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Mexican figurines attached to pallets and cradles

At the 29th International Congress of Americanists, held in New York in 1949, Henri Lehmann (1951, 1953) discussed a group of figurines showing a person lying on his back strapped to a couch. He pointed out the striking similarities among those figures from the Valley of Mexico, from Colima and Nayarit, and from Ecuador.

Presently, the availability of over 130 "bed figures" from West Mexico and a dozen elaborate specimens from Central Veracruz warrants further study of this subject. A summary of regional characteristics and conclusions on the significance of the various types of bed figures will be presented (1).

I shall begin with those Mexican figurines which are easily recognizable as cradles.

I — Infant in a cradle

The earliest cradles known are from the Middle Preclassic of the Valley of Mexico (mainly from Tlatilco). They are oval and shallow, and are sometimes held in the mother's lap. These, and the Late Preclassic cradles from Ticoman, depict, in addition to the strap across chest and legs, a heavy pad held by bands across the forehead to induce flattening of the head (Table I).

In the Chupicuaro tradition (ca. 400-1 B.C.) cradled figurines are fairly abundant; they are rectangular, with plain bottom or one of tightly fitted rods, sideboards, and four legs. The strapped infant is protected by two broad arches, one above the head, the other above the feet. Sometimes these loops are connected by a longitudinal bar. Usually the sex cannot be determined.

Table I. Chronological sequence of infant figures in cradles

PERIOD	WEST MEXICO	VALLEY OF MEXICO	SOUTH-CENTRAL VERACRUZ
Late Postclassic 1350-1521		Aztec box cradles, high headboard, molded. Illustr. in <i>Codex Mendoza</i> ; mentioned by Sahagún	
Middle Postclassic 1150-1350		Chichimec net-and-rod cradles (Mapa Tlotzin)	
Early Postclassic 950-1150	Moldmade cradle with loop (Michoacán)		
Late Classic 600-900/950		Teotihuacán moldmade rectangular cradle with loop. Strapped infant (?) without cradle (650-750)	Mother suckling babe on four-footed cradle with whistle
Early Classic 800-600			
Protoclassical 150-300	Rare in Jalisco, Colima, Nayarit; double loop cradle without infant (Michoacán)		
Terminal Preclassic 150 B.C.-A.D. 150	Rectangular cradles with broad arch over head and feet (Chupicuaro)	Oval trough with four supports (Hi type, Ticoman). Also with strap over forehead for flattening	
Late Preclassic 300-150 B.C.		Miniature (Type Eii) (infant?)	
Middle Preclassic 800-300 B.C.		Oval trough or slab with device for flattening forehead (Tlatilco)	
Early Preclassic 1500-800 B.C.			

Classic period Teotihuacán (Metepec phase) figurines of rectangular cradles, containing infants attired with ear discs and necklaces, were made in molds. Feet rest on the cradle rim and there are indications that a loop was attached after the figures had been removed from the mold. Another type of molded Teotihuacán figures shows a sexless individual with flat headdress whose arms and chest are covered by a broad band with incised

symbolic designs. These figures, however, are not in a cradle, which may have consisted of perishable material. It is therefore not certain whether these individuals represent infants or adults.

The most expressive figures occur in Central Veracruz during the Late Classic and show a mother leaning over the cradle while suckling her babe. The infant wears a necklace and earrings which denote his elevated status as in the Teotihuacán figures; the presence of jewelry in bed figures is, therefore, not confined to adults.

Cradles from the Early Postclassic are not known (except two figures from Michoacan, which represent either infants or adults).

In the 14th century the Chichimecs used cradles made of nets and rods; one of these is illustrated in Mapa Tlotzin.

Aztec moldmade figurines are rectangular with extended headboard and show the infant with a strap across chest and arms, which is fastened to the sides of the cradle. Feet protrude as in Teotihuacán figures. These clay models resemble the wicker-work cradles illustrated in Codex Mendoza (p. 57). Both have loops, probably for easier handling.

II — Adults lying on plain slabs or beds

The West Mexican bed figures have been variously interpreted as children, or adults who were sick and therefore had to be strapped to a couch, or as deceased persons. When

Table II. Chronological sequence of bed figures (adults)

PERIOD	WEST MEXICO	SOUTH-CENTRAL VERACRUZ
Late Postclassic 1350-1521		
Middle Postclassic 1150-1350		
Early Postclassic 950-1150		
Late Classic 600-900/950		Smiling face moldmade whistle/rattle figures on platforms with leg bolster. Elaborate large figures with head bent back and elevated legs, monkey heads or monkey figure attached to platform (Pulque ritual)
Early Classic 300-600		
Protoclassic 150-300	Slabs with or without feet, with predominantly female figures, mostly strapped.	Similar to West Coast figures (2 specimens known)
Terminal Preclassic 150 B.C. — A.D. 150	Sickbeds (Nayarit) Pair under blanket (Colima) Inclined slab (reclinatorio), (Colima)	Lower Remojadas I (rare), similar to West Coast figures.
Late Preclassic 300-150 B.C.		
Middle Preclassic 800-300 B.C.		
Early Preclassic 1500-800 B.C.		

the cradled infant figures are segregated from the "ubiquitous figures-tied-to-a-couch type", as Chadwick (1971: 673, 679) called them, there remains a substantial corpus of couch figures that represent adults. These occur in West Mexico where they are relatively abundant and in South-Central Veracruz, where they are less frequent but much more elaborate. I shall first deal with the figures from West Mexico (Table II).

Comparisons indicate considerable form varieties evident in the position of

arms and legs, the method of strapping, the use of head and leg bolsters, the proportions between size of person and length of slab, etc. The provenience is seldom documented but cultural affiliation can be inferred from regional stylistic traits (mainly in the modeling of facial features and headdress) in figurines from Colima, Jalisco and Nayarit. A tabulation of 112 bed figures leads to the following generalizations:

1) *Figures in the style of Colima* (54 specimens)

Predominantly female (one male, 5 specimens without sex indication); head rests on a pillow between two lateral slab bolsters; head, rarely the feet, extend beyond the slab; occasionally a semicircular loop arches over the head; two or three modeled bands over arms and chest (but 4 specimens have no straps); legs are separated, sometimes slightly

bent at the knee; slabs usually lack supports (conical supports in 7 specimens). Exceptional features: Body strapped but both arms are free (2 specimens); strapless figure detachable from slab (1 specimen); body covered with blanket (1 spec.); figures on slab inclined 45 degrees (reclinatorios); pairs of male and female under a blanket (3 specimens).

2) *Figures in the style of Jalisco* (16 specimens)

All are females (sex sometimes modeled in exaggerated size); pillow but rarely lateral head bolsters; head and feet project beyond slab; no loop over head; 2 or 3 modeled bands over arms and chest (but 3 specimens have no straps); straight legs. Exceptional features: Bed with vertical curved head and foot boards (sickbed? , 2 specimens).

3) *Figures in the style of Nayarit* (42 specimens)

Predominantly sexless (only 5 females); pillow and lateral head bolsters frequent; head and feet do not project beyond slab; figures sometimes much smaller than slab; rarely loop over head (except sickbeds); straps sometimes indicated by paint, but lacking in 7 specimens; 2 specimens have one arm strapped while the other is raised to head; slabs with four supports predominate. Exceptional features: Separate slab with pillow attached (1 spec.); boxlike, polychrome (Itxlán del Río type) sickbeds with flat base (2 spec.), or transverse rods on one or two levels and an opening below lower abdomen of the individual (4 specimens) (Fig. 1); figure with swollen abdomen and distorted face (1 spec.); figures with attendant attached to longer side of bed or slab (4 spec.); bolster beneath ankles (4 spec.); female with dog at her feet (2 spec.).

4) *Figures from Michoacan* (5 specimens)

Only one adult female figure, comparable to the Jalisco types has been published (Lehmann 1953: fig. 26,d). Four specimens from a tomb at San Gregorio (east of Lake Chapala, i.e. close to Jalisco) are in the collection of the Universidad Autónoma de Guadalajara. Of these, a pair of Preclassic (?) male figures has detachable slabs with 4 supports and a large protective ring at each end. Another pair has loops only over the head. The bodies of this pair are flat and details blurred; they were made in a mold together with the slab. Straps are not discernible. In each corner is a perforation which often occurs in Late Postclassic figures. Apparently the figures represent children since the San Gregorio tomb contained also several larger non-bed figures of adults. These rare Michoacan bed figures resemble the flat Toltec-Mazapan figures of the Valley of Mexico and they are probably of Early Postclassic date.

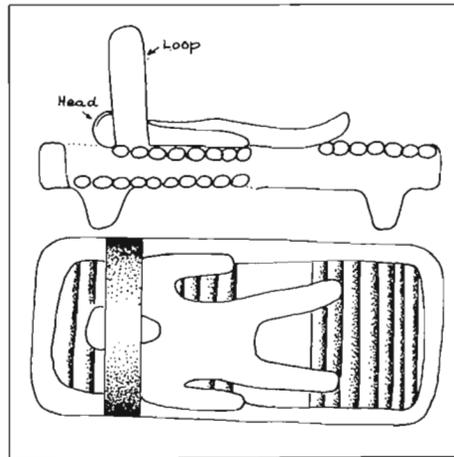


Fig. 1 — Sickbed with effluvial opening in double layer slat base. Nayarit. 13 cm long.

III — Conclusions concerning the meaning of the bed figures from West Mexico

Bed figures of adults display too great a variety to make a typological classification meaningful. In general, the following features, common to Colima, Jalisco, and Nayarit,

are significant: 1) The majority of adult bed figures are female; some have no sex indication, but recognizable males do not occur. Breasts are not indicated. 2) Not all the figures are strapped to the couch (4 Colima, 3 Jalisco, and 7 Nayarit figures have no straps). 3) A few persons are covered by a blanket which may indicate that they are sick. 4) Portrayals of pathological conditions are rare (e.g. abscessed jaw, goiter, see von Winning and Hamner, 1972. fig. 176,196). Evidence of advanced pregnancy is also rare.

Only a small number of bed figures can be described with certainty as representing sick persons. They lie on what Weisman (Läkekonst, 1966) called "hospital beds" (5 specimens, all from Nayarit) which have "special facilities for bowel and bladder incontinence" (Fig. 1). Bed figures with persons attached to one side of the slab are, by their appearance, probably attending a sick individual (1 Colima, 1 Jalisco, 5 Nayarit).

What is the significance of the majority of bed figures that do not portray illness, including 14 that are not strapped? Diego Delgado (personal information) has suggested that they represent corpses on biers prepared for burial. Considering the depth and narrowness of the shaft leading to the burial chamber, a ceremonious way to lower the corpse into the grave would be to tie it to a pallet. This interpretation, however, does not account for figures without straps.

Taking into consideration that clearly recognizable male figures do not exist and that the individuals are sexless or predominantly female, with their legs frequently spread apart, I tentatively suggest, following Delgado's lead, that these individuals represent women who died during or soon after childbirth and were placed on biers preparatory to burial.

In Aztec religion — which has its roots in earlier cultures — women who died in childbirth were accorded high honors because by giving birth they became equals of the warriors who captured an enemy. This concept is consistent with the precepts of a highly organized militaristic society, such as that of the Aztecs and Toltecs. Whether a similar belief prevailed in Western Mexico centuries earlier is not known. However, an outstanding feature of the West Mexican cultures is the elaborate mortuary cult, characterized by shaft tombs containing numerous clay effigies of superior workmanship, including those of individuals suffering from severe diseases. It is conceivable that death as a result of childbirth was common and that cause and effect relationship was well known. Consequently, these women had a place in the mortuary ceremonies and their tragic fate prompted their replication in clay. Since the ritual preceded entombment it is of no importance whether the person was strapped or in what position she held her arms.

IV — Figures from South-Central Veracruz

The few known early (Lower Remojadas I, 150-1 B.C.) bed figures from Veracruz resemble those of West Mexico. Two Protoclassic figures display a knee or ankle bolster which continues to be a significant attribute in later bed figures. So far, no bed figures are known from the Early Classic, a period of close ties with Teotihuacán where such figures are likewise lacking (except for cradled figures and strapped infants without slabs or beds).

Toward the end of the Late Classic, bed figures reappear; they are larger and more elaborate. Two features are now conspicuously prevalent: uplifted legs and a large semicircular loop at the head end of the slab (but not directly above the head) which the individual grasps with both hands. Instead of females only male figures are tied to the couch by means of a wide strap, or are covered with a blanket. A whistle is incorporated either in the base of the couch or forms the leg support. The couches are longer than the

person, are decorated with notched and/or incised designs, and stand on tall cylindrical supports.

The most sophisticated bed figures consist of single or double-tiered platforms. The head of the individual is tilted backward, the body is covered with a blanket, the legs are raised at a 45 degree angle and large bells or rattles decorate the ankles. Significantly, monkey heads are attached to the leg supports or full monkey figures climb on the head loop (Fig. 2).

These attributes indicate that the Late Classic Veracruz bed figures had an entirely

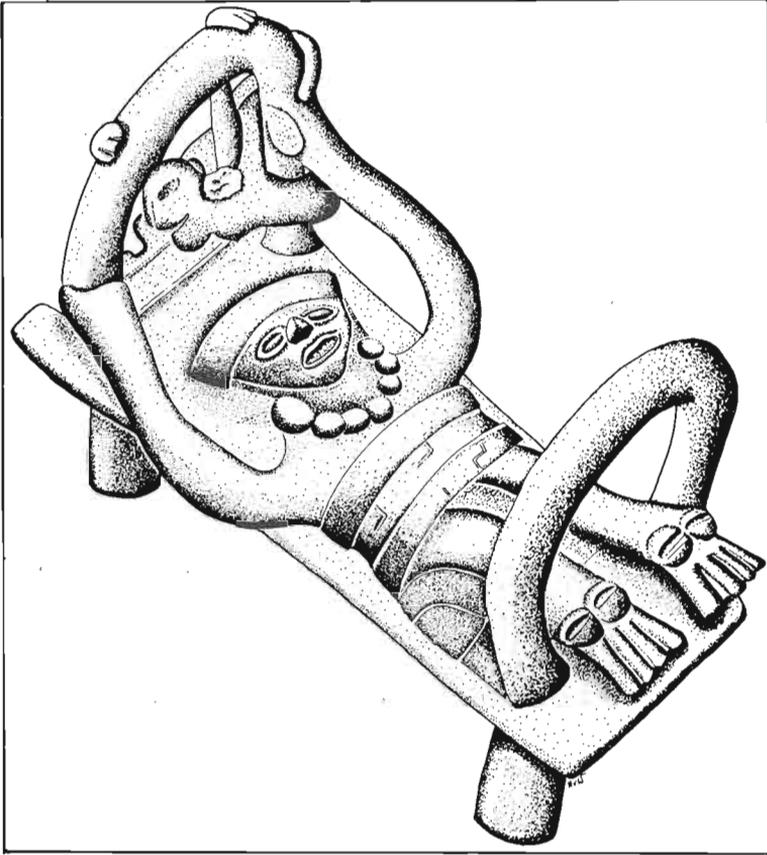


Fig. 2 – Smiling face type figure on platform. A monkey is attached to the loop. Central Veracruz. 28 cm. long. After von Winning and Hammer, 1972:38.

different function than the earlier types from that region and from those of West Mexico. I suggest that they represent ritually intoxicated persons who participated in a pulque ceremony. They are alive but in a state of trance. To test this hypothesis I shall refer to other representations of figures lying on their back with knees drawn up, which are associated with maguey plants and/or vessels containing pulque. Such manifestations occur in Mesoamerica also outside of Central Veracruz, on stone reliefs and in codices, from the Late Classic to Contact.

V – Evidence of the relationship between figures lying on their back with flexed legs, and pulque

1) The low-relief wall panel of the South Ball Court at El Tajín clearly depicts a pulque ceremony (García Payón, 1962). In the center is a person strapped to a platform which is covered with a blanket. His legs are flexed. Eyes and mouth of the strapped person and of the one standing above are stylized “in a manner that is usually reserved for non-human beings, such as gods and monsters” (Tuggle, 1968: 50), hence he is in a state of intoxication. To the right are five maguey plants, three of which show the tall stem with horizontal branches in bloom. The attendant at the head of the tied individual holds a large pulque jar (Fig. 3).

2) Some of the Chac Mool sculptures – recumbent male figures with flexed legs and a container on the abdomen – display attributes that relate them to the pulque gods and to the Eagle-Jaguar cult and, therefore, indirectly to pulque since this is the beverage of the warriors.

3) Codex Vindobonensis I includes a full page (25) devoted to a pulque drinking ceremony where gods – not ordinary humans – partake of this sacred beverage that was

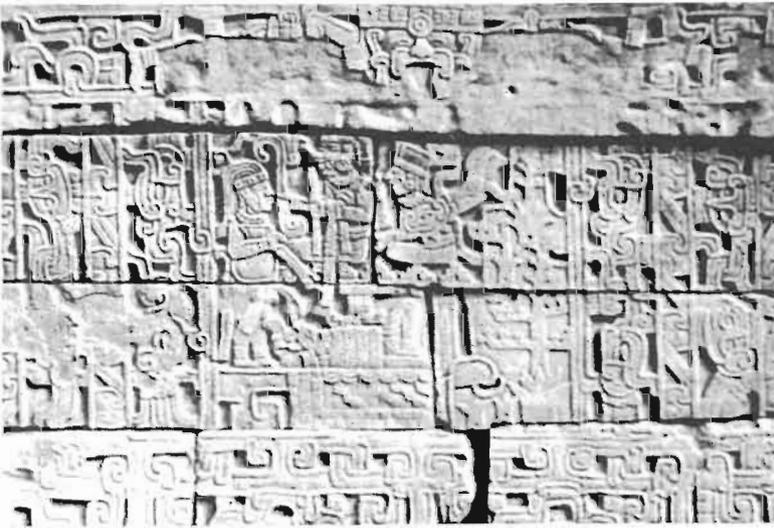


Fig. 3 -- Pulque scene with strapped person. Wall panel, South Ball Court, El Tajín. After García Payón, 1962.

supposedly invented by the goddess 2 Flower. Page 24 on the other hand, depicts a scene related to the mushroom cult. Couches with leg bolsters occur on pages 10, 11, 13, 18, 20 and 22, as well as several pulque plants. Although the couches are unoccupied it is noteworthy that they are depicted and their presence could imply a connection with the pulque ceremony. On page 34 are six males lying on their back with legs drawn up; below is an unoccupied couch.

Caso (1963: 35) interpreted the pulque scene (p. 25) and the mushroom scene (p. 24) as a commemoration of the Mixtec invention of two important “magic medicines”, capable of producing intoxication and hallucinations which are conducive to a spiritual contact between men and their gods.

4) A carved jaguar bone from Tomb 7, Monte Albán, depicts inter alia an individual lying supine with flexed legs on a frame which contains two maguey plants in bloom (Caso, 1969, fig. 206) (Fig. 4,k).

5) A bent leg with a pulque jar above the knee is the hieroglyph of Moquihui, fourth and last Lord of Tlaltelolco, who committed suicide at the conquest by Tenochtitlan in 1473. The hieroglyph varies considerably, but is usually associated with the pulque bowl or the characteristic nose ornament of the pulque gods (Fig. 4,l).

The foregoing examples indicate that the motif of a recumbent figure with flexed legs is associated with pulque or pulque ceremonies (further evidence see von Winning and Hammer, 1972: 31-41). This conclusion was also reached by Barthel (1963: 168-170) who followed a different approach. He identified the main personage on Stela 31, Tikal, as Xipe and the supine figure with flexed legs lying on the jaguar head of Xipe's belt as the motif "night-drinker" (Seler: Nacht-trinker). This name, from the Nahuatl *yoallavana*, *yohuallahuana*, according to Seler, is the ceremonial denomination of Xipe and is applicable only to his specific representative as, for instance, his chief priest. Barthel

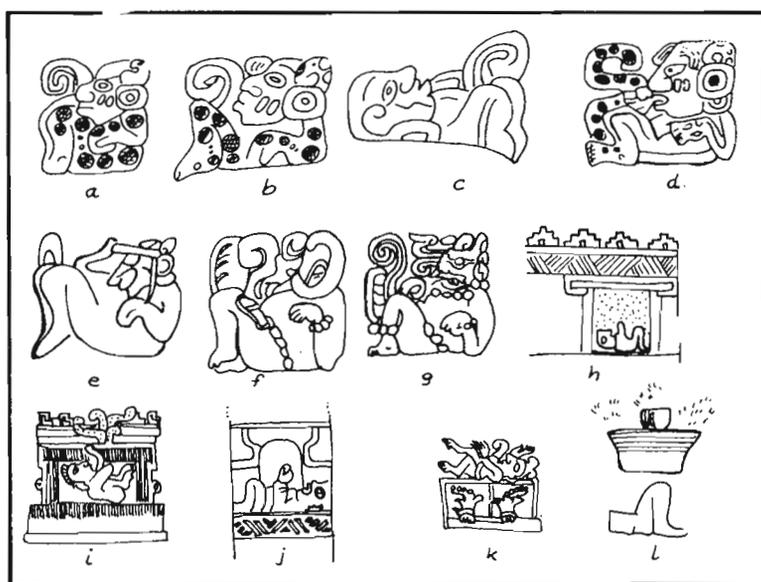


Fig. 4 – Recumbent figures with flexed legs ("night-drinker" motif). After Barthel, 1963: fig. 3.

presented several motifs from Maya inscriptions, Codex Borgia and Vaticanus B, and one from Xochicalco, which are equivalents to the Mexican motif "night-drinker", expressed by a figure lying on its back with legs drawn up (Fig. 4).

The concept "night-drinker" in central-southern Mexico refers, of course, to pulque. That this beverage was consumed ceremonially only after sunset is indicated in Codex Borbonicus 11 by the large disc, half of which shows the sun, the other half the starry sky.

The position of the elaborate Late Classic Veracruz male figures with the heads bent backward, their happy expression and open mouth, is not incongruent with that of an intoxicated person. Significant is the presence of monkey heads on the leg supports (in 3

specimens) or of a full monkey figure attached to the loop (2 specimens) (Fig. 2). Beyer (1965:457) demonstrated that in the codices the monkey head, *inter alia*, symbolizes midnight, which is in agreement with the concept "night-drinker". In fact, Codex Borbonicus 11 depicts the pulque god Patecatl, jaguar and eagle knights, pulque vessels, and a large pulque jar inscribed with a monkey head. On the other hand the monkey is the guise of Xochipilli, patron of the arts of singing, music, merriment, and of abundance and fertility in general. The consumption of pulque is related to merriment, while Xipe (and his impersonator the "night-drinker") is a fertility god.

Not all of the Late Classic Veracruz figures display the monkey head attribute but each one shows a contented facial expression and the legs are elevated. An explanation for this peculiar leg position cannot be offered, but it is interesting to note that intoxication induced by pulque clysters was a very ancient custom among the peoples of the Gulf Coast, reported by the chroniclers for the area of the Huasteca, but not entirely confined to it (Dahlgren, 1953:148). Perhaps the uplifted legs are concomitant with this strange custom.

VI -- Summary

The occurrence of figurines showing adults on slabs or couches is limited in Mesoamerica to Western Mexico (Nayarit, Colima, Jalisco and the adjacent region of Michoacan) and south-central Veracruz. Cradles with infants occur also in these regions, in Chupícuaro and the Valley of Mexico, and they are distinguishable by their relative small size and their trough or boxlike shape.

Bed figures representing adults can be classified into regional groups according to facial features, attributes, and surface finish. Within each group certain traits (e.g. loops, bolsters, supports etc.) overlap regionally and variations in details are too numerous to make a meaningful typology worthwhile. Most, but not all, bed figures are tied with bands to the slab, restricting arm movement. In some cases one or both arms are free and raised to the head. Occasionally the feet are bound.

Less common are individuals with an attendant figure attached to the side of the bed and especially constructed double layer beds with an effluvial opening, whose occupants indicate individuals suffering from bowel incontinence. The latter are limited to Nayarit. It is significant that the great majority of the figurines from West Mexico are women, or individuals of undetermined sex, but not males.

These figures were grave offerings and their meaning is a matter of conjecture. The hypothesis that they represent corpses placed on a bier so that they can be lowered conveniently and ceremoniously in a vertical position through the long and narrow shaft leading to the burial chamber is probable but does not account for those figures which are not strapped. Considering the preponderance of female and sexless figures without male attributes (which therefore may be females) it is tentatively suggested that they represent women who had died in childbirth and who are awaiting burial while undergoing some ritual comparable, perhaps, to that accorded to Aztec women who died under such circumstances. These were honored like the warriors who had died in battle, since giving birth was equivalent of taking a prisoner.

While the significance of the West Coast bed figures cannot be elucidated by archaeological or ethnohistorical analogy — barring a few exceptions — those of the Late Classic period from south-central Veracruz can be explained by comparisons with contemporaneous stone reliefs at El Tajín and details in pictorial manuscripts. The close relationship has been pointed out between a pulque ritual at El Tajín and the Mesoamerican motif "night-drinker" (as defined by Barthel) on the one hand, and the

Veracruz figures, some of which include a pulque-related monkey figure, on the other. It is therefore concluded that these clay sculptures represent a ritually inebriated person whose trance-like condition differentiated him from ordinary humans and thereby facilitated his contact with the gods.

Reference

- (1) Since the number of illustrations had to be limited the reader is referred to those in the recently published catalog of an exhibition at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County (von Winning and Hammer, 1972).

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