

Retracing Prominence: Exposing the Historical Significance of a Uluan Carved Bowl at the Penn Museum

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the cultural and environmental significance of a Uluan bowl housed at the Penn Museum. Through a meticulous examination of the bowl's craftsmanship, including its anthropomorphic depiction of a Honduran White Bat, we explore its potential ceremonial use within the Ulua Valley civilization's deep-rooted spiritual connection to nature. By combining detailed artifact analysis with archival research, this study reconstructs the bowl's historical context. Archival records reveal the commodification of Ulua artifacts and the role of mono-crop agriculture and land exploitation in their discovery. This research highlights the complex interplay between cultural heritage and environmental degradation. This paper underscores the importance of responsible archaeological practices and the preservation of cultural heritage. By examining the Uluan Bowl, we gain valuable insights into the rich cultural traditions of ancient Honduras and the urgent need to protect our planet's fragile ecosystems. Finally, the findings call for greater care in maintaining each cultural and historical past and the ecological landscapes from which such artifacts emerge.

Introduction

It comes as no surprise that through the collection and transportation of objects during the 20th century or earlier, transcripts documenting the historical significance of such items are often lost, forged, and/or misinterpreted. These errors highlight the poor considerations of colonists on such materials, especially since these items often “incorporate in their bodily form the rhythms of the practices that gave rise to them” and “[concretize] in material form the presence of other people and places” (Luke, 2010). Thus, to rediscover and shed light on the importance of these objects, this paper chooses to use object-based archaeology or the study of artifacts and objects from past societies. This subform of archaeology underscores cultural beliefs and practices, changes and continuities, and insights into daily life through focused analysis of select objects. By emphasizing the gaps in history that are missing about objects, the paper also aims to redefine and clarify confusing information.

Ravaged by an undocumented culture of mono-crop agriculture, the object chosen, a Uluan bowl, was brought to the Penn Museum in 1914. However, much of the information available about this object remains obscure, which is exactly why a proper narrative is needed. To specify, according to the Penn Museum's online collections, “NA5529” (the accession number of the focused object) is a small bowl with a white and gray color. The Penn Museum labels the bowl as stemming from the Ulua Valley, a region located in Northwestern Honduras (Penn collections). The established people who once lived in this area, the Uluan people, had close connections to nearby civilizations like the Mayans. In fact, many Mayan traditions seemed to have influenced Uluan traditions. From ceramic vessels to skulls with Maya-style dental, many patterns found in Uluan objects share relations to the Maya world (Henderson, 2022). Pottery within ancient cultures is useful as researchers can gain insights into mythological narratives, religious rituals, and social hierarchies through the motifs and images depicted on such objects. Patterns and similar themes also highlight the

potential influence one culture had on another, which can tell a lot about important concepts shared at the time. Unfortunately, the Ulua culture, similar to many other cultures, does not have a definable date. Researchers estimate the peak of the Ulua civilization to be around 600-850 AD, during which the highest amount of communities and people existed. Although there are many cultural similarities between the Mayans and the Ulua people, the Mayans had a much larger and longer civilization, and thus, the Ulua community is relatively less documented. Yet, their interconnectedness is proved as many Mayan objects were found beneath the banks of Ulua, alluding to the interactions between the two communities. The shorter time frame of the Ulua civilization resulted in a smaller population of objects of this culture. Additionally, the smaller size of this civilization further exacerbated the lack of objects. Thus, when such objects were excavated and discovered, the scarcity of them made prices and the demand for them increase greatly. According to George Gordon, who was the Director of the Penn Museum at the time, the objects were “so unusual and of a type so distinct as to cause a good deal of curiosity,” which captured the attention of many collectors (The Museum Journal).

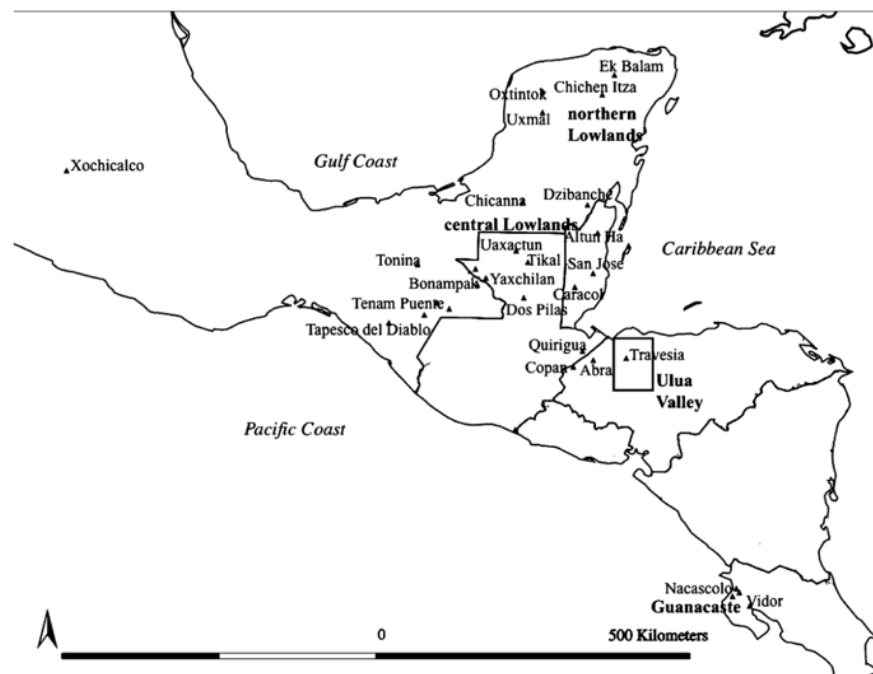


Figure 1. Depiction of the Ulua Valley’s region along with nearby civilizations (Dillian, 2009)

Overall, the region of the Ulua civilization “[supported] a rich and varied flora and terrestrial and riverine fauna” and was extremely “favored by nature,” making it a desirable location for many past societies not only due to environmental reasons but also transportation access and a large number of resources as well (Brodie, 2006). Such regional variability included precious minerals like obsidian and contained marine items like shells due to the Gulf of Honduras nearby. Due to this prosperity, the Ulua Valley became a central focus for many agricultural and mining companies that tried to exploit this area. In specific, mono-crop agriculture, or the practice of growing the same crop year after year, became an extremely enticing option for many American cultures. Many companies, like the United Fruits Company, came to regions in Central America to perform monocropping, usually for plants like bananas or sugar cane (Tucker, 2000). This concept, similar to commodity crops, is when only one type of crop is grown in an area each year, which can result in a multitude of negative consequences, specifically to the environment (Dementievgioward, 2023). Unlike standard farming practices, which regulate and give the ground time to heal, mono-crop agriculture trades nutrients in the ground for short-term production, often leaving past agricultural sites in poor

and unusable conditions. According to historian Christina Luke, farming, among pillaging, was one of the driving causes of the destruction of ground in this area (Luke). Thus, it is likely that the objects were found due to alternative reasons first. However, once the uniqueness and scarcity of these objects were made apparent, the demand for these objects increased heavily. Unfortunately, this rise caused more excavations to take place, resulting in further environmental damage. In combination with an analysis of the bowl and secondary literature reviews, this paper hopes to reveal more about the environmental malpractice during society at the time of excavation. Additionally, it aims to reveal insights into the role of pottery in Uluan society and the bowl's purpose.

Methodology

In this paper, the author used two primary methodologies—object observation and archival research. Through looking at past archives based on information surrounding an object, one can obtain invaluable research on the object's past history, including its cultural significance, location and whereabouts, transportation, and final location. This information sourcing, when coupled with object-based archaeology, reveals a larger overview and background that combines religion, theme, and setting. As a result, crossed verification to ensure factualness and improved historical reconstruction develops.

To study using object observation, the author reached out to PhD candidate Elizabeth Pamblanco, who serves as Collections Coordinator at the Penn Museum. Ms. Pamblanco prepared the Uluan bowl in advance within an object room, and the object was thus able to be viewed. Unfortunately, due to the fact that the object was normally hidden from public view, the author was only able to look at the object for approximately two hours based on the museum's policy. Within these two hours, the researcher carefully took note of each detail noticed. Having been prepped and taught before the observation by Dr. Francisco Diaz and PhD candidate Charlotte Williams, both of whom are archaeological researchers at the university, the observer was able to effectively and efficiently point out interesting markings about the bowl. Interesting details included any disfigurements like cracks or significant markings, pigmentation, color, and overall patterns noticed. Due to the value and fragility of the object, the author was unable to physically move the bowl, yet Ms. Pamblanco kindly moved it based on request. Through her flexibility, pictures from all angles were able to be taken based on the noticeable differences mentioned above.

Additionally, Dr. Diaz and Ms. Williams recommended drawing the figure with labels, which the researcher accomplished. The drawing helped to enhance focus on details to raise awareness and also brought attention to details that were invisible at first glance. Furthermore, when necessary, flashlights were also used. Along with such drawings, a diagram of steps of how the object might have been made was created as well based on the observer's past knowledge and information. Such diagrams were created to help envision the object's past and creation in a better light. In addition, the measurements of the object, as well as the length, width, and height, were also taken using a measuring tape. These observations, along with all others, were noted solely on paper and pencil.

Similarly, photos and notes about objects in the same collection of the bowl were taken as well. Since most of the other objects were on display, their viewing was extremely easy within the displayed gallery. However, due to the fact that they were untouchable behind the glass wall, it was impossible to view the objects from different angles. Fortunately, key parts were still observable, such as prominent patterns, figureheads, indents, and markings.

As for the archival data, in a similar fashion, the author reached out to the Penn Museum and met Alex Mezzati, the senior archivist at the museum. Any archival records based on the bowl were found and stored. Once collected, an analysis of each folder was completed, and any important notes were detailed. The types of data accessible included checks, receipts, letters sent and received, and documented transactions. In scouring for information, the author looked for key phrases related to the bowl. These specifics included "Ulva Valley," "L.G. Valentine" (the previous owner), and "marble and limestone." Also, information related to the group of objects that the bowl belonged to was also noted, especially since little information existed about the bowl itself. Overall, based on these indicators, photos were taken if an important document or letter was found. Furthermore, archival information that didn't relate directly to the bowl,

perhaps instead correlating to the history of excavation at the time or the interactions between Valentine and others, was recorded as well.

Finally, existing online literature reviews were conducted from secondary sources, all of which were related to the bowl or Uluan collection. These types of sources, including articles and books based on the historical significance of these collections, along with any information about the Uluan Valley and the transaction of objects, were all looked at. After intensely reading through and annotating these files, notes were taken on related pieces of information.

Beforehand, the author possessed a limited amount of information about the object. Particularly, secondary sources that focused on the background and history of the bowl were looked at and searched for. Ranging from general information about Uluan Valley to more specific sources about the cultural connections the people living there had, many sources had relevant information to the bowl, even in terms of indirect connections. Information about the reasons for companies coming in the first place, the history of Uluan investigations, and restrictions for agriculture were studied as well. Even though skimmed literature reviews and observations based on a photo of the bowl were taken, a true understanding of the object did not exist. This fact is exacerbated when considering the fact that accessible photos online do not offer multiple angles or relative size measurements. However, coupled with information brought from archives, a new understanding was created through the study of object-based archaeology. Previously, limited knowledge was transformed through the many benefits of this combination listed above, resulting in many new discoveries that went even further than what each of these two strategies could do on their own.

Object Observations

To clarify such discoveries, one important note would be about the bowl itself and its characteristics. Firstly, the precise material it is made of is defined as stone, but the museum's online website describes that it may vary between limestone and marble, both of which would match the color of the bowl. For distinct features, the object features a large bat head on the front of the dish surrounded by two clawed hands on either side. Each claw holds five different fingers. With the head and arms at the front of the bowl, the bowl can be described as the body of the bat. As for the head itself, an angry expression is shown with scowling teeth. The eyebrows are scrunched, slanting the eyes to replicate a furious emotion further. The ears are much smaller relative to the head and round, yet, in contrast, the nose is pointy and large. However, the cheeks of the bat's face are round, and from a side view, one could mistake the bat for smiling extremely largely. Yet, the pointed teeth evoke fear and strengthen a contrasting argument instead. Overall, the head is covered in dark, red patches and spots. Although most of these spots are apparent in the crevices and cracks of the head, which mark the distinct features of the bat's face, there are also red blotches in smoother parts. As for the body of the bat or the bowl itself, markings are adorned around the object in a repeating scale. These repeating carved markings weave through the sides, similar to the pattern of a basket or the scales of a snake. Also, the same red spots appear on the crevices and cracks of the pattern as well. This pattern is in between two smoother, cylindrical plates or structures that have minimal markings. Interestingly, the top of the bowl is uneven in that the cylindrical structure does not lie solely on a singular plane, instead wobbling around the rim. Additionally, the inside of the bowl, along with the bottom, features an extremely smooth surface, which is in direct contrast with the carved sides. There are also very few cracks on these surfaces, with only one dark red crack that runs through the inside of the bowl and on the bottom. However, there are still splotches of red and black that are sprawled across the very bottom of the bowl, yet not as many on the inside. Finally, on the back of the bowl, another face is depicted relative to the bat's head. This face has one singular lip that curves upwards, representing a smile, with the lower lip being cut off by the lower cylindrical boundary. However, even though there are straight teeth in the middle of the smile, the teeth become more curved and curved as they travel farther away. As for the nose, it is located right between the eyes, touching them. When viewing farther up, the author noticed that swirls are depicted, appearing to be eyebrows at first. This second face interjects the pattern highlighted before, and thus, although the pattern wraps around the entire bowl, it is blocked by two faces on opposite ends. In the end, the final dimensions of the bowl, as mentioned above, came to approximately 7.1 inches in length, 4.1 inches in width, and 3.1 inches in height. These dimensions, comparatively, are not similar to the rest of the items

that were a part of the original collection. The other items on display are much larger, being vases or jugs, yet some similarities still exist. For example, the color of the bowl matched the grey and white hue of the other items, and the carvings were similar in that they were patterned across the sides.

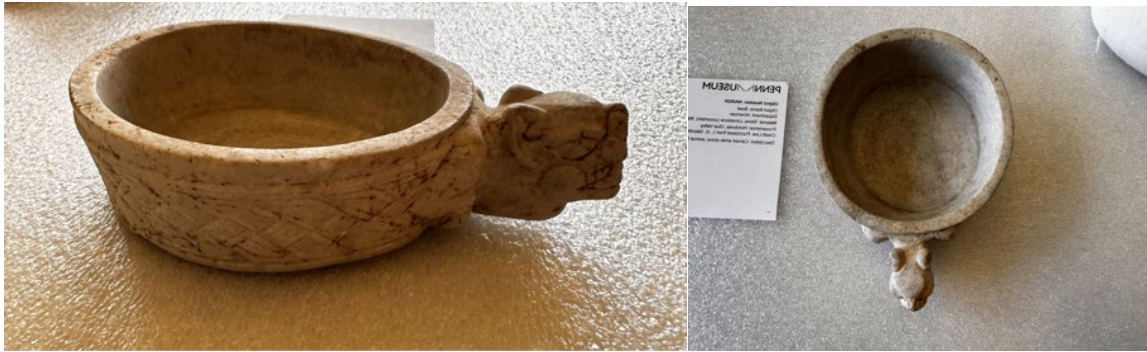


Figure 2 & 3. Image depicting a side view of the Uluan Bowl. Image depicting an aerial view of the Uluan Bowl. (Author's Images)

Next, discovered archival information likewise gave a multitude of information as well. Unfortunately, all of the physical evidence found correlated to knowledge that came after the first discovery of the items in the Ulua Valley; thus, cross-checking facts about the history of the land before is not possible using this data. Regardless, plenty of information about the collection of objects and their transportation process can still be found. For instance, the author discovered that the initial seller of the objects, whom Gordon, the director of the museum, purchased from, was named L.G Valentine. Presumably, Valentine sent initial letters to Gordon detailing the discovery of the objects, yet such letters were not available. It is important to note that within all primary sources and files available about this discussion, only letters coming from Valentine existed, with those from Gordon not there. To continue, the earliest message takes place on April 4th, 1914, in which Valentine mentions that he would be happy to discuss and show the objects in his possession to Gordon. The letter concludes with details about communication, such as when to call and where. The author then noticed that a check and receipt existed as well. Although the reason for the check wasn't labeled, based on past letters, it can be concluded that this was Gordon's payment to Valentine for the first group of objects Valentine discussed earlier. The total sum came to three hundred dollars, and the date of this check was April 25th, 1914. The location where to address the check was New York, at 17 Battery Place. The check's number was 6148, and it was labeled as "University of Pennsylvania Department of Archaeology." The next notable letter found would be one written on July 6th, 1914. In this message, Valentine states that a rumor had been spread through the Ulua region, one that related a tremendous amount of value to the antiquities there. He exclaims that due to newspaper sources too, unwanted competition for these items, coming from numerous parties, resulted. However, Valentine confidently confirms that he will be able to get all objects in the San Pedro region and ends the update by saying that physical force with a gang of men may be used, too.

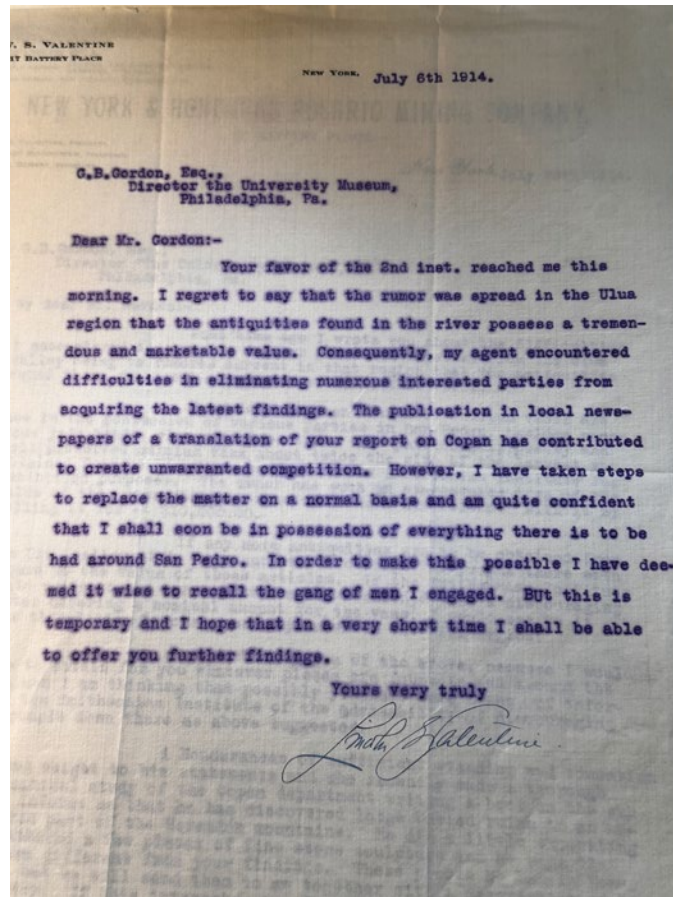


Figure 4. Image depicting Valentine's Letter to Gordon about the rising prices of the Uluan objects (Author's Images)

Lastly, a few weeks later, on July 28th, 1914, another letter was sent. The author noticed that this letter was more formal in that a proper heading and company were established, form numbers were included, the names and titles of party members were stated, and both cable and mine addresses were sent as well. Interestingly, the title of the company mentioned says "NEW YORK & HONDURAS ROSARIO MINING COMPANY." Within the letter itself, Valentine references his past communication of the increasing prices of objects and continues to say that around six beautiful calcium vases are not in his possession but instead are in the possession of others around San Pedro. In fact, he exclaims that one of these vases, twice the size of the largest he sent to Gordon, was exaggeratedly estimated to sell at a 10,000 dollar price. Due to the unwanted attraction to the objects, Valentine then asks and offers the idea of the Smithsonian Institute to undervalue the vase in a letter, one that Valentine would leak to the public. Doing so would "[discourage the people down there]." Finally, Valentine concludes by exclaiming that more artifacts may have been found in a nearby location and states that he would be happy to discuss once again if Gordon were to be interested.

Discussion

Based on the results discussed above, a more clarified narrative can be drawn forth. Unfortunately, in terms of the history of the bowl, not much is known as a whole. Other than the Ulua civilization's cultural relationship to the Mayans and their civilization, very little is known about them, as mentioned above. Even after looking at the bowl itself, very few confirmative hypotheses can be made. Without looking at any distinct carvings, the bowl appears to be a very orthodox structure, with a smooth, carved inside and a more rigid outside. However, when looking at the decorative

indents on the sides and the faces or heads, it can be theorized that the Uluans had a strong respect for nature. Firstly, the bat head itself has distinct characteristics like small ears and a large, pointy nose. Such details match up with the native Honduran bat, the White Honduran Bat. Thus, it can be concluded that through this visual representation, the Uluans adorned the bat, perhaps for ceremonial or religious purposes. This theorized respect for the environment is also shown through the other animal faces depicted on the bowl as well. These adornments are similar to many other Mesoamerican civilizations, such as the Mayas, which confirms the cultural connection between the Uluas and them once again (Team, 2023). In fact, according to Luke, the Mayans had a “pattern of portraying the built environment on portable objects” (Luke, 2010). Due to the fact that this bowl may relate to the Uluan’s spiritual connection to nature, it could be theorized that the bowl may have been used for ceremonies solely. Such ceremonies may have had malicious purposes, though, especially since the face of the bat is one of anger. However, an interesting and anthropomorphic fact about the bat’s arms is that it has five claws in total on each hand. In reality, the Honduran White Bat does not have as many, yet this difference could correlate to the amount of fingers a human has. Thus, it seems that the relationship between humans and nature is strongly emphasized through this artifact. As for the physical traits of the object, the lack of cracks within the inside of the bowl and on the bottom is most likely due to the absence of carvings. Since a larger surface area supports a greater amount of force, the inside would be much more resistant to chips or indents than the sculpted areas. Regardless, the object as a whole is in a healthy condition, with a lack of large indents. The strength and integrity of this object may also allude to the fact that this bowl was not used a lot, which would make sense if it were used for special occasions.

As for the archival review, the increasing value of the objects demonstrates the rising demand for unique artifacts at the time. This fact is exacerbated by the background information known about the objects. Monocrop agriculture, as stated above, was most likely the primary intention for companies coming to the Ulua Valley in the first place. However, in preparing the land for this or any type of agriculture, bulldozing has to occur first (Bulldozer). Due to the fact that such bulldozing was done without any regulation or proper care, many artifacts that were hidden beneath the soil may have been damaged. This damage is most likely what enabled the discovery of the Uluan antiquities. In fact, although the reason why Valentine was in Honduras was unknown, it is probable that he, like many other companies at the time, first came for mono-crop agriculture and was not of any antiquities. Yet, since some of these pieces were already destroyed, the number of objects in the first place was likely minimal. Thus, even though a limited amount of Uluan objects existed in the first place, relative to larger civilizations like the Mayans, this quantity decreased further through the destruction of objects due to mono-crop agriculture. For this reason, the price of such objects increased within the early 1900s as individuals not only became more curious but also realized the limited number of antiquities existing. In fact, when juxtaposed relatively, the price increase within two months is astonishing. To start, the initial 300 hundred dollars that Gordon paid for the first batch of objects, around four distinct ones, in April of 1914 translates to roughly 10,000 dollars today, 2024. However, the appraisal of one larger vase of the same collection was estimated to be around 10,000 dollars in July of 1914, which translates to over 300,000 dollars today. Thus, in only two months, the price increased exponentially. Once again, the increased price, however, was likely not due to the public’s newfound interpretation of the object. Rather, the destruction of objects, coupled with their uniqueness and rising interest, resulted in these raised appraisals.

Through the analyses of both the object-based research and the archival notes, the author notes that a singular theme is prevalent within both the Uluan society and society during the 1900s: a connection to the environment. For the Uluans, the premise of the bowl’s creation can be correlated to animals and nature. The representation of the Honduran White Bat exemplifies the Uluan’s strong relationship with the land they were a part of. On the other hand, society in the 1900s destroyed the environment through the consequences of mono-crop agriculture. Even with knowledge about the negative environmental impacts of this form of agriculture, companies at the time had very little care for the environment and land of Honduras. Thus, along with the drying up of resources of the Ulua Valley, the destruction of land in preparation for mono-crop farming also destroyed the environment.

It is important to note, though, that many of these hypotheses about the bowl are assumptions, even with evidence. For example, although ideas on the bowl’s origins are brought up, they should not be understood as a definite

answer. In fact, when looking at the museum's website, the title of this bowl is just that: "bowl." The lack of a proper title itself disserves the unique history the object has and demonstrates that very limited information about this item is known, which is exactly what this paper attempts to resolve. The question of what the bowl may have been used for is hypothesized in this paper, yet further research and data are needed for a concrete answer.

Conclusion

The findings of this paper allude to the extensive cultural background of the Uluan society. Through a closer analysis of the bowl, its engravings, and key characteristics, the author noticed two important details—the condition of the bowl and the symbolism of animals. For the latter, the creators of the bowl implemented anthropomorphism, specifically giving the Honduran White Bat, the animal depicted, five fingers. This choice may have been made to underscore the connection between individuals and the natural world, giving further understanding of the cultural choices at the time. For the former, the relatively pristine condition of the bowl hints toward the fact that this bowl wasn't used very often. Rather, in connection to Mayan understanding and traditions, it most likely was used in ceremonies for special occasions. These two facts are the primary reasons for the price of these objects during the time of excavation. The initial discovery of the objects, though, was the primary result of monocropping by international companies. After extensive bulldozing in the area in preparation for farmland, such objects were most likely discovered. Once individuals began to realize the historical and cultural importance of such objects, along with the limited amount, the price of these objects began to skyrocket. Unfortunately, the cost of this booming market came at the price of the environment. In fact, "Today, it is impossible to excavate a one-meter by one-meter excavation trench at the site without stumbling over a plundered area" (Brodie). The extent of this damage raises important awareness about these issues, especially when greed is prioritized over cultural appropriation and environmental safety. Additionally, when considering the possibility that this situation likely happened to many other culturally significant collections, the degree of damage is much more apparent. Going forward, this Uluan bowl should be used as an example that highlights the consequences of performing monocropping and plundering rather than protecting cultural items.

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