



Winter 2003

In the House: Maya Nobility and Their Figurine-Whistles

Julia A. Hendon
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/anthfac>



Part of the [Archaeological Anthropology Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Hendon, Julia A. 2003. In the House: Maya Nobility and their Figurine-Whistles. *Expedition* 45:3:28-33.

This is the publisher's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/anthfac/1>

This open access article is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

In the House: Maya Nobility and Their Figurine-Whistles

Abstract

Studies a large collection of clay figurines in the Copan Valley of Honduras. Describes the different kinds of figurine-whistles that high status Maya had in their houses.

Keywords

Maya, clay, figurines, whistles, Honduras, Mesoamerican, Copan

Disciplines

Anthropology | Archaeological Anthropology

IN THE HOUSE: MAYA NOBILITY AND THEIR FIGURINE-WHISTLES

By Julia A. Hendon

Unspeakable dignity isolates the diminutive nobleman. Dominating the shelf, his regnant nature ignores the bric-a-brac obstructing his view. With arms folded and head imperially lifted, he waits cross-legged for the next petitioner.

THUS EVAN CONNELL IN HIS NOVEL, *The Connoisseur*, describes a Precolumbian Maya clay figurine sitting in the window of an antique shop. I first read Connell's novel, about a middle-aged insurance executive obsessed with buying Precolumbian art, while carrying out archaeological excavations in Honduras. In these excavations, I recovered figurines that were stylistically different from the one described above but equally compelling to the eye. I was struck by how well Connell captured the appeal that such three-dimensional clay images exert over us today. His novel also, unfortunately, illustrates the degree to which Mesoamerican figurines have been considered collectibles. Since many figurines have been looted and then sold in the art market, their location, dating, and context have been lost, information that no amount of connoisseurship can replace.

PUTTING FIGURINES BACK INTO THEIR SOCIAL SETTING

What can we learn if we treat figurines as things that Mesoamerican people made, used, exchanged, and valued? To do this, we need to put figurines back into a social context and

think about how figurines reflect the beliefs and cultural values of the people living in Mexico and Central America before European contact. Good archaeological provenience allows us to know the kinds of settings in which figurines were typically used, what kinds of imagery are emphasized, and where they were made.



A figurine head from my 2002 excavations at Cerro Palenque in the Lower Ulua Valley. Stylistically similar to ones found at Copan, it demonstrates the calm expression and youthful aspect of most representations of humans.

peak, they are found in almost all areas where archaeological research has been carried out.

THE COPAN VALLEY

I studied a large collection of figurines recovered from excavations in the Copan Valley. During the Late Classic period, the Valley was home to a politically centralized Maya kingdom. The rulers of this kingdom lived in an elaborate center with temples,

In Honduras, where I have done archaeological fieldwork since 1980, we can infer the significance of clay figurines from their long history of use and their widespread distribution. Precolumbian societies of the region made and used figurines starting as early as 1100 B.C., when settled village life began there. During the Late to Terminal Classic periods (ca. A.D. 650-1000), when occupation in Honduras was at a



LEFT: Map of southeastern Mesoamerica showing the major sites mentioned in the article.

BELOW: Settlement in the Copan Valley showing the densely settled residential zone surrounding the royal precinct. The figurines discussed here come from the eastern section of the zone.



palaces, a ball court, and carved monuments. They used hieroglyphic writing to record their achievements and monumental sculpture to create large-scale images of members of the royal house.

A densely settled residential area surrounds this center. The residents of this zone lived in compounds comprised of three to four large houses on raised foundations, arranged around a paved courtyard. The quality of the architecture and the presence of decorated pottery serving and eating vessels, marine shell and jade jewelry, and other markers of social importance and wealth commonly found in Mesoamerican societies of this time period, show us that the area, as a whole, was occupied by families of high status within Copan society. Beyond this inner circle lived farmers scattered throughout the rest of the Valley.

The figurines I have studied come from the eastern section of the dense residential zone. We found 511 whole or partial figurines during excavation of 13 residential compounds, carried out from 1981–1984 by the Copan Archaeological Project Phase II (PAC II). Complementary excavations of small rural farmsteads by PAC II recovered almost no figurines.

WHY HAVE FIGURINES IN THE HOUSE?

Although the impression conveyed by the looting of figurines for sale to private collectors is that figurines all come from burials, examination of scientifically excavated samples reveals that this is not the case. Some of the Copan figurines do come from graves but only a few of the many burials excavated in the residential area contained figurines. The majority were found in the trash deposits that had accumulated behind the houses we excavated. This suggests that figurines were used by the living residents of the compound and then discarded at some point afterwards.

The fact that we find broken figurines in trash deposits does not mean that these objects had no value or were treated with indifference. The Copan residential trash deposits contained



ABOVE: Members of the Copan nobility lived in large residential compounds such as this one. Most of the figurines came from trash deposits located behind houses. Other buildings in the compound include storage buildings, kitchens, and temples, such as the central building in this photograph.

many items used in daily life and for more special occasions. Incense burners and decorated bowls and plates for serving food were in common use and indicate that the high-status people living in these residential compounds actively engaged in ritual activities designed to promote group solidarity and reinforce social identity through the celebration of events significant to the family. Figures, whether made of clay, stone, wood, or even corn dough, are integral to these kinds of ceremonies in Mesoamerica today as in the past. Once the ceremony was over, many of these figures were discarded or broken as a way of permanently removing them from daily life.

What role did figurines play in these ceremonies? This question has been addressed most thoroughly by archaeologists working with Formative period (*ca.* 1600–100 B.C.) figurines found through the excavation of houses. Joyce Marcus has argued that figurines from the Oaxaca Valley, Mexico, served as stand-ins for dead family members, becoming a focal point for communicating with ancestors. Rosemary Joyce, studying both Formative and Classic period figurines from Honduras, considers figurines to be representations of ideal people or types of people that were intended to provide models for the behavior and appearance of living people. As both scholars have noted, Formative period human figurines are much more likely to depict women, suggesting that women's ritual activities, social roles, and comportment were of particular interest to these societies.

This argument may be extended to the Classic period, especially in Honduras, where the later figurine traditions continue to emphasize women, although representations of men become more common than earlier. Since both men and women were modeled out of clay, the Late Classic Copan elite wished to have images of ideal persons of both genders. A striking example of this is one of the few figurines from a burial. A man and woman stand side-by-side, arms clasped. Facing the viewer, they present an image of intimacy and harmony. At least two other examples of this couple have been found, one from another burial and one from a trash deposit.

Many of the Classic period figurines are also whistles, something not found in the Formative period. As musical instruments or noisemakers, figurines would have added an

important element to these family rituals. Murals, scenes painted on clay vessels, and commentaries written after the Spanish conquest, attest to the importance of music in Mesoamerican religious life. Drumming, singing, and playing wind instruments such as whistles, flutes, or shell trumpets, accompanied the large-scale ceremonies in Maya and Aztec society. Figurine-whistles would have provided families with a simple way of providing music for their smaller-scale ritual events.

WHAT KINDS OF FIGURINE-WHISTLES DID HIGH STATUS MAYA HAVE IN THEIR HOUSES?

Few of the figurines I studied were intact. Although their broken state sometimes makes identification difficult, over one-third of the pieces (38 percent) represented human beings, slightly less than one-third (27 percent) represented animals, and the final third (35 percent) were unidentifiable as to species. If we look only at the 332 that I could determine were human or animal, representations of people predominate, making up about 60 percent of the sample. Birds, dogs, and felines are the most frequently depicted animals. In order to pursue the notion of figurines as representations of socially accepted models of behavior and appearance, I have concentrated on the human figures.

Most of these clay people are simply dressed. Women wear long shifts — or have pieces of cloth wrapped around their bodies, like a sarong, that sometimes exposes the breasts. Men wear loincloths with the long end hanging down in front. Occasionally they also wear a kind of coat. Men and women have a standard set of jewelry, made up of round, flattened earspools and a bead necklace. Sometimes beaded armbands are added. In real life, jewelry like

this served as markers of social status, not gender.

Figurine faces do not look like portraits of individual people. Instead, they seem to represent two types or categories of people. The first type, which is by far the most common, is someone with an unlined face and a calm, dignified expression. These figures look young, but are not children. To me, these faces look like people in “the prime of life,” old enough to be full-fledged active and vigorous adult members of society. Their eyes and mouths may be open or shut. If the mouth is open, the makers of the figurines were careful to delineate the teeth.



One of the couple figurine-whistles. Note how the artist placed the man and woman's earspools one above the other. While this may have been done to solve a technical or design issue, the clasped arms of the figures also reinforce the viewer's sense of emotional closeness.



TOP: Figurine-whistles from northern Honduras, confiscated by the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History, as part of their ongoing efforts to control the looting of archaeological sites.

BOTTOM: Figurine molds and heads from a small site in the Lower Ulua valley excavated in 2001. The molds were used to produce figurines wearing turbans made of folded cloth, one of the most common headdresses found at Copan. In contrast to Copan, where they are almost unknown, molds are common in large and small communities in the Ulua region.



Some of these young adults have teeth that look like they have been filed or artificially reshaped, another practice we know was carried out by people of high social status in Maya society. The second type is someone who is clearly old, with many wrinkles and the sunken cheeks of a person who has lost some teeth. These old people appear to be in some pain or at least look more troubled than their young counterparts, with open, twisted mouths or faces.

Although it is possible to group the young adults into several stylistic groups, based, for example, on how the eyes are made or the shape of the nose, they nevertheless all share the characteristics discussed above. It is mainly their headdresses that set them apart. This seems to be how the makers and users of human figurines thought they should be differentiated. The most common form of head covering is a cloth turban. The different ways the cloth is folded, decorated, and tied create a range of intricate designs. Some people wear headbands, the clay incised to indicate the texture or pattern of the cloth. Men have feathers attached to the front of their headbands. Women bind most of their hair tightly to their head with the band but allow one lock to hang loose. A fancier headband, with three beads attached to the front, is used to tie up short hair, which rises up above the headband. Another head-dress, usually worn by women, is a wide-

brimmed hat with a big bow in the front. Others have headdresses comprised of the head of an animal or grotesque-looking, imaginary creature. The hair, when shown, is carefully cut and very neat.

Just as the faces are calm, the bodies are shown in static poses. Single figures of men and women either stand, with their arms close to their sides and their hands resting on their stomach, or sit, with hands resting on their knees. They may hold something in their hands, such as a staff, pot, child, or small animal. The couple figurines, despite their embrace, do not seem more active in their pose.

WHERE DID THE FIGURINE-WHISTLES COME FROM?

The human figurines I have discussed here, as well as many of the animals, were made using molds. Yet only one mold fragment was recovered from the 13 residential compounds excavated. And this mold was designed to make an animal whistle. Nor have molds been found in the more rural sites that have been studied. It looks as if the Copan elite were getting their images of ideal humans from somewhere else. But the source of most of their mold-made figurine-whistles was not their Maya neighbors to the west and north but rather the complex societies of northern Honduras, where such figurines were manufactured and used throughout the Classic period.

These societies, located northeast of the Copan Valley in the Naco, Lower Ulua, and Comayagua Valleys, did not use Maya hieroglyphic writing and had their own distinctive styles of pottery, architecture, and sculpture. They also manufactured and used figurines in abundance. Unlike the Copan Valley, where almost no figurines have been found outside the elite zone, figurines and whistles were used by all levels of society in northern Honduras for ritual offerings and household ceremonies. In the Naco Valley, manufacturing of many different craft items, including figurines, was centralized in the political center of La Sierra. In the Lower Ulua Valley, by contrast, manufacture was decentralized and took place in both large centers and small villages.

At my current research site of Cerro Palenque, a large community that dominated the Lower Ulua valley A.D. 850–1000, I have found broken molds and figurines in trash deposits, often in association with large amounts of incense burners and food serving vessels. Ongoing excavations by Jeanne Lopiparo of the




Figurine molds and bodies also from the northern Ulua Valley. The woman holds a clay pot. Figurines like this were imported into the Copan Valley for the use of the Maya nobility.

University of California at Berkeley in contemporaneous small communities north of Cerro Palenque have found an abundance of figurines and molds as well.

The stylistic variety and different kinds of clay used to make the figurines suggest that the Copan elite were getting their figurine-whistles from many different northern Honduran communities. People at Copan also liked the beautiful polychrome pottery made in northern Honduras. Once again, they looked north and east for a source of imported pottery, not west into the Maya heartland. The puzzling thing is what northern Honduran societies received in return, since little tangible evidence of Copan-produced products has been found in this area. The Copan elite may have been very interested in the acquisition of finely crafted items from their northeastern neighbors but those neighbors seem not to have reciprocated interest in Copan's material culture.

CONCLUSIONS

Excavations in the Copan Valley have collected a large sample of figurines from residential areas. Not only do I have many examples to study but I also have good archaeological provenience for them that tells me where each figurine was found and what other kinds of objects it was associated with. This combination has allowed me to look at the kinds of images the figurines represent and where and how they were used by the Maya living in the Valley. The concentration of figurines in trash deposits behind high status houses, and the few cases where figurines are included in burials, give us further insight into their social context and meaning than could be obtained from studying the figurines in isolation. Noble, wealthy members of the Late Classic Maya kingdom of Copan used small representations of men and women as part of the routine of their domestic life. Farmers and other people of lower social status and wealth living scattered throughout the Valley did not.

Carefully dressed and wearing valuable jewelry, these figures presented an image of people who were calm, self-controlled, healthy, and in the prime of life. Rather than conveying a sense of individual personality, the figurines show us an ideal that speaks to the concerns of the noble families who used them. As images of men and women, they embody the proper dress, look, and attitude of those of high rank. As whistles, they allow people to play music that was important to religious ceremonies or social events. And as imports, they demonstrate their owners' abilities to acquire objects from outside of the local Valley and imply contact with different groups of people. 

Julia A. Hendon is associate professor of Anthropology at Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, PA. She graduated in 1979 from the University of Pennsylvania and received her doctorate in anthropology from Harvard University in 1987. A specialist in Mesoamerican archaeology with interests in household archaeology, gender, economic specialization, and the development of complex societies, Dr. Hendon has concentrated her fieldwork and research on the Classic period Maya and neighboring complex societies in northern Honduras. Since 1998, she has directed the Cerro Palenque Archaeological Project. Dr. Hendon also conducted fieldwork in Guatemala, Belize, Arizona, and England.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Bob Preucel for first suggesting this article to me. My research at Copan was supported financially by the PAC II, Harvard University, and the National Science Foundation. My research at Cerro Palenque is supported by Gettysburg College, the Heinz Family Foundation, and the National Science Foundation. William T. Sanders provided me with the opportunity to work at Copan and write my dissertation on the elite residential zone. Lic. Carmen Julia Fajardo, head of the department of archaeological research at the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History, kindly gave me permission to use data from Copan and Cerro Palenque in this article. Jeanne Lopiparo supplied me with slides of figurine molds from her excavations. Amy Yarnell provided important data entry assistance. The analysis described here has benefited substantially from discussions with Rosemary Joyce. I am solely responsible for the interpretation presented here and any errors that it may contain.



FOR FURTHER READING

Boone, Elizabeth H., and Gordon R. Willey, eds. *The Southeast Classic Maya Zone*. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1988.

Healy, Paul. "Music of the Maya." *Archaeology* 41,1(1988):24-31.

Hendon, Julia A. "Having and Holding: Storage, Memory, Knowledge, and Social Relations." *American Anthropologist* 102(2002):42-53.

Joyce, Rosemary A. "Women's Work: Images of Production and Reproduction in Pre-Hispanic Southern Central America." *Current Anthropology* 34(1993):255-274.

Joyce, Rosemary A., and Julia A. Hendon. "Heterarchy, History, and Material Reality: 'Communities' in Late Classic Honduras." In *The Archaeology of Communities: A New World Perspective*, edited by Marcello A. Canuto and Jason Yaeger, pp.143-160. London: Routledge, 2000.

Marcus, Joyce. *Women's Ritual in Formative Oaxaca: Figurine-making, Divination, Death and the Ancestors*. Memoirs of the Museum of Anthropology, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 33, 1998.

Schortman, Edward M., and Patricia A. Urban. "Living on the Edge: Core/Periphery Relations in Ancient Southeastern Mesoamerica." *Current Anthropology* 35(1994):401-430.