

CHAPTER 8  

The Physical Evidence of  

Human Sacrifice in Ancient Peru

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INTRODUCTION

Descriptions of human sacrifice by the Inca and other native peoples of Andean South America are scattered through many of the early colonial-period Spanish chronicles and histories (Figure 8.1). These are not eyewitness accounts, but are generally secondhand descriptions by native informants. Unlike accounts from Mexico, where human sacrifice was witnessed firsthand by Spanish soldiers and priests in the early sixteenth century, written accounts from Peru generally describe religious practices prior to the conquest of the Inca empire.

The secondhand nature of Andean accounts led, not unexpectedly, to differences of opinion as to the frequency with which, and context within which, human lives were offered by the Inca and other Andean peoples. At one extreme lie writers such as Garcilaso de la Vega, who claimed that the Inca banned the practice of human sacrifice. Reliable sources such as Fray Bernabé Cobo, however, described various rituals in which the Inca reportedly offered human lives (Rowe 1946). Sacrificial practices among the diverse peoples incorporated into the Inca empire are less known; such knowledge is limited for the most part to scattered references drawn from oral histories (Rowe 1948; Moseley and Cordy-Collins 1990).

Only during the twentieth century has archaeological evidence been brought to bear on the question of human sacrifice in pre-Hispanic Peru. Max Uhle was the first to uncover and systematically record archaeological evidence of human sacrifice by the Inca at the site of Pachacamac, on the central coast of Peru. Uhle excavated a cemetery that contained the bodies of numerous female sacrifices made by the Inca in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. Preservation was excellent, allowing him to make detailed observations of the bodies and their accompanying clothing and offerings. The bodies were naturally mummified, and tightly knotted cloth ligatures were still in place around their necks, indicating death by stran-
ulation. Uhle compared this discovery with early colonial-period descriptions of Inca sacrifice, finding significant parallels with the written accounts (Uhle 1903). Uhle’s work was important in providing evidence to refute Garcilaso de la Vega’s claim that the Inca did not practice human sacrifice (Rowe 1995; Verano 1995).

It was not until the mid-twentieth century that additional evidence of Inca human sacrifice was documented archaeologically. The frozen body of a boy found on Cerro El Plomo in central Chile (Mostny 1957) has been joined in recent decades by a growing number of high-altitude Inca sacrifices found on mountain peaks in Chile, Argentina, and Peru (Schobinger 1991; Reinhard 1993). These mountain sacrifices correlate well in their context and associated offerings with early colonial-period accounts of the Inca sacrificial cycle known as capac hucha, in which children selected from different parts of the empire were brought to the Inca capital at Cuzco, then returned to their native region to be buried at high mountain shrines. The
recent discovery of three such sacrifices atop the Nevado Ampato, near Arequipa, Peru, has drawn worldwide attention to this practice (Reinhard 1996; 1997).

Ethnographical accounts and archaeological evidence confirm that the Inca practiced human sacrifice. The offering of human lives appears to have been reserved for particularly important rituals and events, however, and was certainly not a daily occurrence in Inca times. Textiles, camelids, chicha, coca leaf, and other items were the offerings most frequently made to propitiate Andean deities (Rowe 1946; Murra 1962).

Certain Inca sacrificial practices can be reconstructed in substantial detail, given the availability of both ethnographic and archaeological evidence. Attempts to identify similar practices in pre-Inca societies are more difficult, due to a lack of ethnographic sources and the vagaries of archaeological preservation. Nevertheless, in recent decades important archaeological discoveries have been made that reveal evidence of a long tradition of human sacrifice in Andean South America. How human sacrifice can be identified from archaeological evidence, and the contribution physical anthropological analysis can make to interpreting these findings, are the subject of this chapter.

IDENTIFYING HUMAN SACRIFICE IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD
How is human sacrifice identified archaeologically? This is an important issue, because preconceived notions can lead to distinctly different interpretations of archaeological data. Human sacrifice implies the intentional offering of human life. The way in which sacrificial victims are dispatched may leave recognizable skeletal or soft-tissue evidence, but this is not always the case. Distinguishing between natural and induced death in archaeological remains is often difficult.

Disarticulated or partial human remains found in offering pits or within architecture are examples of archaeological finds that require careful evaluation. If complicating factors such as postburial disturbance can be ruled out, the key issue is whether the remains represent freshly sacrificed individuals or secondary offerings. The burial of skulls or other skeletal elements in ceremonial architecture is an ancient practice in the Andes, dating back at least to the Early Horizon at sites such as Chavín de Huántar (Burger 1984). Offerings of burned skeletal remains have also been documented (Lumbreras 1989; Cordy-Collins 1997). Complex mortuary practices involving the secondary burial of human remains and the removal of skeletal elements from tombs are also known (Menzel 1976; Buikstra 1995).
The offering of secondary remains is an activity quite different from the sacrifice of a living individual, and presumably carried distinct meanings for ancient Andean peoples. Confident diagnosis (or ruling out) of death by sacrifice becomes particularly important in interpreting such finds. The context in which the remains are found may provide important clues, for instance, as in the case of high-altitude Inca sacrifices, which generally do not show physical evidence of cause of death, but are found in mountaintop shrines far from human settlements or normal burial sites. On the other hand, the burial of selected skeletal elements may be identified by a lack of cut marks or other indications of intentional disarticulation of fleshed remains (Burger 1984; McEwan 1987).

The careful examination of remains, both in the field and in the laboratory, is essential for distinguishing between sacrificial victims and secondary offerings. The presence of cut marks, fractures, or other indications of trauma can suggest possible cause of death as well as record details of postmortem treatment of the remains. Careful examination can effectively distinguish a skull that was separated from the body in intentional decapitation from a skull that was collected from a tomb or other context and simply reburied. For example, Lumbreras (1981) identified a group of skulls buried in a Formative Period mound near Ayacucho as an offering of the heads of freshly decapitated individuals based on the presence of upper cervical vertebrae still articulated with the skulls. Cordy-Collins (“Decapitation,” this volume) makes a similar interpretation for a cache of skulls found at the site of Dos Cabezas, based on both the presence of cervical vertebrae and cut marks consistent with decapitation.

Good archaeological preservation can play an important role in identifying sacrificial victims. Strangulation was a common method of dispatching sacrificial victims in Andean South America. It is described in various ethnohistoric sources and has been documented archaeologically as well. In Uhle’s cemetery of sacrificed women at Pachacamac, all of the victims were strangled from behind with a cloth ligature. The excellent preservation of soft tissues and textiles allowed him to examine in detail the form of the knots and even the degree to which the victims’ necks were constricted by the ligatures (Uhle 1903). Had preservation not been as good, and only skeletal remains been found, identification of death by strangulation probably would not have been possible. Modern forensic data show that while manual strangulation victims often show fracture of the hyoid bone, strangulation by ligature rarely leaves osteological evidence (Ubelaker 1992). Remains in high-status tombs, such as a female found face down in Tomb 2 at Sipán (Alva and Donnan 1993; Verano 1995), may have been strangled
(Figure 8.2), but in the absence of clear indications of skeletal trauma, the specific cause of death cannot be determined.

Details such as the presence of a neck ligature can be crucial to the proper interpretation of a burial. Some years ago I was asked to examine a mummy that had been excavated at the Chimú administrative center of Manchan in the lower Casma River valley. Preliminary observations by the excavators suggested a high-status male burial. Status was inferred by the presence of elaborate textiles and grave goods; sex by the morphology of the mandible, which was judged to be "male" by the archaeologists. Subsequent study in the laboratory revealed the remains to be those of a female on the basis of pelvic morphology—a more reliable sex indicator. In addition, there was a cord tied tightly around the neck, suggesting death by strangulation. These findings changed the interpretation significantly—from the burial of a high-status male to a probable dedicatory sacrifice. In this case the fine textiles and other objects associated with the body apparently were not markers of the elite status of the individual in life, but of the ritual importance of the sacrifice itself.

The type of material used to construct a ligature may also indicate some difference in the way sacrificial victims were treated. Uhle's women at Pachacamac were strangled with cotton cloths. Two strangled females I have
FIGURE 8.3. Ligatures found around the necks of female sacrifices at El Brujo (photos by John W. Verano, courtesy of the El Brujo Archaeological Project): (a) (above left) Ligature from Sicán retainer burial. Some of the victim’s hair is caught in the knot tied behind the neck (lower knot in photo). Diameter of opening: 7 cm.; (b) (above right) Moche sacrifice photographed during excavation; (c) (left) Lab photograph of ligature.

recently studied from the site of El Brujo in the Chicama River valley in northern Peru show cord ligatures constructed of distinct materials (Figure 8.3a–c). An adult female who was strangled and buried with a high-status male Lambayeque (Sicán) burial was dispatched with a fine cotton cord. A sacrificed Moche woman found in an isolated pit in a different area of
the site was strangled with a coarse rope made of cabuya fiber, a strong plant fiber normally used for fishing nets and utilitarian cordage (Arabel Fernández, personal communication). The coarse fiber rope suggests a general lack of concern for the victim in this case. She was buried in a simple pit with a camelid, but with no other offerings.

FORMS OF SACRIFICE AND POSTMORTEM TREATMENT OF REMAINS

The examples described above reflect some of the forms of human sacrifice for which we have archaeological evidence in the Andes. These include sacrifices of individuals or groups in ceremonial architecture, as well as the burial of retainers with high-status individuals. The demographic characteristics of sacrificial victims as well as the way their remains were treated may provide insight into the meaning and purpose of a particular sacrificial practice. For example, historic sources indicate that most Inca sacrifices were of children, who were “buried with gold and silver and other things and with special superstitions” (Cobo 1990 [1653]: 112). This corresponds well with what has been found in high-altitude shrines. However, the Inca were also reported to have sacrificed war prisoners following important military victories. While archaeological evidence of this has not yet been found, several sites on the north coast of Peru (discussed below) have produced impressive examples of prisoner sacrifice during pre-Inca times. A distinctive feature of these sacrifices is the way the bodies of the victims are treated. Rather than being carefully buried with rich offerings, the bodies were left to decompose on the surface, and many show signs of intentional mutilation (see Bourget, this volume). Such treatment, involving mutilation and the denial of proper burial, implies a sacrificial ritual and an attitude toward the victims that are quite distinct from those associated with the carefully buried Inca child sacrifices of the capac hucha.

TROPHIES AND COLLECTIBLES

There is evidence that selected human body parts such as heads, skulls, teeth, and long bones were occasionally collected and modified for ritual or personal use. The Inca were known to collect various trophies from their enemies (Rowe 1946: 279; Lastres 1951: 65), although only a few examples of these have been found archaeologically (e.g., J. Tello 1918). From pre-Inca times, the best-known examples of such trophies are mummified heads from the Paracas and Nasca cultures of southern coastal Peru, described by Proulx in this volume (see also Verano 1995). Proulx concludes that Nasca trophy heads were probably procured through warfare rather than sacrifice.
However, he notes the frequent association of trophy heads with supernaturals and with plant motifs and other symbols of fertility, and suggests that the heads had important ritual significance to the Nasca beyond their function as war trophies.

As is made clear in two other chapters in this volume (Cook; Cordy-Collins, "Decapitation"), Paracas and Nasca art had no monopoly on decapitators holding human heads. This theme is found in many coastal and highland Andean art styles, dating from the Initial Period through the Late Horizon (ca. 1800 B.C.-A.D. 1530). Indeed, decapitation at the hands of supernatural beings seems to be the quintessential signifier of ritual death in the Andean world (Verano 1995). With the exception of those associated with the Paracas and Nasca cultures, however, very few heads of decapitated victims have been found archaeologically. It seems that the practice of collecting, preparing, and curating mummified human heads was a tradition that developed and flourished primarily on the south coast of Peru. Nevertheless, two discoveries of decapitated victims have been made at Moche sites on the north coast of Peru in just the past few years. The first, a cache of skulls, some with cervical vertebrae still articulated, is described by Cordy-Collins in this volume ("Decapitation"). The second find was made at the urban sector of the pyramids at Moche in 1996 (Verano 1998). It consists of two human crania modified into bowls by having the top of the vault cut away (Figure 8.4a, b). One of the crania has drilled holes for attachment of the lower jaw. Previously, such skull bowls were known only in the form of ceramic vessels (Figure 8.5), but it is now clear that actual skull vessels did exist. Both of these crania show cut marks on various surfaces, indicating that they were prepared from flesheheaded (presumably of sacrificial victims) and not simply from dry skulls. Although some evidence of decapitation and the curation of skulls is now known for the Moche, the iconographic evidence suggests a greater interest in the collection of blood (see below) than in a specific focus on collecting heads, as was the case in the Paracas and Nasca cultures.

Prisoner Sacrifice

Although discoveries of high-altitude Inca sacrifices made in recent years are important in providing further evidence of the Inca practice of capac hucha, these finds are similar in most respects to earlier discoveries at high-altitude sites. As a result, they do not offer substantial new insight into sacrificial practices in the Andean world. What are perhaps more significant are two sacrificial sites recently discovered on the north coast of Peru. These provide the first well-documented archaeological evidence of pris-
Figure 8.4. Modified skulls from the urban sector of the pyramids at Moche. Drawing by Gustavo Pérez.

oner sacrifice, an activity that previously was only inferred from depictions of combat, prisoner capture, and sacrifice in north-coast art. The discoveries were made in 1984 at the site of Pacatnamu in the Jequetepeque River valley, and in 1995 at the Huaca de la Luna (Pyramid of the Moon) in the Moche River valley.

The Pacatnamu Mass Burial
In 1984, fourteen human skeletons were found at the bottom of a three-meter-deep defensive trench at the archaeological site of Pacatnamu in the lower Jequetepeque Valley (Figure 8.6; Verano 1986). They were found at the entrance to a major pyramid and architectural complex, known as Huaca 1, built during the later phase of occupation of the site, ca. A.D. 1100-1400 (Donnan 1986). The fourteen individuals were all adolescent and young adult males, ranging in age from approximately fifteen to thirty-five years (Verano 1986). They were found in three superimposed groups, separated from one another by a layer of sand and rubble. Surface weathering on some of the bones, as well as abundant remains of scavenging insects, indicates that the bodies were not promptly buried, but decomposed on the surface (Faulkner 1986). Rope fragments were found around the ankles of some individuals, and around the wrist of one, indicating that they were bound or hobbled. No traces of clothing other than a possible loincloth fragment were found with the skeletons.
Laboratory study revealed evidence of multiple injuries, including stab wounds (two bone-point fragments were recovered in the excavation), cut marks, skull and long-bone fractures, and evidence of forced dismemberment. Two individuals show cut marks indicating that their throats were slit, two were decapitated, and five individuals appear to have had their chests cut open (Verano 1986). In addition, four individuals were missing their left radius, one of the bones of the forearm. Cut marks and fractures
on bones that articulated with the missing radii indicate intentional removal from the victims. The radii may have been collected as trophies to be modified as flutes or other objects; there are descriptions of such practices in Inca times (Rowe 1946: 279).

The identity of the victims in the mass burial is unknown, although the ropes around their ankles and their age and sex distribution suggest that they were captives. Biometric comparisons of the victims’ crania with samples from Pacatnamu and nearby coastal and highland sites were not conclusive in identifying them either as members of the local population

![Figure 8.6. The uppermost layer of skeletons in the mass burial at Pacatnamu. Photo by John W. Verano.](image)
or as outsiders. Isotopic analysis of their bone collagen did indicate some dietary differences from the local population, however, suggesting that they were not locals (Verano and DeNiro 1993).

The pattern of wounds and postmortem treatment of the Pacatnamu victims show close parallels to Moche and Chimú artistic depictions of prisoner sacrifice (Figure 8.7). These scenes typically show the formal presentation and sacrifice of bound captives. Severed heads and limbs, splayed bodies, and vultures are commonly depicted in these scenes. The presence of vultures may be symbolic of their role as opportunistic carrion feeders, but there is some evidence they may have been active participants in the sacrifice of captives (Verano 1986; Rea 1986). In addition to artistic parallels, the Pacatnamu mass burial shows similarities to north-coast ethnohistoric accounts of punishments involving mutilation and exposure of the corpse to scavengers (Rowe 1948: 49). It thus provides important archaeological corroboration for events until recently inferred only from ethnohistoric accounts and iconography.

**Prisoner Sacrifice at the Huaca de La Luna**

In 1995, archaeologist Steve Bourget made a spectacular discovery at the Huaca de la Luna in the Moche River valley (Bourget 1997a; 1997b; this volume). In an enclosure (Plaza 3A) behind the main platform, he discov-
ered a sacrificial site littered with the skeletal remains of Moche sacrificial victims. Excavations over three field seasons uncovered the remains of more than seventy individuals. An adjacent plaza, which to date has been only partially tested, contains additional skeletal remains. Careful excavation of Plaza 3A, and ongoing laboratory analysis of the osteological remains and associated ceramic offerings, permit a preliminary reconstruction of events which took place here ca. A.D. 550–650. An overview of the sacrificial site is presented by Steve Bourget in this volume. My discussion will focus on the analysis of the skeletal remains.

**General Features of the Sample**

Skeletal remains from Plaza 3A fall into four basic categories: (1) complete and articulated skeletons; (2) partial skeletons, missing the skull or one or more limbs; (3) isolated limbs, hands, feet, or other clusters of articulated elements; and (4) individual isolated bones. Complete skeletons are relatively rare, while partial skeletons, clusters of bones, or isolated elements are more common. The high frequency of disarticulation complicates estimating the number of individuals present in the deposit, but preliminary counts indicate at least seventy individuals. As at Pacatnamu, the bodies were not promptly buried, but were left exposed on the surface. Excavation revealed some fifteen superimposed layers of remains, imbedded in alternating layers of mud and sand (Bourget 1997a; 1997b; this volume). Some bones show extensive sun bleaching and surface weathering, while others show little evidence of exposure. Specific patterns of exposure have not been correlated with the stratigraphic position of the skeletons, but this is a subject of ongoing analysis.

**Demographic Profile**

All skeletal remains from Plaza 3A, with the exception of the two child burials found at a lower level (Bourget, this volume), are of adolescent and young adult males. No remains of females or children are present, nor are there any older adults (over forty-five years) present. Based on various skeletal and dental aging criteria, the mean age of the sample is twenty-three years, with a range of approximately fifteen to thirty-nine years. The demographic profile indicates a highly selected sample of individuals.

**Physical Characteristics**

The skeletal morphology of the Plaza 3A victims indicates that they were healthy and physically active individuals. In general, bones are large and
show pronounced muscle attachment areas, and there is little evidence of anemias (porotic hyperostosis, cribra orbitalia) or other indicators of poor health (e.g., enamel hypoplasias). However, there is abundant evidence of previous skeletal trauma in this group. Healed fractures of ribs and long bones, as well as depressed fractures of the skull, were observed in eighteen individuals (Figure 8.8). Many of these fractures, especially of the skull and certain long bones, suggest interpersonal violence rather than accidental injury. Fracture incidence per individual and bone has not been calculated, but compared to other Moche skeletal samples I have studied (Verano 1994; 1997), Plaza 3A victims have an unusually high frequency of these injuries, which suggests that the Plaza 3A victims had a particularly active and violent lifestyle.

At the time of death, at least eleven individuals had injuries that were in the early stages of healing. These included fractures to ribs, scapula, long bones, and the margins of the nasal aperture (Figure 8.9). Estimates of post-injury intervals vary from several weeks to perhaps a month. These fractures presumably were sustained during combat or following capture and are important in suggesting that at least several weeks passed between the time of capture and sacrifice. What happened during this time is a subject for speculation, but Moche depictions of the arraignment of prisoners appear to show ceremonies involving the public display of captives (Franco, Gálvez, and Vásquez 1994; Donnan and McClelland 1979; Alva and Donnan 1993).

Perimortem Injuries in the Skeleton
Perimortem injuries can be defined as those that occur at or around the time of death, when bone is fresh and flexible. The two most common injuries of this kind in the Plaza 3A sample are cut marks on the cervical vertebrae and skull fractures. Although infrequent, cut marks were also seen on some cranial, long bones, and bones of the hands and feet.

Cut marks were most commonly seen on the second and third cervical vertebrae, although examples were found on the first and fourth cervical vertebrae as well (Figure 8.10). In individuals with fully observable cervical spines, approximately 75 percent showed cut marks. They vary from one to more than nine distinct cuts, located on the anterior surface of the vertebral body and frequently on the transverse processes as well. The marks left on bone appear to be the result of cutting of the throat rather than an attempt to decapitate the victims. Many cases were observed of cut marks in individuals with the skull and vertebral column still fully articu-
FIGURE 8.8. Healed fractures of the left radius, ulna, and second rib of one of the sacrificial victims at the Huaca de la Luna (Plaza 3A, Individual I). Photo by John W. Verano.

FIGURE 8.9. Fractured left ulna in the process of healing (Huaca de la Luna, Plaza 3A, HG96-102). Photo by John W. Verano.

lated. Moreover, cut marks were found primarily on the anterior and lateral surfaces of the vertebrae and not on the intervertebral joints or spinous processes, as would be expected in decapitation (Verano 1986). The cut marks present on the Plaza 3A victims correspond well to Moche artistic depictions of the slashing of the throat of captives to collect blood (Figure 8.7; Alva and Donnan 1993).

Skull fractures were generally massive, resulting in breakage of a large portion of the cranial vault (Figure 8.11). Most appear to have been produced by blows from blunt objects, although in a few cases the margins of broken areas suggest a more pointed weapon such as a star-headed mace. Based on preliminary examination of the fractured skulls, it is difficult to judge whether the blows were inflicted at the time of death or afterward, following some decomposition of soft tissues; the morphology of the fractures is ambiguous.

Other than skull fractures and cut marks on the cervical vertebrae, evidence of perimortem trauma is rare. Several crania show scattered cut marks on their external surfaces, but only a few examples of cut marks are present on postcranial bones. This is puzzling, given the high frequency of disarticulated remains in Plaza 3A. Isolated limbs, hands, and feet were common finds. In the laboratory these were carefully examined for cut marks or fractures suggesting forced disarticulation, but very little evidence was found to suggest this. The disarticulation and scattering of elements seen in Plaza 3A may be the result of natural decomposition of the bodies, perhaps assisted by vulture activity. Alternatively, the lack of cut marks might indicate that bodies and body parts were manipulated after sufficient decomposition had occurred to allow easy disarticulation. Bourget (1997a; 1997b) describes and illustrates examples from Plaza 3A of trunks, limbs, and other elements that he believes were intentionally arranged as opposed pairs.

Skeletal Remains in Plaza 3B
In 1996, limited excavations were conducted in an adjacent plaza, designated Plaza 3B (Montoya 1997). Partially articulated and disarticulated remains of at least seven individuals were found in several small excavation units. These remains are of particular interest because they clearly show cut marks indicating dismemberment and intentional defleshing (Figure 8.12). Cut marks were found on nearly all bones recovered from Plaza 3B. The locations of the cuts correspond to areas of muscle attachment, implying that the objective was not simply to disarticulate, but to deflesh the skeletons. The Plaza 3B excavations, although limited in extent, indicate that
some sacrificial victims at the Huaca de la Luna received more complex treatment than that observed in the remains deposited in Plaza 3A.

Ritual Behavior at the Huaca de la Luna

Evidence from Plaza 3A, and preliminary findings from limited excavation in Plaza 3B, suggest that activities involving the capture and sacrifice of prisoners played an important role in ritual practices at the Huaca de la Luna. The findings from Plaza 3B, in particular, indicate more complexity in the manipulation of the bodies of sacrificial victims than is seen in Plaza 3A. Evidence of defleshing of bodies raises the possibility of cannibalism at the Huaca de la Luna. Similar patterns of cut marks (corresponding to areas of muscle attachment) have been reported on disarticulated skeletal remains from archaeological sites in central Mexico by Carmen Pijoan and coworkers (Pijoan and Mansilla 1990; Pijoan, Mansilla, and Pastrana 1995). These workers interpret the cut marks and body processing as evidence of
ritual cannibalism, a behavior frequently described in Mexican ethnographic sources. It is perhaps premature to conclude that ritual cannibalism was practiced by the Moche, given the limited osteological material excavated from Plaza 3B in 1996. Further excavation is needed to understand better the context of these remains.

CONCLUSION

Peruvian archaeology is a particularly dynamic field at present. It seems that each year brings the announcement of a significant new discovery. For those interested in ritual sacrifice in ancient Peru, the past decade has been a very productive one. Major advances have been made in interpreting the iconography of sacrificial practices and in linking art with archaeological evidence. Of all geographic areas, perhaps the north coast of Peru is where the greatest progress has been made in the archaeological documentation of sacrificial practices. Evidence of prisoner sacrifice and ritual decapitation has now been identified at multiple sites, and it is now clear that Moche depictions of ritual combat and the sacrifice of prisoners record actual events, and not simply mythological narrative. Sites such as Sipán and San José de Moro preserve the tombs of officials who presided over rituals involving the sacrifice of captives. The skeletal remains of their victims have now been identified at the Huaca de la Luna, and similar evidence can be expected to lie buried in ceremonial compounds at other Moche sites.

It is only in the past ten years that it has been possible to integrate the iconographic and archaeological evidence of human sacrifice in northern coastal Peru. Much of the new information coming out of sites such as Huaca de la Luna is still in the preliminary stages of analysis and interpretation. Other sacrificial sites remain to be discovered and excavated, and we can expect that current interpretations will need revision and refinement as new discoveries are made. It is the nature and pace of these discoveries that make Peruvian archaeology such a dynamic field of research today.

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