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## **Forgotten Images: A Study of the Ceramic Figurines from Teotihuacán, México**

**Research Year:** 1998

**Culture:** Teotihuacán

**Chronology:** Pre-Classic to Early Classic

**Location:** Teotihuacán, México

**Site:** Teotihuacán

The archeological zone of Teotihuacán, México, is located approximately 40 miles northeast of México City. There is little doubt that Teotihuacán was a major city-state that housed a complex urban society (Millon, 1981:198), and ancient occupation at the site was continuous from 150 B.C. to A.D. 750. Millon states that, "For 600 years or more, 85-90 percent of the inhabitants in the eastern and southern Valley of México were concentrated in the Teotihuacán Valley, most of them in the city..." (Millon, 1981:221). At its peak, it is estimated that the population of Teotihuacán may have surpassed 200,000 (Millon, 1981:208), and by A.D. 600 it was the sixth largest city in the world (Chandler and Fox, 1974:368), covering an area of approximately eight square miles.

Clay figurines were produced in the ancient city of Teotihuacán during all eras of occupation, and are found almost without exception in all areas of the site. In the catalog for the exposition "Teotihuacán: Art from the City of the Gods" (Berrin and Pasztory, 1993:222), Warren Barbour writes that "...figurines were manufactured in the millions and form a significant proportion of the total artifactual collection from the ancient city". Moreover, as pointed out by Sue Scott (1994:10), "Figurines [in Mesoamerica] constitute the single most numerous artifact category depicting the human form," thus providing an interesting and often graphic glimpse into the past. The study of clay figurines can be useful in the identification of migration patterns, exchange routes and in the definition of chronologies, but more importantly the clay figurines reflect the ideology, culture and daily life of the people who used and produced them (Noguera, 1965:7).

From 1993 to 2000 I conducted thorough studies on two separate collections of clay figurines and miscellaneous artifacts recovered during excavations conducted by the *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* from 1993-1994, two thousand four hundred fifteen artifacts of which are considered in this study. The first collection is from excavations in Fronts 1, 2 and 3 of the La Ventilla area of the site, directed by Rubén Cabrera Castro. Located in squares N1W1, N1W2, S1W1, and S1W2 (Millon *et. al*,

1973), Front 1 is an architectural compound for civic and religious use, Front 2 is a residential area, and Front 3 is a residential area inhabited by artisans (Sergio Gómez, personal communication, 1998).

The second collection is from excavations in the Group 5' Sector directed by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma from 1993-1994. Located in square N5W1 (Millon et. al, 1973:18), Group 5' consists of a three-temple complex with adjoining living areas. Its chronology is suspected by some investigators to date from the Miccaotli era, having been subsequently abandoned in the Xolalpan period (Paz Bautista, 1994). Nonetheless there was archaeological evidence of some Post-Metepec reuse and possible reoccupation. Moreover, the majority of the figurines from the site date to the pre-Miccaotli phases of Tezoyuca, Patlachique and Tzacualli, giving us a seemingly broader chronological spectrum than was originally reported.

Chronologically, the majority of the figurines from La Ventilla date to the latter phases of Teotihuacán-era occupation (A.D. 450-750) as well as from the later Coyotlatelco period (A.D. 750-1000). The group 5' collection consists mainly of figurines from the earlier periods of occupation at the site (100 B.C. - A.D. 450). Combined, these two areas present material from all Teotihuacán phases, as well as smaller quantities dating from the Pre-Teotihuacán period and continuing on through the Aztec and Colonial phases (there are also several examples of "foreign," i.e. non-Teotihuacán figurines brought in from other sites around Mesoamerica). These collections house representative samples of virtually all of the most common figurine types, as well as fragments of some types not previously recorded in the literature.

For the most part, the distinguishing factor between these collections and the many others gathered at Teotihuacán over the decades is simply the extensive quantity of figurines, their (comparatively) excellent condition, and the fact that they were found in excavated contexts. It is true that the vast majority of figurines found at La Ventilla and Group 5' were originally deposited as architectural fill, which is also the case for almost all of the other figurines that have been found in the ancient city over the years. Nevertheless, these collections house several examples of figurines found in primary contexts, such as one figurine in direct association with the floor of a habitational unit and others which are chronologically important because they were found in sealed contexts. The state of preservation of these collections is impressive; many figurines are complete or nearly complete, and some still have traces of the paint they were decorated with.

This study explores various aspects of the figurines, including: Figurines as a source of social information; clarification of principal questions regarding the material; prior research on Teotihuacán figurines; refinement of the stylistic chronology; nomenclature; general diagnostic features, and; catalog of types (including both anthropomorphs and zoomorphs). One of the most important conclusions drawn from this study is the fact that there is a clear continuity of figurine types throughout the centuries which reflects the stability of certain cultural traditions from generation to generation.

As far as types are concerned, it would not be fair to say that the figurines under consideration in this study are "exceptional" barring a few that have not been reported in the literature prior to this time. On the contrary, the vast majority are types that have already been reported by such authors as Noguera (1975), Séjourné (1966), Barbour (1975), Scott (1994), Kolb (1995), Goldsmith-Jilote (in press), etc. The La Ventilla and Group 5' collections have the good fortune of presenting specimens from all eras of occupation of the old city. As previously mentioned, there are also several examples from the Aztec and Colonial periods, as well as imported figurines from such areas as Michoacán, Tlaxcala and Puebla. What is "exceptional" about these collections is that they provide sufficient data to be able to observe a fixed continuity of types throughout the centuries, and the opportunity to present them in a orderly fashion.

One of the biggest problems hindering figurine research today is the tendency of researchers to call nearly any figurine or attribute thereof a "type". Many investigators see minor differences in styles as chronological markers or entirely separate types. In reality, it stands to reason that many of these differences can be attributed to the personal manufacturing technique of the numerous potters and potters' workshops that provided figurines for a city that, at its height, had an estimated population of nearly 200,000 people. It is obvious that prior to the use of molds, no two handmade figurines would turn out exactly alike, even if made by the same potter to represent the same entity. By mold made times, perhaps one workshop represented a certain figure one way, while another workshop would manufacture that same figure in generally the same way but with a different stylization to some of the attributes. These and other possibilities accounting for differences among figurines have found little recognition in the literature, but are explored in this study.

In terms of chronological interpretation, it is important to keep in mind that the function, use and manufacture of the figurines is very different from the function, use and manufacture of the ceramic vessels, at least in the case of non-ritual ceramics. In fact, it is probable that the artisans who manufactured the figurines were not the same as those who manufactured the ceramics destined for domestic use (Múnera, 1985:5). Barbour (1975:4) writes that "...some of the problems associated with the development of a clear chronology for the figurines has been the result of too closely relating the chronology of the figurines with the chronology of the ceramics". The chronology used in the present study is a combination of those proposed and used by the Teotihuacán Mapping Project (Millon, 1973:Fig. 12), and by Rattray (1966; 1996), having been modified by the author especially for figurines.

The recovery of figurines is not normally the goal of excavation, but nonetheless they are found in large quantities when excavation is carried out. As a consequence, figurines are often treated as "second class citizens" too interesting for the dump (which in the long run is most often the destination of certain artifacts in México due to lack of storage space) but too complex and with too little guidance from the literature to really know how to carry out a worthwhile analysis of them. Perhaps the study undertaken here raises more questions than it answers. We must consider this an advantage in that it will hopefully stimulate future research in this area, and gives at least a basic chronological and typological foundation with which to begin.

As the third most abundant artifact category at the site, it is time that more attention was given to the figurines on a per-project basis. It is hoped that this dissertation will in some way contribute to spawning interest on the subject, not just at Teotihuacán but at other Mesoamerican sites as well. The ongoing study of the figurines will help us fit another piece into the puzzle that is Teotihuacán, in order to eventually meet our collective goal of forming a better understanding of daily life in the great urban center.

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