

April 2001

Pulque Cups

Many years ago when my twin brother Scott and I first began to assemble a library on the civilizations of ancient America, among our first acquisitions was a thin book on prehispanic art and mythology. One of its most memorable illustrations was that of a curious pedestal cup made of baked clay and painted with skulls and crossbones and other strange symbols. These designs appeared to be executed in black paint on a white slip ground giving the object a dramatic even barbaric appearance that nevertheless was quite elegant. The cup was said to have come from Cholula and to be of Aztec and thus late post classic workmanship. It was almost certainly created between 1325 to 1521 C.E.

In the years following that first discovery I came upon several more examples of these strange black and white cups, all with pedestal bases, narrow hour glass mid-sections topped by flaring bowls presumably to contain a ritual liquid of some kind, very possibly pulque. I now know of the existence of a dozen of these cups which are now generally referred to as "Pulque Vessels". There are six in the Gentling collection, two in the Mexica hall at the Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia, and one at the Delgado Museum of Art in New Orleans. Two cups were sold at Sotheby's in New York on May 27, 1998. And of course the first cup I saw illustrated Irene Nicholson's 1967 book, "Mexican and Central American Mythology".

When all these cups are viewed together one can see that they possess a distinct and shared iconography that almost compels the observer to conclude that they were created for a specific ritual purpose. But if this is true, what could that ritual be? No less an authority than H.B. Nicholson is puzzled by them and merely suggests (Nicholson 1983) that they were possibly used in a funereal context. Pastory and a frustrating number of other scholars offer us less. They avoid attempts at seriously interpreting iconography and seldom go beyond simply a basic description of design elements of pottery decoration, leaving the student of the subject to struggle on his own.

Early in our studies of pre-Columbian ceramics my brother and I became increasingly aware that, no matter how simple the painted designs might be, they were not applied to pottery for their decorative value, not even the simplest designs. Those who believe otherwise - and I am afraid there are many - are misled by the western world's increasing secularization of art and iconography over the last three centuries. There was no secular world in ancient Mexico. All of existence was infused with spirit, and every human activity had ritual significance and was a reflection or model of the first acts of creation.

The making of pottery was no minor activity. It required considerable technical knowledge, effort and skill. All pottery was born of the substance of the sacred earth itself,

manipulated by artists whom the ancients believed were in touch with the spirit, and made hard through the agency of sacred fire. It was thus born in a fusion of spirit with matter that lent every cup, bowl and plate, no matter how simple, a dignity and symbolic significance that was, I believe, universally acknowledged. This is probably true for ancient pottery all over the world, but for the student of pre-Colombian ceramics any attempt to interpret the "messages" of its iconography will be greatly helped by a basic understanding of just how cups, bowls or plates almost certainly were perceived in the ancient mind.

In the fall of 2000 a good friend of mine, a prominent Mayanist, sent me a copy of Karl Taub's essay titled "The Turquoise Hearth." It was subtitled "Fire, Self Sacrifice, and the Central Mexican Cult of War". My friend told me that there was much about the work that puzzled her or that she simply did not understand. For Scott and me, however, the paper covered much familiar territory while at the same time offering new and exciting information and insights. Many of Taub's observations were similar to my own which I had written in 1993 in a rambling discourse titled, "The Xiuhtlalpilli, Royalty and the Cult of Fire." My paper had been an answer to Patricia Anawalt's article on the xiuhtlalpilli, the royal robe of Aztec rulers in "Archaeology Magazine".

In putting to paper my own observations on the role of fire in Aztec thought, I touched on Aztec ceramics, the origin of pottery in general and some of the meanings to be found in its painted decorations. Although I did not specifically discuss the so called pulque vessels, they were very much on my mind. The other examples of this pottery I had discovered had only whetted my appetite to understand at least something of what their striking imagery might be about.

Over the years I have made many observations about Aztec iconography, a subject which I believe has long been ignored or simply misunderstood by Aztec scholars whose interests were often directed elsewhere. It is my intention with this paper that by examining these fascinating Aztec beakers in the pursuit of a better understanding of their imagery I will offer insights that I hope will help us to come closer to grasping the messages left for us on other post classic central Mexican pottery as well.

Steps for Rowlin Manuals

- 1) First get Nicholas Grombels program for planetarium Room, small "Spinet Room"
- 2) Deposits for design phase to begin.

A. This deposit is non-refundable but will be applied to final price of Gentling work. All early or preliminary studies will go to Rowlin. Later, final scale designs are another matter.

- 3) If possible, we need to know what it will cost - what they are willing to pay us so that we could adjust our efforts accordingly.