

CLASSIC MAYA VASE PAINTINGS  
WHICH NOW ALLOW THE IDENTIFICATION  
OF ENEMA ICONOGRAPHY

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Peter Furst (State University of New York, Albany) and Michael Coe (Yale University) in the recent March 1977 issue of *Natural History* magazine offer the first identification and graphic demonstration of the Maya use of enemas in special ritual contexts; Coe has been able to identify two characteristics of this enema rite, the specially shaped jug which held the enema liquid and the now easily identifiable enema tube or syringe. Following upon Coe's work this writer has been able to not only substantiate this controversial theme but also go further to identify other artifacts associated with ritual enemas. These new identifications were possible from studying a series of approximately 20 vases and 2 plates with enema related iconography photographed in private collections—vases which up to that time had not yet been seen by Coe or Furst.

1) a special segmented bib can be connected to this ritual; the bib, always shown identically whether carried by women about to tie it around the worn or men's necks. This bib (analogous to a lobster bib) is worn in enema rituals because in the same rituals beverages and solid foods are consumed orally; these substances cause vomiting. Actual vomiting scenes are clearly rendered on a Tepeu 1 vase from Peten.

2) bundles of "sticks" either bloodletting daggers or potent cigars are associated with enema symbolism in two paintings.

3) a rare “U”-shaped object or compressed food serving of unknown use is associated with enema symbolism in two paintings.

4) a tentative identification is made of a special headdress which may be related to the deity associated with this ritual.

5) the enema syringe (animal bladder on bone tube) is clearly depicted by Maya painters; two Tzakol 3, one Tepeu 1, and one Tepeu 2 vases show the tube inserted into the anus of celebrants. Hollow bone tubes are commonly found at Peten archaeological sites; the possible connection will be explored.

6) the enema jug can now be securely labeled and readily identified, whether by its basic shape, irrespective of its proportions, presence or lack of accessories (optional handles, optional lid, optional stand). Once it is realized that this shape jug is associated with enemas we can get a better idea of how common these rituals were by reanalyzing sherds of actual jugs excavated in Peten range type structures. Previously such jugs were conservatively considered “water jugs,” an aptness not recognized by early writers.

Aside from identifying the clothing and artifacts associated with the enemas, it is possible to present a few tentative observations on the general situation of these rites:

A) Women are often present, either rubbing men’s shoulders, more often undressing men, or holding the bibs ready to tie them on. Women are never shown receiving enemas. On two vases the women’s conspicuously naked breast suggests that vases not yet recorded may well surprise us with still other aspects of the overall palace ritual.

B) In many enema scenes executioners are present, sometimes conspicuously holding axes or knives used in human sacrifice. Conversely, in many Dance after Decapitation Death scenes the dancers hold enema syringes, drug jugs, with Akbal glyphs

and in one case a dancer carries a syringe in one hand and on his native backpack (mecapal) he carries a drug jug with a bunch of pointed cigars (?).

C) God N is associated with several enema scenes, although his overall relation to the ritual is not known. A special net-weave form-fitting outfit often distinguishes his presence on these occasions (otherwise God N per se is not the enema deity, nor particularly related to enemas in his normal pursuits).

D) Coe has suggested that a spiral hieroglyph may represent the sphincter muscle; it should be possible in the future to identify other hieroglyphs which are associated with enema rites.

E) Water lily jaguars (same as in decapitation dances), spider monkeys, and rarely frogs, birds, or deer are portrayed in the paintings. In most cases it is evident that human beings are merely dressed up in animal costumes.

F) Enema scenes first appear in Peten polychrome paintings on two cylindrical tripods (Tzakol 3). During subsequent Tepeu 1 times these paintings become ubiquitous then continue strong into Tepeu 2. Whereas no pottery at Uaxactun nor Tikal shows an actual enema administration, closely related Dance after Decapitation imagery (black-white-black shawl) is distinctive on one plate in the Tikal museum and other imagery on a published Uaxactun sherd. One vase from Burial 196 clearly shows a man smoking a cigar; and from the same tomb on a small polychrome vase is painted a possible enema jug next to a throne and next to a basket of plants. The plant leaves are the same shape as the segments of the standard vomit bibs. In the same tomb was a large plain jug of approximately the same shape as an enema jug.

G) Whereas Furst (Hallucinogens and Culture, 1976) and M. Coe (Ritual Enemas, 1977) list several possible ingredients added to the enema liquid, the writer and Robicsek each independently feel that another botanical-chemical ingredient is more likely. When it is finally solved which of the several possible potent substances was used, the implications are

numbing, for traditional studies of the Maya are upsetting. Traditional studies of the Maya way of life have never previously been faced with evidence of such unexpected behavior.

H) Whereas enemas for normal medical cleansing are common from other societies throughout the world, this series of Maya paintings indicates that their enemas were highly ritualized and were for the ingestion of diluted botanical substances into the body—not for the normal medical purging of wastes. For a people who lack modern intravenous syringes the enema tube is the easiest manner to ingest a substance which would be vomited if taken orally.

Now that it is possible to readily identify certain artifacts and clothing as associated with perverse enema rites it is possible to restudy the paintings of Central Peten and sherds from Central Peten, sites. Scholars now need to seriously and dispassionately consider the possible behavioral results within the upper class. Furthermore, in what manner would the condition of the upper class in the 9th century be related to their demise at the hands of postulated raids and peasant uprising? As a science, archaeology is capable of taking new information once available and investigating the ramifications