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INDIAN NOTES
MONOGRAPHS

EDITED BY F. W. HODGE



A SERIES OF PUBLICA-
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AMERICAN ABORIGINES

A GOLDEN BREASTPLATE
FROM CUZCO, PERU

BY

MARSHALL H. SAVILLE

NEW YORK
MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN
HEYE FOUNDATION
1921

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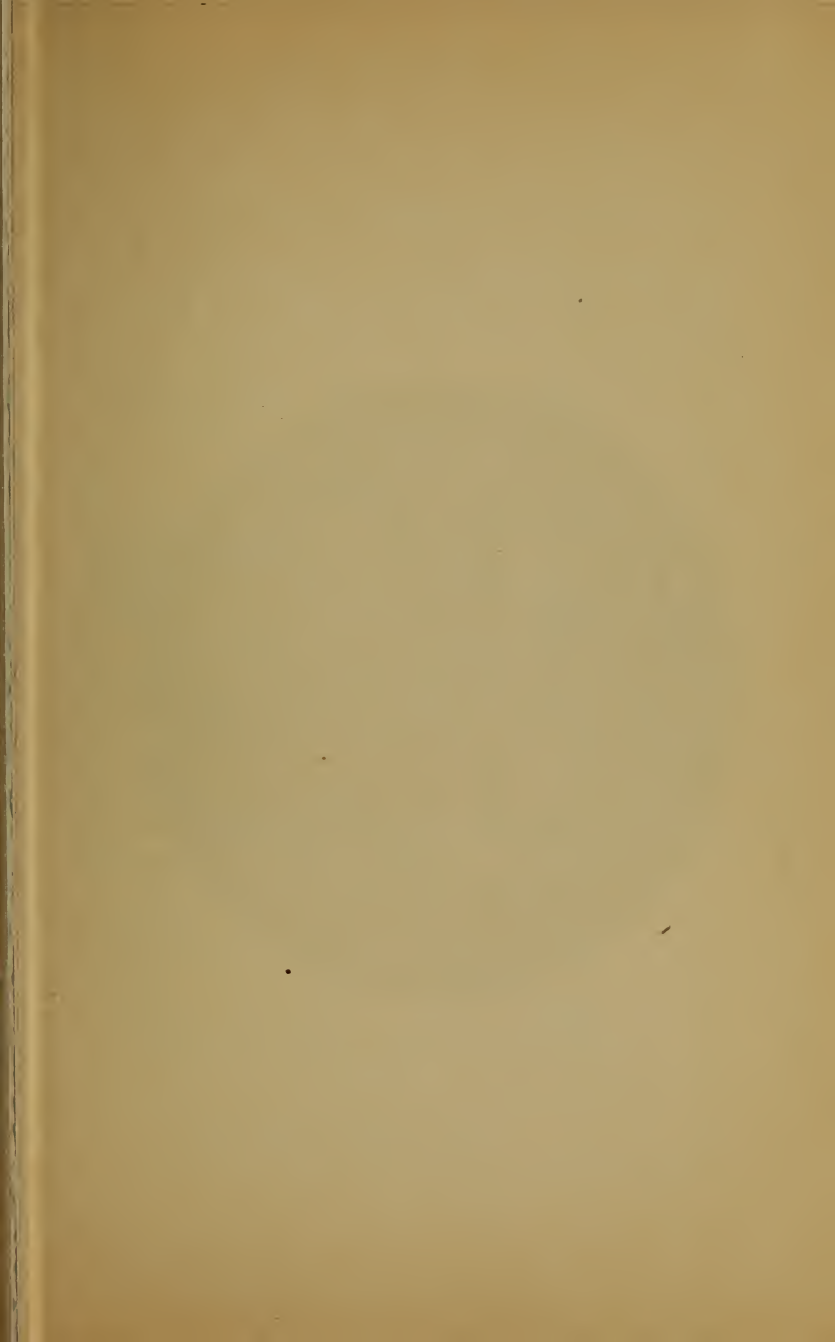
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GOLDEN BREASTPLATE FROM CUZCO
(DIAMETER 5 1/4 IN.)

A GOLDEN BREASTPLATE FROM CUZCO, PERU

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GOLDEN breastplates in the form of discs have been found in various parts of ancient America, notably Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. Some are plain discs, while others are embossed with figures, or, as in the case of some specimens from Colombia, bear in high relief the representation of two breasts. Curiously, they are not so common in Peru as in the north-western part of South America.

The most interesting specimen known from Peru is the one we illustrate, for the first time from a photograph, in pl. I. Its history is interesting. Sir Clements R. Markham when in Peru in 1853 examined it shortly after it had been presented to

General Echenique, at that time President of the republic. Markham described it briefly in his Cuzco and Lima (London, 1856), but did not reproduce the drawing of it which he had made. In 1860 William Bollaert read a paper regarding this breastplate before the Royal Society of Antiquaries, and in the same year reprinted his study of the object, with Markham's drawing, in his Antiquarian, Ethnological and other Researches in New Granada, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. Finally, Markham reproduced his drawing in his work, The Incas of Peru (London and New York, 1910), from which we quote the following:

“Gold plates, $5\frac{3}{10}$ inches in diameter, representing the sun, with a border apparently designed to denote the months by special signs, were worn on the breast by the Incas and the great councillors. The gold ornaments were seized and ruthlessly destroyed by the Spaniards wherever they could be found. A great number were never found. Some were presented to General Echenique, then President of Peru, in 1853. There was the golden breastplate, a gold topu or pin, the head with a flat surface about 4 in. by 2 in., covered with incised ornaments; four half-discs forming two globes and a long stalk, also a flat piece of gold with a long stalk.

We thought that the flat piece like a leaf and the discs were from the golden garden of the sun, and a golden belt or fillet for the head. The President brought them to the house of Don Manuel Cotes, at Lima, for me to see, on October 25, 1853, and I made a copy of the golden breastplate and of the topu. The Señora Grimanesa Cote (née Althaus), the most beautiful lady in Lima at that time, held the tracing paper while I made the copy. It was very thin, and the figures were stamped, being convex on the outer side and concave on the inner. The outer diameter was $5\frac{3}{10}$ inches, the inner 4 inches. This is by far the most interesting relic of the Incas that is known to us.¹ Note [written in 1910], All traces of it are lost. Dr Max Uhle recently made inquiries of General Echenique's son, but he knew nothing about it."

Nevertheless, about this time it was sold by some member of the family to Dr Gaffron, from whom it was purchased in 1912 by Mr Heye, and it is now in the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, together with the several other pieces mentioned by Markham, with the single exception of the topu.

Bollaert attempts to interpret the design on the breastplate as representing "a lunar calendar or zodiac." In this he is followed by Markham in his work above mentioned.

An elaborate effort is made to identify the signs on the outer rim with the various months of the year. That the large face in the center represents the sun is possible, but the interpretation of the various symbols is open to question. They may or may not represent the signs for the months. At present we know far too little about the meaning of such characters on the textiles, pottery, and other artifacts from ancient Peru and Bolivia to allow us to speculate with assurance as to their meaning. We give in pl. II a new drawing, made by Mr William Baake, of this interesting specimen, in order to place it before students, in the hope that it will stimulate a study of the symbols of this part of the South American continent which possibly have a bearing on calendrical matters.

Many differences will be noted in our drawing by comparison with that made by Markham. The pectoral has two small perforations on the rim at the top for suspension, and there are two narrow slit-like openings on each side of the large central face at the junction with the inner side of



FIG. 1. A. Epidermis. B. Hypodermis. C. Cortex. D. Pith. E. Cambium. F. Secondary xylem. G. Secondary phloem. H. Pericycle.

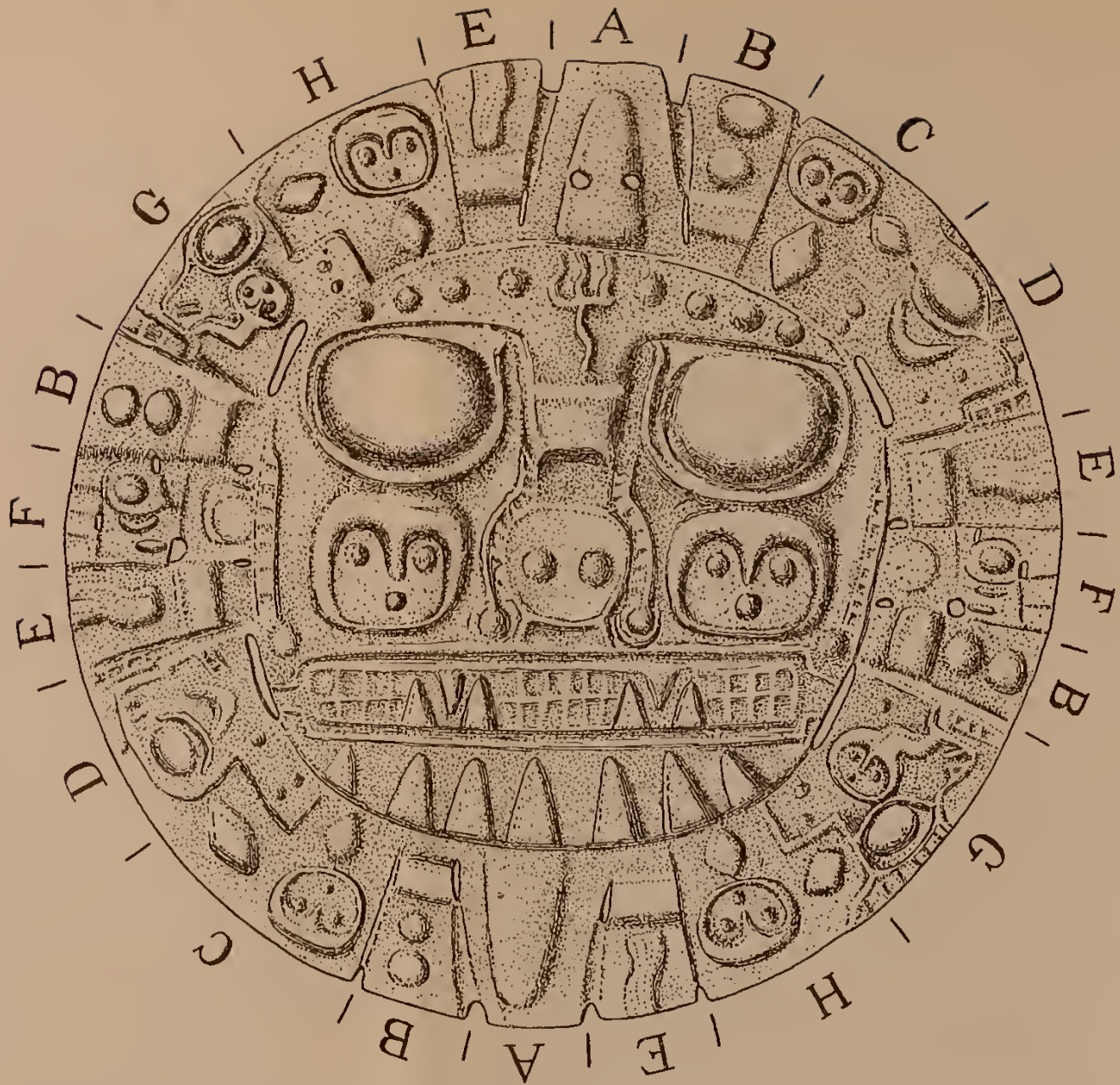
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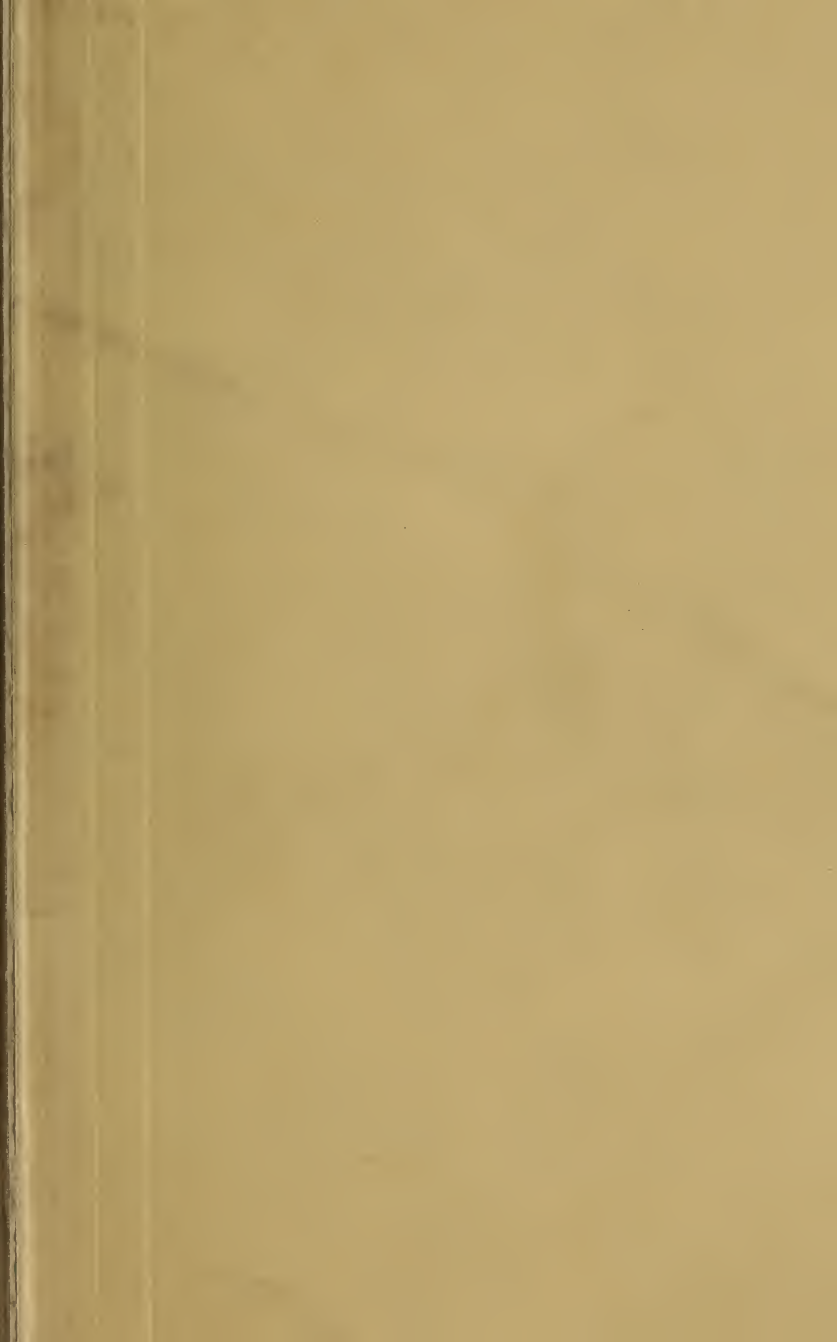
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the rim, and on the inner rim itself on each side are also two small perforations. The treatment of this face somewhat resembles that found on pre-Inca discs of copper overlaid with gold from the province of Pichincha, Ecuador.

Analyzing the symbols on the rim, we find that they are twenty in number, each character being repeated from two to four times at regular intervals. Each symbol is lettered in the drawing, those of each group bearing the same letter. Proceeding from the upper central one, these signs occur as follows: A, twice, being the conical figure at the center of the upper and lower rim; B, four times, the character at the right of A; C, twice, but it is the same symbol as H, except that the diamonds in C are at the right of the face, while in H they are at the left; D, twice; E, four times; F, twice; G, twice; and H, twice. The face in C and H is identical with the two larger faces in the center of the disc below the eyes of the mask. A smaller similar face is found in G. Thus this symbol is repeated eight times, alone, as in the center of the disc, accom-

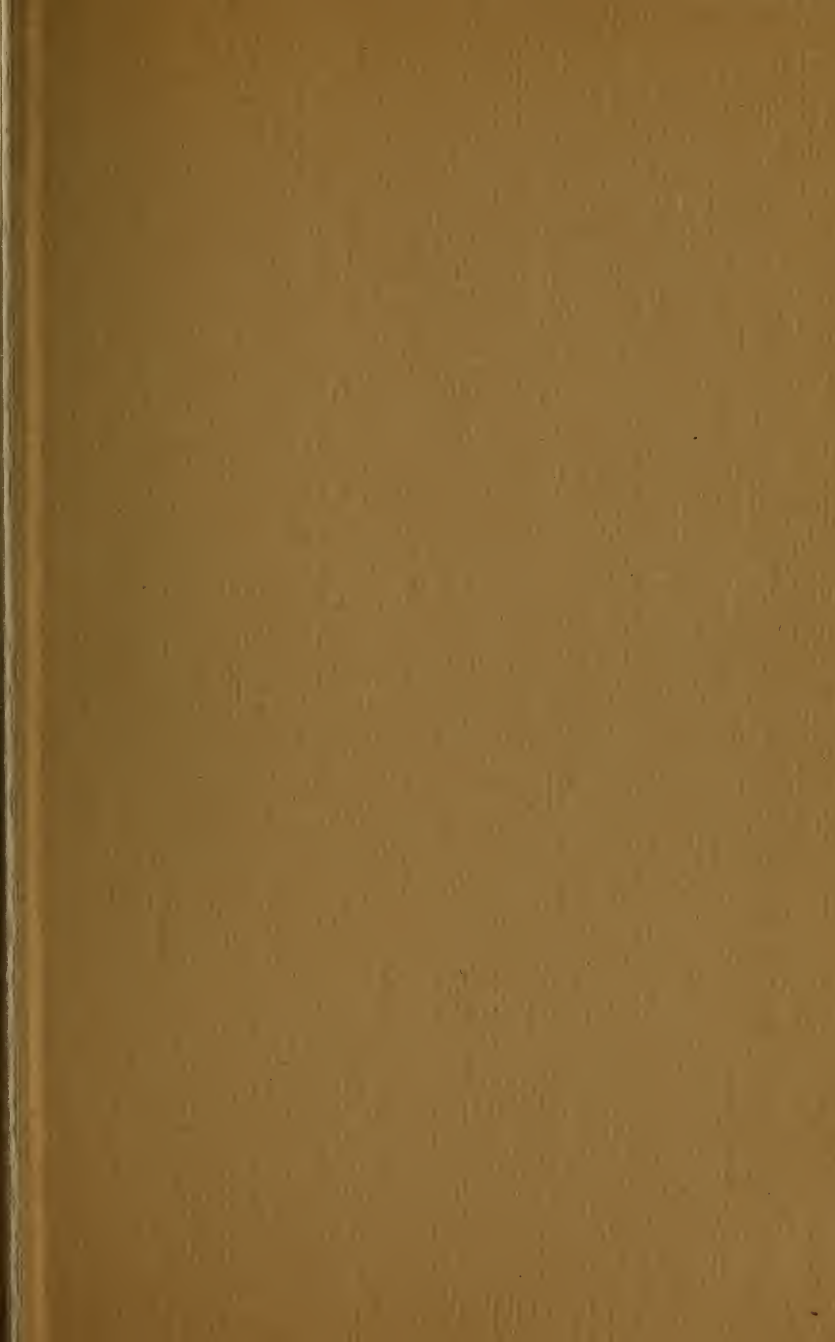


DRAWING OF GOLDEN BREASTPLATE LETTERED TO SHOW THE CHARACTERS
AROUND THE RIM



panied by diamonds as in c and H, and in combination with other characters as in G. The sign B is two small discs or dots above a short vertical bar. The symbol D presents a slight variation in each one. That in the upper right-hand side shows a crescent, above which is an egg-like character; it may be an eye in one case, separated from the crescent by a curved band. In the other example, found in the lower left-hand side, this curved band occurs between the two symbols.

Without going into a further discussion regarding the specimen, we may say that we are inclined to regard it as belonging to the Tiahuanaco period or epoch, and not to the Inca or Quichua period. The central face seems to be more closely allied to the faces depicted on the sculptures of Tiahuanaco than to those found on Inca sculptures and vessels.



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