



# Vessel in the form of a figure with a burden

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## On display

**Title/Description:** Vessel in the form of a figure with a burden

**Object Type:** Figure

**Materials:** Terracotta

**Measurements:** h. 300 x w. 165 x d. 200 mm

**Accession Number:** 670

**Historic Period:** Formative (late) period (300 BC-AD 300)

**Production Place:** Colima, Mesoamerica, Mexico, The Americas

**Credit Line:** Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1976

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This standing male figure is shown carrying a burden, probably a basket, using a mecapal or tumpline, a common way of transporting goods in ancient Mesoamerica (Hassig, 1985: 28-30; see also Leyenaar, 1981). The figure is short and stocky, with a protruding mouth and widely spaced eyes. His only article of clothing is a penis sheath attached by a cord around the waist. The arms are raised and his hands grasp the tumpline.

In the Aztec period, porters or *tlamemes* formed a distinct, probably hereditary, occupational group. According to Hassig, the idea of carrying a burden had both honourable and negative connotations; it was used as a metaphor for rulership and marriage, but it was also ultimately associated with slavery or the lower levels of Aztec society.

Von Winning (1974a: 36; 1974b) has suggested that Colima examples of figures with tumplines may represent the earliest use of this device in Mexico, although it is known as early as 1000 BC in South America (Gallagher, 1983: 31). It has been suggested by several authors that a relationship existed between type cultures of West Mexico and those of Ecuador prior to the Christian era, although the nature and extent of this contact is unclear (Kelly, 1974). The formal attributes of the terracotta vessels (such as stirrup spouts), as well as the use of shaft tombs (a feature common in South America but almost unknown in Mesoamerica outside West Mexico) may support such a link.

Although many Colima ceramic effigies are vessels (this one has a spout in the top of the burden), it is unclear whether they were used before interment. Meighan and Nicholson (1989: 58) note that some of the tomb pieces show signs of wear. It is not known why such a figure would be included as part of a mortuary assemblage. Toscano (1946: 22-6) and Meighan and Nicholson have tentatively suggested that the ceramic figures placed in tombs represented the deceased and his or her

retainers, and that 'supernaturally vivified', they may have been thought to continue their earthly existence in the after-life. Following this hypothesis, this servant and court figures such as the dwarf (UEA 866) may have been connected with a concept of retainer sacrifice, which is known from other parts of Mesoamerica. The broken left leg has been re-attached in modern times.

Joanne Pillsbury and Ted. J. J. Leyenaar in Steven Hooper (ed.). 1997. Catalogue to the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection. University of East Anglia.

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## **Provenance**

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from John A. Stokes Jnr., New York in 1977 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.

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