

## EARLY ACCOUNTS OF THE SOUTH AND CENTRAL AMERICAN BLOWGUN

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The blowgun, a native hunting weapon employing the idea of compressed air to propel a small projectile, is found both in the New World and in several areas of Southeast Asia. The blowgun trait complex, with its wide but discontinuous distribution, has been the object of considerable controversy by anthropologists. This controversy, in large part, deals with the New World occurrence of the weapon, particularly with the question of possible blowgun diffusion from the eastern to the western hemisphere. In this paper, although there will be no discussion of this problem, an attempt will be made to "place" the American occurrences of the blowgun in time and space. Such background work is very helpful in examining the larger aspects of the problem of blowgun diffusion between large areas.<sup>1</sup>

The material presented here documents the pre-Conquest and early Conquest use of the implement in South and Central America, drawing both from archaeological and historical sources. The blowgun also appeared in the southeastern United States, but its introduction there seems clearly post-European and will not be considered in this report.

### SOUTH AMERICA

Pre-Conquest occurrence of the blowgun in South America is known only from the Peruvian coast, where conditions of preservation are particularly favorable. From North Peru a few depictions of the blowgun appear on ceramic vessels. A pottery vessel in the Wassermann-San Blas collection shows a man shooting at three birds with a blowgun. Details are not clear, but the gun apparently did not have a mouthpiece. If the relative proportions of the figures are correct, the gun trunk is at least 5 feet long.<sup>2</sup>

Larco, in *Los Mochicas*, shows a figure of a man shooting a blowgun, modeled in high relief on a vessel side. Again there are few details, but the length of the blowgun seems to be 5-7 feet.<sup>3</sup> Both the Larco and the Wassermann-San Blas vessels are from the Mochica culture and date, possibly, before 500 A. D. According to Larco, no examples of blowguns have been found from any other pre-Spanish North Coast culture.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a more general discussion of the blowgun problem cf. Carroll L. Riley, "The Blowgun in the New World" (*Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 8, pp. 297-319) and Jens Yde, The Regional Distribution of South American Blowgun Types (*Journal de la Société des Américanistes de Paris*, vol. 37, 1940, pp. 275-317).

<sup>2</sup> B. Wassermann-San Blas, *Cerámicas del antigua Peru* (Buenos Aires, 1938), p. 274.

<sup>3</sup> Rafael Larco Hoyle, *Los Mochicas* (Buenos Aires, 1945), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Rafael Larco Hoyle, personal correspondence.

Peabody Museum of Harvard is in possession of an actual blowgun with a bundle of darts from the Peruvian coast. These are almost certainly pre-Spanish but of uncertain date. The gun and 31 darts were found wrapped in "a piece of natural colored cotton textile". The bamboo-like tube ranges from .48 inches to .56 inches in external diameter. There is no mouthpiece. The darts average 6.5 inches in length and are made of split strips of the same material as the tube. They are feathered with parrot down and bound with cotton thread. The points are sharpened, and one point has a split bird's quill lashed on, giving a total length of 9.2 inches. The darts are not poisoned. An interesting point about this blowgun is its extreme shortness. The efficiency of such an instrument is uncertain: possibly it was a toy.<sup>5</sup>

Harcourt and Nique have reported what is probably a prehistoric blowgun from the collection of Prado y Ugarteche of Lima. This implement, "a long tube polished and incised", came from a South Coast grave.<sup>6</sup>

An illustration of a textile, pre-Spanish but otherwise undated, from Pachacamac in central Peru, has been published by Max Schmidt. The fragment of cloth pictures a man, standing by a tree, shooting almost straight up (presumably at a bird). Details of this blowgun are, again, uncertain, but if proportions of gun length to body length are correct, the implement is 7-9 or more feet long. The man holds the gun with his left hand while his right clutches what may be a bundle of darts. The one-handed shooting stance is extremely unlikely: a long blowgun cannot be held steady in such a position.<sup>7</sup>

The blowgun seems to have disappeared from the Peruvian coast by the time of the conquest. A number of early sources, however, mention the gun from several areas of northern South America. As early as 1540-1541, a member of the Benalcázar party reported the blowgun from the Atrato River region of western Colombia. Speaking of the inhabitants of Sima, Tatape, and Choco, the report says: "They were a warlike people; they fight from the rooftops till no one remains to fight. They have for arms, blowguns . . . with which they shoot darts with points of palm."<sup>8</sup>

A few years later in the nearby province of Arma (in the middle Cauca valley), Cieza de León remarks on the use of the blowgun. According to Cieza, "The arms used by these Indians are darts, lances, slings and blowguns."<sup>9</sup>

In a publication of 1599, Vargas Machuca had an interesting account of the

<sup>5</sup> Peabody Museum, Harvard University, personal correspondence.

<sup>6</sup> Raoul d'Harcourt and Jeanne Nique, "La sarbacane; l'élevage des oiseaux; la tête réduite chez les peuples Mochica" (*Journal de la Société des Américanistes de Paris*, vol. 31, pp. 103-108, 1934), p. 103.

<sup>7</sup> Max Schmidt, "Über Altperuanische Gewebe mit szenenhaften Darstellungen" (*Büßler Archiv*, vol. 1, pp. 1-61, Berlin, 1911) p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Jorge Robledo, "Descripción de los pueblos de la provincia de Ancernia" (*Colección de documentos inéditos del real archivo de Indias*, 42 vols.: vol. 3, pp. 389-413, Madrid, 1864-1884) p. 412.

<sup>9</sup> Pedro de Cieza de León, *Travels* (Clements Markham tr. and ed., Hakluyt Society, vol. 33, London, 1864) p. 71. The Urteaga edition of Cieza gives the word "tiradera" (spearthrower) rather than "cerbatana".

blowgun as a fighting implement. Writing of the central Magdalena region, Vargas says:

In some areas as in Carcare, the Indians fight through loopholes in log stockades or fortifications with blowguns, similar to those that are used to shoot pellets [the Mexico-Maya type], with which they shoot a dart made of palm and slender, of a span length. The point is made like an awl and this point is weakened [*esta va enervada*]. Now that our people are fighting with the Indians they have to aim at the face because there would be no danger to the body on account of armour. When the dart head enters the flesh the dart shakes and breaks off and the poison [*yerba*] on the part that remains inside begins working. Boys of 10 or 12 years also take part in this.<sup>10</sup>

Elsewhere Vargas makes an unlocalized reference to the blowgun with poisoned darts and its use in warfare.

The chronicler Simón, writing in the early 17th century, notes the blowgun in several places on the northern coast of South America. Speaking of the Indians of Santa Marta, he says: "They have a curious use of the blowgun; with it they shoot all manner of birds using slender arrows, but only for the plumage; they never eat meat, not even deer, because over and above corn and [cultivated] roots, their diet is of fish and fruit." For the natives of the "Valle de la Caldera", near the juncture of the Magdalena and Cauca Rivers, after speaking of the raising of birds for their plumage, he remarks: "Others use the blowgun and slender arrows for the same thing [to obtain plumage]."

Farther west, Simón lists the blowgun for the southern Maracaibo area:

"On the edges of these plains are encountered the Indians named Bobures, a people very gentle, affable, and unwarlike; they fight only with blowguns in which they use darts tipped with a poison. If anybody is wounded with this, even a little, he falls to the ground, senseless, for two or three hours. This allows the Indian a chance to flee and afterwards the person arises, fully conscious, without any other danger."<sup>11</sup>

Another reference to this charitable tribe comes, a century later, from Oviedo y Baños. Oviedo adds little to Simón's account but says that anybody hit by a Bobure dart "becomes in an instant like a dead person."<sup>12</sup> Neither Simón nor Oviedo identifies the poison used.

Early accounts of the blowgun are also found in the central Andean and Montaña region. In the year 1567, the Licentiate Gasco sent Juan Maldonado from Peru to explore the Bení River basin. The reports from the expedition tell of finding the blowgun used by an Indian group in what was perhaps the Madre de

<sup>10</sup> Bernardo de Vargas Machuca, *Milicia y descripción de las Indias* (2 vols., Madrid, 1892) vol. 2, p. 94; vol. 1, p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Pedro Simón, *Noticias históricas de las conquistas de tierra firme en las Indias Occidentales* (5 vols., Bogota, 1892) vol. 5, pp. 218, 191; vol. 1, p. 229.

<sup>12</sup> José de Oviedo y Baños, *Historia de Venezuela* (New York, 1941), p. 204.

Dios River valley: "The Corocoro fight with blowguns and small poisoned darts, a thing extremely harmful."<sup>13</sup>

Accounts of the Peruvian and Ecuadorian Montaña come somewhat later. In the early 17th century the blowgun was reported for the Maynas (Maina) and nearby groups. Saabedra, in 1619, says: "... they shoot [the various types of birds] with blowguns and poisoned arrows. There are different types of monkeys, grey, black, and white; squirrels; and other furred animals that the Indians eat, shooting them with the blowgun."

In this period, Vaca de Vega reported a district of "Zebraten-ears" (blowgun users) somewhere in the Marañón River basin.<sup>14</sup> The Jesuit, Figueroa, also reported from this general area. In a relation, written in 1661, he says: "They [the Maynas] also use the blowgun with poisoned darts with which they shoot."<sup>15</sup>

The Brazilian, Heriarte, in a report of 1639, mentions the blowgun, used with poisoned darts in warfare, from the province of Agoas of the upper Amazon River. Exact details are lacking.<sup>16</sup> One other account which may possibly refer to the blowgun is in a well known report of the Tupinamba of the Brazilian coast. This is the story of Hans Stade, captured by that group in the mid-16th century. In telling of his capture, Stade relates: "And they turned back with the canoes again to those on shore, and these shot with blowpipes [*roren*] and arrows upon us, and those in the boats back again to them; and they untied my hands once more, but the ropes around my neck still remained firmly bound."<sup>17</sup>

Nordenskiöld questions this account and suggests that *roren* should read "spear-thrower" rather than "blowgun". He points out that the Tupinamba apparently did not use projectile poison, thereby making the blowgun useless as a weapon of war. Nordenskiöld also notes that no other writer on the eastern Tupian tribes mentions the use of the blowgun for that area.<sup>18</sup>

A somewhat later account of the blowgun is that of the Jesuit, Dobrizhoffer, writing in the mid-18th century. In his work on the Abipones he says:

"That wooden tube from which little balls or nails, furnished with silken or linen thread to aid their flight, are blown by the mouth, is unknown to the Abipones, but I am informed that it is used by certain Peruvian Indians dwelling amongst the Moxos and Baures. These people, not being provided with iron nails, put thorns imbued with a poisonous juice into a wooden tube,

<sup>13</sup> Juan Alvarez Maldonado, *Relación de la jornada y descubrimiento del río Manú* (Seville, 1899), p. 50.

<sup>14</sup> Cristobal Saabedra (and others), "Relación de los Maynas" (*Relaciones Geograficas de Indias*, 4 vols.: vol. 4, pp. 139-162, Madrid, 1897) pp. 148, 160.

<sup>15</sup> Francisco de Figueroa, *Relación de las misiones de la compaña de Jesús en el país de los Maynas* (Madrid, 1904) p. 255.

<sup>16</sup> Mauricio Heriarte, *Descripcam do estado do Maranhã Para, Coruça y rio das Amazonas* (Vienna, 1874) p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> Hans Stade, *The Captivity of Hans Stade of Hesse* (Albert Tootal, tr, Hakluyt Society, vol. 51, London, 1874) p. 55.

<sup>18</sup> Erland Nordenskiöld, *The Ethnography of South America as seen from Mojos in Bolivia* (Comparative Ethnographic Studies, no. 3, Göteborg, 1924) p. 60. *Roren*, in this case, probably referred to a trade firearm.

and blowing hard into it, aim them against wild beasts, and their enemies, by which means they slay with impunity."<sup>19</sup>

This statement is interesting mainly as one of the earliest suggestions of post-Columbian spread of the blowgun. The "Peruvian Indians" may have been either Quechua or Indians farther east, the latter having been displaced by the movement of Quechuan-speaking peoples in the 16th and 17th centuries. It is possible that they were the agents for introduction of the blowgun into the Madeira River headwaters.

#### MAYA-MEXICO

The blowgun in the Maya-Mexico region differed from that in South America in that it used a pellet of clay rather than a dart or quarrel as projectile. Reports for the blowgun cluster in two areas, the Maya region of Yucatan and Guatemala and the Aztec-Tarascan domain of central and southwest Mexico.

The Maya Indians made extensive use of the blowgun as a hunting device. Perhaps its earliest known appearance is the representation of a blowgun on a polychrome plate from Quintana Roo. There are also references to the implement in mythological accounts of the Quiché Maya of the Guatemala highlands. The traditional history and origin myths of the Quiché first became known from the work of the Dominican Friar Ximénez, who, in the early 18th century, transcribed and translated an earlier Quiché-Spanish document, written in the mid-16th century and based on pre-Spanish oral tradition. The historical and pseudo-historical sections of Ximénez' transcription have been recently translated as the *Popol Vuh*, which deals with the creation of the earth and its plants and animals and the origin of mankind. In the early times a kind of evil trickster, Vucub-Caquix, attempted to rule the world. Two youths (gods in disguise) decide to destroy him as an example and warning to mankind, as yet uncreated. The two take their blowguns on shoulder and set off to kill Vucub-Caquix and his family. Vucub had a large cherry [*nantze*] tree which he was in the habit of climbing each day to gather fruit. The two boys lie in ambush till the trickster climbs for his meal: "Instantly he was injured by a discharge from Hun-Hunahpu's blowgun which struck him squarely in the jaw, and screaming, he fell straight to earth from the treetops."

Vucub-Caquix flees to his house, where he is visited by the Creators in the guise of an aged couple. Asked what had harmed him, Vucub tells them of the pain in his teeth: "All of this is because two demons shot me with a pellet [from their blowguns] and for that reason I cannot eat. Have pity on me, then, tighten my teeth with your hands." The Creators pull Vucub's teeth and replace them with corn grains, thus destroying his lordly features and his claim to godship.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Dobrizhoffer, *An Account of the Abipones* (3 vols., London, 1882) vol. 2, pp. 360-361.

The divine youths continue the struggle against the sons of Vucub-Caquix. They go on a trip with the second son, Cabracan, who boasts that he will demolish a mountain to show his strength. They promise to lead him to a high mountain:

"We must take you between us. One will go at your left and the other at your right, because we have our blowguns, and if there should be birds we can shoot them." And so they set out happily, trying out their blowguns. But when they shot with them, they did not use the clay pellets in the tube of the blowgun; instead they felled the birds only with a puff of air when they shot them, which surprised Cabracan very much.

The youths then kill Cabracan by use of magic.

The *Popol Vuh* has other references to the blowgun: it is used to shoot birds, to kill beasts of prey, as part of the equipment of hunters, and as a bridge to cross a stream. The name for the blowgun in the Quiche dialect is *ub*.<sup>20</sup>

Though the blowgun played an important part in the *Popol Vuh*, the "Annals" of the neighboring Cakchiquels do not mention it. This group used the blowgun, however; the Cakchiquel name for the instrument is *puub*.<sup>21</sup>

In the Yucatan area the blowgun is mentioned in the *Chilam Balam* of the town of Chumayel. This work, written soon after the conquest, contains an interesting reference to the blowgun as a weapon. Speaking of conditions under the Spaniards, it says:

Then with the true God, the true [Christian] Dios, came the beginning of our misery. It was the beginning of tribute, the beginning of church dues, the beginning of strife with purse snatching, the beginning of strife with blowguns, the beginning of strife by trampling on people, the beginning of robbery with violence, the beginning of forced debts, the beginning of debts enforced by false testimony, the beginning of individual strife, a beginning of vexation, a beginning of robbery with violence.

Roys says that these statements are stereotyped phrases, usually employed to describe a riot or the plundering of a town. In this *Chilam Balam* the Maya word for blowgun is *tzon*.<sup>22</sup>

A number of early Spanish sources mention the blowgun for the Maya area. Landa, writing in 1566, says of the Yucatan Maya:

They had a certain soft brass which, when found with a light mixture of gold yielded them hatchets and the little rattles they used in their dances, as well as a certain sort of chisel which they used in making the idols and boring out the blowpipes, as in this figure in the margin [figure

<sup>20</sup> Delia Goetz and Sylvanus G. Morley, *Popol Vuh* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1950) pp. 96, 98, 105, 128, 138, 140; also Fr. Francisco Ximénez, *Historia de San Vicente de Chiapa y Guatemala* (Biblioteca Goathemala, vol. 1, Guatemala, 1929) pp. 11-16.

<sup>21</sup> Fr. Tomás Coto, *Vocabulario de la lengua Cakchiquel* (ms., Library of American Philosophical Society, mid-17th century) f. 35.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph L. Roys, *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (Carnegie Institute of Washington, pub. 438, 1933) pp. 20, 79.

missing]: they use the blowpipe a great deal and shoot well with it. This brass . . . is part of their traffic in Tabasco for their idols."<sup>23</sup>

In the *relaciones* of Yucatan, 1579-1580, there is mention of the blowgun from the town of Tequite which gives information on hunting methods: "There are many grouse in the mountains that differ little from those in Spain; birds very timorous and very good to eat. The Indian leaves with two dogs and by barking the dog trees the birds. The Indian, with a blowgun knocks down a great many."<sup>24</sup>

Another reference to the blowgun in Yucatan comes from the Motul dictionary attributed to Friar Ciudad Real and completed in the first and second decades of the 17th century. The word list includes entries for blowgun, *tzon* or *tzon kak*.<sup>25</sup>

The blowgun appeared in Verapaz (present day northcentral Guatemala). Herrera, as of the beginning of the 17th century, records the instrument for this area: "They made very curious Feather-work in several Forms and Figures; bore Trunks to shoot Pellets, weave Mats, Baskets, and Nets, and make Pots and other Utensils of Earthen-Ware."<sup>26</sup>

The Friar Moran entered the Choltí area of upper Verapaz in 1625 as part of an unsuccessful attempt to subdue the province. Moran succeeded in composing a dictionary of Choltí, however, and in this work the name for the blowgun is given as *tzon*.<sup>27</sup>

In the Mexican area, the blowgun seems to have been used at Teotihuacan in the first centuries A.D. The Stockholm Ethnographic Museum has a collection of 42 round clay pellets from that site, very similar to modern blowgun pellets. Linné has published an illustration of a sherd from classic Teotihuacan which depicts a bird hunter holding what is almost certainly a blowgun in one hand. In the other hand is cupped a round object, presumably a pellet.<sup>28</sup>

Other pre-Spanish references to blowguns come from the codices, but its representation was rare. The Bologna codex shows what is probably a man shooting with a blowgun.<sup>29</sup> The post-Conquest Kingsborough codex, in a series of tribute rolls, pictures an Indian holding a segmented stick which is possibly a blowgun.<sup>30</sup> More important is the depiction in the pre-Columbian codex (Bodley No. 2858) of a man shooting at a bird with a blowgun. He holds the tube with both hands while over the left elbow is hooked a basket or, more likely, a net for the pellets.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Diego de Landa, *Yucatan Before and After the Conquest* (William Gates, tr., the Maya Society, pub. 20, Baltimore, 1937) p. 94.

<sup>24</sup> Hernando de Bracamonte, *Relación de Tiquite* (Colección de documentos de Ultramar, 25 vols.: vol. 11, Madrid, 1885-1928) p. 110.

<sup>25</sup> Antonio de Ciudad Real, *Diccionario de Motul*; and Fr. Juan Coronel, *Arte de lengua Maya* (Merida, 1929), p. 287.

<sup>26</sup> Antonio de Herrera, *General History of America* (John Stevens, tr., 5 vols., London, 1726) vol. 4, p. 204.

<sup>27</sup> Pedro Moran, *Diccionario en lengua Choltí* (The Maya Society, pub. 9, Baltimore, 1935) p. 21.

<sup>28</sup> S. Linné, "Blowguns in Ancient Mexico" (*Ethnos*, vol. 4, pp. 56-61, Stockholm, 1939) pp. 56-57.

<sup>29</sup> Eduard Seler, *Codex Borgia* (2 vols., Berlin, 1904) vol. 1, p. 42.

<sup>30</sup> Francisco de Paso y Troncoso, *Codice Kingsborough* (Madrid, 1912) p. 52.

<sup>31</sup> Edward King (Lord Kingsborough), *Antiquities of Mexico* (9 vols.: vol. 1, London, 1831-1848) p. 38.

This codex, according to Clark, is pre-16th century and, along with others (the Nuttall or Zouche, Colombina, Becker, Selden, and Vienna), deals in part with the adventures of a culture hero, Eight Deer. Clark places the birth of this warrior at 1439 or possibly 1387. He considers all the codices dealing with Eight Deer to be Zapotecan in origin.<sup>32</sup> If this is true, it attests the use of the blowgun in the Oaxaca area in pre-Spanish times.

The historical legends of the Aztecs also mention the blowgun. According to tradition it was first introduced by the Chichimecs, who were its inventors. The chronicler Ixtlilxochitl says of the early history of these tribes: "Their habitations were caves and they also had houses, but of a kind covered with grass. Their arms were the bow and arrow; the people also used the blowgun to go hunting, and they invented it."<sup>33</sup> The Jesuit, Alegre, writing a century and a half later, also mentions the Chichimecs: "The bow and arrow were their war arms; however for the hunt the chiefs and people also used blowguns, of which it is said they were the inventors in America."<sup>34</sup>

Veytia, in his *Historia Antigua*, relates that the Chichimecs of the time of the Emperor Achauhtzin had a super-blowgun: "And all the men capable of bearing arms went armed, some with bow and arrows, others with blowguns with which, by blowing, they shot pellets of clay with such force as to kill a man or wild beast. At that time they were all the arms used by the Chichimecs."<sup>35</sup>

The early Aztecs took the blowgun from the Chichimecs, and it was of considerable importance for hunting during the Axtec period. Zurita, writing in the 1550's, states that hunting during former (pre-Conquest) times, particularly bird hunting, was important in the Valley of Mexico. He then notes that people "were skilled in the use of the blowgun."<sup>36</sup>

Clavijero describes the implement as used by the Aztecs of that time: "They employed bow and arrows, darts, nets lassos, and blowguns. The blowguns that the kings and nobles used were curiously carved and painted and, beyond that, trimmed with gold and silver."<sup>37</sup>

Earliest Spanish accounts of the use of the blowgun came with the Cortes expedition. In the year 1519, Cortes reached the City of Mexico and imprisoned the Emperor Montezuma in the Emperor's own palace. At the same time he kept up a pretense of friendship with the Aztec ruler. During this period Montezuma presented Cortes with a number of gifts, including 12 blowguns. In his second letter to Charles V, the Conquistador describes these:

<sup>32</sup> J. Cooper Clark, *The Story of "Eight Deer" in the Codex Colombino* (London, 1913) p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> Don Fernando de Ixtlilxochitl, *Relaciones históricas de los Tultecos y de los Chichimecas*. (In Kingsborough, *Antiquities of Mexico*, 9 vols.: vol. 9, London, 1831-1848) p. 335.

<sup>34</sup> Francisco Alegre, *Historia de la compañía de Jesús en Nueva España* (3 vols., Mexico, 1841) vol. 1, p. 279.

<sup>35</sup> D. Mariano Veytia, *Historia antigua de Méjico* (3 vols., Mexico, 1836) vol. 2, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Alonso de Zurita, *Historia de la Nueva España* (Madrid, 1909) p. 217.

<sup>37</sup> D. Francisco J. Clavijero, *Historia antigua de México y de su conquista* (2 vols., Mexico, 1844) vol. 1, p. 225.



He also gave me a dozen blowguns with which he shoots, nor do I know how to tell of their perfection to your Highness: for they are decorated with very excellent paintings and perfect color, in which there were many kinds and figures of birds, animals, trees, flowers, and various other things, and the mouthpieces and points were trimmed in gold and also the middle all beautifully worked. He gave me a gold carrying net for the pellets and he gave me golden pellet moulds and many other things of almost infinite number."<sup>38</sup>

Of the other eyewitness accounts of the conquest (Diáz, Vásquez, Andres Tapia, and the Anonymous Conqueror), only Bernal Diáz del Castillo mentions these presents. Diáz, writing many years after the event, recalls the blowguns but seems to have been confused as to their number. He quotes the Aztec Emperor as saying: "I also wish to send him [Cortes] three blowguns with their bags and pellet moulds for they have such good jewelwork on them that he will be pleased to see them."<sup>39</sup> They were presented to Cortes and, according to Bernal Diáz, "the three blowguns with their pellet moulds, and their coverings of jewels and pearls, and pictures in feathers of little birds covered with pearl shell, and other birds, all were of great value."

This gift of blowguns made an impression on a number of early writers. The Oidor Zurita describes them in, essentially, Cortes' own words.<sup>40</sup> Salazar calls them "blowguns of brass [*fuslera*] and silver", and says that "the nets for moulds and pellets were of gold and some of silver."<sup>41</sup> Oviedo y Valdés also refers to gold-decorated blowguns.<sup>42</sup> The historian Gómara adds a few more details when he says: "The blowguns . . . are of cane [*fusta*] and silver . . . Montezuma was in the habit of shooting with them . . . some were decorated with paintings of birds, animals, flowers, and trees, very well done. The others were engraved. The net[s] for the pellets were of gold and some of silver."<sup>43</sup> Solís, writing in the 17th century, mentions them simply as "pieces of metal in figures of animals, birds, and fish".<sup>44</sup> Herrera says the blowguns were "adorned with most curious silver work".<sup>45</sup>

Several writers mention the use of the blowgun in the Valley of Mexico during early Spanish times. Montezuma was supposed to have been an expert hunter. Torquemada remarks of the Aztec ruler: "Montezuma attended the hunt by the lake to shoot birds and rabbits with the blowgun [a weapon] at which he was skilled."<sup>46</sup> Gómara, speaking of the hunting methods of the Aztecs, says: "Others go fowling with nets, traps, snares, lures, and other means and Montezuma

<sup>38</sup> Hernan Cortés, *Cartas de Relación de la Conquista de Méjico* (2 vols., Madrid, 1942) vol. 1, p. 96.

<sup>39</sup> Bernal Diáz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* (A. P. Maudslay, ed. and tr., London, 1933) pp. 340-341.

<sup>40</sup> Alonso de Zurita, "Breve y sumeria relación" (*Nueva colección de documentos para la historia de Mexico*, 5 vols.: vol. 3, Mexico, 1886-1892) p. 124.

<sup>41</sup> Francisco Cervantes de Salazar, *Crónica de Nueva España* (Mexico, 1936) pp. 112-113.

<sup>42</sup> Gonzalo Oviedo y Valdés, *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (4 vols., Madrid, 1853) vol. 3, p. 299.

<sup>43</sup> Francisco López de Gómara, *Historia de la conquista de México* (2 vols., Mexico, 1943) vol. 1, p. 269.

<sup>44</sup> D. Antonio de Solís y Rivadeneyra, *Historia de la conquista de México* (Madrid, 1790) p. 282.

<sup>45</sup> Herrera, *General History*, vol. 2, p. 429.

<sup>46</sup> Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana* (3 vols., Mexico, 1943) vol. 1, p. 460.

was a good shot with the bow and with the blowgun, at which he was skilled at bird-shooting."<sup>47</sup> Veytia adds that "Montezuma delighted in music and in the hunt and he was as skilled in the use of the bow as he was in that of the blowgun."<sup>48</sup>

The Emperor was not the only blowgun user among the Aztecs. Of the people in general Torquemada tells us: "And consequently, birds are raised as much for the enjoyment of their song as for the shooting of them with blowguns, which they used a great deal and were very skilled shots."<sup>49</sup>

In the Latin translation of Cortes' second and third letters made in Nürnberg in 1524, the Emperor's cosmographer Alonzo de Santa Cruz included a map of the Valley of Mexico. In the area among the mountains south of Lake Chalco a man is shown shooting a blowgun. Details are uncertain but the gun is of considerable length — 6 feet or more.<sup>50</sup>

Gutiérrez, writing in the last part of the 16th century, says that the Mexicans enjoyed hunting with the blowgun.<sup>51</sup> Molina, in his dictionary of 1571, lists the Nahuatl word for blowgun as *ilacalhuaztli* and for pellet (*bodoque*) as *telolotli*.<sup>52</sup> The Mexican name, *ilacalhuaztli*, is also given by Suarez de Peralta for the "Zebra-tana" or blowgun.<sup>53</sup>

Sahagún, in a mid-16th century description of the province of Anahuac, mentions a special use for the blowgun: "This bird [the Xuihtototl] is hunted in the month of October when the plum trees are ripe; then it is killed with blowguns in the trees, and when it falls to the ground they pull up some grass to pick it up so that their hands will not touch its plumes, for they say that if this happens, the plumes will lose color."<sup>54</sup>

The implement was still in use in the Valley of Mexico in the late 17th century. The traveler Careri remarks during a trip to Mexico City in 1698: "Saturday, 10th, I saw some Indians that killed the least birds upon the highest trees with pellets shot out of trunks."<sup>55</sup>

Outside the valley area there are fewer mentions of the blowgun. Accompanying Spanish correspondence on the Cavendish raid of the Autumn of 1587 is a map showing the raided sections of the west Mexican coast. In the general Colima-

<sup>47</sup> Gómara, *Historia de la conquista*, vol. 1, p. 252.

<sup>48</sup> Veytia, *Historia antigua*, vol. 3, p. 409.

<sup>49</sup> Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana*, vol. 1, p. 292.

<sup>50</sup> S. Linné, "Hunting and Fishing in the Valley of Mexico in the Middle of the 16th Century" (*Ethnos*, vol. 2, pp. 56-64, Stockholm, 1937)

<sup>51</sup> Pedro Gutiérrez de Santa Clara, *Historia de las guerras civiles del Perú* (6 vols., Madrid, 1925) vol. 5, p. 62.

<sup>52</sup> Alonso de Molina, *Vocabulario de la lengua Mexicana* (Leipzig, 1880) pp. 20, 118.

<sup>53</sup> D. Justo Zaragoza, ed., *Relación de Suarez de Peralta* (Madrid, 1878) p. 386.

<sup>54</sup> Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (5 vols., Mexico, 1938) vol. 3, p. 165. See also Sahagún in the Florentine Codex (Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, trans.) *Book II, The Ceremonies*. (School of American Research, Monographs, No. 14, Pt. III, Santa Fe, 1951). A chant on page 212 runs, "... Shoot not at thy brother, the dead; use not the blow gun on thy brother."

<sup>55</sup> Gemelli F. Careri, *A Voyage Around the World*. (In Churchill's Voyages, 6 vols.: vol. 4, pp. 5-568, London, 1745) p. 512.

Michoacan area the cartographer depicts a man shooting at a bird with a blowgun. The pellet is shown midway between the bird and the gun. Curiously, the end of the tube is drawn flared in blunderbuss fashion. This may, however, be an accident of drawing.<sup>56</sup>

The Gilberti dictionary of 1559 for the Tarascan area does not list "blowgun" but gives the word *miqua cupuntsi* for "bodoque", a word that usually means "blowgun pellet".<sup>57</sup>

No references were found for the blowgun in northern Mexico and in Lower California.<sup>58</sup>

#### THE ANTILLES

In spite of occasional claims that have been made, the blowgun probably was not found in the Antilles at the time of the Conquest. The statements of Farabee<sup>59</sup> and Wissler<sup>60</sup> that there was an Antillean blowgun are both undocumented. Gower's remark that "on the whole it seems to be accepted that the blowgun was used both in Florida and the West Indies"<sup>61</sup> is based on Wissler and Farabee and on the following quotation by Ling Roth about one of the Columbus expeditions to Hispaniola: "Their only arms are reeds cut in seeding times, to which they fasten small sharpened sticks."<sup>62</sup> This statement clearly refers to a lance or arrow and not to a blowgun. None of the early chroniclers seemed to have mentioned the blowgun in the Antillean area.

#### SUMMARY

At Conquest times the blowgun extended in a discontinuous distribution from northern Bolivia to central Mexico. There were two separate areas, each with a particular type of blowgun. In South America the implement was concentrated in the central and northern Andes and in the Montaña to the east. Little is known of the structural features of the gun, but it is possible that only a simple tube was used. The projectile was a dart or arrow. Poison was reported from Bolivia, the Peruvian Montaña, the upper Amazon, Colombia, and the Lake Maracaibo region. It is impossible to determine the type, but it may be that more than one kind of poison was used. The blowgun as a weapon of war is mentioned for Bolivia,

<sup>56</sup> Map, courtesy Dr. France V. Scholes, University of New Mexico.

<sup>57</sup> Maturino Gilberti, *Diccionario de la lengua Tarasco o de Michoacán* (Mexico, 1901) p. 226.

<sup>58</sup> For a negative report on the implement in northwest Mexico see Ralph L. Beals, *The Comparative Ethnology of Northern Mexico before 1750* (*Ibero-Americana*, no. 2, pp. 93-225, Berkeley, 1932) pp. 194-198.

<sup>59</sup> William C. Farabee, *The Central Caribs* (University of Pennsylvania Museum, Publications in Anthropology, vol. 10, 1924) p. 56.

<sup>60</sup> Clark Wissler, *The American Indian* (New York, 1931) p. 138.

<sup>61</sup> Charlotte D. Gower, *The Northern and Southern Affiliations of Antillean Culture* (Memoir, American Anthropological Association, no. 35, 1927) p. 21.

<sup>62</sup> H. Ling Roth, "The Aborigines of Hispaniola" (*Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, vol. 16, pp. 247-286, London, 1887) p. 268.

the Amazon, the Atrato and central Magdalena Rivers of Colombia, and Lake Maracaibo.

There are no early reports for the blowgun in the lower Amazon, the Negro, and Orinoco River drainages. It should be remembered, however, that there were very few records for these areas in the early days. Most of the accounts that do exist are of rapid trips and contain relatively little ethnography. The one mention of the blowgun on the Brazilian coast depends on the translation of a rather indefinite word and probably should be disregarded.

In Central America, south of Guatemala, there seem to be no clear-cut reports of the blowgun. In historic times the South American type diffused into Panama, and the Maya-Mexican gun into Honduras and Nicaragua.

The Maya and Mexico blowgun was probably a simple hollowed-out tube. A pellet of clay was used for the projectile. Carrying nets were used to hold the pellets and a gauge (perhaps a diameter gauge) was important to their manufacture. Poison could hardly have been used with this type of projectile. It is unlikely that the pellet blowgun was regularly employed as a fighting implement.

The blowgun had a considerable antiquity in this area and was shared by most or all the southern Maya-speaking peoples at the Conquest period. In the Valley of Mexico it was used at Teotihuacan, probably by 500 A. D.

In spite of rather wide use of the blowgun, there is a general lack of mention of it in the early sources. This fact has often been taken to mean that the blowgun was absent from large areas where it is found today. However, even in regions where the implement was well documented, a surprising number of writers of Conquest times fail to mention it. Because of this, any distributional conclusions, drawn from negative evidence, must be regarded with caution.



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