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THE MESOAMERICAN "MUSHROOM STONES" AND THE CHINESE ANCESTOR TABLETS

Summary

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The so-called mushroom stones of southern Mesoamerica have been variously interpreted. They have been thought to have phallic meanings, but more recently they have been identified as probably representing the hallucinogenic mushroom and to be connected with the "mushroom cult" that appears to be of importance in the area. The origin of the form is commonly attributed to the Highland Maya of the Pre-Classic Period.

It is of special interest, however, that similar mushroom-shaped stone and pottery objects are found in Shang Dynasty China. The stones are commonly 12 to 14 inches in height but there are also smaller ones and some that reach a height of 5 feet. They are usually mushroom shaped, with a round stem and round cap, but squared ones also appear. Early literary sources refer to those objects as being not only of stone and pottery but also of marble, jade, silk, bronze, and wood.

In China these mushroom shaped objects represented the primitive symbol (phallus) of an ancestor or deity. In ancient China most of the deities were tribal ancestors. These mushroom shaped ancestor tablets occur quite frequently in oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions as objects in the temple or as objects of worship.

It is suggested that the mushroom-shaped stones of Mesoamerica are derived from the early Chinese ancestor tablets. The form was continued in Mesoamerica while it disappeared in China by evolving into the modern gravestones and wooden ancestor tablets. This appears to be a better explanation of the mushroom stones than that of considering them to be replicas of mushrooms.

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