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Foreward: Aztec Figurine Studies

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Foreword: Aztec Figurine Studies

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Ceramic figurines are one of the mystery artifact categories of ancient Mesoamerica. Although figurines are abundant at archaeological sites from the Early Formative period through Early Colonial Spanish times, we know very little about them. How were figurines used? Who used them? What was their symbolic meaning? Did these human-like objects portray deities or people? Most scholars believe that ceramic figurines were used in some way in rites or ceremonies, but it has been difficult to find convincing evidence for their specific uses or meanings.

The lack of knowledge about the use and significance of ceramic figurines is particularly striking for the Aztec culture of central Mexico.¹ Early Spanish chroniclers devoted literally thousands of pages to descriptions of Aztec religion, yet they rarely mentioned figurines. Ritual codices depict numerous gods, ceremonies, and mythological scenes, yet figurines are not included. Today we have a richly detailed understanding of many aspects of Aztec religion, but figurines play only a minor role in this body of knowledge. An important reason for the omission of figurines from the early colonial textual accounts is that these objects were almost certainly used primarily by women—in the home—for rites of curing, fertility, and divination (Cyphers Guillén 1993; Heyden 1996; Smith 2002), and the Spanish friars who wrote the major accounts of Aztec culture had little knowledge of Aztec women or domestic life (Burkhart 1997; Rodríguez-Shadow 1997).

Ceramic figurines can provide crucial information on Aztec domestic ritual and life. They offer a window on these worlds that are very poorly described in written sources. Given the great importance of these objects, the small number of scholarly studies devoted to them is puzzling and alarming. There is no comprehensive analysis of Aztec ceramic figurines; in fact there is not even an agreed-upon classification or typology of the objects. Only two published studies have illustrations of large numbers of examples (Baer 1996; Parsons 1972).

Given the small number of publications on the topic, Flora Kaplan's MA thesis on Aztec figurines remains, after nearly 50 years, an important work. Kaplan studied a collection of figurines in the American Museum of Natural History that were excavated—but not published—by George Vaillant at the sites of Nonoalco and Chiconauhtla. She analyzed the attributes of the objects in terms of Aztec iconography and described a typology based upon the identification of deities. Her photographs of the objects were superb. A brief historical review of research on Aztec figurines can place this work in its intellectual context, and also help explain why this 50-year-old thesis remains valuable today.

¹ Important studies of pre-Aztec Mesoamerican figurines include Cyphers Guillén (1993), Hammond (1989), Lesure (1999), Marcus (1998), Miller (1975), Sánchez de la Barquera Arroyo (1996), Scott (2001), Stocker (1991), and Stocker and Charlton (2001). Lesure (2002) reviews theories and approaches to ancient figurine studies in general.

Research on Aztec Figurines

The relatively few publications on Aztec figurine research can be divided into studies that focus primarily on whole figurines in museum collections and those that analyze fragmentary examples from archaeological fieldwork. Studies pursuing the first of these approaches have concentrated on the iconography of Aztec figurines, particularly the identification of deities based upon clothing and other attributes. Eduard Seler (1990-98:vol. 2, 166-170), the great Mesoamericanist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, initiated the first approach. He illustrated a number of whole Aztec figurines from the Uhde Collection in Berlin and proposed deity identifications. This tradition of emphasizing the iconography of figurines and the identification of deities continued in the 1950s in papers by Cook de Leonard (1950) and Barlow and Lehmann (1956); the latter paper was later reprinted, in Spanish, in a more accessible source (Barlow and Lehmann 1990). Flora Kaplan's MA thesis was written within this intellectual tradition.

Scholarship on figurines in museum collections continued after 1958 in two types of publication. First, books on Aztec art devote some space to ceramic figurines and their iconography (e.g., Basler and Brummer 1927; Bonifaz Nuño and Robles 1981; Matos Moctezuma 1989; Pasztory 1983). Second, catalogs of museum exhibits of Aztec art typically include several ceramic figurines (e.g., Eggebrecht 1987; Matos Moctezuma and Solís Olguín 2002; Solís Olguín 1991, 2004b). Works of both types feature only a very few of the finest surviving ceramic figurines, ignoring the great majority of the examples in museums. This narrow focus makes it difficult to assess the range of variation in form, style, attributes, or iconography in Aztec figurines (Smith 2004).

There are two major exceptions to this pattern of focusing narrowly on only a few fine figurines: First, Alva Millian's MA thesis, also at Columbia University (Millian 1981), examined a large number of figurines from museums, particularly those in New York and Philadelphia. This is an important work, and photocopies have circulated among Aztec specialists for many years. Unfortunately, the numerous photographs of figurines do not reproduce well in photocopies, limiting the usefulness of the thesis for scholars. Second, the catalog of Aztec ceramics in the Lukas Vischer collection at the Ethnographic Museum in Basel (Baer 1996) contains illustrations and brief descriptions of a large number of Aztec figurines. This is one of the largest museum collections of Aztec figurines, and the catalog includes high-quality photographs and line drawings of the entire corpus. Other studies have used museum collections to address specific kinds of figurines, such as temple models (Schávelzon 1982; Wardle 1912) and early colonial Spanish figurines (Barlow 1946; Von Winning 1988).

These studies of figurines in museum collections take advantage of the complete nature of the objects. A variety of figurine attributes—from the headdress and hairstyle to the types of objects being held (infants, drums, etc.), to specific religious symbols on the figurines—can be analyzed as a complex whole, allowing rich iconographic interpretation. Studies of fragmentary figurines from archaeological excavations, on the other hand, must rely upon a much more limited repertoire of attributes. Only a few of the nearly 2,000 figurine fragments I excavated at Yauhtepec, for example, were sufficiently complete to propose confident identification of specific deities (Smith 2005). Most of the objects are so fragmentary that they can only be identified as a figurine fragment; it is often impossible to determine such basic facts as whether or not they are

anthropomorphic, whether they are male or female, or other features. A further problem characterizes most studies of figurines from archaeological excavations and surface collections: archaeologists have tended to publish and describe only a small proportion of the figurines from individual Aztec sites.

Some archaeological studies provide extensive discussions and illustrations of small sets of complete or nearly-complete figurines from a site, ignoring a larger corpus of fragmentary examples from the same site (e.g., Brumfiel 1996; Cook de Leonard 1950; Guilliem Arroyo 1997; Otis Charlton 2001). Other studies summarize the range of figurines recovered, but with a limited level of illustration and documentation of the corpus from a site or region (Otis Charlton 1994; Smith 2002, 2005). The best publication of a collection of archaeological figurines from Aztec sites remains Mary Parsons' study from the Teotihuacan Valley (Parsons 1972). This work stands out for its comprehensive approach to the corpus of figurines recovered in the region, and for its extensive illustrations.

The Present Work

Flora Kaplan analyzed the nearly 1,000 figurines excavated by George Vaillant at Nonoalco and Chicouauhtla.² Hers was the first comprehensive study of a collection of excavated figurines with provenience information. It established the method—followed later by most other archaeologists—of applying insights from research on whole figurines to collections of fragmentary figurines from excavations. Vaillant's collections differ somewhat from other archaeological collections I am familiar with, in that there are many whole objects and very large pieces; this is a great contrast to the collection of figurines I excavated at Yautepec, for example, which consists mostly of small fragments (Smith 2005). The large size of the fragments from Nonoalco and Chiconauhtla allowed Kaplan to carry out a much more detailed iconographic analysis than is possible with most excavated collections.

This MA thesis is important not just because of the small number of other works on Aztec figurines; it is a significant work of scholarship in its own right. In discussing Flora Kaplan's MA thesis, Alva Millian (1981) states, "The enduring value of her work is the order she imposed on a large body of excavated figurines from the Postclassic period. It is evident that Kaplan's study served as groundwork for Mary Parsons, who has provided the only other comprehensive study on a controlled group to date." Mary Parsons (1972:82) notes that "Her thesis is a very good synthesis of a vast amount of material." These scholars recognize the important place of Flora Kaplan's MA thesis within the history of research on Aztec figurines.

After completing her MA thesis at Columbia University, Flora Kaplan went on to receive her Ph.D. in Anthropology from The Graduate Center, City University of New York. She had a distinguished career at New York University in the Department of Anthropology and in museum studies pursuing research on a variety of topics in the areas of art, crafts, and cognition, in Mesoamerica and Africa. She retired in 2004 as professor *emerita*, Faculty of Arts and Science. Among her many contributions to anthropology I want to mention just one. For her dissertation, Kaplan conducted research on Mexican folk ceramics in Puebla (F.S. Kaplan 1980). A later book

² Vaillant never published these important excavations. Christina Elson has been analyzing his data and the artifacts collections, all housed at the American Museum of Natural History in New York (e.g., Elson 1999; Elson and Smith 2001).

on this topic, *A Mexican Folk Pottery Tradition*, is one of the finest ethnographic studies of traditional Mesoamerican ceramics (F.S. Kaplan 1994a). Particularly noteworthy is her investigation of the cognitive dimensions of ceramic vessels as perceived by their makers and users (F. Kaplan 1981; F.S. Kaplan 1985; F.S. Kaplan and Levine 1981). This research has important implications for archaeologists that have yet to be explored.

Flora Kaplan's MA thesis contained the germs of several of her later research interests. Her use of iconographic data from the codices and chronicles to interpret the forms and meanings of figurines was later replaced by ethnographic interviews and formal analysis to approach the cognitive meanings of contemporary ceramic vessels. Her use of a museum collection may have presaged her later work in museum studies, which included research and publication (e.g., F. Kaplan 1991, 1993; F.S. Kaplan 1994b) as well as teaching and founding the museum studies program in the Graduate School of Arts and Science at New York University.

Given the recent expansion of fieldwork in Aztec archaeology (Hodge 1998; Matos Moctezuma 2003; Smith 2003) and an increased interest in Aztec art as witnessed by major museum exhibits (Alcina Franch, et al. 1992; Matos Moctezuma and Solís Olguín 2002; Solís Olguín 2004a), it is only natural that the present thesis should take its rightful place in the body of scholarship on Aztec ceramic figurines and on Aztec material culture and society generally.

Flora Kaplan and I want to thank the Department of Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History for permission to reproduce the figurines in this thesis. We are grateful for the help provided by Christina Elson (of the American Museum of Natural History). We also thank Marilyn Masson, Director of the Institute for Mesoamerican Studies (University at Albany, State University of New York), for her help in reproducing and distributing this work.

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