

FIELD MUSEUM'S AGUSAN GOLD IMAGE

"The most spectacular find yet
made in Philippine archeology"

by Bennet Bronson

Displayed in a wall case in the Museum's Hall of Gems is a small statue of solid gold, roughly but boldly cast, in the form of a seated and haloed woman. While easy to overlook, it is a famous piece. In the words of H. Otley Beyer, for decades the dean of archeologists in the Philippines, this statue is "the most spectacular single find yet made in Philippine archeology."

It is said to have been found in 1917 by an anonymous woman, probably of the Manobo tribe, while walking through a little-frequented ravine in Agusan Province in the southern Philippines. After a series of narrow escapes from the gold dealer's melting pot, the statue chanced to come to Beyer's attention. Immediately recognizing its importance, he tried unsuccessfully to persuade the (American) colonial government to purchase it for the National Museum in Manila and then turned for help to three private individuals: Faye-Cooper Cole, then Southeast Asian curator at this museum; Shaler Matthews, professor of religion at the University of Chicago; and Mrs. Leonard Wood, wife of the governor-general of the Philippines. Through the efforts of these three the money was raised. The statue arrived, still in good condition, at Field Museum in 1922.

The statue is five and a half inches high and weighs almost four pounds—a substantial quantity of gold. However, its historical importance greatly exceeds its value as bullion, for it symbolizes the start of a major era in Philippines history. Before the statue was made, about A.D. 1000-1300, the Philippines were isolated from the mainstream of world events. Other parts of Southeast Asia had been closer to the developed parts of Eurasia

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and Africa and had begun to show the effects of this contact—the use of writing, of imported art styles, and of outside political and religious ideas—as early as A.D. 100. In the Philippines, on the other hand, this process of "Asianization" began so late that some have doubted that it occurred at all, maintaining that the islands remained effectively isolated until the arrival of Muslim traders and Spanish conquerors in the early 1500s. Yet, evidence is now accumulating to the contrary. Vast quantities of Chinese and Thai ceramics are being found, showing that the Philippines were commercially linked to the rest of the world by A.D. 1000 at the latest. Specialists are beginning to take new interest in the fact that many Philippines people possessed the art of writing long before the arrival of the Conquistadors, apparently borrowed from India at an early date. And occasional objects are discovered which show that the ancient Filipinos were not passive spectators of the contact process. The Agusan Gold Image is prime evidence of this.

What else the image is remains a puzzle. It is clearly a Hindu or Buddhist female deity: according to the Filipino expert Juan Francisco, perhaps a *sakti* or a *tara*. But it is quite atypical by the standards of most Hindu-Buddhist artistic traditions including that of ancient Java, to which it seems distantly to belong. Perhaps, as Otley Beyer himself suggested, the statue was made in the Philippines by Javanese miners, not necessarily expert in their own artistic traditions, while engaged in working the placer gold deposits in the Agusan area. Or perhaps, as the great Dutch historian F. D. K. Bosch once hinted, the statue is atypical in style because it was made by native Filipinos. Like other Filipinos, the Manobos of Agusan have a long tradition of excellent metal-working, as is shown by several of the exhibits in Hall G at Field Museum. A Manobo artist in, say, A.D. 1100 might have been quite capable of producing the statue. However, no such speculation can be proved at present. We will not know definitely who made it until many more Philippines excavations have been performed. □



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