara use of cow or deer horn to relieve "el aire," which La Barre interprets as apoplexy.<sup>12</sup>

General Miller lists tapir feet among the products he saw imported from the Montaña by the Indians of Cuzco, but he makes no mention of their use.<sup>13</sup> There may be other references to the use of this delicacy by Peruvian Indians, but so far I have not found them in my search of the literature, nor have I discovered supportive archaeological evidence.

Two ceramic tumblers from the site of Pacheco, Nasca, one a model of a human hand the other of a human foot, are analogous in form to the piece in question, and it seems reasonable to speculate that they might have been analogous in function.<sup>14</sup> If we can assume that Huari tumblers, like Inca tumblers, were drinking cups,<sup>15</sup> then they may have been used to imbibe potions during rituals. Each potion may have contained scrapings from the nails of the particular animal species represented. Rowe reports that Inca sorcerers used human teeth, hair, and nails in their magic.<sup>16</sup> My identification of the Taksa Urqo specimen as the left forefoot of a tapir and Cobo's reference to the medicinal power of that particular tapir appendage add strength to the inference that the ceramic piece served a magico-religious function.

There remains, of course, the possibility that I have erred again, that the artist was not intending to model a tapir's foot at all. If that is so, then my speculations regarding its function come to naught. But if I am correct, this ceramic specimen may be taken as evidence of the importation of exotic tropical goods by the peoples of the Huari empire. These goods may have been brought from the nearby Apurimac Valley. Or, if the vessel represents the foot of a Tapirus pinchaque, it may be indicative of a tribute-trade network which extended into far northern Peru and southern Ecuador. So little archaeological reconnaissance has been carried out in the far northern Andes of Peru that we cannot be certain where the northern boundaries of the Huari empire lay. But if Matos' discoveries in the upper Piura Valley attest to a Huari center at Morropón, it seems likely that there were other such settlements in the neighboring highlands.<sup>17</sup>

#### Acknowledgements

James and Linda Belote were the first to point out our misidentification of the modeled ceramic vessel and to suggest that it might be a tapir's foot. They also provided useful information on the modern use of tapirs in Ecuador. Dr. Philip Hershkovitz of the Chicago Natural History Museum and Dr. H. Rosenberg of the University of Calgary provided

me with very useful zoological information and examined photographs of the specimen. John Rowe generously copied and gave me one of his photographs of the ceramic vessel and provided information on the modern use of tapir feet in southern Colombia. Warren DeBoer brought General Miller's reference to the trade in tapir feet to my attention. The illustrations were drawn by Mr. Lorne Perry. I am grateful to the Calgary Zoo for allowing Mr. Perry to enter the pen of their tapir and photograph its feet and to Mr. Perry for daring to do so. Finally, I wish to thank William and Billie Jean Isbell for sharing their humble quarters in Chuschi with me during the summer of 1967.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Raymond and Isbell, ms. The vessel now resides in the Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología, Lima.

<sup>2</sup>Menzel, 1969, p. 98 note 32.

<sup>3</sup>Menzel, 1969, p. 98 note 32.

<sup>4</sup>Herskovitz, 1949, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup>Herskovitz, 1949; 1954; Goodwin and Holloway, 1972; Grimwood, 1969.

<sup>6</sup>Herskovitz, 1949; 1954; Goodwin and Holloway, 1972.

<sup>7</sup>John Rowe, personal communication.

<sup>8</sup>Herskovitz, 1949, p. 7; James and Linda Belote, personal communication.

<sup>9</sup>Oviedo y Valdés, primera parte, lib. XII, cap. XI; 1851, tomo I, p. 405, reports that tapir's feet, after cooking for twenty hours or more, make delicious food which is easily digested.

<sup>10</sup>Herskovitz, 1949, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup>Cobo, lib. 9, cap. LIX; 1956, tomo 91, p. 369.

<sup>12</sup>La Barre, 1948, pp. 225-226.

<sup>13</sup>Miller, 1836, p. 176.

<sup>14</sup>These pieces are part of the collection from Pacheco housed in the Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología, Lima.

<sup>15</sup>Rowe, 1961, p. 317.

<sup>16</sup>Rowe, 1946, p. 314

<sup>17</sup>Matos Mendieta, 1969, p. 111.

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## KEY TO ILLUSTRATIONS

## Plate I

Fig. 1. Ceramic vessel reputed to come from the site of Taksa Urqo, district of Cangallo, province of Ayacucho, Peru. Photographs courtesy of John H. Rowe.

## Plate II

Fig. 2. Rollout drawing of design band from fig. 1. Drawing by John H. Rowe and Thomas Weller based on three color photographs taken by John H. Rowe and notes taken by Patricia J. Lyon in 1967.

Fig. 3. Drawing of the vessel shown in fig. 1.

Fig. 4. Drawing of the left forefoot of a specimen of Tapirus terrestris, the Brazilian tapir, based on a photograph taken in the Calgary Zoo. Scale applies to the tapir foot.

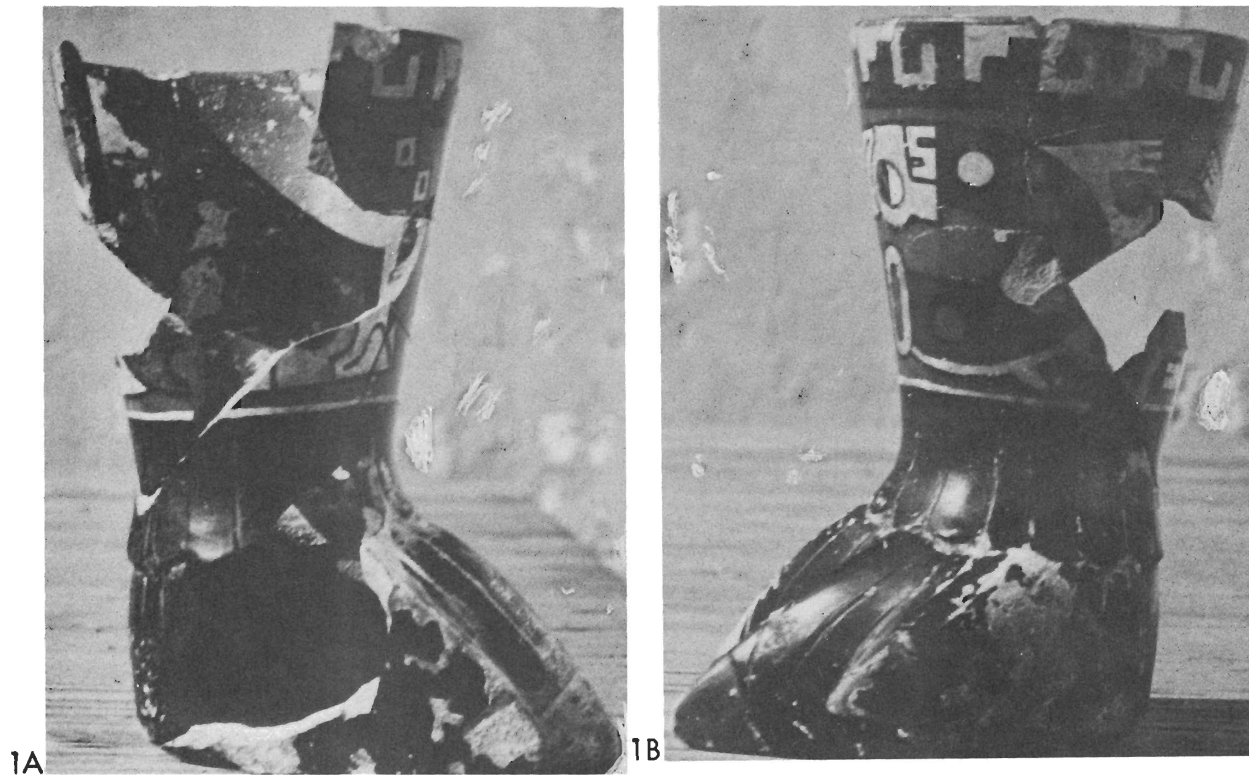
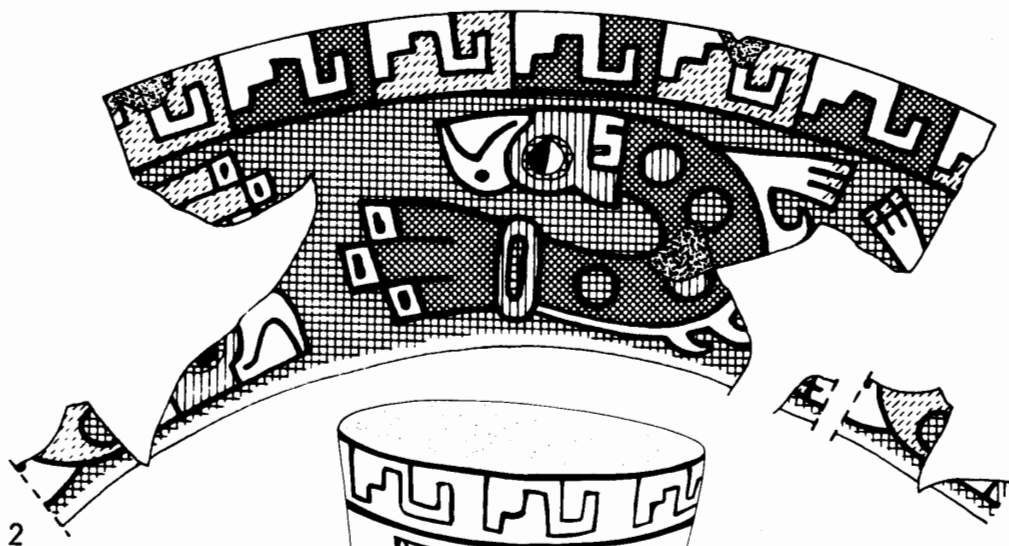


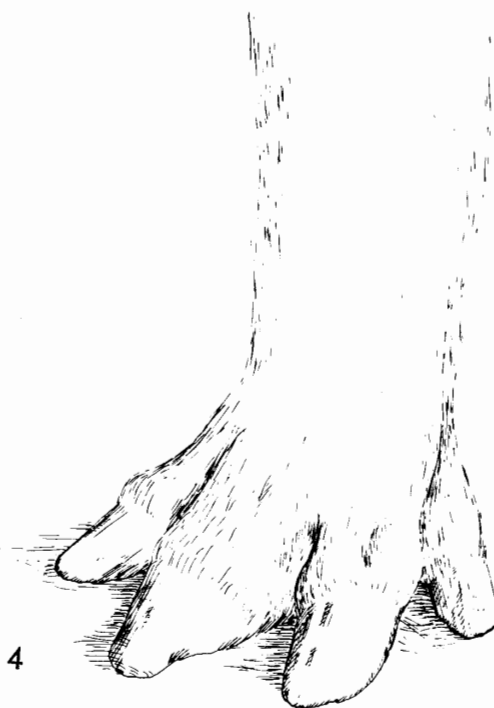
Plate I. Fig. 1, footed cup from Taksa Urqo. See Key to Illustrations.



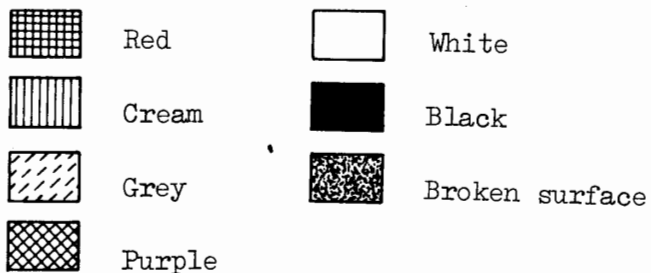
2



3



4



0 5 cm

Plate II. Fig. 2, rollout drawing of design from cup shown in fig. 1; fig. 3, footed cup; fig. 4, left forefoot of a Brazilian tapir, for comparison. See Key to Illustrations.