



INSTITUTO DE INVESTIGACIONES  
ESTÉTICAS  
ARCHIVO HISTÓRICO



FONDO	<b>BEATRIZ DE LA FUENTE</b>
SERIE	005: TRAYECTORIA ACADÉMICA
CAJA	013
EXP.	167
DOC.	0001
FOJAS	1-12
FECHA (S)	5/4

# Sacred plants and men in precolombian art

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In the last two decades historians of pre-columbian art have been occupied, mainly, in the comprehension of images in sculpture in stone and clay or painted in vessels and in murals. Nevertheless the ~~very~~ scarce information in written sources, ~~difficult~~ difficult the correct understanding of such images, and attributions about precise themes are frequently uncertain. In fact, in this kind of studies, ~~these~~ scholars ~~go~~ proceed to ~~pass~~ from elemental recognition of the image to cultural interpretation that might be either social or religious.

So iconographical studies have been more concerned with images of deities and with those that have historical meaning, very few deal with aspects related <sup>to</sup> ~~with~~ rituals. In this paper, I will present for the first time, two slabs

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 discovered at Tula in the actual state of Hidalgo; the images depicted in them illuminates an aspect not fully recognized in ~~pre~~ pre-columbian art: that is the use of hallucinogens that provoke insidite experiences in mind.

- ① The slabs of Tula, carved between X to XII century, have depictions of men and plants. Men are shown half recumbent ~~in a~~ dying position, static and ritual; plants are hallucinogens. The identity of these ones, allows a better approximation to its original meaning.
- ② In murals of Teotihuacan, from around the VI century, are depicted mushrooms named Psilocibe mexicana and seeds and plants with flowers of olotihqui,
- ③ in ceramics of Western Mexico, from 200 B.C to 1000 A.D. a mushroom of high stem with umbrella also Psilocibe, is the center around which dances a group of people holding their hands; in

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- ④ a terracotta from central Veracruz, from the late classic period, VIII to VIII century, the same mushroom is like a small drum played
- ⑤ by an officiant; from the Maya area there are many sculptures in stone, from the first centuries of our era, with representations of the mushroom, they have frequently in the lower part images of ~~other~~ animals some of them are toads of the species who produce bufotenin, an <sup>powerful</sup> hallucinogenic substance.
- ⑥ In codex Magliabecchi and
- ⑦ Vindobonensis there are figures of mushrooms related to gods and ritual activities. The franciscan missionary Bernardino de Sahagun wrote versions from their <sup>speaking</sup> nahuatl informants
- ⑧ about the use, among the aztecs, of the Tetranacatl, <sup>that means 'flesh of the gods'</sup> the wondrous mushroom that is illustrated as ~~possessed~~ <sup>possessed</sup> by demons in the Florentine Codex from the Biblioteca Laurentiana
- R. Gordon Wasson made a study of botanic

- iconography from the well known Aztec sculpture  
 9 of Tochipilli god <sup>of flowers,</sup> of spring festivities and renovation  
 10 of life, with the assistance of specialists he recognized  
 the plants ~~and~~ carved in its body. Among them are  
 11 the already mentioned sacred mushrooms, morning glory, sinicvichi, a sacred auditory  
 12 hallucinogen, the plant of tobacco, the cacahuizochitl  
 13 with its flower pozomatli <sup>also an</sup> visual hallucinogen. All the information

given above indicates that ~~the~~ people of Mesoamerica depicted and render cult to plants and animals that ~~when~~ ingested, modify, in various ways, the ~~conscious~~ conscience when they are ingested. According  
 In the Tratado de las supersticiones y costumbres gentílicas que oy ~~viven~~ viven entre los indios naturales de esta Nueva España, 1629, from Hernando Ruíz de Alarcón, it is stated that Indians rendered cult to seeds, plants and mushrooms, they were in fact <sup>considered</sup> sacred.

The wide distribution of these representations permit us to suppose, that ~~it is~~ a profound cultural

5/ concept, deeply related with beliefs and rituals, was of primary importance in Mesoamerica;

Hallucinogenic plants have different effects on mind, they all modify it in a very profoundly: producing states of ecstasy, deliriums, exaggerated euphoria, visual and auditory fantasies, and some times depression and death. The scenes of the slabs from Tula, confirm the frequency of these depictions and their effects. In Tula there

(15) is a group of buildings, recently explored, that distinguishes from the monumental constructions and the enormous open spaces that characterize the central part of the city, ~~near the railroad~~ <sup>actual</sup> and a bridge ~~has been finished~~. This group is about 6 kilometers distant from the monumental area, and ~~so~~ differs from it because of the small constructions that might indicate that was destined to ritual ~~etc~~ intimate activities.

One of these buildings has a square <sup>Courtyard</sup> small ~~patio~~ with walls in its three sides, and in the fourth

6/ one, a brief stairway. ~~The entire structure~~ ~~is~~ ~~on~~ ~~the~~ ~~stairway~~. Cubes above slopes ~~are~~ limit the stairway. Each one of the two slopes was covered in its front by a stone slab with carved reliefs.

I had the opportunity of seeing and photographing them in January 1982 and in May 1984; ~~the~~ I did not find them by November 1985, and so far I do not know where they are <sup>localized</sup> ~~localizes~~. Each

16) slab is 43 cms in the base <sup>and</sup> 50 cms. high; the stone is the usual volcanic toba from the region.

~~From~~ An irregular frame limits the relief scene which is basically the same in both: from the

stomach of the reclining man

17) rises a tree with fruits. The feet of the men were placed ~~in~~ near the stairway, the heads distant from it. Men and trees are clearly seen. The head is raised, the face turned up, and the body rests horizontally. Only ~~one~~ the left leg is visible, and it is placed in such

7/ a way that the foot is above the ground. Also the only arm visible is the left one, that descends by the body and rests in the ground. The two men are dressed with a maxtlatl or loincloth, a belt, headdress, leg wraps and sandals. They use earplugs, noseplugs, pectorals and bracelet. The ornaments are different in both, they indicate, ~~the~~ possibly, that they are different individuals. Figures of men are rendered in profile, but feet and parts of dressing and ornaments, are depicted <sup>frontally</sup> ~~in profiles~~.

Above the <sup>stomach</sup> of each figure grows a tree that bifurcates in two branches, these curves, descends and divide, in their lower part fruits are <sup>hanging</sup> ~~visible~~. I will transcribe part of the botanic identificación given to me by Dr. Jose Luis Diaz, from the Institute of Biological Research at our National <sup>Quito</sup> University. Both reliefs depict the same plant, they have identical elements, the best equivalent among the magic and ritual plants from Mexico



8) is Datura ceratocaula, a tree from the Solanaceae family with ~~delirious~~ ~~delirious~~ ~~delirious~~ power to induce delirium in humans. The reasons that make one identify them are 1. The most conspicuous elements in the reliefs are **A** ovoid fruits, plain and hanging from the branches. 2. In all of them appears a caliciform pedunculus **B** 3. From the plants of the genre Datura only the ceratocaula has this characteristics. 4. The bifurcation **C** is characteristic of this genre, the trunk bifurcates in 4 and the branches divide successively <sup>in</sup> the same way. 5. The elements without pedunculus **D** are leaves. Besides these morphological arguments, that do not permit ~~an~~ a wrong identification, there are some others of historical character. There is no doubt that Datura ceratocaula is native from America and that was used with the names of Tlapatl and hexéhuac by ancient mesoamericans.

19) Codex Florentine and Badiano, include these

9/  
 plant among the psicotropics of magic use. The discovery is important because, as far as I know, this will be the first pre-columbian representation of such a plant". Until here the botanical diagnostic.

Now well, it is convenient to precise what is Datura and what are its effects on mind ~~to~~ when ingested. According to ~~the~~ botanist R. Evans Schultes and to chemistry A. Hoffmann, I quote "There <sup>(20)</sup> is in species a rare species of Datura, so different that has been assigned a separate section from the genus, this is Datura ceratocaula, a plant that grows in lakes and swamps. It is known as "torna loco" (that is to go crazy) a powerful narcotic. In Ancient Mexico it was venerated and considered "the sister of ololuhqui (that is morning glory or the seed of the Virgin) The effects of both are similar. Physiological activity begins with a state of relaxation, then ~~after~~ a

stage of hallucinations, followed by a ~~deep~~ profound sleep and lost of conscience. In some cases might reach death. " <sup>light</sup>

From it has been said before we might approach the meaning of the Tula Slabs. It seems that the men are in an ecstatic attitude, and that datura, with which it is unified creating a plastic entity man-tree, has given them supernatural power; perhaps ~~at~~ in its hallucinations look at the plant as part of himself, and in its "cosmic conscience" transfigures in the sacred tree.

One must remember that the buildings where the slabs were found, are so different from the others at Tula, that suggest a liturgic character.

With Datura the toltecs at Tula might have had an specific ritual, but in other times and places of Mesoamerica, ~~with~~ different rituals were held, with diverse hallucinogenous plants. In this way, the scenes of the slabs from Tula, unique

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in the specific ~~theses~~ <sup>matter</sup> that represent, but integrated to the general theme of other representations of hallucinogenous, reinforce the expression of a general concept in Ancient Mexico that is the use of ritual plants considered sacred.

I want to ~~see~~ finalize saying that this paper is ~~only~~ part of a major research. I have found a great variety of hallucinogenous depicted either in sculpture ~~or~~ <sup>over</sup> in painting; some of them are exquisite depictions, not as rude as the Tula Slabs. This <sup>botanical</sup> imagery from the first millennium Before Christ to the XVI century will, be confronted with ethnohistorical information, the very rich prose and poetry written in Nahuatl frequently refers metaphorically to the "enhiabrating flowers". The actual use of hallucinogenous for divinatory and curatory purposes can also help to understand their antique meaning. But the

main purpose of this research is to prove that a just recognition of an artistic theme might lead to a better approximation to some aspect of ~~precolombian~~ the thoughts and beliefs of precolombian men.