

# On the Dilemma of a Horn

## *The Horned Shamans of West Mexico*

BY ELIN DANINIEN

IN ONE OF THE WALL cases of the Penn Museum's Mesoamerican Gallery two small figures curl and turn around each other, joined together as they have been for perhaps two thousand years. Each grasps the other by the single horn that protrudes from his forehead. Because this small clay sculpture, like many others from west Mexico, stems from unscientific excavation in the earlier years of the 20th century, it brought with it no contextual information as to its purpose or the identity of its protagonists. Such unproven objects offer greater scope for interpretation, but less possibility for certainty.

In yet another sense, this sculpture presents a small example of the way archaeology works, moving toward an understanding of the past in halting steps, with sometimes faulty



This map of west Mexico illustrates the geographical closeness of the home of the ancient cultures of Jalisco, Colima, and Nayarit to the modern area of the Huichol, a culture that maintains its Precolumbian identity and religious practices, including shamanic trance and visions.





interpretations; occasionally reversing previously upheld theories; using new information to rethink past conclusions; and incorporating ethnographic analogy, mythology, and ethnohistory in the quest to enhance our knowledge of the past.

#### THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF WEST MEXICO

Until very recently, the archaeological region of West Mexico, comprising the modern states of Nayarit, Colima, and Jalisco, an area roughly the size of the state of Arizona, was more readily identified by its pre-Columbian art than by any data based on officially sanctioned excavations. Innumerable clay figurines, in varying attitudes, postures, and degrees of sophistication, were brought out of shaft tombs, some as deep as 16 meters, with one or two chambers leading off from the bottom of the center shaft. These tombs were used from about 200 B.C. to A.D. 500 to bury the dead.

Because so many of these figurines lacked obvious accoutrements of ritual or rulership, they were considered to be representations of the activities of daily life. Ancient West Mexico was considered to have been outside the central region of Mesoamerica that gave rise to complex societies. Instead, it was seen as a region that had been populated by egalitarian groups living in villages where craftsmen created nothing more than “folk art,” the label given to these small clay figurines.

The first two official excavations took place in the 1930s; a regional survey in 1946 was not followed up until the 1950s and 70s, when some mapping and recording of looted shaft and chamber tombs was done. In the 1970s, a survey of the site of Teochitlan showed evidence of hierarchy, ranked lineages, and ritual architecture, criteria for social organization at the chieftain level.

In 1993, the discovery of an important tomb at Huitzilapa, Jalisco, was the first, major, completely unlooted shaft tomb to be scientifically excavated. Dating to about A.D. 200, this tomb's evidence put to rest forever the idea that the region was completely isolated from other Mesoamerican cultures, or that it never advanced past the stage of egalitarian village life. The two chambers of the Huitzilapa tomb were at the bottom of an 8-meter deep shaft; inside were grave goods that included perishable food offerings and mats in which the bodies had been wrapped. Each chamber contained three bodies. The most elaborately arrayed individual was a male, with a large number of jades, shell ornaments, earrings, and beads. At his side and on his loins were conch shells, ornamented with painted stucco.

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In addition to his horn, this clay figurine (#60-7-20, from Colima, A.D. 100-400) wears what appears to be a headdress in the form of the sun's rays. Among the Huichol of today's West Mexico, it is the shaman whose power causes the sun to rise. A similar belief may have been common among the people of the Precolumbian Colima culture as well.

MAP AND PHOTOGRAPHS: Penn Museum



Pottery figurines from Colima, Mexico, dating to A.D. 100-400. (H:6.7cm. #66-30-20): These two figures, originally referred to as “wrestlers,” have been identified as shamans, individuals who communicate directly with supernaturals, sometimes achieving trance with the help of hallucinogens, sometimes seeming to transform themselves into gods or their animal counterparts. They were frequently depicted as horned.

**This object was purchased by the Museum in 1966, following what was then accepted practice. In April, 1970, the Museum published what came to be known as the Pennsylvania Declaration, stating that no object would be purchased without “information about the different owners, place of origin, legality of export, etc.” Later that year the United Nations issued the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. Similar resolutions have been adopted by the Society for American Archaeology, the Archaeological Institute of America, and the American Anthropological Association. Despite these resolutions, and the increasing vigilance of governmental agencies, the looting of pre-Columbian sites continues unabated.**

#### FROM THE SECULAR TO THE SHAMANIC

One-horned figures, frequently found among the shaft-tomb art, had been identified by art historians as warriors. In an article in 1965, and in his 1966 dissertation, Peter T. Furst put forward his innovative theory that shamanic religion and shamanic practices, similar to those documented in other parts of the Americas and in Asia, were practiced in the villages of west Mexico. He cited as evidence many of the figurines that had been labeled as “folk art,” and in particular the “Colima One-Horns.” These, he said, represented shamans and shamanic tomb guardians.

In the years that followed Furst’s controversial publications, much evidence has accumulated to confirm the presence

of shamanism in Mesoamerican antiquity and, among some traditional groups, its continuity into the 21st century. Although some difference of opinion continues, the identification of shamanism among early Mesoamerican cultures, and recognition that much of the tomb art of west Mexico was shamanic in nature, have been accepted by most anthropologists.

#### SHAMANS AND SHAMANISM IN MESOAMERICA

Unlike priests, who communicate with the gods through offerings, prayer, and public ritual, shamans interact directly with the supernatural through trance, spirit possession, and transformation. The word “shaman” is of Siberian origin, and many of the beliefs and practices of Mesoamerican shamans contain much that is Siberian, including ecstatic trance, supernatural flight, and animal spirit companions. Priests may be part of a religious or political hierarchy, while shamans depend on personal magnetism and successful performance.

Shamanism may have come to the Americas with the first people to cross the Bering Strait land bridge. Evidence for its practice has been found from Alaska to the southernmost regions of South America. Peter Furst has identified 3000-year-old Olmec sculptures as human shamans in the act of transforming themselves into jaguars.

As the Mesoamerican cultures developed from villages to cities, the roles of shaman and priest became intermingled, with shamanic practices surviving in much priestly ritual. Today, the shaman as healer is still part of traditional culture among the Maya of highland Guatemala, southern Mexico, and Belize. The geographic and cultural isolation of the Huichol of west Mexico allowed them to maintain their culture in a relatively intact state during the centuries since the Spanish Conquest; shamans and shamanism have been, and continue to be, part of their daily lives.

#### THE FIGURES IN QUESTION

Within the recognized symbolic criteria, the small clay figures that are the subject of this report are clearly shamans. They have the single forehead horns that Furst has labeled as part of a shaman’s regalia in other figurines. The kilts these figures wear are further evidence supporting their identification as shamans. That these garments have been reserved for priests, rulers, and shamans is evinced in figurines recovered from Tlatilco in central Mexico (*ca.* 1200 B.C.) and the Olmec region (*ca.* 1000 B.C.) in what are now the states of Tabasco and Veracruz. Nose rings and necklaces adorning these figures are additional proof of their elite status.

But what is the horn? What does it represent? And why use a single horn, rather than the paired horns usually found

in nature? There seems to be no standard to which all the horns conform. The shape is sometimes little more than a conical knob; on other figures, almost torpedo-shaped; horns on still others resemble tongue depressors. The horns can be straight or curved, a pointing finger, an elongated cone, or a rounded pyramid.

Furst has proposed that the origin of the single horn may lie in observations of the native male turkey, which has a hornlike wattle above its beak that becomes especially prominent during mating season. Other possibilities include the horned serpent or the rhinoceros beetle, which some indigenous beliefs connect to the underworld. Furst suggests that the smaller, knob-like appearance denotes a novice, while the larger horn indicates a shaman in full possession of his powers.

Art historian Mark Miller Graham has another theory about the origin of the horn and its purpose. He believes that its origin is in the spires of the conch shell, which has a long association with rulership in central Mexico and among the Maya. Conch shells appear as part of the headdress in portraits of Maya rulers and they are important elements in the art of Teotihuacan. Rather than identifying a shaman, Graham holds that conch spire headdresses are part of the iconography of rulership, and evidence for the developing hierarchy of west Mexican society.

If the horn is a conch spire, and part of the ruler's regalia, does this preclude its use by shamans? Recent interpretations of Maya epigraphy and archaeology conclude that one of the roles filled by the rulers of the great Maya cities during the Classic era (*ca.* A.D. 250–900) is as the premier shaman of the city. Thus, since rulers frequently performed as shamans, and were considered to become supernatural after death, the identification of the horn as a conch shell spire does not rule out its designation as a symbol of shamanic power.

The conch shells found in the Huitzilapa tomb, covering the male figure's loins and placed at his side, suggest that he, perhaps, was just such a shaman chief of the site of Huitzilapa, which contains mounds and plazas, ball courts, terraces, residential communities, and circular complexes that may have been ritual centers.

Another possibility for the origin of the single horn lies in an extrapolation from some additional Maya rulership symbolism. The ruler is responsible for the fertility of the land, and his offering of blood drawn from the penis is equivalent to semen. This sense of the ruler as progenitor is brought out most clearly in the name of the founder of the dynasty of the Maya site of Yaxchilan, where his name glyph shows a penis drawn above the jaguar head. The glyph is read as Progenitor Jaguar, or Penis Jaguar.

Other rulership glyphs also include the phallus, reinforcing the idea that virility is an essential element of rulership. Might not the single horn be a symbolic statement of masculinity, as well as shamanic power and rulership? After all, one of the strengths of long-lived symbols is their ability to incorporate and convey multiple meanings.

Thus, the two figures in the gallery, once called wrestlers, are now clearly seen to be shamans, perhaps shaman-chiefs, or shaman-kings. But why do they do battle, grasping each other by their symbols of power? Are they engaged in a struggle for supremacy? Is one shaman evil, and the other good? Is this an event that occurs in a myth lost in antiquity? While one day we may be certain of the reason for the single horn and its material, we will probably never know why these two figures are locked in antagonistic embrace. The intrigue of that question is, perhaps, part of their continuing hold on us, proof that their power survives the centuries. 🏠

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#### For Further Reading

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