

# Pre-Columbian Amazon Jewelry



Alexandre Guida Navarro<sup>1\*</sup> and Stéphen Rostain<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, Federal University of Maranhão, Laboratory of Archaeology, Brazil

<sup>2</sup>Research Director, French National Center for Scientific Research, France

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\*Corresponding author: Alexandre Guida Navarro, Associate Professor, Federal University of Maranhão, Laboratory of Archaeology, Av. dos Portugueses 1966, Bacanga, UFMA, cep.: 65080-805, São Luís, Brazil

## Abstract

Artifacts made from green stone and steatite form a set of jewels from the pre-Columbian indigenous peoples of Santarém in the lower Amazon, Suriname and Venezuela. The discovery of such pendants in Maranhão, Eastern Amazon, could suggest that they were traded or even produced in this region.

**Keywords:** Greenstone; Amulet; Muiraquitã; Amazon; Stilt house

## Introduction

Two pre-Columbian frog-shaped amulets have been found in archaeological sites of two different lakes of Maranhão during the dry season. These muiraquitãs are interesting because few other specimens on such artefacts come from archaeological context. Muiraquitãs are zoomorphic stone pendants, depicting mainly geometric frogs, found throughout the Amazon and the Lesser Antilles. These artifacts are polished and made from greenstones, usually jadeite, tremolite-actinolite, serpentinites, nephrites and amazonite [1,2]. If some specimens can be geometric pendant (generally tubular), the term muiraquitã is, for most authors, reserved for figurative sculptures. Among the zoomorphic muiraquitãs, the frog is by far the most popular animal, but some representations of fish and birds are also known. They are supposed to be associated with archaeological cultures linked to the Incised-Punctate/Araucoid Tradition [3]. As far as the idols generally made from steatite appear to have been objects used in shamanic hallucinogen inhalation rituals, such as parica (*Anadenanthera peregrina*) [4].

## Discussion

The two amulets from Maranhão were associated to pre-Columbian stilt houses that have been dated. The first muiraquitã was collected in 1971 in the site Cacaria, in the Cajari. Wooden post of the building has been dated 570 AD. The second muiraquitã comes from the Boca do Rio stilt village, on the Turiaçu River, in the city of Santa Helena. Taking advantage of the low level of

the lake, a systematic surface collection could be carried out, providing many anthropical remains as pottery, stone tools, wooden artifacts. One of the houses has been dated 885-995 AD calibrated (Beta 406836). Such dates are too old to correspond to an Araucoid occupation, unless these groups were already there. Mineralogical analyzes by MicroRaman demonstrated that the main mineral constitution is tremolite/actinolite, therefore equivalent to what is generally called nephrite. These results were confirmed by analyzes of XRD, which proved to be mainly tremolite-actinolite the constituent element of the piece, with tremolite being dominant. The two Maranhão specimens clearly show an anthropo-zoomorphic shape with stylized human head (with eyes, nose, mouth and ears) and trunk. The bottom of the body is more reliable to a frog design. Two incisions in triangle delimit two folded legs. The complete low part of the body is very similar to other amulets figuring a frog. It seems that this kind of representation mixing a human part and another batrachian is a quimera, probably mythical. That result a symbiosis between human beings and animals like birds, frogs, mammals and other ones. The last elements difficult to explain are two protuberances on the head, like horns or feather diadem. Also, they possibly show a duality perspective depending on the angle seen by the spectator.

Indigenous populations have always manifested a great interest in these green stones that were traded on long distance. Very soon after contact, Europeans developed a legend about

these pendants saying that they were exchanged with the Amazons, “the women without men.” So, these peoples believed that the muiraquitãs were fashioned from lake mud that hardened like stone on contact with the air. In fact, the production and exchange of green stones began around 400 BC and continued until the beginning of colonization. Four zones of green stone manufacture are known: the Lower Amazon, the central coast of Suriname, around Valencia Lake on the coast of Venezuela, and the north of the Lesser Antilles. The Lower Amazon was probably the

most important and with greater circulation flow. The meaning of these goods is not yet fully understandable, although literature provides ethnohistorical examples that they were jewelry associated with marriage, trade and the power of regional chiefs [5]. The muiraquitãs also were collected in the stilt houses in Maranhão Eastern Amazon, from 1000 kilometers of the mouth of Amazon. These greenstones fit within the characteristics of the pieces produced in the Lower Amazon, especially in the region of the Trombetas and Nhamundá rivers in Santarém (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Muiraquitãs: A. Santarém; B-C. Cacaraia and Boca do Rio sites, Maranhão; C. Kwatta-Tingiholo, Suriname; D: Barbakoeba, Suriname (A, C, D: S. Rostain; B, C: A. Guida Navarro)

Kwatta-Tingiholo also was an important production center for these valuable pendants. More than 50 muiraquitãs with different styles, from figurative to geometric shape, were found in the main site. It is almost certain that the muiraquitãs discovered at the Arauquinoid sites in the Guianas originated from Kwatta artisans and diffused along the coast, establishing an effective exchange network. Because the rock was absent on the Suriname coast, it was obtained through groups along the interior with access to the sources. For example, in the Brownsberg Massif, specialists extracted the stone, worked them, and polished them to make tools, particularly blades for axes. These products were transported from south to north by the principal riverine routes (the Suriname and the Saramacca) to the coast. Muiraquitãs constituted the principal means of intra- and interethnic ceremonial exchange. Bartering took place between tribal chiefs for marriage or peace transactions, for example, with these green stones representing the currency.

### Conclusion

Differently from what Boomert [1] postulated that the muiraquitãs when move away from their source of production, they lose their quality and design, the examples found in the stilt villages of Maranhão have an equal quality, if not greater, than that of the aforementioned classical area. The Maranhão case would point to direct long-distance relationships or even another production center for these artifacts. So, these artifacts

are evidence of circulation and interaction spheres between these geographical areas.

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