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THE VOTIVE OFFERING AND THE ART OF SILVERSMITHING IN GUATEMALA

Josefina Alonso de Rodríguez

Guatemala had a prominent expression in the noble art of silversmiths or **metalsmith of silver**, - as they were often referred to in colonial manuscripts- who demonstrated their artistic talents into all kinds of sacred and domestic objects. Similarly, silversmiths also found expression in the votive offering, whose preferred material was silver, as a result of Christianization and the consequent introduction of Spanish religious customs.

During the colonial period, and in keeping with the tradition of centering life around the belief that the Saints influenced all aspects of human activity and existence, each activity had its own patrons or intercessor and **advocate**. Towns and cities had their patrons, as did the various trades -each protected by a patron saint adopted by its guilds- well as the different liberal professions. People often carried, as their given name and personal patron saint, the name of the saint on whose feast day they were born. The Saints had influence over everything. There were **saintly advocates** for every activity, and thus they could not be absent as protectors from the hazards of physical life -illnesses- as well as from those of social life -wealth, poverty, imprisonment, freedom, growth and protection of the family-. In equal measure, there were **saintly protectors** against the physical disasters of nature -plagues, floods, droughts, crop failures, etc-. For every misfortune, for every threat, faith offered the **anchor of a saintly intercessor between God and human anguish**. There was a saint to avert each calamity or to help remedy it. The lexicon still preserves, in its popular tradition, the Castilian prayer from the 17th century: "**San Isidro Labrador, quita el agua y pon el sol!**" ("Saint Isidore the Laborer, take away the rain and bring the sun!"), which

became common throughout the Americas and is still repeated in many Hispanic towns. There were also Saints tasked with bestowing specific blessings, and others more universal who were known to grant favors indiscriminately, or more precisely, miraculous ones, and therefore were considered capable of answering any request.

This current of thought, which had a great influence on religious art, is manifested in the votive offering as a concept and in its corresponding popular representation. The word **votive offering** carries within it the meaning of the intention behind the object donated to a saint, as a vow offered, as a sign and a reminder of a benefit received. That is to say, when the **votive offering** is commissioned by the artisan and later placed on the altar of the corresponding saint, it is because the giver has already received the grace of their petition.

As ancient as humanity itself, the **votive offering** took on a new form within the Christian religion from very early times. It found its expression during the Middle Ages and, especially, in the late Gothic period, with the proliferation of images based on the lives of the saints as told in *La Leyenda Aurea*. With this momentum, it reached Guatemala, where it took on the same meaning it held for other newly converted Christians in the Americas, who gave it their own distinctive characteristics, in line with their need for "protection" against adverse social and natural forces.

Not only silver **votive offerings** were produced in Guatemala: paintings on copper or -more commonly- on brass are well known, often accompanied by extensive explanatory inscriptions describing the miracles received by the donors, or by simple expressions of gratitude. In these, the painter illustrates, through a descriptive scene, the type of favor received. Inscriptions of thanks were also engraved on small marble or silver plaques, most of them rectangular, others shaped like hearts.

The type of **votive offering** that interests us, perhaps as significant for art as those previously mentioned paintings, is that of the solid figurines made from the noble metal used by silversmith, these figurines were commissioned to be offered to God, the Virgin, or the Saints, particularly those associated with the healing of illnesses. In Guatemala, as in Spain -and perhaps even more so than in Spain- there was widespread production of these figurines in silver, the metal in which one of the noblest arts flourished in Guatemala during the colonial era and much of our independent period, throughout the 19th century.



ALTAR OF Our Lady of the Sacred Heart
in *Las Beatas de Belén* Church. The votive
offerings that are offered to this virgin.

Thus, **these votive offerings**, made entirely of silver and shaped to represent the part of the body that received healing through the intercession of the Saint, take on in Guatemala uniquely expressive forms marked by simplicity and naivety. They are symbols meant to be placed on the walls surrounding the altar of the interceding Saint who granted the favor, and to whom the grateful recipient donates the offering as a visible sign of the miracle received. In the case -of Saints known for being especially miraculous and widely venerated-, such offerings can cover the entire ceiling of their chapels, and even their cloaks and garments -when the images are "dressed" figures-. They are also placed inside their glass cases when they are representations of the **Señores Sepultados** or **Nuestra Señora del Tránsito**.

It is in these **votive offerings**, that represent parts of the body, where the popular imagination of both the donor and the silversmith who created the piece display the greatest flourishes of their thought and expressive spontaneity. Feet, calves, legs -with or without the inclusion of the hip-, hands, single fingers, forearms with hands, full arms, heads -all representing men, women, or children- torsos, entire bodies posed to indicate, with one or both hands, the location of the organ that was healed through the intercession of the Saint; sick individuals in their own beds -male or female-; lungs, kidneys, stomachs, hearts, sexual organs, eyes, ears, etc. Absolutely every part of the body was made in silver, to be hung, in eternal gratitude for the favor received, around the most miraculous images.

The images of the Saints who are considered protectors of healing from various ailments are distinguished -in their **votive offerings**- by their specific denomination. A classic example is the silver eyes -either one or two, depending on the favor- offered to the miraculous images of **Saint Lucy**.

The breasts -generally depicted on a plate, just like the attribute carried by the Saint herself- are offered to **Santa Agueda**, the protector of women's illnesses. Legs, or crutches -the latter symbolizing that they were no longer needed thanks to the Saint's intercession- appear in the votive offerings to **Saint Lazarus**. The votive offerings to Saint Blaise, protector against throat ailments. Figurines of pregnant women, as offerings to Saint Raymond Nonnatus or to Saint Rita -patroness of the impossible- Kidney stones, which were offered to **Saint Liborius** and **Saint Benedict**. And so on, various symbols representing other illnesses, whose healing is generally attributed to **Saint Salvador of Horta**; or the representation of different physical deformities, for which **Saint John of God** is considered the patron. The teeth and molars offered to **Saint Apollonia**, patroness of dentists; and the figurines of little women and men, or simply their

Right panel of the same altar, where votive offerings in the form of gratitude plaques predominate. The heart at the top with the Cuban flag is not a silver votive offering, but rather a fabric heart with embroidered details.

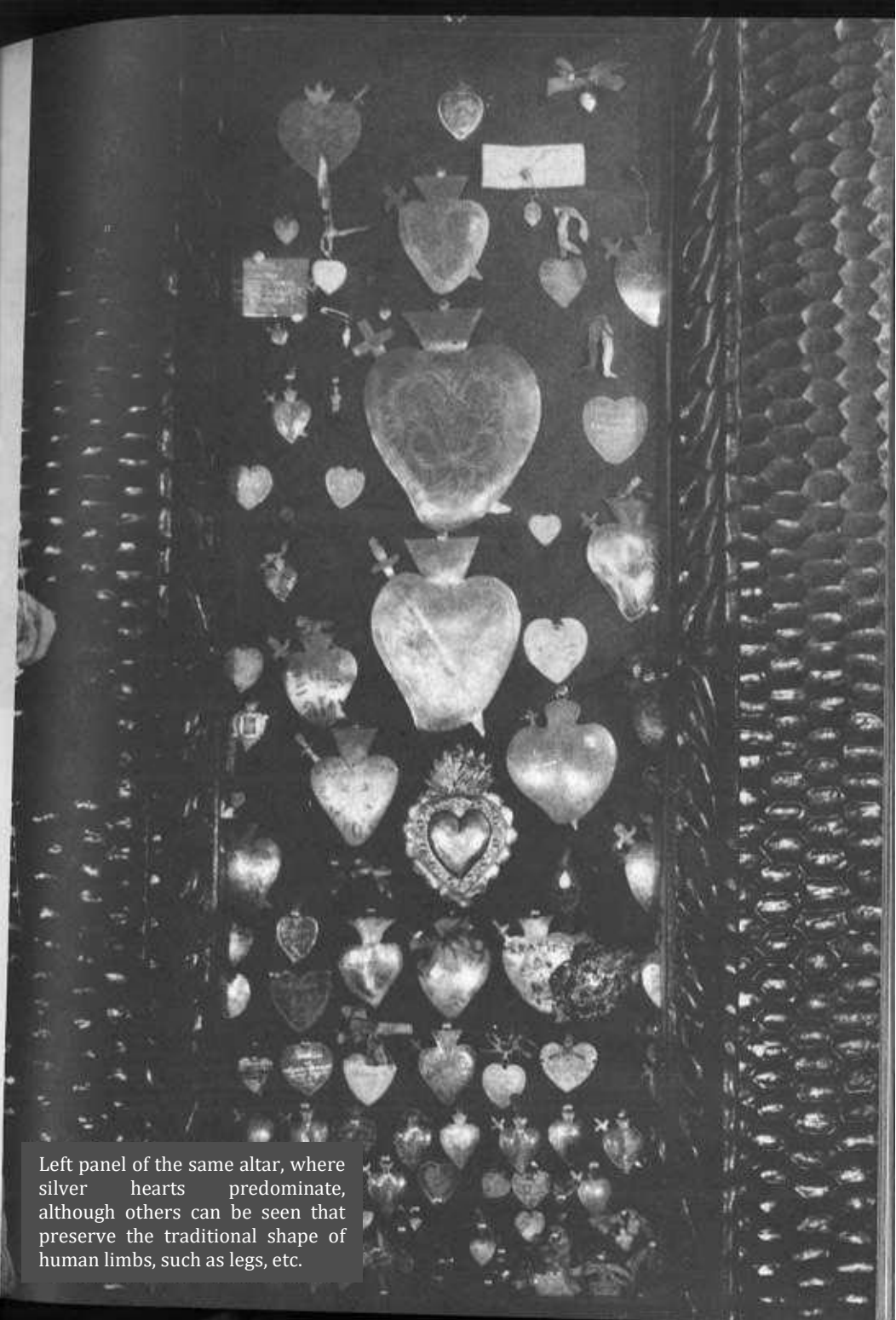
heads, which were offered to **Saint Vitus**, healer of epilepsy. **Saint Margaret**, **Saint Andrew**, and **Saint Elizabeth**, patrons in the struggle against infertility, had their own particular votive offerings. Hearts -a category of their own- are offered for various fulfilled petitions to different Saints, whether in gratitude for healing or for gifts of love, both spiritual and human. All of these, are just a few examples of Saints with special devotions and their corresponding votive offerings, without even touching upon the intercessions of the Virgin Mary -especially Our Lady of Sorrows- or of images of the Lord in His various forms as Jesus or Christ. Among the latter is the image of the Lord of Esquipulas, in Guatemala, an object of intense devotion and pilgrimage to His sanctuary, drawing not only people from our country, but also from all of Central America, Mexico, and even from South America and the Antilles during the colonial period.

It is worth noting that in Guatemala, in addition to the Sanctuary of the Lord of Esquipulas, there are other sanctuaries of special devotion where images are the object of gratitude expressed through votive offerings: the **Jesús de Trujillo** in the *Villa Nueva* Temple, Department of Guatemala; the **Señor de San Felipe** in Antigua Guatemala; the **Padre Eterno** in the *San Sebastián* Temple of; and the **Señor de las Misericordias** in the temple that bears the same name. Likewise, Virgins of equal veneration receive votive offerings, such as **Our Lady of the Abandoned** in the *Santa Rosa* Temple, **Our Lady of the Sacred Heart** in the *San Francisco* Temple, and other Saints like **Saint Jude Thaddeus** in the *La Merced* Temple, all located in Guatemala City.

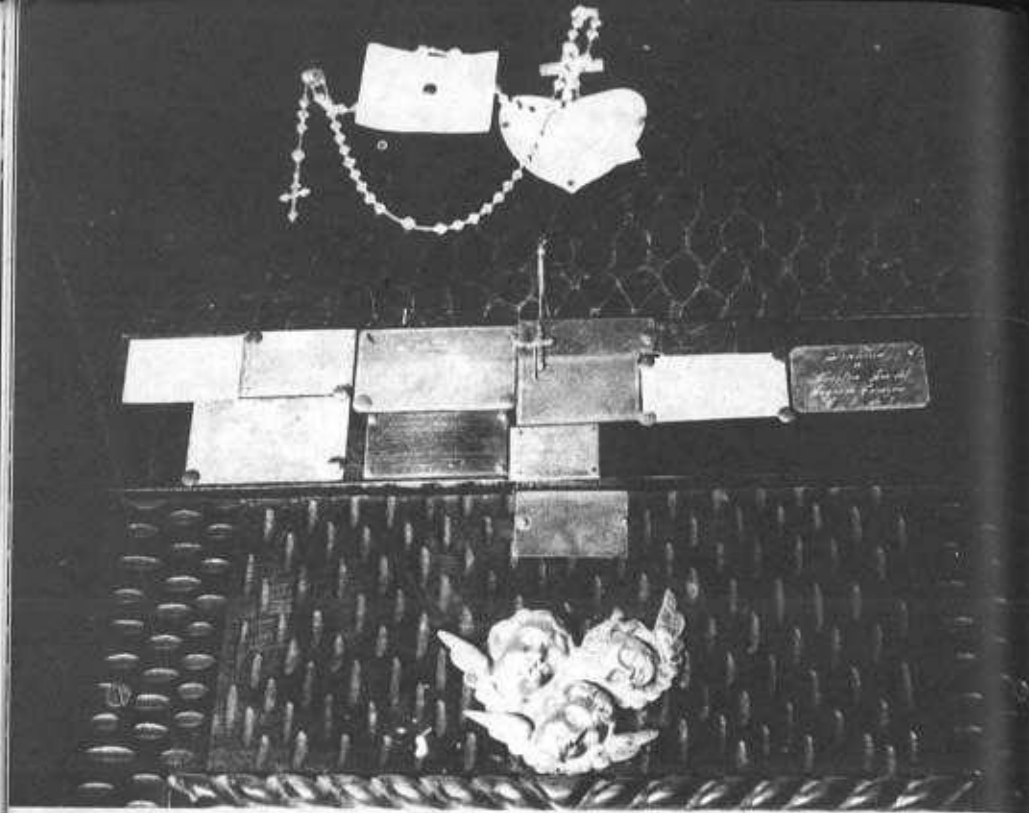
In the past, there were Saints who received special forms of veneration that have since disappeared, such as Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, mentioned by Tomás Gage (Fray Tomás de Santa María) in his well-known work, which he describes in his distinctive tone and style.

One of the most interesting silver inventories I am aware of is that of the church in the town of Atiquisaya, annexed to the Santiago Chalchuapa Parish, which today is part of El Salvador. It was carried out in January 1803 by the parish administrator, *Don** José Joaquín Echeverría, in the absence of the parish priest, for presentation during the pastoral visit of Archbishop Don Luis de Peñalver y Cárdenas. It details "various exceptional silver objects, among which it is worth noting some that appear to be votive offerings -though they are not identified as such- listed as follows:

Don: commonly used today for addressing senior people in Guatemala, the English variation is Mr.



Left panel of the same altar, where silver hearts predominate, although others can be seen that preserve the traditional shape of human limbs, such as legs, etc.



Detail of the same altar showing various votive offerings above the image of the Virgin.

“ ...

And in another, a small carved cross with two little fangs set in silver.

And in another, two little silver feet.

And in another, silver eyes.

And in another, a tooth cleaner, a soterrana (sic.), and a breastplate with its green and black stones.

...”

The document does not specify to which Saint they belong, but it does mention several existing images, among them “an image of the Lord of Esquipulas,” so it can be inferred that they correspond to Him.

Also worthy of mention are the votive offerings dedicated to the Saints who protect captives, such as Our Lady of Mercy, who received the votive offering from the women jailers. Similar offerings were made to other Saints whose intercession was sought either to obtain the release of a prisoner or in gratitude for having been spared imprisonment.

There are numerous silver votive offerings from Guatemala, especially those from the 19th century and earlier periods. It is important to note that it is very rare to find very old votive offerings, as the Church had the custom of melting them down once there was no more space to place them near the Saints, since they were so numerous that they tightly covered the surrounding area. The resulting silver was then used to make some item for the service of the Saint's altar, whether a sacred vessel, altar candlesticks, or flower vases. For this reason, it is difficult to find very old votive offerings for study. This practice also made room for new votive offerings from successive devotees.

Among the oldest known pieces, special mention should be made of the locusts, which were once abundant in Guatemala due to the frequent plagues of this insect that devastated crops until the 19th century. Also noteworthy are *zompopos*, bedbugs, ants, and other equally destructive insects, as well as small snakes representing various harmful reptiles. Grains of corn, young ears of corn, and even whole corncobs were also offered as votive offerings in gratitude for good harvests.

It is possible that the first ones that is the locusts, were votive offerings dedicated to Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, considering what Tomás Gage refers to in his work regarding the plague of this insect that occurred in Mixco (municipal government) in 1632:

Zompopo: an ant species that belongs to the leafcutter and fungi cultivator ant group in the Atta genus.

"All the images of the Saints in Mixco were taken out to the fields in procession, particularly those of the Virgin and of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, in whose honor it is customary to bless small loaves of bread stamped with the image of the Saint. It is said that they are effective in warding off plague, fever, and all sorts of dangers and great public calamities.

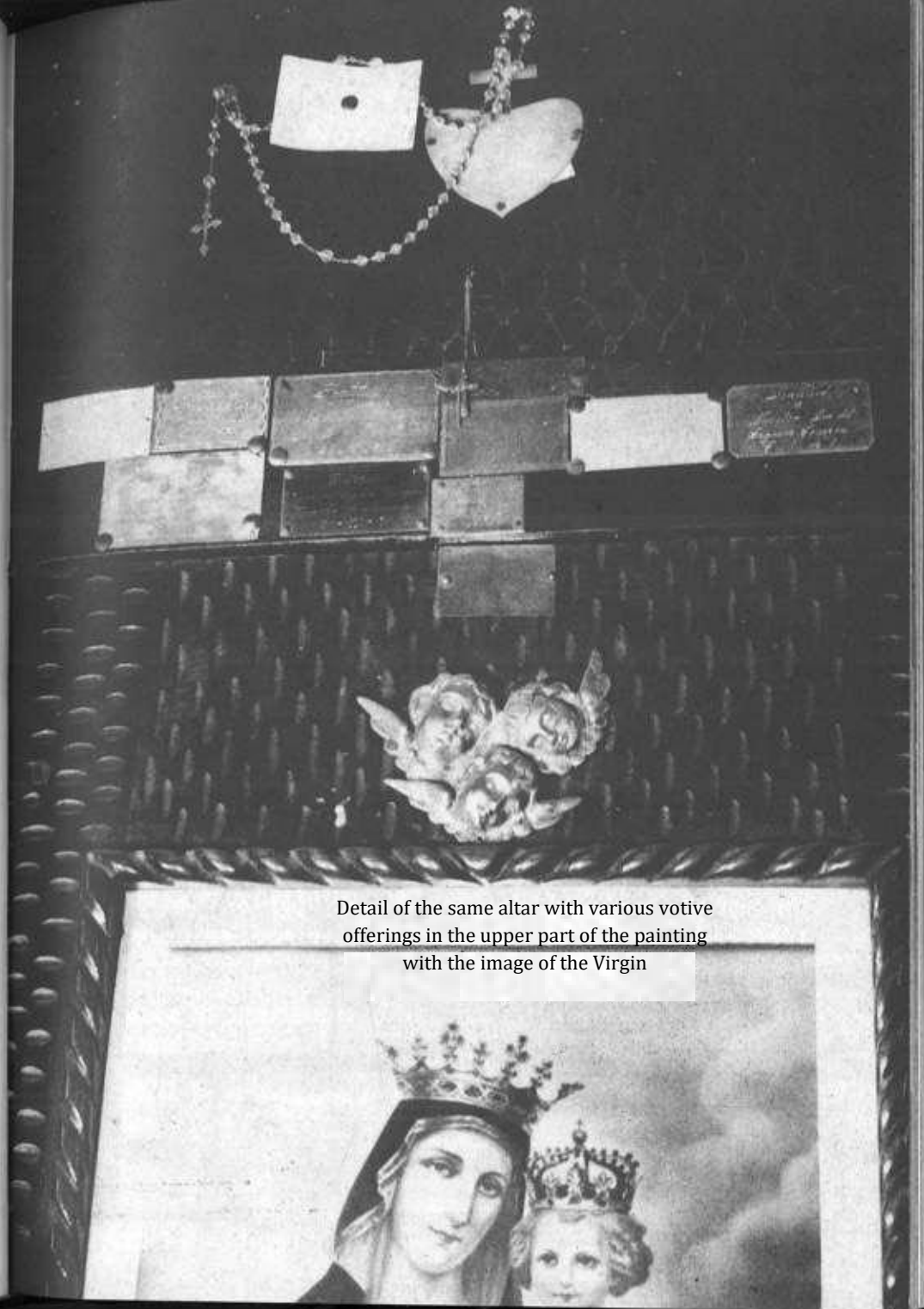
All the Spanish farmers and landowners of the valley came to Mixco to bring their offerings to this saint; they had masses said and had those small loaves blessed, which they then took to their parish priests. Some threw them among their wheat fields, while others placed them within their fences and thickets, believing that with Saint Nicholas and these blessed breads in his name, the locusts would be kept away from their lands. So, when the insects withdrew without damaging their crops, everyone began to shout 'miracle' in favor of Our Lady and Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, and to have masses said to fulfill the vows they had made during the plague;..."¹

Also curious are the votive offerings made for the healing of horses, noble animals so useful to man, especially in the past, of which finely crafted horseshoes or complete legs are often found.

Although some authors have pointed out that the custom of offering votive offerings was adopted by Christians from ancient pagan practices, the truth is that Christians gave it a completely different meaning, one in accordance with the significance of worship in the Christian religion. Nevertheless, the votive offering both in ancient pagan religions and in Christianity is the result of the same underlying intention: the offering of a gift at the moment of requesting a favor, to be fulfilled once that favor has been granted. The difference in meaning between paganism and Christianity lies fundamentally in the fact that, in Christianity, the miracle is not expected from the image itself -as it is from the idol in paganism- but from the saint whom the image represents. The saint acts as a mediator between the believer and God for the granting of divine grace. The votive offering is the external symbol of the believer's gratitude.

It is also important to point out that among collectors of silver votive offerings, these are often confused with certain pieces that are merely charms, made solely with the intention of being components for bracelets or necklaces.

¹ **NUEVA RELACION que contiene LOS VIAJES DE TOMAS GAGE EN LA NUEVA ESPAÑA.** Biblioteca "Goathemala", Volume XVIII, 1946,



Detail of the same altar with various votive offerings in the upper part of the painting with the image of the Virgin

Detail of the votive offerings from the same altar in plates 1 and 2.



These can be clearly distinguished from one another by their craftsmanship and by the more ornamental and inconsequential character of the latter. If a piece lacks any of the distinctive attributes of a votive offering, it must be regarded solely and simply as a charm. I should clarify, however, that here I use the word 'charm' in its modern sense: a small ornament typically worn by women, children, and even men. In earlier times, the word charm -then spelled *dix* or *dixe*- referred to "Gospels, reliquaries, pacifiers, little bells, and other small trinkets made of crystal, silver, or gold, which were placed on children's necks, shoulders, or other parts of the body to protect them from harm, amuse them, or adorn them," according to the original definition of the word as found in the first edition of the *Diccionario de la Lengua Castellana*, published by the Royal Spanish Academy in 1732.

On the other hand, there are small silver pieces that, although not votive offerings, are related to religious silverwork. These were crafted to accompany small devotional images as **saintly attributes**. Such is the case with little angels or small fish, the latter being an attribute of Saint Raphael the Archangel, who is often depicted holding one in his right hand. Small jugs and other figures, such as those of certain animals, are also not votive offerings, though they may have once formed part of a small Nativity scene.

Another common confusion is the tendency to consider certain pieces as votive offerings when they are actually **amulets**. These, which would deserve a dedicated study, were and still are widely used in our country and are linked to popular superstitions. This is the case of the small, clenched hands with the thumb protruding between the index and middle fingers, known in Spanish as **higas**, which were crafted not only in silver but also in jet, coral, or jade; the deer eyes set in silver; and other items not necessary to describe here. All of these objects have a superstitious character, and some particularly the former were traditionally placed around the necks or wrists of children to protect them from the **evil eye**, as previously noted in the old definition of *dixe*. These amulets belong to the realm of fetishism. In this context, one should also mention the **nahuales** (Mayan spirit/animal companion) still used by some Indigenous people.

Regarding the *higas* mentioned earlier, it is interesting to partially transcribe their definition from the first edition of the *Diccionario de la Lengua Castellana*, already cited, where they appear as:

"An amulet by which the Gentiles vainly persuaded themselves they could ward off the evil eye and protect themselves from the harm they believed envious people could cause by merely looking at them or their belongings" ... "The meaning and representation of the figure is of a most indecent nature, and it was dedicated to Priapus. Nonetheless, it is often placed among other *dixes* on children in Spain; and the Moors, who still use it, are convinced that it possesses the power falsely attributed to it by idolaters. Its etymology comes from the verb **Goitevo**, meaning to bewitch or enchant, from which the name **Agoiteutos** was formed using the privative prefix A, signifying 'one who cannot be bewitched.'"

This dictionary further elaborates that the gesture made with the hand -which reproduces the **higa**- was a custom among the Moors, "...who, making the **higa**, would say: **Xampza fehahinak**, which is interpreted as **Five in your eye.**"

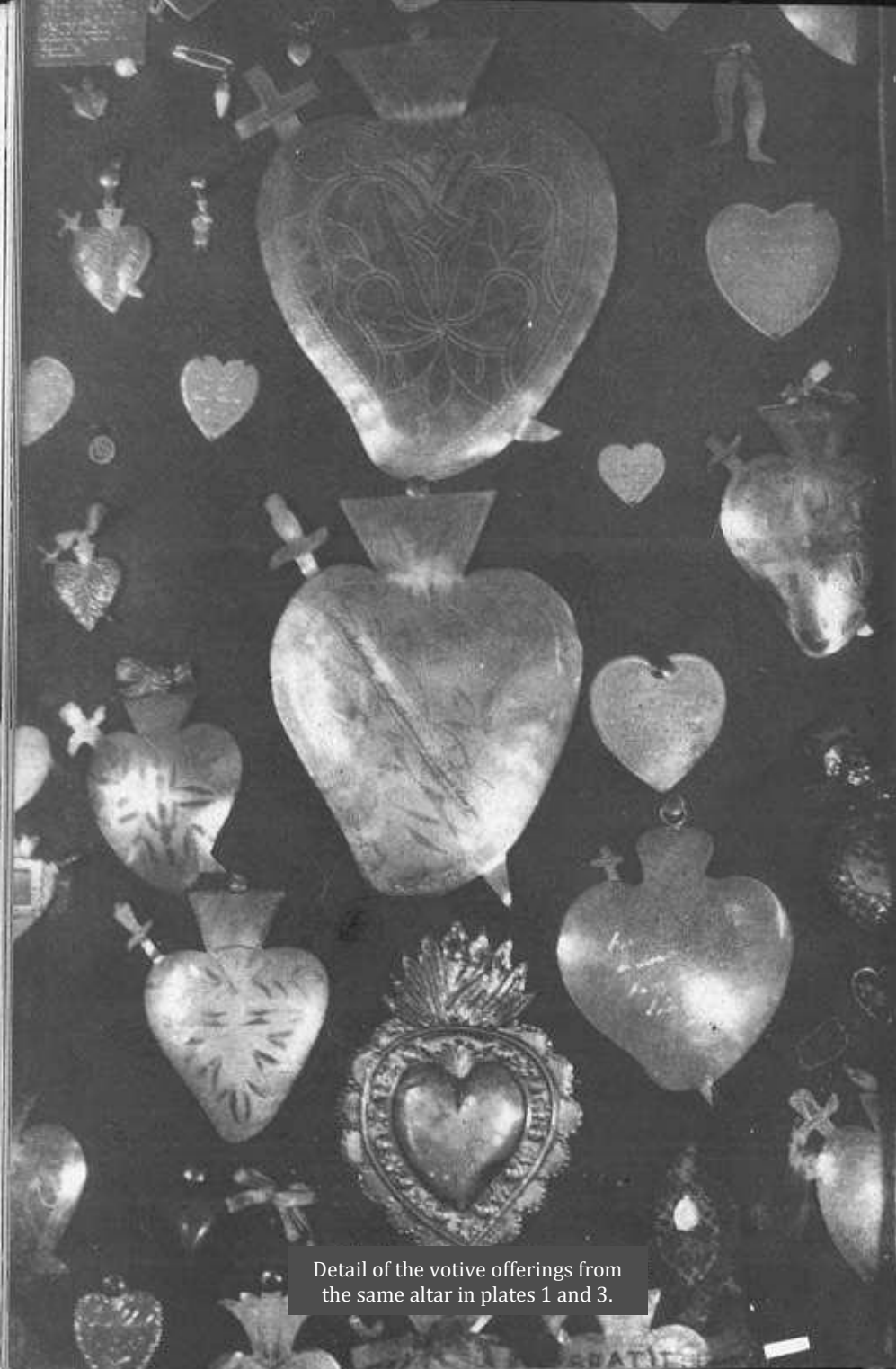
Currently, the use of votive offerings has decreased significantly, and even the few that are still preserved -if we consider the large quantities that once adorned the temples where Saints of great devotion were venerated in the past- have not been the subject of studies or research, although interest in owning them in private collections has recently emerged.

Today's silver votive offerings are limited to pieces made from extremely thin sheets of low-purity silver, as the old silversmiths would say. Stereotyped little figures abound, showing little creative imagination and possessing only limited artistic value.

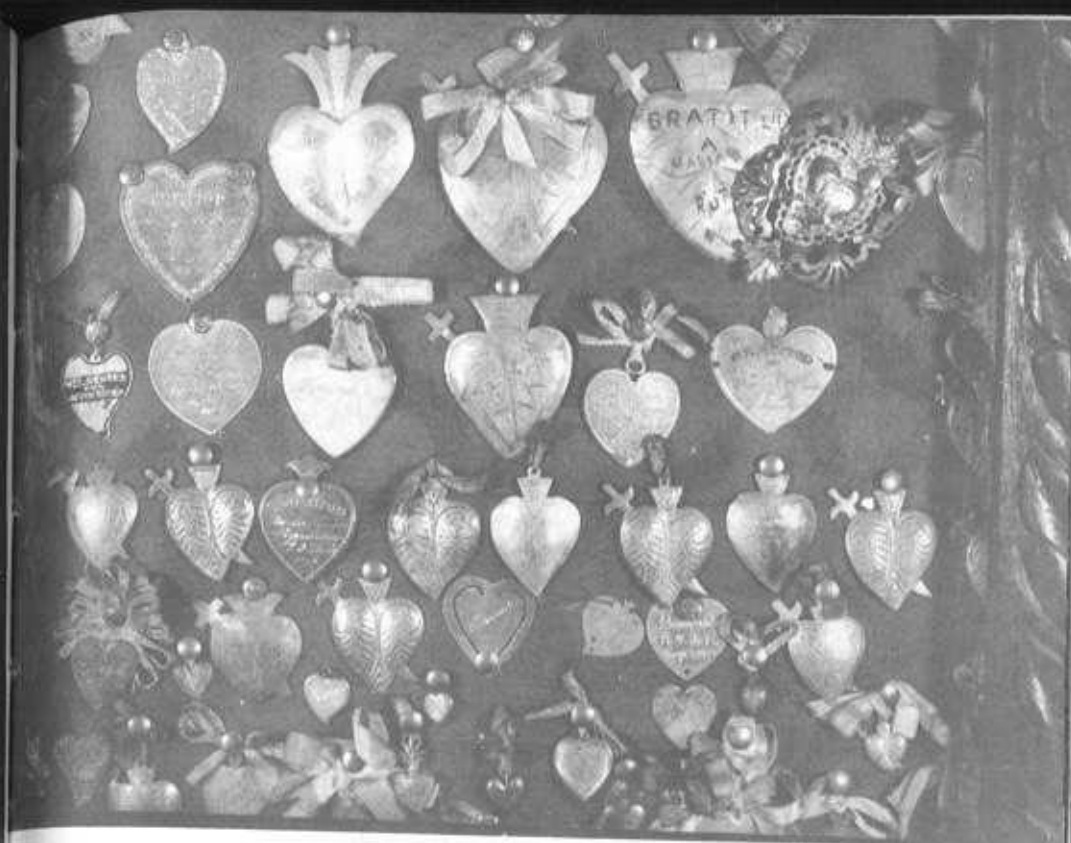
It is in the pieces from earlier times, now almost vanished, that we can discover all the excellence, spontaneity, and innocent candor of a popular art that is fading under the influence of post-conciliar religious thought currents.



Detail of the votive offerings from the same altar in plates 1 and 2.



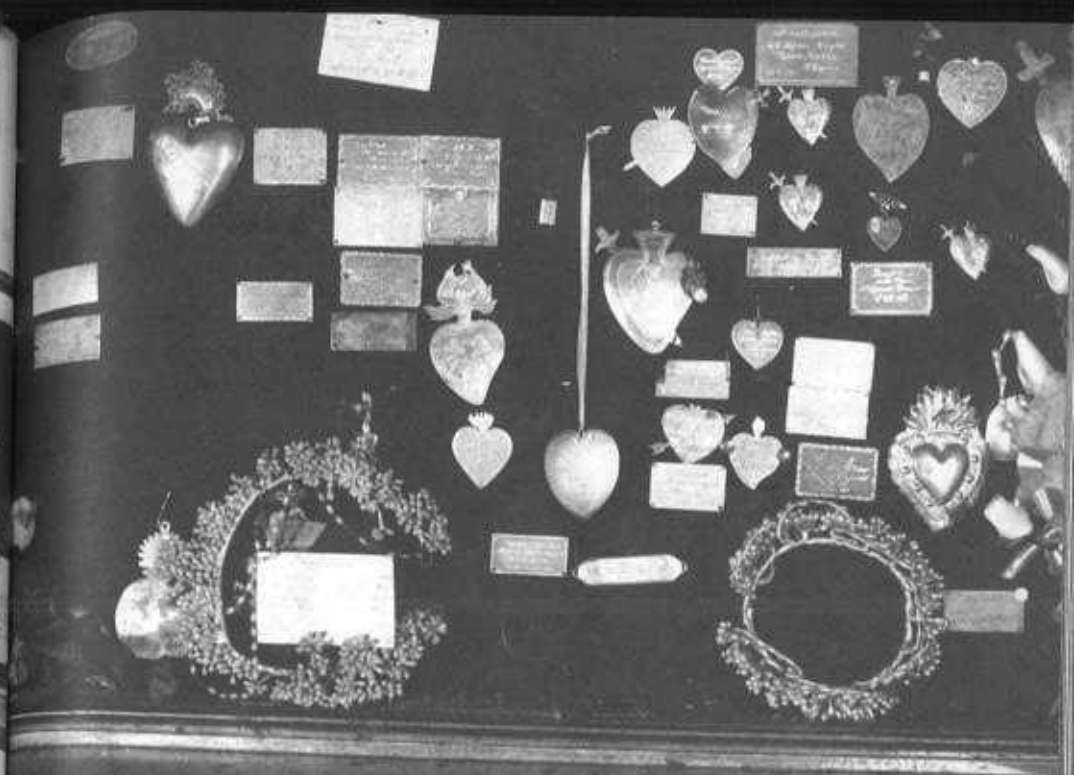
Detail of the votive offerings from
the same altar in plates 1 and 3.



Detail of the votive offerings from
the same altar in plates 1 and 3.



Votive offerings from the altar of
Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in the
San Francisco Temple in
Guatemala City.



Votive offerings from the altar of
Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in the
San Francisco Temple in
Guatemala City.



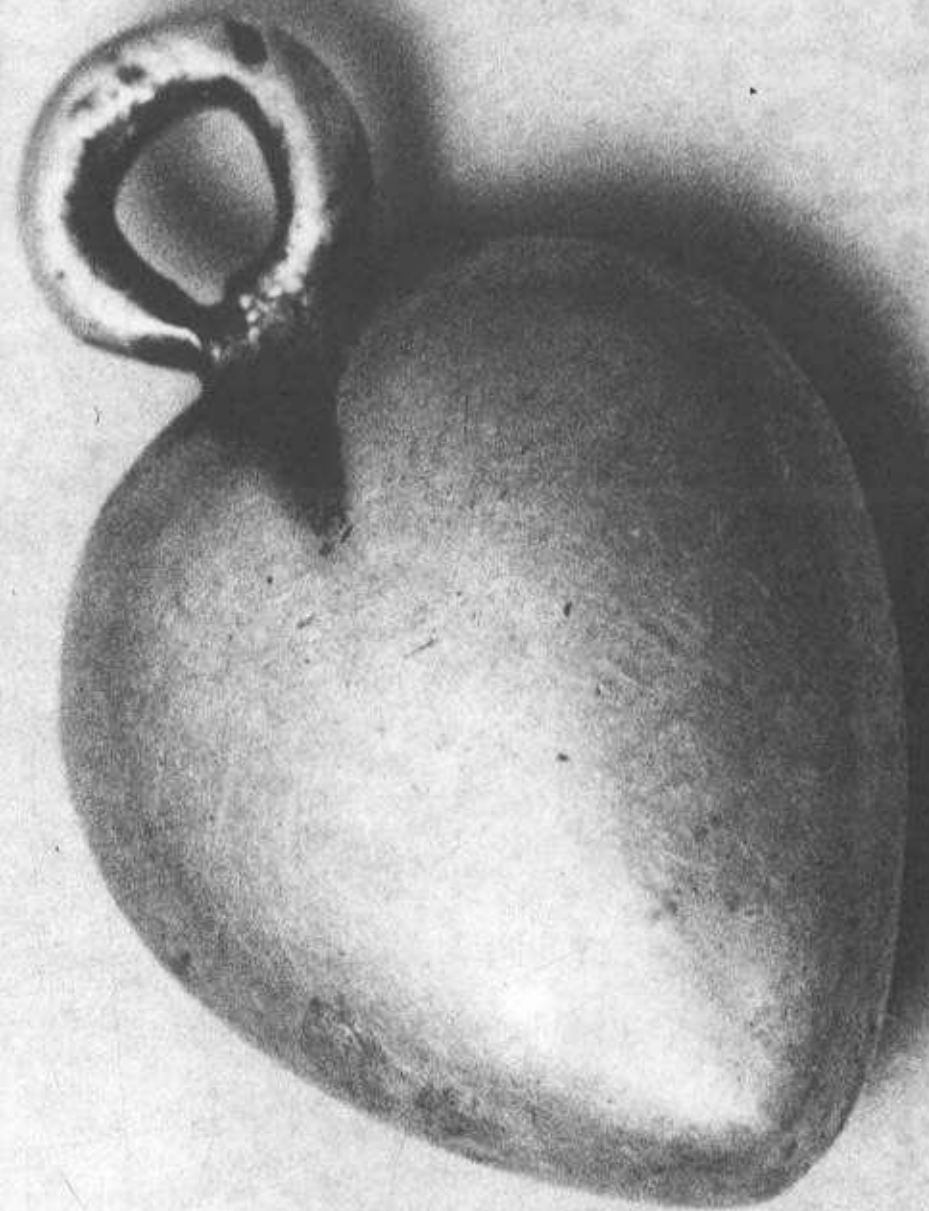
Heart engraved with a zig-zag punch
(obverse). Collection: J. A. de R.



Reverse of the previous piece, featuring
the dove symbol of the Holy Spirit.



Detail from Plate No. 10: Plaques and hearts with inscriptions of gratitude. Also included are two bridal bouquets, one made of wax orange blossoms on wire, and the other of fabric roses and ribbons.



Heart. Collection: A. de M.



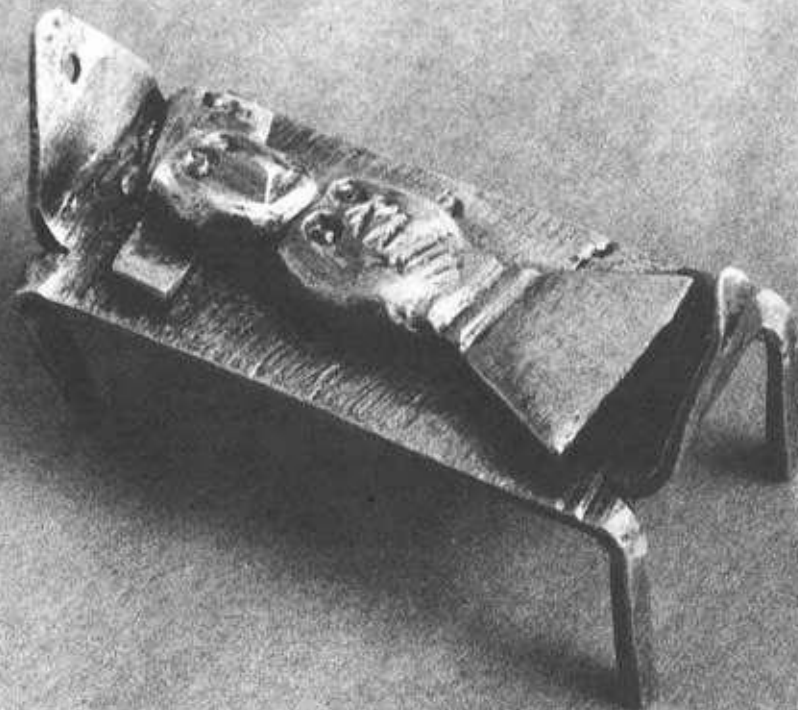
Heart. Collection: *J. A. de R.*



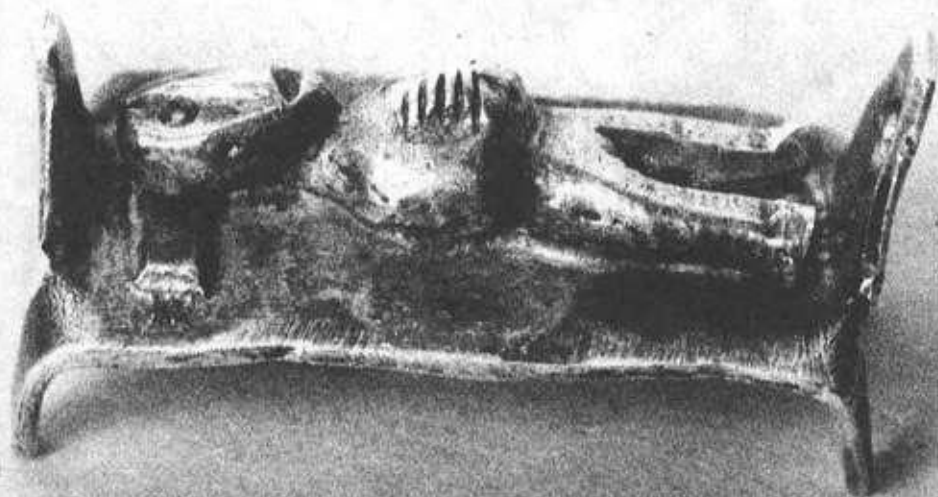
Angel. Votive offering



The same figure as above. Note the masterful effect of the iris and pupils of the eyes, noticeable only in the photographic enlargement, as this is a miniature-type votive offering.



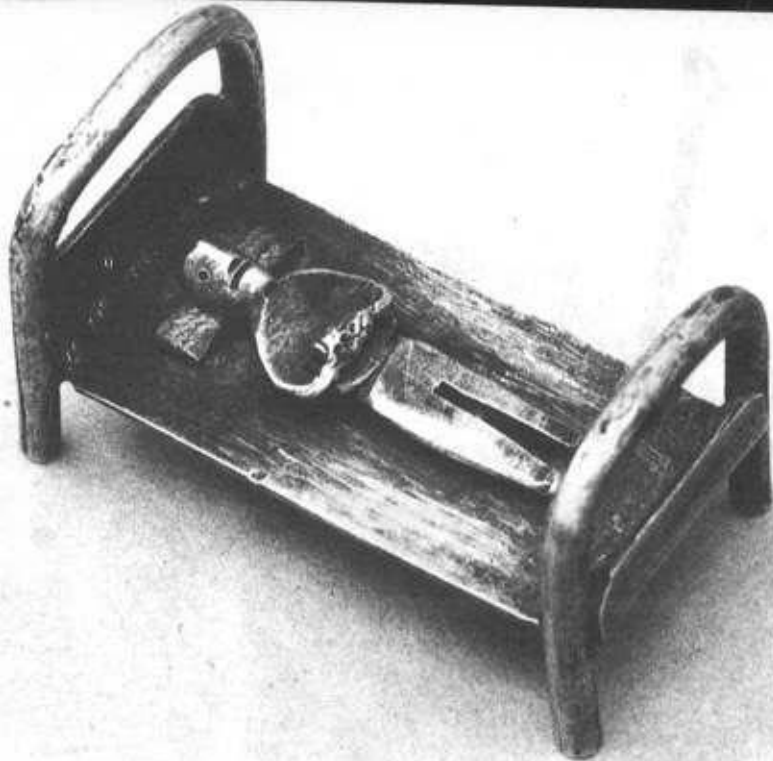
Sick or deceased. In her bed. The symbolism of this type of votive offering cannot be clearly determined, as it may equally represent the grace received from the healing of an illness that required a long period of bed rest, or the grace of having attained a "good death."



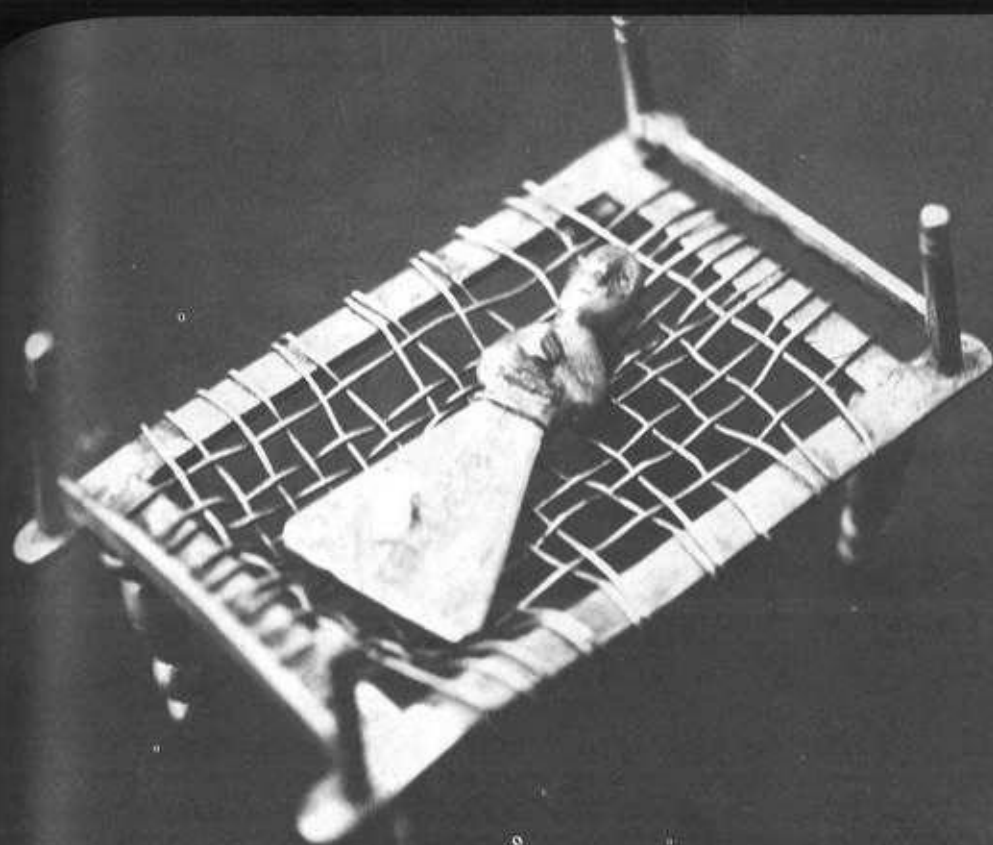
Sick or deceased in them bed.



Sick or deceased in them bed.



Sick or deceased in them bed.



Sick or deceased. In her bed. The symbolism of this type of votive offering cannot be clearly determined, as it may equally represent the grace received from the healing of an illness that required a long period of bed rest, or the grace of having attained a "good death."



Embossed plaque resembling the façade of the town jail. This is one of the most interesting votive offerings featured in this study, as it reveals great originality involving not only the imagination of the silversmith but also that of the client who commissioned it. Note the prisoners behind the barred windows, the lanterns on each side, the door with its lock and details, etc. To remove any doubt a delightful touch the sign reads *CARSEL* (a misspelling of the Spanish word *Cárcel*, which is "jail" in English), complete with its misspelling, something one would never see on a real jail, yet which gives the piece a truly popular character, culminating in the donor's inscription, transcribed in its original form on the page where the illustration appears. Stripped of its charming misspellings -which, for the silversmith and the donor, are not mistakes, as they write "sincerely" just as the words are pronounced- it reads: "Ciriaco Chitamul gives thanks, with the truth of his heart, to the Lord of Trujillo for having freed him from jail."



Jail with its prisoner inside. Votive offering for the same reason as the previous one.



Man with a bottle. Votive offering for the cure of the vice of drinking, offered and fulfilled by a *ex-bolo* (to use the Guatemalan slang, "bolo")

Bolo: refers to a drunkard.

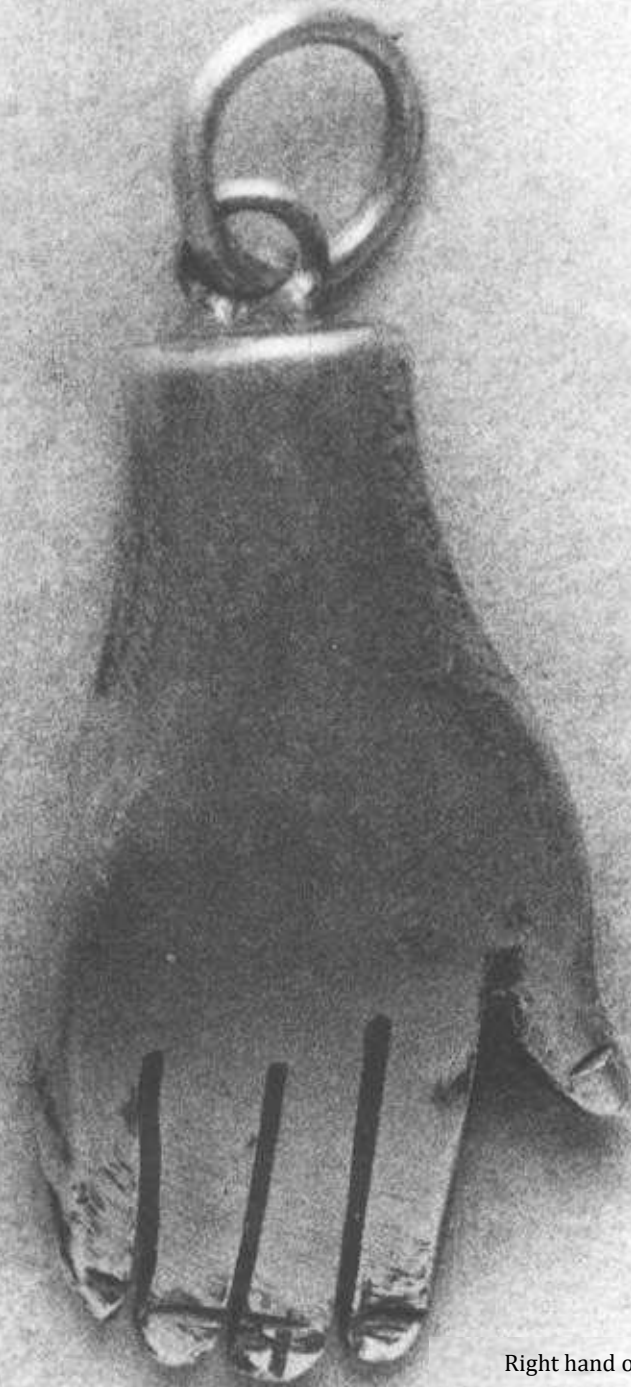
Ex-bolo: someone who has quit drinking.



Man with a rifle. Votive offering for having been "saved" from military service.



Right hand of a woman



Right hand of a man.



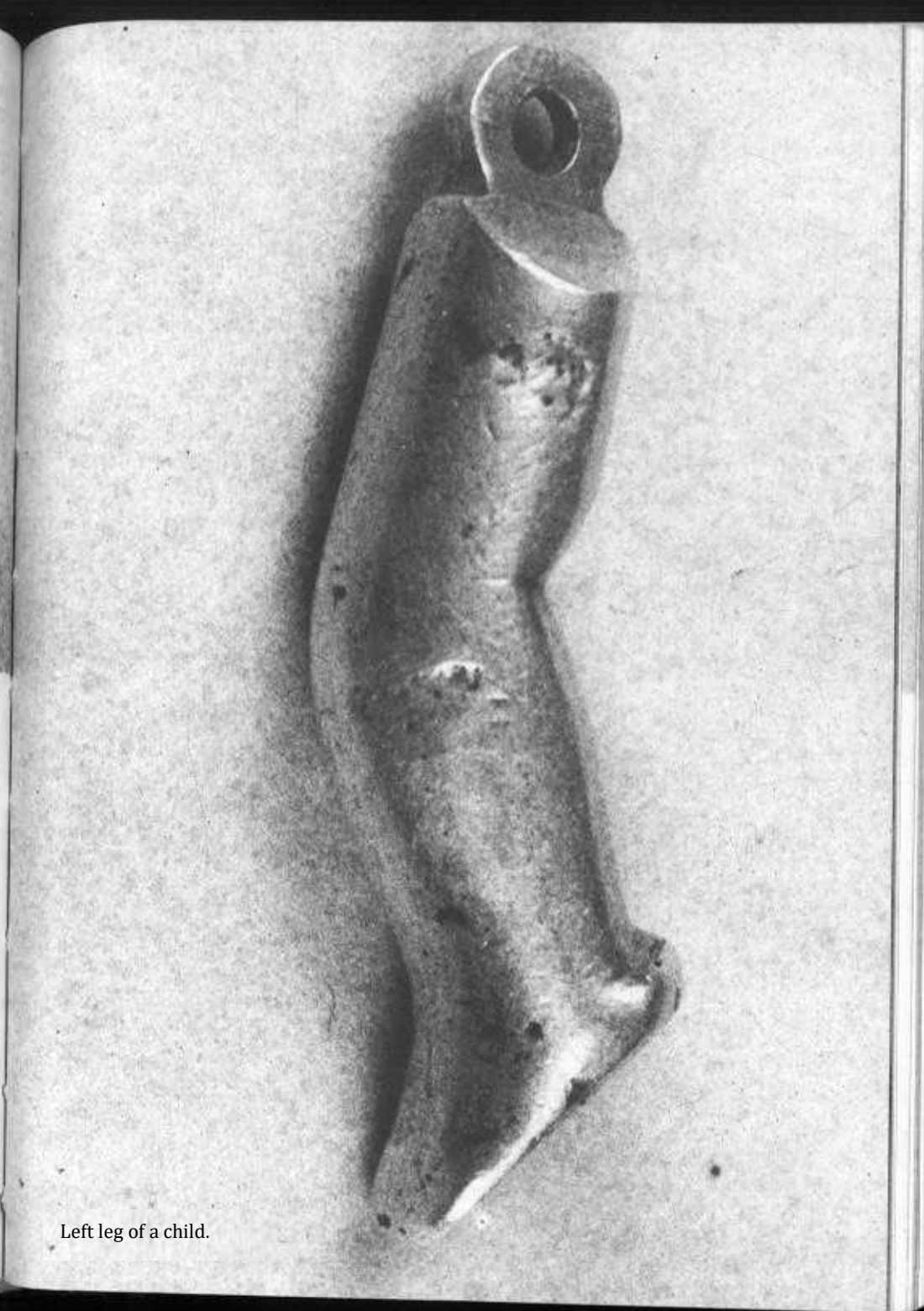
Left forearm with hand.



Index finger.



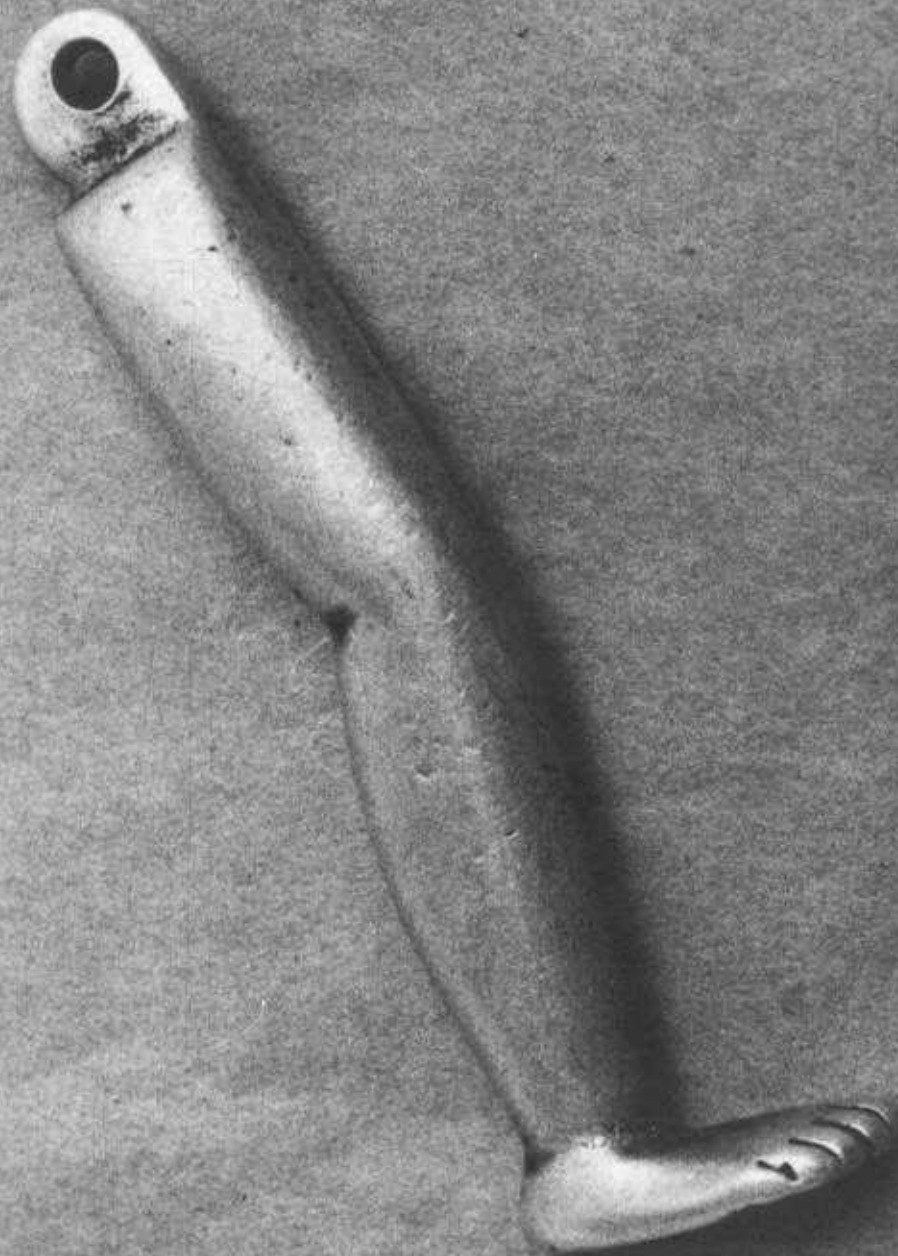
Lower part of forearm with right
hand.



Left leg of a child.



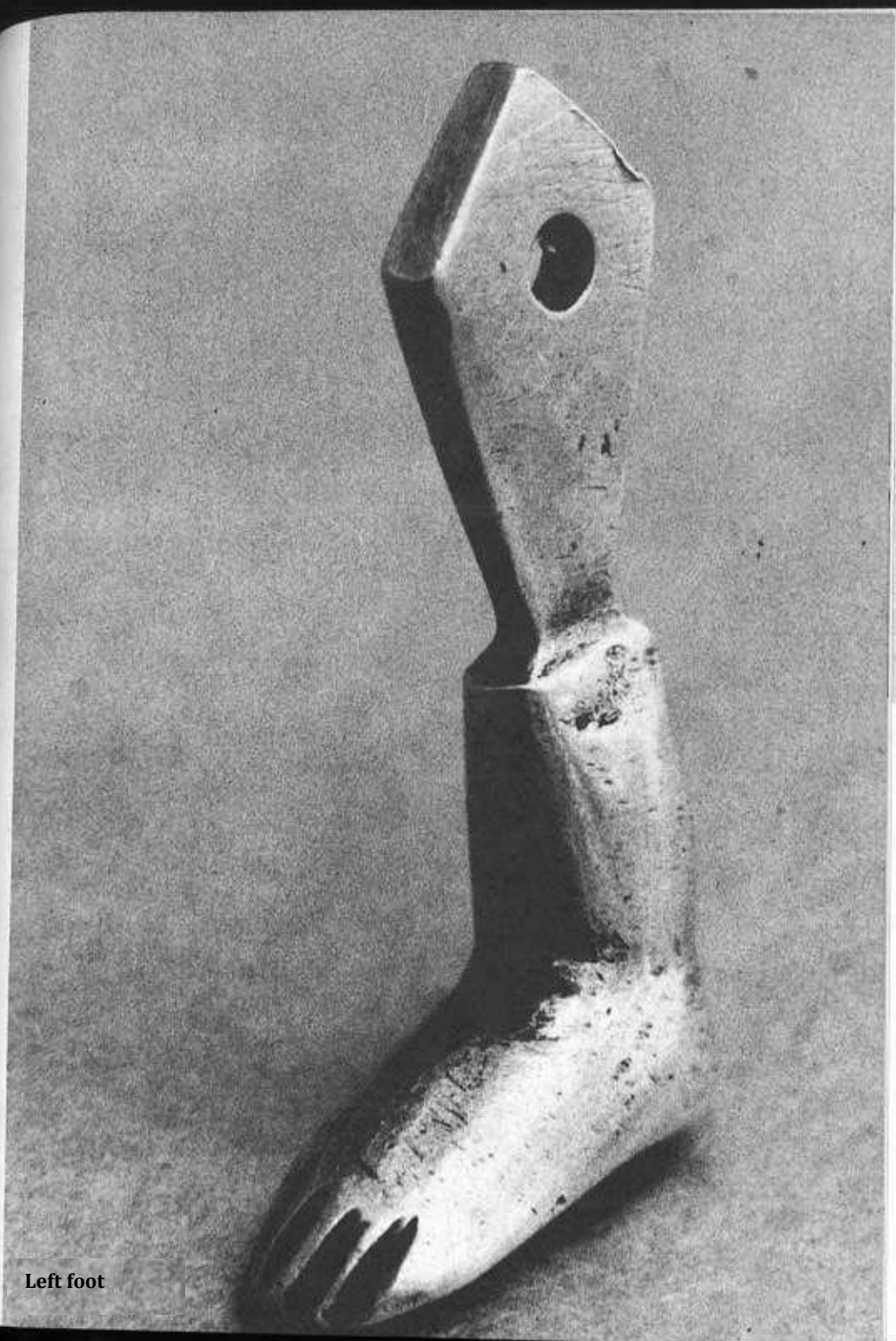
Right foot of a child.



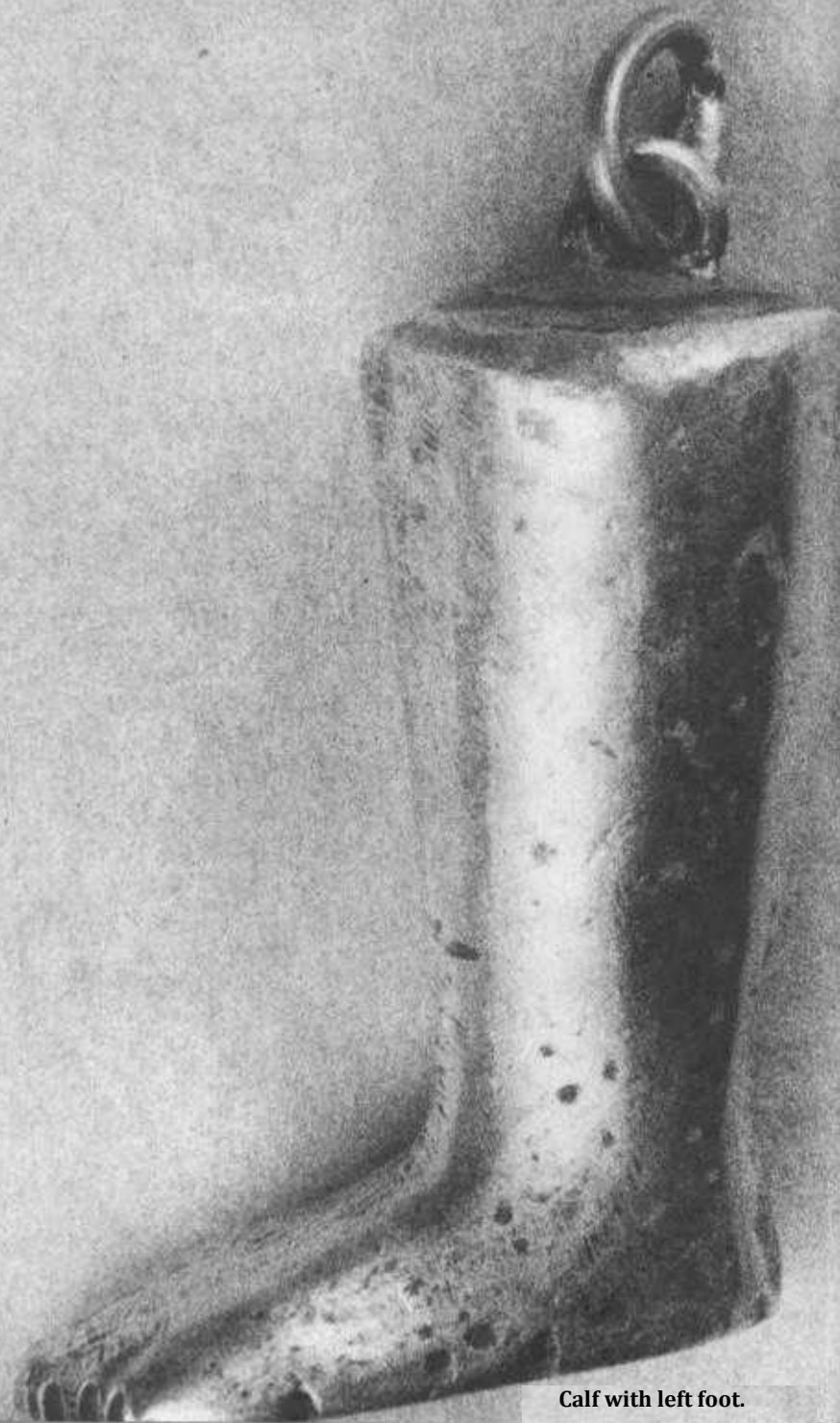
Right leg



Left foot.



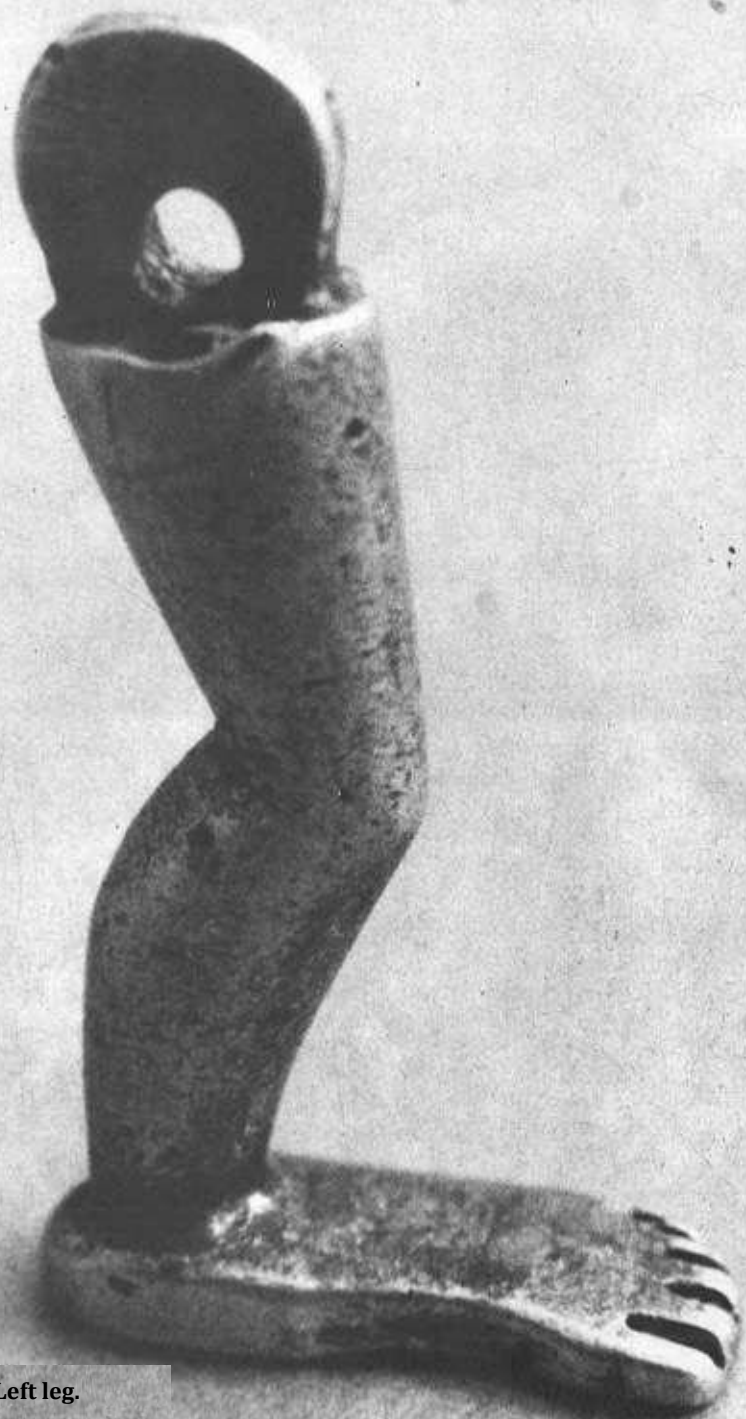
Left foot



Calf with left foot.



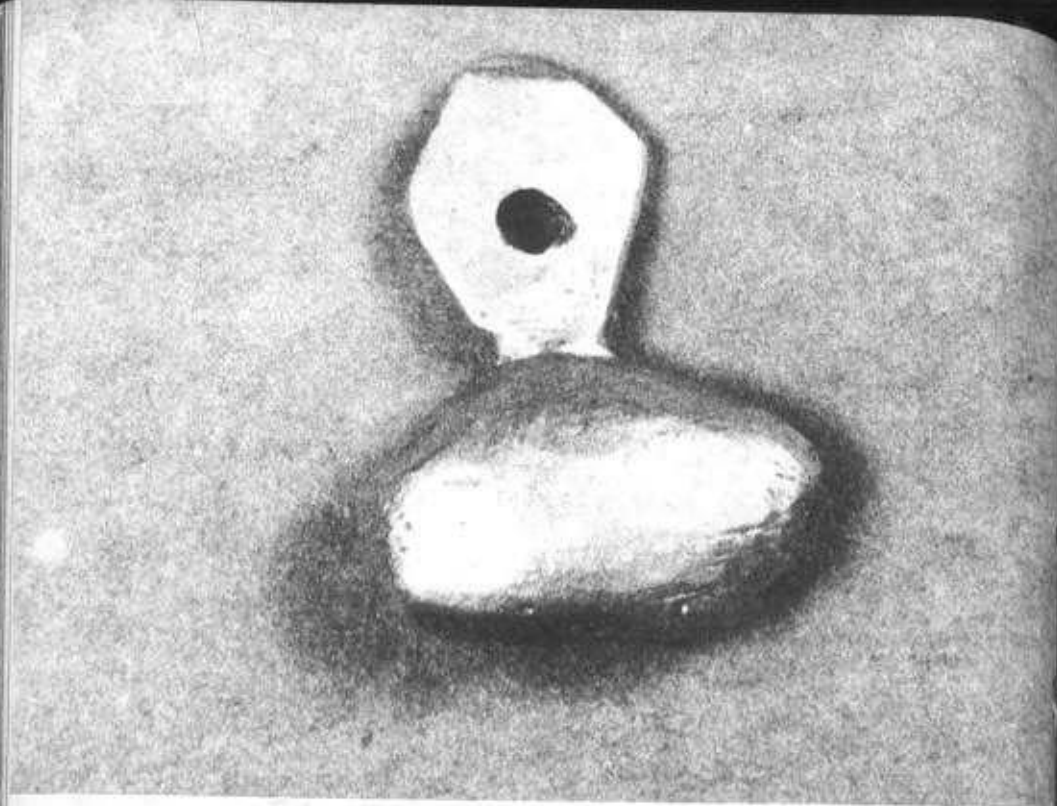
Right leg.



Left leg.



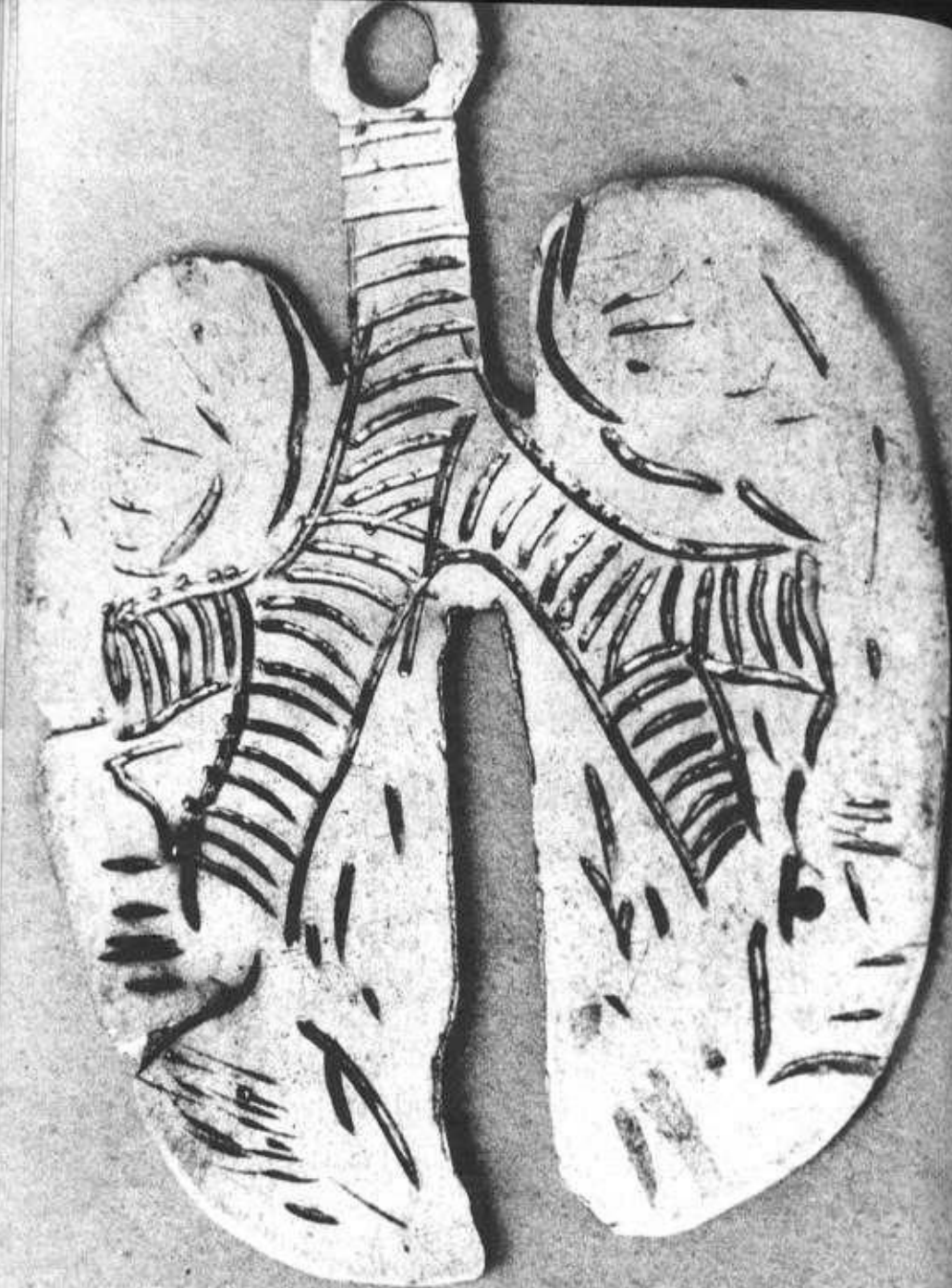
Left side from the waist down
including the entire leg.



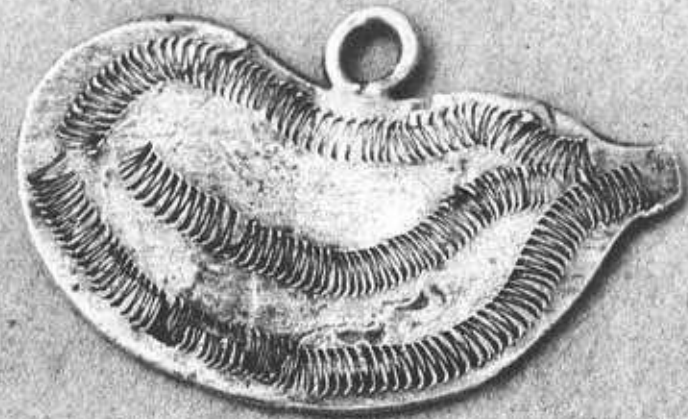
Kidney.



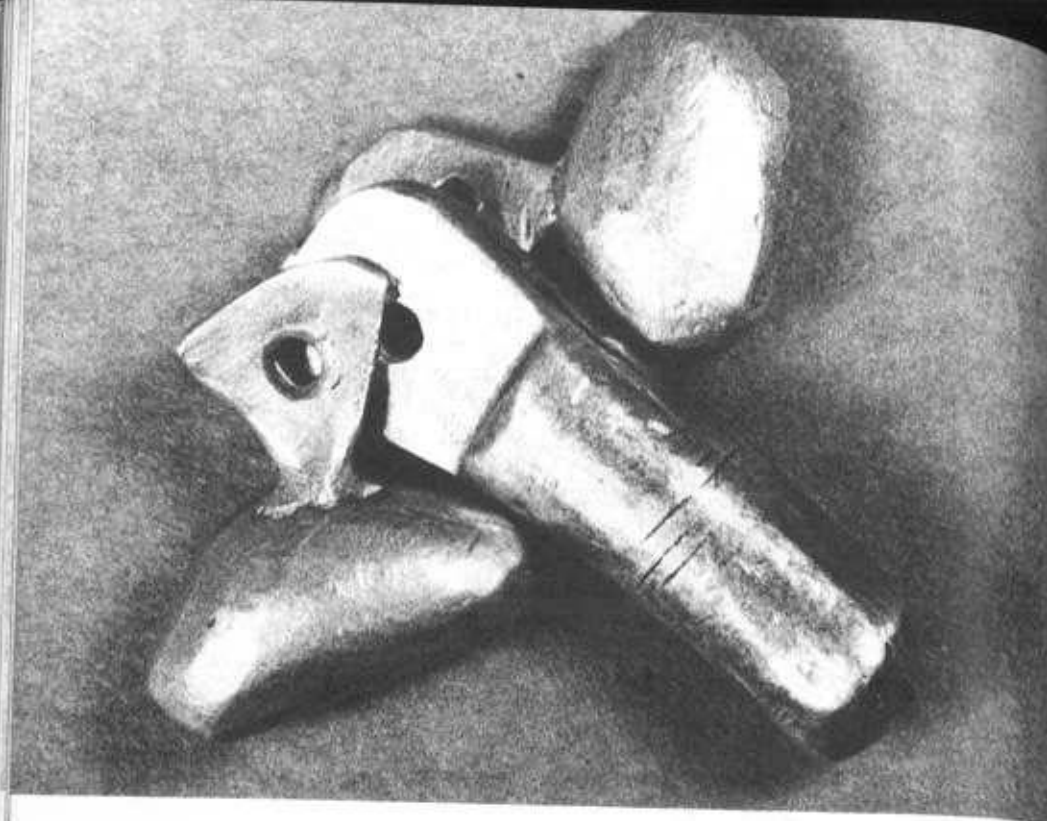
Right ear.



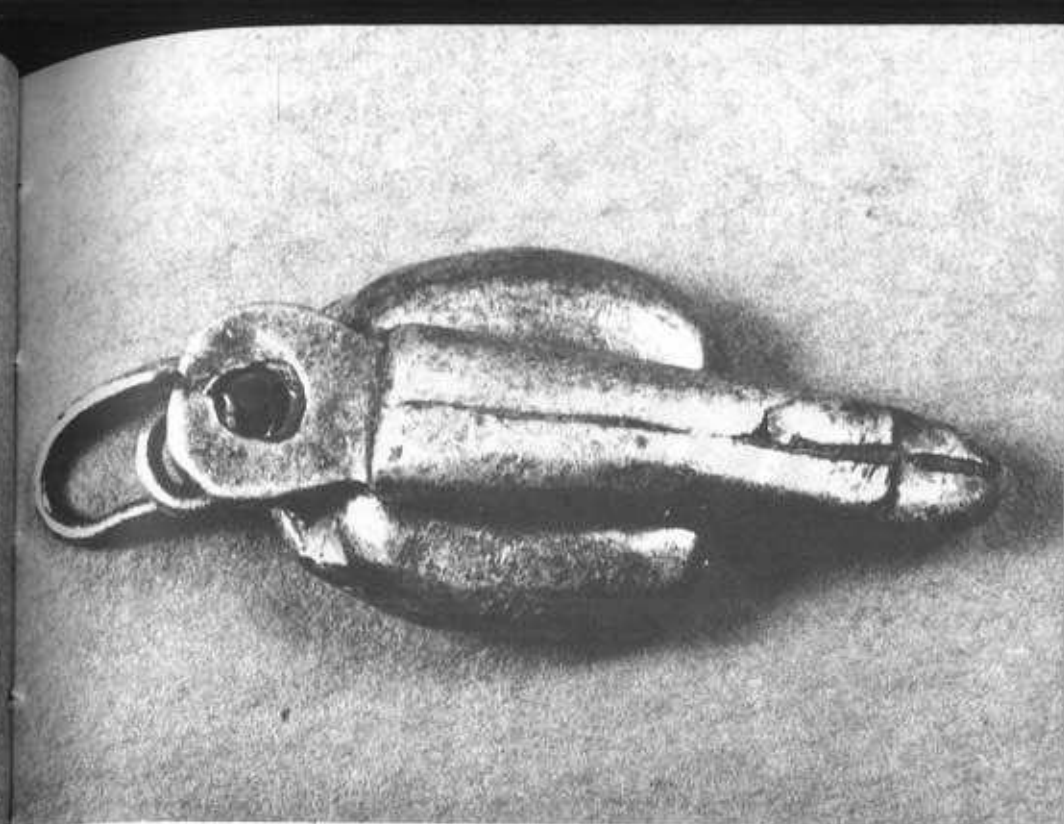
Lungs with its trachea



Stomach.



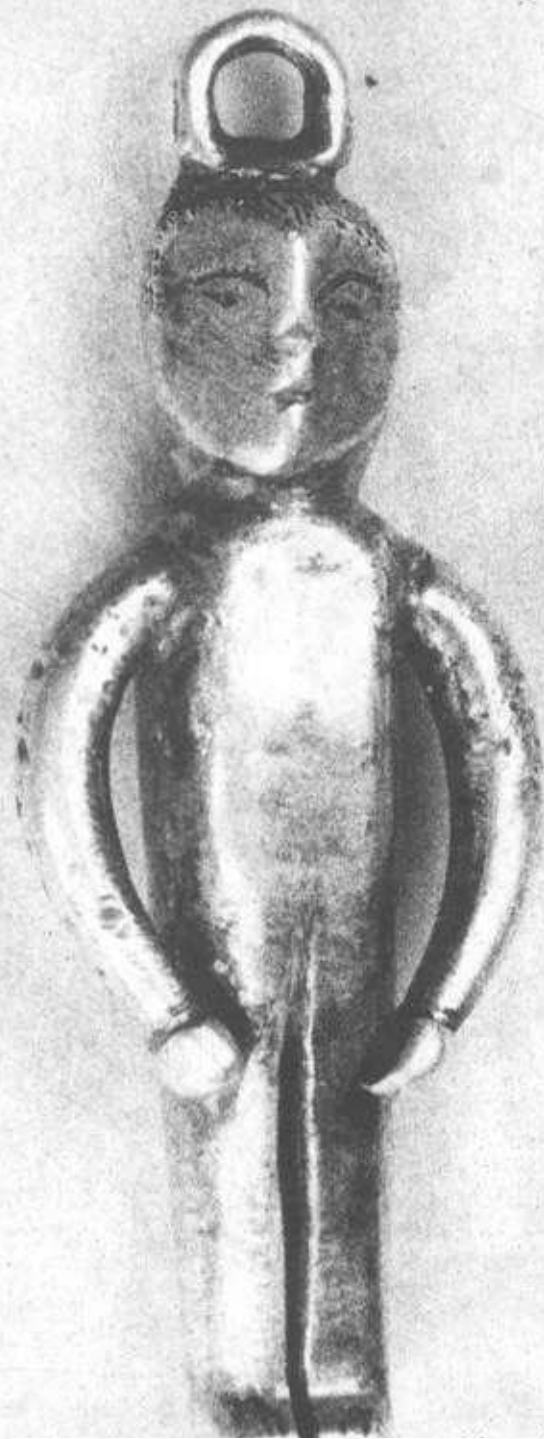
Male sexual organs.



Male sexual organs.



Testicles, detail of plate 46.



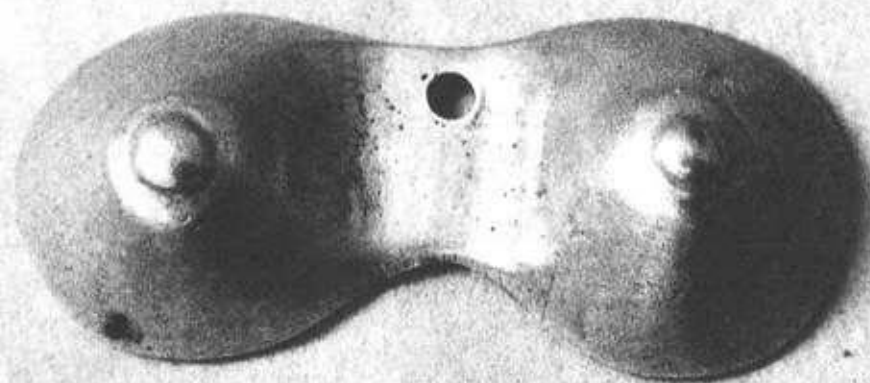
Male figure in the act of pointing to his genitals.



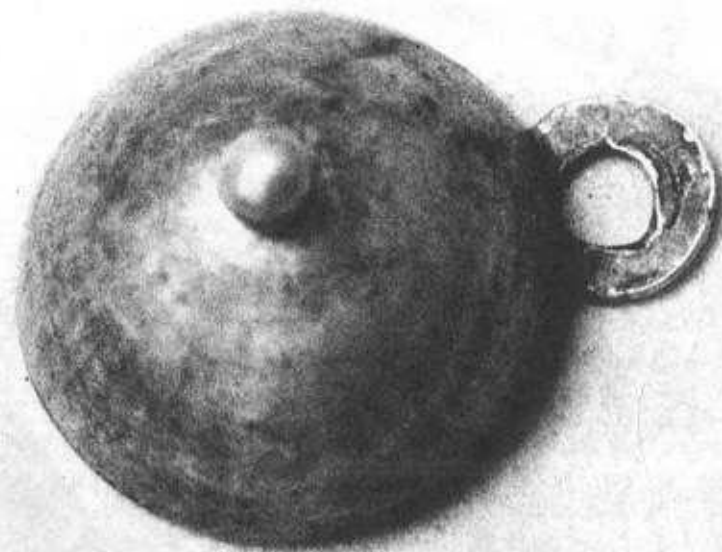
Member, detail of plate 46.



Female figure uncovering her bust.



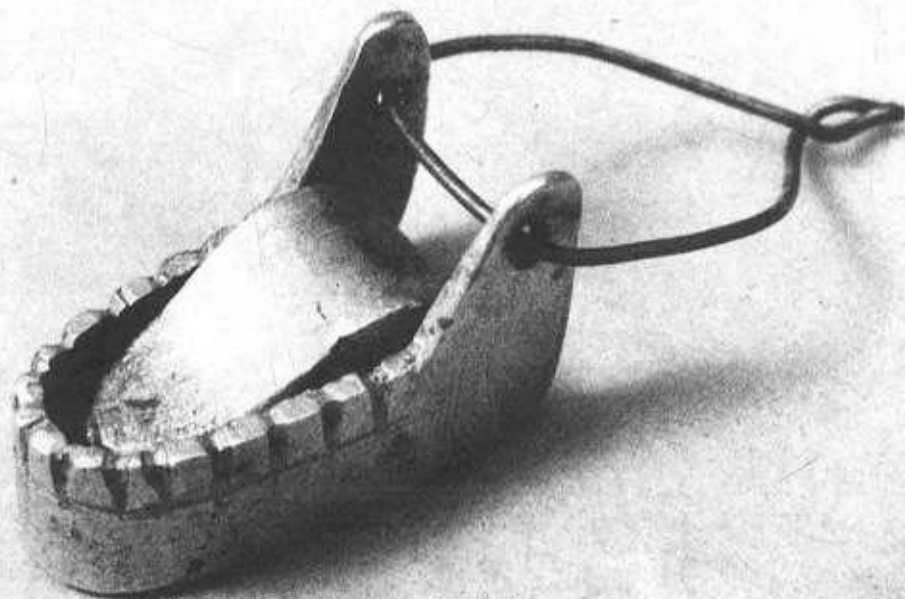
Breasts.



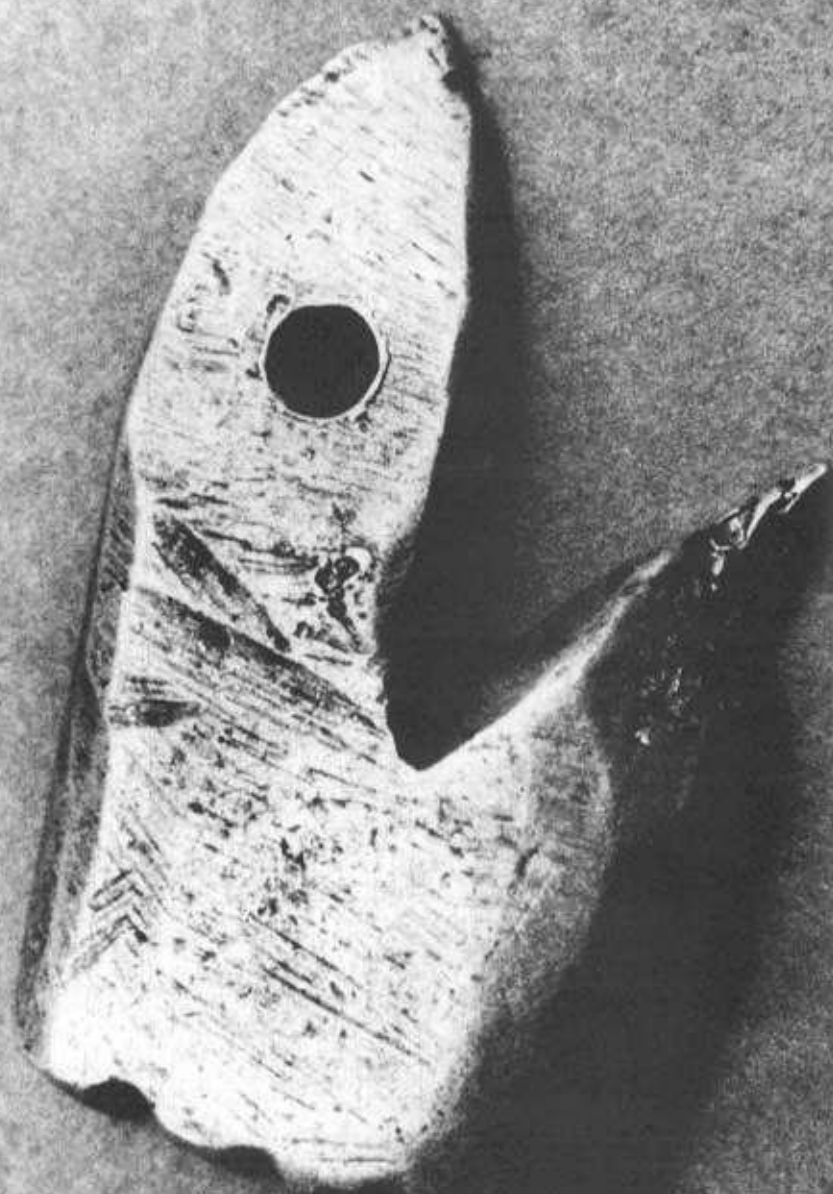
Breast.



Molar.



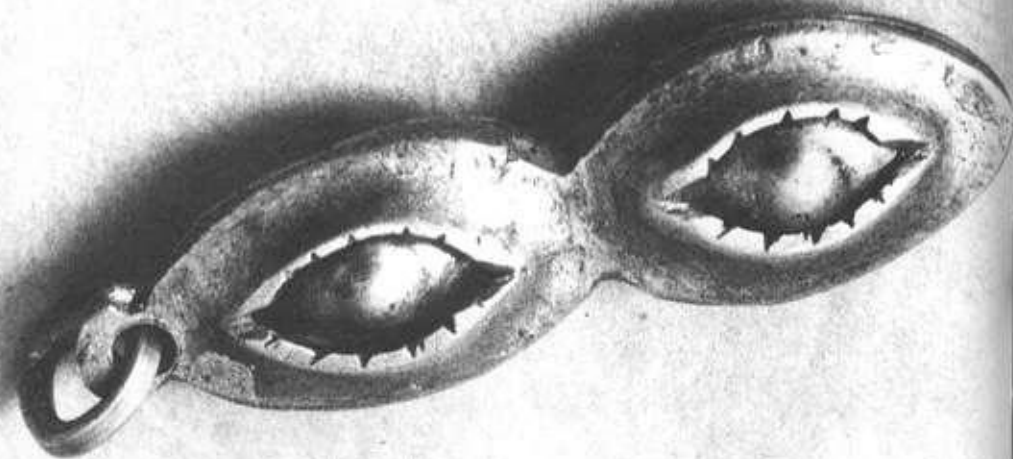
Lower jaw with tongue.



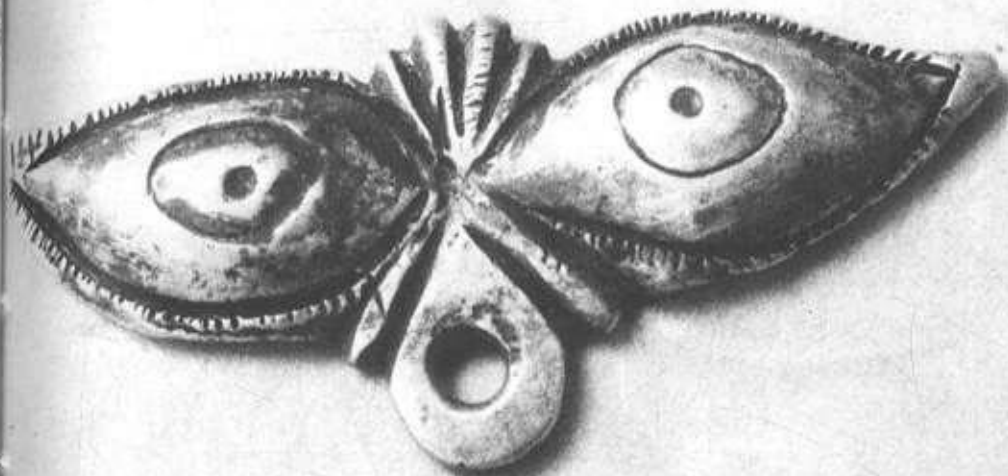
Molar. Note the difference from plate 54; each one is identified with a specific type of tooth.



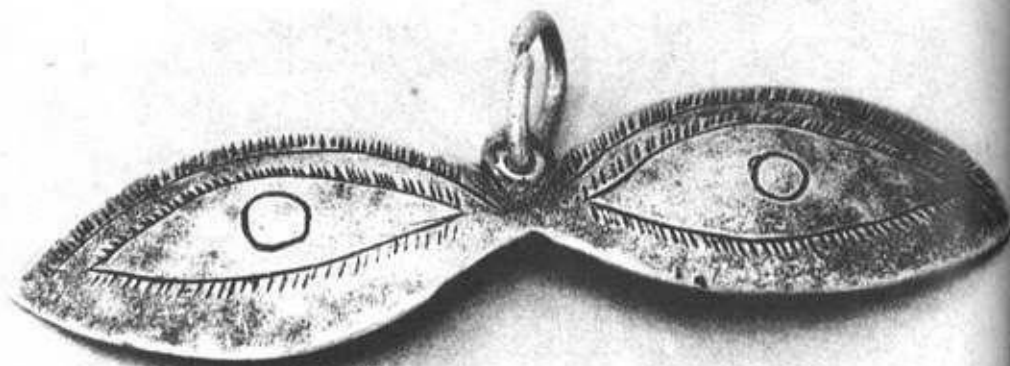
Lower set of teeth.



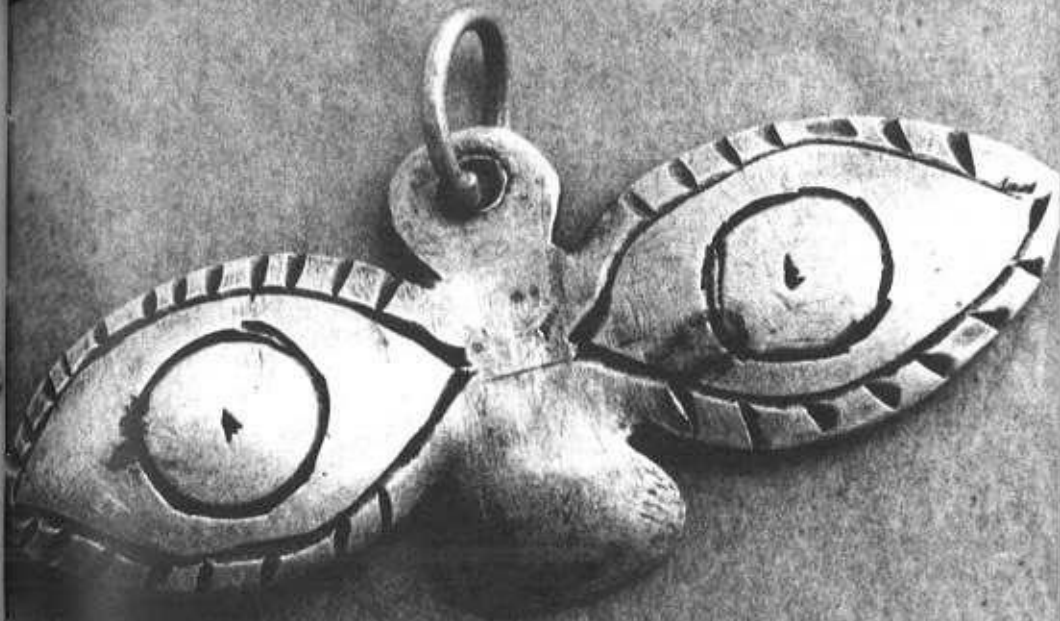
The two eyes of the face of each donor. There are also votive offerings of a single eye.



The two eyes of the face of each donor. There are also votive offerings of a single eye.



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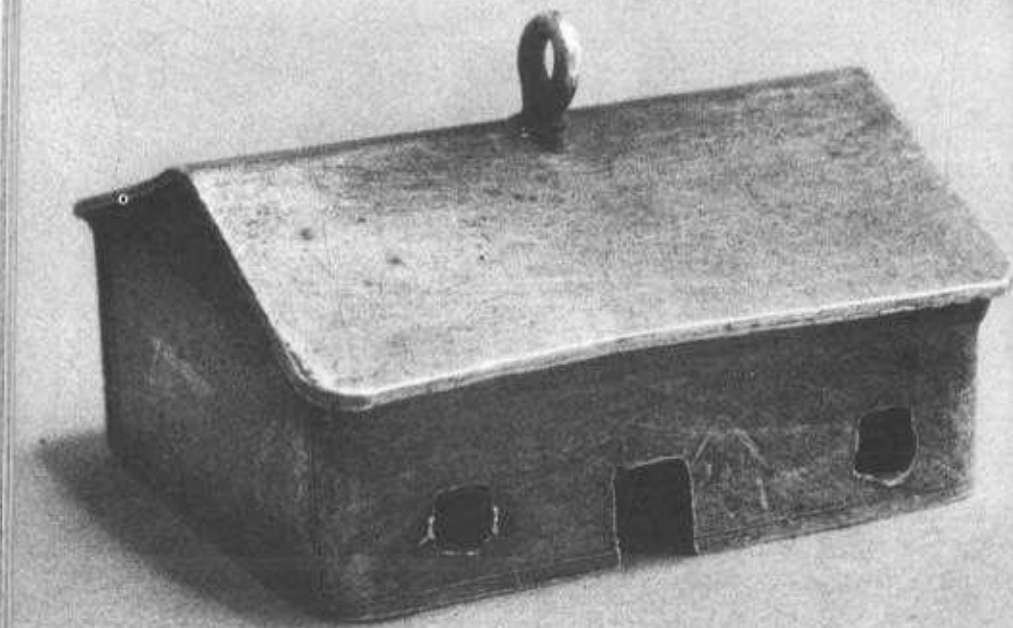
The two eyes of the face of each donor. There are also votive offerings of a single eye.



Woma's head.



Woman with twins or double babies, likely a thanksgiving for a successful childbirth.



House.



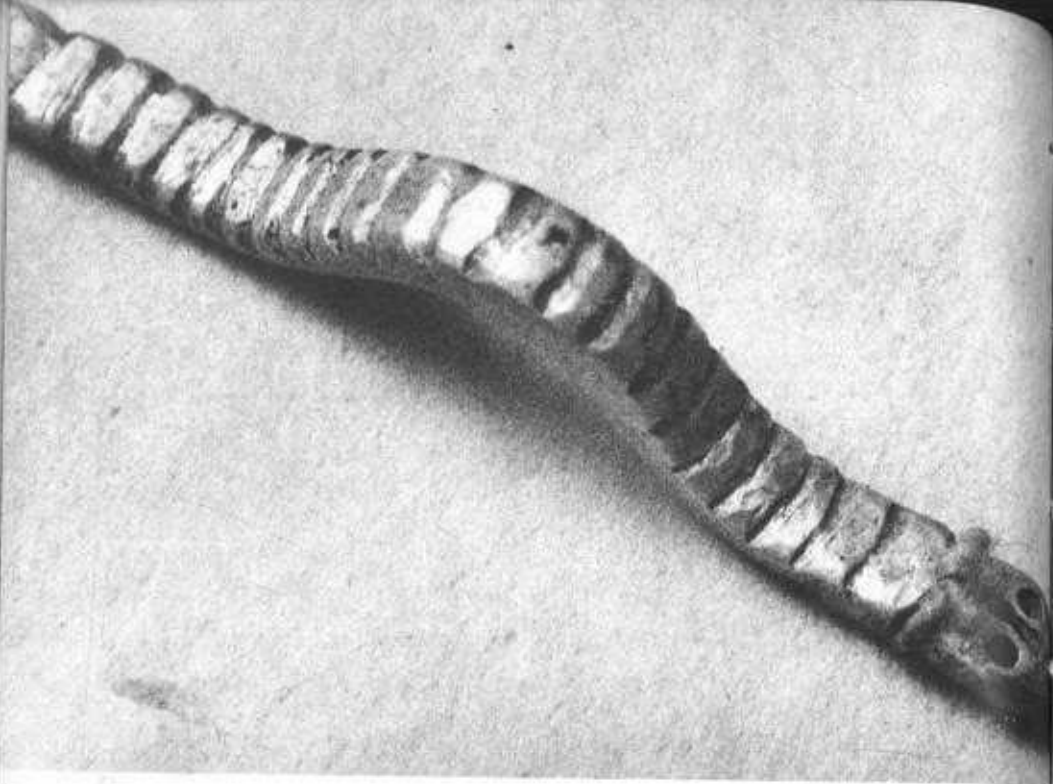
Yoke of oxen.



Mating of animals. Likely an offering of thanks for the increase of the sheep flock.



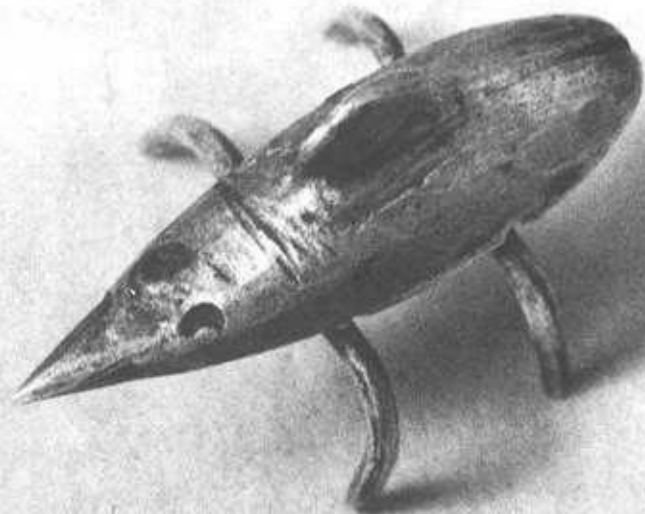
Grain of corn for a good harvest.



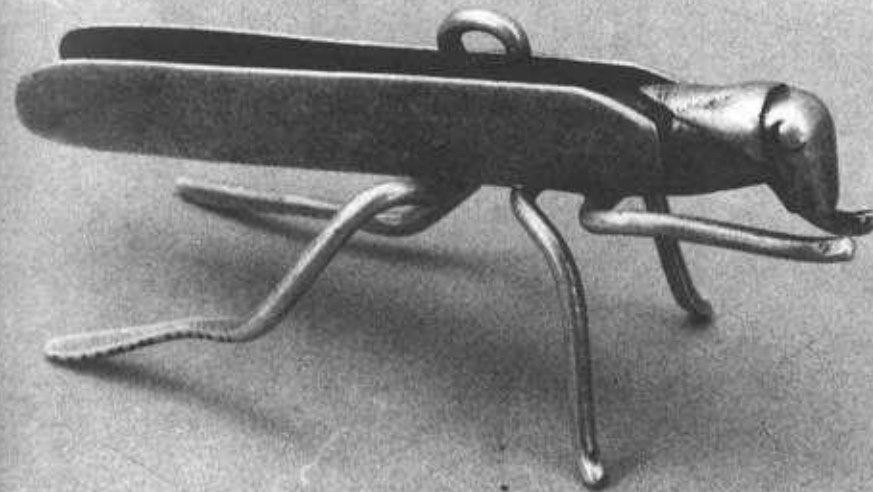
Worm.



Zompopo (leafcutter ant). Note that it only has six legs.

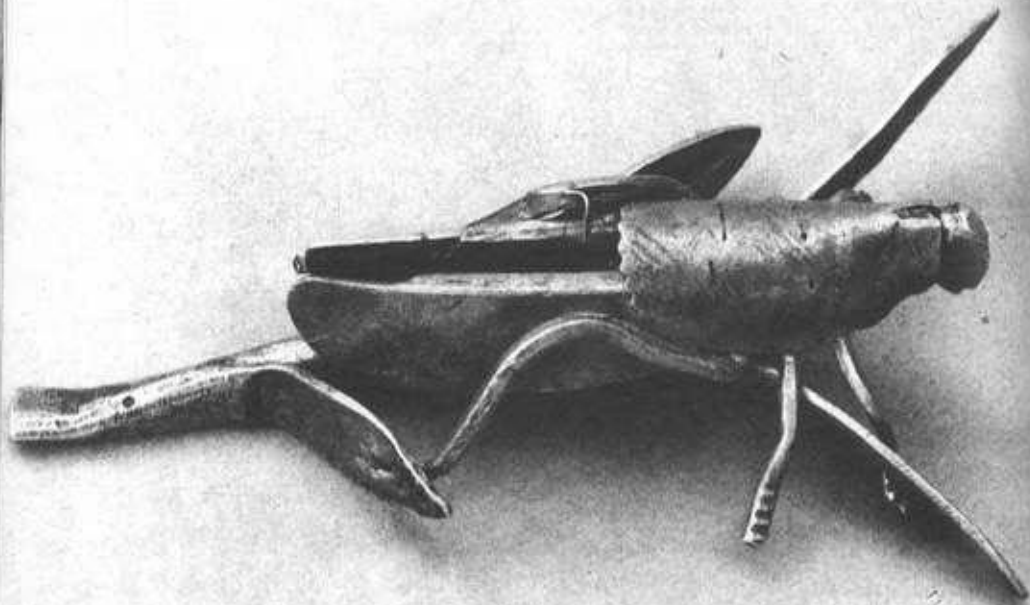


Piendo, a pest of the cornfield.

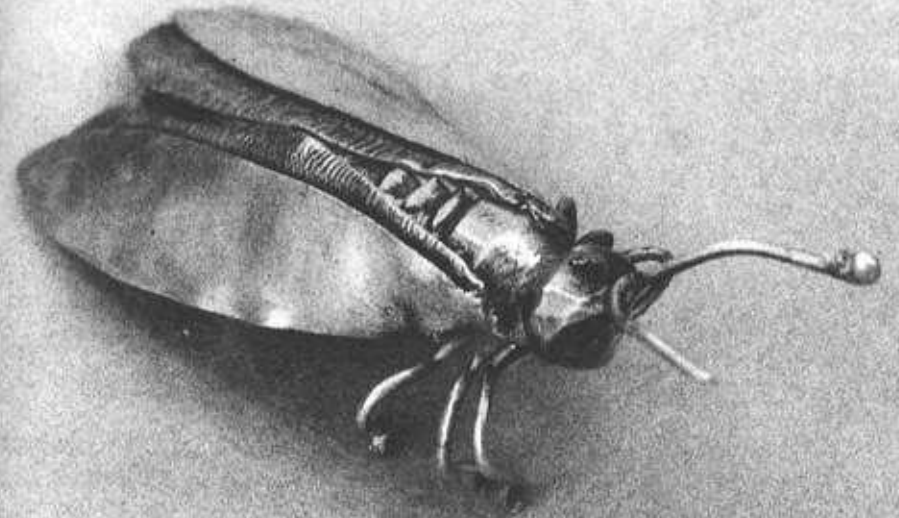


Locusts.

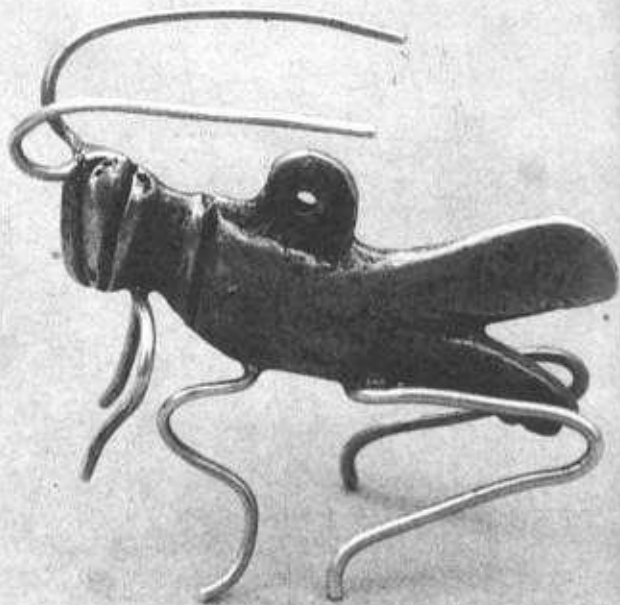
Piendo: an insect plague that affects the corn field.



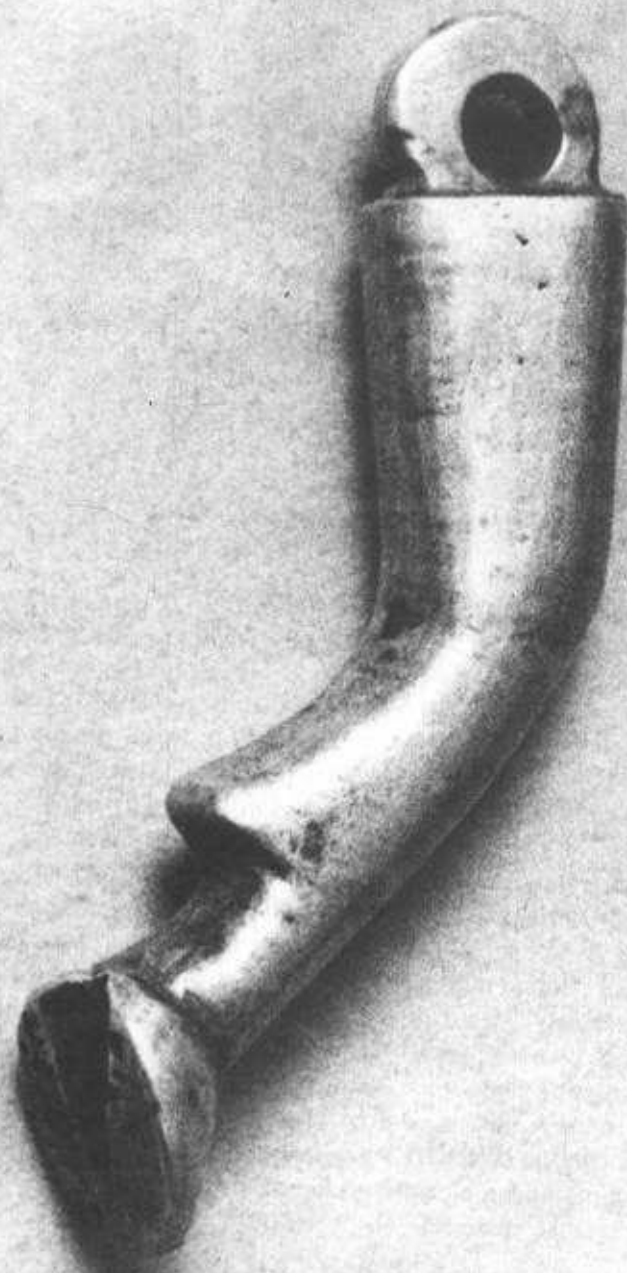
Locust on a cornfield branch.



Blowfly.



Grasshoppers.



Horse's leg.



Horse's hoof.