



The tribal medicine man chants loudly and shakes a rattle as he leads his subordinates in a chorus.

PRE-COLUMBIAN MEDICINE MEN

# Relics Show Their Merits

By Faye Marley

► Long before Columbus arrived in the Americas, medicine men in Mexico and Peru were forging ahead with brain surgery, cesarian sections, leg amputations and treatment of some diseases still confounding modern science.

Examples of pre-Columbian sculpture that may have been teaching models for Stone Age medics have been found by archaeologists and are being exhibited at the National Library of Medicine near Washington.

The clay figures are mute testimony to the skill of the primitive surgeon as well as the artists who molded them. In some fields, the early Peruvians appear to have been ahead of Civil War surgeons.

"We only started brain surgery 80 years ago," Dr. Abner I. Weisman of New York Medical College told Science Service. Dr. Weisman loaned his collection for the exhibit.

The Peruvians were trephining by cutting a hole in the skull with a sharp stone in primitive times, he said. The "surgeon" used coca juice to ease the pain, letting it drip from his mouth as he chewed a quid while he worked.

The figure on the cover is an example of splinting a broken bone in the upper arm. The headgear is typical of that worn by the Nayarit Indians of Mexico, and the swollen lips are a mark of social prominence among the tribes.

Dr. Weisman believes this figure is the only one in America. Among the 131 pieces displayed are some that show the squatting method of bearing children, the presence of syphilis or some other subtropical disease such as yaws, the existence of cancer, dwarfism and other congenital defects.

Some of the jug figures in Dr. Weisman's exhibit are examples of water retention rather than of obesity, he believes, although some students have simply called them "fat men."

Among the collected paraphernalia of the early medicine man of Western Mexico are whistles formed like a dog's head, an owl head, a birdman and a medical inhaler.

Dr. Weisman's collection, which has just come from Stockholm, where the King of Sweden introduced it at the Museum of National Antiquity, is to be returned to the owner's private museum in a New York brownstone.

Dr. Weisman, a sometime archaeologist as well as a physician, has done some digging himself. But most of his collection was bought or was in the form of personal gifts from Latin American friends. He has been collecting sculpture for 26 years, and his is the largest collection in the United States made up of exclusively medical figures of the pre-Columbian era. The 131 items he is exhibiting are a part of a collection of some 3,000 pieces that date back to 2,000 B.C.

Many archeologists agree that, like all other sculpture of that era, medical sculpture was almost always placed in graves, either as a part of the dead person's treasured possessions, or perhaps as an explanation to the gods of the circumstances of illness or death.

The viewpoint Dr. Weisman holds, however, is that the sculptures were actually teaching models.

As evidence, he points to the graphic representations of the symptoms and signs of malnutrition, deformity, physical and mental illness, the states of pregnancy and childbirth, the techniques of amputation, trephining, and perhaps even cesarian section captured in clay.

Figures showing abdominal incision could be either examples of cesarian section or ritual incisions in fulfillment of a vow. But it is likely that in some cases, at least, the purpose was obstetric surgery.

Another question that apparently never can be definitely answered is whether there was syphilis before Columbus.



Mother's hand on a child's fevered brow is timeless.



Multiple cancer is possible in this swollen figure.

Specimens of pre-Columbian sculpture showing skin lesions (see picture) are quite rare, and those that have been found illustrate various kinds. None can be satisfactorily diagnosed as secondary syphilitic lesions, says the collector, though defenders of the reputation of Columbus' crew have raised the point as evidence that the disease predates Columbus' arrival.

One figure shows twins joined together. In pre-Peruvian societies it was thought that twins could be a sign of marital infidelity—hence why should two babies be born? Or were they a superabundant gift from the gods? In any case, one baby was often killed at birth and placed in a special jar for preservation. In Western Mexico, however, there was evidence of identical twins up to young adulthood. The larger collection includes a representation of twins.

One thing that primitive mothers shared with the modern parent is shown in a figure of a mother hovering over her sick child as she, perhaps, brings him to a doctor for diagnosis and treatment.

Dr. Weisman believes his collection answers the questions: Were pre-Columbian medicine men quack healers and charlatans, or scientists and surgeons?

"Pre-Columbian sculptors," the collector says, "depicted the pathology of many diseases, the physical states of their people, the knowledge of their physicians and the skill of their surgeons."

Dr. Martin M. Cummings, director of the National Library of Medicine, says of the exhibit:

"Dr. Weisman's sculptures are entrancing as objets d'art and intriguing to historians and physicians."

Said Dr. Weisman, "I view my collection as being in the Sigerist tradition. I am proud to dedicate the exhibition at the National Library of Medicine to his memory." Dr. Henry E. Sigerist was a foremost authority on the history of medicine. He died in 1957.



Mexican Indian woman kneeling with newborn baby.