

The Venus of Capucuy

Written by María Soledad Solórzano

Wednesday, 26 May 2010 04:19 - Last Updated Wednesday, 26 May 2010 04:55

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The term Venus comes from the Roman deity of love and beauty, and its use has become popular, at the ancient art level, to designate female iconographic representations, both in painting and sculpture. Throughout prehistory, there has been many and diverse human representations, both male or female, many of which have been found in cave paintings, stone and metal materials, particularly on clay, the raw material from which thousands of "figurines" were manufactured during pre-Columbian Ecuador. These representations, primarily female in our country, have been the subject of numerous studies, mainly morphological, lagging far behind gender studies, among which is worth mentioning those of Yepez (2002) and Di Capua (1994).

Costanza Di Capua analyzes female figures in the Valdivia culture (the so-called "Venus"), linking them with women's biological periods (pre-puberty, puberty, adulthood). Her study is based primarily on the headaddresses of the figurines, looking for patterns of production, or rather of design, in the association of these headaddresses with anatomical elements from the Venus.

It should be noted that work on Ecuadorian figurines has been focused mainly on those from the Coast. Those from the Sierra (Highlands) have not attracted much attention, perhaps because they are male representations. In the Amazon region there is no literature on the subject, for an obvious reason: no human figurines have been found. However, recently the author has recorded a finding that bears witness to the production of clay figurines in the Ecuadorian Amazon. In mid-2007, in an emergency intervention at the site of Capucuy near Lake Limoncocha, Sucumbios province, it was found an area of pre-Columbian occupation in which stamps were recovered in the shape of hands and feet, cylinder seals, circular pieces in a cover manner, stirrup handles, anthropomorphic appliquéés, and clay female figurines, among others. This occupation has a radiocarbon date of 2100 - 2060 BP, or about 150-110 BC (Solórzano, 2008).

In general, these objects were found fragmented and badly damaged, but it could verify the presence of 7 women figurines, judging by the clear representation of their sexual attributes. This figure has been called the Venus de Capucuy. The best preserved piece is a body without head (apparently broken), 4.2 cm long (1.6 in), 1.2 cm wide (0.6 in) and 1.1 cm thick (0.4 in). The upper and lower extremities were modeled in a truncated manner, meaning that there is presence of thighs and forearms, but the potter did not model the arms or legs. On the other hand, the pelvis area is clearly delimited by incisions, as well as the buttocks. The absence of

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breasts, suggests that is a pubescent woman.

The other fragments (six) correspond to representations of coarser bodies, but with features suggestive of a feminine body, particularly in the torsos. Their dimensions range from 5.2 cm residual length (2 in) by 2.4 cm wide (0.9 in) and 2.1 cm thick (0.8 in), on the one hand, and 3.8 cm residual length (1.5 in) by 1.8 cm wide (0.7 in) and 1.4 cm thick (0.5 in), on the other. Two fragments have breasts, the former could be associated with a mature woman in a state of lactation or post-lactation, judging by her swollen abdomen and her enlarged and well marked buttocks, while the second, having a flatter abdomen, it could be a woman that is not pregnant. It is difficult to define these categories due to the ambiguity generated by the fragments. In a third, for example, it can be seen a clearly bulging belly, but no appliquéés or patterned imprints that are associated with breasts.

The only anthropomorphic body with a head that was recovered during the excavation process corresponds to an apparently non-female representation. This is a straight body, 7.3 cm (2.9 in) Long x 3.0 cm (1.1 in) Wide and 1.9 cm (0.7 in) thick, with truncated arms made with appliquéés and in the center, a sort of navel, made with a lentil type appliqué. The head gives clear feline insinuations, which seem to suggest the representation of a "shaman."

According to Di Capua (1994), ceramic figurines reveal part of daily life and even the rituals of the group. The sample recovered is actually small, but gives some hints about the nature of the Capucuy figurines. For example it can be seen an emphasis on the physiology of women, with very detailed features implemented by the potter with intent. The myth of the Shuara Mama Ratona (Rueda 1983) reaffirms the importance of pregnancy and childbirth, hence the importance of women not only to biological reproduction of the group, but also for social reproduction. It is possible that the risks of pregnancy (postpartum infection, poor positioning of the fetus, among the most common) and survival of this, by women, have been reflected in the clay, as indicators of intra or extra group hierarchies. As a first hypothesis, it's proposed the idea of the hierarchical relationship of a 'ritual' order among pregnant women and the shaman. Moreover, this material, and others that are recovered in the systematic excavations in the region, will necessarily lead to considerations about the role assigned to women in Amazonian cultures. Neki Andi, a Quichua-Huaorani mestizo (personal communication, 2007) points out that the majority of conflicts arising between the Huaorani are the result of the abduction of women, resulting in revenge of the affected and the killing of the kidnappers. So are women the subject of free trade, with goods and messages alike, such as Levi Strauss presented, or rather the prey obtained in violent circumstances? Here is a subject on which I would draw the attention of archaeologists in future research.

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