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**Aztec Ceramic Figurines: An Analysis of
“Female Holding Child” Hollow-Rattle Figurine**

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Introduction

Ceramic figurines from archaeological sites and museum collections are the least published of the Aztec material culture (Smith 2005:45). However, when found in archaeological context, they can provide extensive information. These figurines are rarely found in buildings of ritualistic purposes, such as temples but rather in domestic settings. As more figurines are being uncovered, studies of archaeological collections have shown that these figurines were of widespread distribution (Smith 2005:51). A large number of these ceramic figurines depict women, including those with children in their arms and possibly female deities. These ceramic figurines can highlight the importance of women in the warfare driven, male-dominated Aztec society. In this paper, I will examine one such ceramic figurine in the on-exhibit collection at the San Antonio Museum of Art titled "Female Figure Holding Child" (accession number 97.12.33).

In this paper, I will present information on female Aztec figurines, in connection with their portrayal in art. Furthermore, women's position in the Aztec culture will be evaluated. In doing so, I hope to bring attention to the underrepresented group and how the domination over women was not a universal theme within the male-dominant Aztec culture. Early in the development of Aztec society, gender equality and complementarity was stressed, as demonstrated by the dual-sex deity Ometeotl (Joyce 2000:144). As the Aztec empire began to grow, there is an evident transition from gender equality to the domination over women. This is shown through official state art. However, what the urbanized and elite Aztecs promoted about the treatment of women contrasted to those in the rural regions of the Aztec lands. Rather than the subordination of women

depicted, women were depicted in ways that resisted the state ideology. I will argue that the ceramic figurine focused on in this paper is an example of this resistance.

“Female Figure Holding Child” Ceramic Figurine Description

This Aztec figurine (Figure 1) is currently located at the San Antonio Museum of Art's Meadows Gallery in the Pre-Columbian Art exhibit. It depicts a bare-breasted woman, wearing only a long diamond patterned skirt and holding an identical miniature version of herself; the child. She wears her hair wrapped on top, or this could represent a headdress. The figure is in an upright standing position, with her left arm holding the child. The child wears a similar skirt and similar hairstyle of the larger figurine. The figurine is a hand-held size, with only the front of the figurine decorated and the back flat with no design. The figurine is mold-made and is hollow. Within the information folder provided by SAMA, accompanying notes assumed it served as a rattle from the Texcoco region, dating A.D. 1300-1500. An analysis of this piece will be in the discussion portion of this paper.

Aztec Culture

While the word Aztec conjures up images of dominance and wealth, their cultural beginnings were humble. Their mythology states that they emerged from a cave known as Aztlan (Townsend 1992:54). The actual location of Aztlan has puzzled archaeologists and Aztec emperors alike.

The Aztecs were a nomadic group, then known as the Chichimecs. When they left Aztlan they were lead by their deity Huitzilopochtli. His mother was the goddess

Coatlicue or “she of the serpent skirt”, who is frequently depicted in ceramic figures. For years, the Chichimecs traveled the Valley of Mexico, searching for a sign that Huitzilochtli said would be their new home. Finally, their visionary sign was seen; the place where an eagle was perched atop a cactus (Townsend 1992:59). That exact location was on an island in the middle of Lake Texcoco (Townsend 1992:59) in today’s Mexico City. From there, the great city of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, emerged and they grew from their humble beginnings to one of the greatest empires of the prehistoric world.

Ceramic Figurines

There is little focus on the production and use of ceramic figurines found within the Aztec material culture. Smith suggests one of the reasons for this is that scholars are generally ignorant of the variety of ceramic figurines available (2005:45). Ceramic figurines can give a range of information about the domestic setting, economic practices, and ideology of a culture. Figurines can also help us understand the views and attitudes towards groups of people. This section will introduce the different types of figurines found at Aztec sites, the production and distribution of ceramic figurines, and the imagery and use of figurines, specifically female figurines, within the Aztec culture.

Types & Location

The three types of figurines found at Aztec sites include solid figurines, hollow figurines, and jointed figurines (Brumfiel 1996:146). Solid figurines, which are the most commonly found, stand upright, are flat back and mold made (Brumfiel and Overholtzer

2009:297). Hollow figurines would have had clay pellets inside so they can be used as a rattle (Smith 2002:103). The positions of the hollow figurines vary, from kneeling, to sitting, and standing. Jointed figurines are rare, with only arm and leg fragments being found (Smith 2002:53). Male and female figurines have been found at Aztec sites, although in some cases the gender cannot be determined. Animal figurines, have also been discovered, with dogs, possums, monkeys, and birds being the more popular images (Smith 2005:51).

A majority of Aztec figurines are found in domestic homes and settings. At the Templo Mayor in the capitol of Tenochtitlan, archaeologists uncovered human size ceramic figurine. However, surprisingly, they have never found small-scale figurines (Klein and Lona 2009, Smith 2002). Most doll-size figures have been uncovered in household debris (Brumfiel 1996:146) in the Valley of Mexico region (Figure 2). Despite their domestic locations, scholars argue that the figurines found were likely used in ritualistic activities at the household levels (Brumfiel 1996, Smith 2005). This issue will be further discussed below.

Production & Distribution

In the Aztec cities, Yautepec, Xaltocan, and Otumba, archaeologists have uncovered a large collection of complete and fragmented figurines (Smith 2002, Brumfiel and Overholzter 2009, Charlton, Nichols, Charlton 1991). Based on a high frequency of figurine and mold fragments in Otumba, figurine workshops were determined to be established there (Charlton, Nichols, and Charlton 1991:107). These figurine workshops were found in domestic settings, with production supplying enough

figurines to nearby sites (Charlton, Nichols, and Charlton 1991:108). Figurines were mold made, based on mold fragments found and on the general repetitive appearance of each figurine. It is suggested that those making the figurines were independent manufacturers and distributing their works in local markets (Charlton, Nichols, and Charlton 1991:108). In Huexotla, another Aztec-period site, figurines were more concentrated in rural areas than in the urban center (Brumfiel 1996:151-152). If local market places were the center of figurine distribution, then it would explain the presence of figurines in domestic only settings.

Imagery

The majority of figurines excavated at Aztec-period sites are anthropomorphic (Smith 2005, Brumfiel 1996). Figurines are classified as male or female based on distinct gender clothing and the presence of gender specific physical characteristics. Female figurines are more common than male figurines (Smith 2005:53). Commonly, the female ceramic figurines are in an upright, standing position.

There is great debate over whether the female figurines represent specific deities or a generalized view of the Aztec woman. If the female figurines do represent deities, there is further confusion as to which female deity. The diamond pattern skirt design depicted in majority of the female figurines may be representative of the snake skirt of the mother goddess Coatlicue. However, the same skirt pattern can be seen on fertility goddesses (Figure 3). The hairstyle/headdress depicted on many Aztec figurines, including the SAMA figurine, is comparable to that of Cihuacoatl, the goddess in charge of the spirits of women who died due to childbirth (Klein and Lona 2009:333-335).

However, the two-horned hairstyle of the female figurines is also commonly associated with married Aztec women (Klein and Lona 2009:330). It is not uncommon for these female figurines to be holding a child or two in their arms (Figure 4) (Brumfiel 1996:147). There has been an interpretation that identical miniature “child” figurines is not representing a child but an adult woman; this suggests that women may have used female figurines for a ritualistic purpose (Smith 2002:102). Others believe these figurines could represent local deities unassociated with the Aztec state religion or also individuals, such as a local shaman or even ancestors (Smith 2002:106). These ideas are reasonable but are underdeveloped ideas and need further investigation.

Discussion

Use, Meaning, and Significance of Female Figurines

One of the purposes of this paper was to further develop the use, meaning, and significance of ceramic figurines, specifically female hollow-rattle figurines. In doing so, I have been able to piece together background information for the female figurine displayed in the Pre-Columbian gallery at the San Antonio Museum of Art.

There has been some debate over whether the female figurines depicted deities or humans. I propose that the figurine depicts a human being with goddess attributes. If this figure was simply portraying a deity, there would have been more of an attempt to portray recognizable characteristics restricted to deities.

The SAMA female figurine holds an identical, miniature version of herself. Scholars examining other similar figures have argued that this miniature figurine does not represent a child, but a grown woman (Smith 2002:103). Therefore, the overall

figurine depicts a woman holding a female figurine, implying that the women used figurines in daily life. I agree with Smith's interpretation. The miniature figurine is dressed similarly to its larger self and also wears a hairstyle similar to that known for Aztec married women. Finally, there is a hint of breasts on the miniature figure, which clearly shows the figure is suppose to have a developed body of an adult. Along with the classification of the piece being a hollow-rattle figure, I believe that the SAMA piece was involved in rituals involving fertility and reproduction.

Hollow-rattle figurines are typically associated with fertility and reproduction. One reason is the shape of the figurine. The figurine is round and has smoothed down edges. This suggests that the figurine was to be held (Brumfiel and Overholtzer 2009:312). If the figurine was to be held, then this implies that the figurine would have been actively used. Its archaeological context also gives reason for themes of reproduction and fertility. Hollow-rattle figurines have been found in baths, which would have been utilized by pregnant women to ensure a successful pregnancy, as well as protect the purity of the child (Brumfiel and Overholtzer 2009:312, Berrelleza and Balderas 2006:34).

The hollowness alone of the figurine can symbolize pregnancy. To ancient people, the womb would have been an unoccupied space with its only set purpose of housing a child. The hollowness of the figure then would represent an empty womb. However, I also believe that the figure could resemble a person involved in reproduction, like a midwife. A midwife would have held an important position within the domestic sphere. A midwife's sole responsibility was the safety and comfort of the pregnant woman. Sahagun noted that the family members of the pregnant woman

spoke with respect to the midwife when handing over their pregnant daughter to the midwife's charge, referring to the midwife as "the skilled one...artisan of our lord" (Sahagun 1969:152). Therefore, the association of fertility goddess attributes, such as the diamond-pattern skirt design, would be rational to make with the midwife.

Women & that Aztec State Ideology

As previously mentioned in this paper, ceramic figurines are rarely found in major political and religious structures but are abundant in domestic settings. This suggests that figurines must have been involved in household activities. Brumfiel proposed that hinterland populations were resistant in the subordination of women theme expressed by the Aztec elite (1996:155). She brings up the notion of official vs. popular images (e.g. the ceramic figurines) of women, and concluded that popular images were a form of resistance against the state ideology. Going along with Brumfiel, I propose that female ceramic figurines were made by women as a way to promote gender equality amongst the male-dominant society. As the Aztecs began to dominate more land and cities, women began to lose their equal status. The making and distribution of figures would have served as a reminder to the women that they were a necessity to the state, regardless of the subordination theme promoted. In a society where warfare was promoted, women were a necessity to produce future warriors. Figurines associated with reproduction would have been an ideal way to boost the morale of women and remind them of their power amongst their society, as well as a necessity for a successful pregnancy.

Within the context of this paper, ideology is defined as beliefs and values that promote one group over others (Brumfiel 1998:3). In the Aztec society, warriors were valued above all, as can be seen in the official art of the Aztec state. Official art is art that is commissioned by the state and promotes state ideology. Official art can be found in temples and palaces, places of political and religious influence. An example of official art promoting a negative attitude towards women include the dismembered Coyolxauhqui relief at Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan and the decapitated Coatlicue statue with blood in the form of snakes pouring out (Brumfiel 1996:156). Only when the state is benefitted is the theme of equality promoted, but in a violent form. Blood was important to the continuance of life in the Aztec religion and it was vital for men and women to partake in blood letting (Joyce 2000:168-169).

Other instances of male dominance expressed in official art is the commonly depicted “Aztec women’s pose” (Brumfiel 1996:158). In various mediums of art, women are shown in a kneeling position (Figure 6), which is associated with womanly activities, such as weaving (Brumfiel 1996:158). This contrasts with depictions of women in popular art, which is defined as art that is not commissioned nor adhere to the state’s ideology. The majority of figurines (an example of popular art) show women standing up (Smith 2002:102). Children are rarely seen in official art, but like our SAMA piece, women can be seen holding children in their arms. The depiction of women and children serve as a reminder that reproduction is vital to society thriving.

Lesure (2002:587) comments that the “tradition” of art such as the household figurine began to decrease in frequency as the state became centralized and urbanization occurred. Along with his, Nash (1978:353) comments that women would

have held leadership roles prior to the centralization of political system. It seems that as the Aztec society began to come together as a state, the emergence of their male-dominant ideology was apparent. In the time between their settlement in Chapultepec to their move to Tenochtitlan, there was shift in organization, from the division of clans to the division classes (Nash 1978:352). Previously, women carried bloodline but with the organization shift, the bloodline was now carried down the patrilineal line.

Guidelines for how individuals should act are stressed in the Aztec society. Sahagun notes that “good” women are to attend to others and works to serve others (Sahagun 1969:2). The bad mother is “unreliable” and teaches her children disobedient ways and “expounds nonconformity” (Sahagun 1969:2). A young girl is “obedient [and] modest” (Sahagun 1969:2). The guidelines set by Aztecs for the women’s behavior further show their attempt to dominate over women.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to highlight the importance of ceramic figurines within the Aztec culture. From this, I had hoped to bring about more information about the San Antonio Museum of Art figurine. I feel that the title of the piece (“Female Holding Child”) should be changed, as the figurine is most likely not carrying a child but instead represents female holding a miniature figurine in her arms. The figurine would have been associated with reproduction process and may have been tied to midwifery. In regards to where the piece may have come from, the Texcoco region is a reasonable area to place the figurine. City-states nearby, like Huexotla, where large collections of

complete and fragmented figurines have been found, would have distributed figurines at local markets and some may have traveled to the imperial city of Texcoco. As for the time date, I cannot say with certainty the exact time period the piece was made in. In relation to female figurines being evaluated, the position of women in the Aztec culture was examined. With figurines as an example of popular art, it was a way of resistance against the ideology and give power to women in a subtle way. It is a reminder to all, then and now, that women are not less than men and are highly valued individuals.

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