

ARCHAEOLOGY

# Mystery of Prehistoric Clay Figures is Believed Solved

## French Physician Shows that All Figurines he Gathered In Mexico Represent People in Distress of Mind or Body

A FRENCH PHYSICIAN may have the right answer to the riddle of at least some of the small, "unexplained," prehistoric clay figures of people—persistent puzzles to archaeologists—which are found almost everywhere in Mexico.

The figurines are only a few inches high. Most of them are crudely made, but are extremely clever. Although of pre-Columbian manufacture, they are still very plentiful in most fields and archaeological sites.

What were they used for?

Dr. E. Berillon suggests an answer, at least for many figures which he has gathered from all parts of Mexico. All his little human figures represent people in distress of mind or body. There is a woman whose body is covered with eruptions, a man in agony from toothache, another with colic in his liver. Still another is insane, tied up in a

"straitjacket." Such figurines, Dr. Berillon thinks, were thank-offerings to the gods for curing ailments of body and soul, or petitions to them to work such cures. All of them are pierced with holes, and may have hung upon some ancient altar or idol.

Dr. Berillon has studied large numbers of these little clay figures that seem to portray suffering, and he thinks the art is so directly to the point that he can tell what was wrong with the victim. The obvious eruptions on the woman's body, he believes, may represent ordinary pimples, or they may be syphilitic sores—if, as many doctors believe, that disease is of American origin.

One of the most interesting figures is that which he believes represents an insane person. This figurine is tied up, in a prehistoric straitjacket. The mouth is open and the tongue is out, and on the figurine's back is a lizard

gnawing at his brain. Mental diseases, Dr. Berillon says, were believed by the ancient Aztecs to have been caused by lizards. If his interpretation of the figure is true, then the Aztecs knew that the mind centered in the head.

While the actual use of these ancient images and idols cannot be conclusively proven, they are found by thousands from Mexico to northern South America. Of course, not all of them are "pathological" like those studied by Dr. Berillon. Sometimes the figures are found in graves, and appear to have been portraits or caricatures of the departed. Female figures are plentiful in fields, and archaeologists think they might have been clay prayers for taller corn, better beans, or hotter chile peppers, since the female figure is said to have represented productiveness.

### Modern Customs Similar

These are only guesses of archaeologists. But in view of Dr. Berillon's suggestion, it is interesting to note customs in Mexico today. Everywhere the Mexican Indian gives modern "ex votos" to the Christian God or to the saints. In almost any Indian town in Mexico the Virgin or patron saint of the local church, whoever it may be, has his mantle or robe covered with an astonishing number of little silver arms, legs, eyes, heads, hearts, noses, or other parts of the human body. Figurines of the whole body are common also. These are gratitude offerings of the already cured, or petitions of those still suffering.

The Indian prays not only for the welfare of his own body, but for his farm animals and pets. He also prays for his crops and fields, and for rain in drought. If his burro is incapacitated with a sore back, a little silver burro goes upon the hem of the Virgin's robe in the morning. Or just before the new brood of turkeys is hatched, the Indian may pin a silver turkey upon the heart of San Lorenzo or of San Francisco or the Virgin of Guadalupe or of Soledad, so that they will not forget what is expected of them. Images of saints are known to have been stood upside down in a corner when they failed to grant some reasonable request. The robes of the Virgin are sometimes pathological museums in silver, or mingled botanical and zoological gardens. One saint's statue in Cordoba, in the State of Vera Cruz, had on its mantle, among other silver offerings, a bull, a corn ear, a cat and a turkey.

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THANKSGIVING OR APPEAL?

One or the other, it is believed, was the object of modeling such clay figures which are only a few inches high. The above sketch shows the figure on the left to be suffering, supposedly, from toothache. The other figure seems to have the colic.