Moche Art and Archaeology in Ancient Peru

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National Gallery of Art, Washington
Distributed by Yale University Press,
New Haven and London
War and Death in the Moche World: Osteological Evidence and Visual Discourse

There has long been active debate about the political organization of Moche society. Some scholars propose that the Moche were rather loosely organized as a confederation of valley polities linked by ideology and political alliances, somewhat analogous to the royal courts of Europe [Alva and Donnan 1993: 220]. Others argue that Moche was a centralized state-level society, ruled from the site of Moche [Billman 1996; Moseley 1992; Wilson 1988]. A third model proposes that state-level organization was achieved only in terminal Moche times (Moche V), with the establishment of a capital at Pampa Grande in the Lambayeque Valley (Shimada 1994). These competing models draw support from diverse sources of evidence. A central issue, however, is the nature of Moche expansion and control—whether military or otherwise—over the coastal valleys of northern Peru, and the relationships between Moche elites in these valleys. If Moche was indeed a state-level society that expanded and maintained control by force of arms, one would expect to see archaeological evidence of warfare, population displacement, and the construction of defensive sites and administrative centers. One also might expect Moche iconography to include scenes of combat, conquest, and the subjugation of defeated enemies.

Most scholars would agree that convincing archaeological evidence of Moche warfare and military conquest has yet to be found, but the apparently rapid spread of the Moche into the Virú, Santa, and Nepeña valleys [Donnan 1973; Proulx 1982; Willey 1953] indicates some form of territorial expansion, and evidence of dramatic settlement pattern shifts and the construction of defensive sites in some north coast valleys [Bawden, this volume, and 1982; Dillehay, this volume] suggests periods of conflict and instability. There is no question, however, that armed combat is a common theme in Moche art. The issue I would like to explore in this paper has long been a familiar one to students of Moche iconography: whether Moche combat scenes depict a form of ritualized combat among the elite class, or secular warfare and conquest. Although this question is an old one, it has been brought back to the forefront recently by a series of important archaeological discoveries at the sites of Sipán, San José de Moro, and the Huaca de la Luna, which provide new insight into the nature of Moche warfare.

Moche Warriors and Warfare
Modeled ceramic figures of warriors, and combat scenes in fine-line slip painting on ceramic vessels are common in Moche art. Fine-line combat scenes appear on some Moche III ceramic vessels, but they are most numerous—and appear in most detailed form—on Moche IV vessels [Shimada 1994: 108]. Most scholars who have described these scenes [Donnan 1973, 1997; Hocquenghem 1987; Kutscher 1950, 1954] interpret them as
some form of ritualized combat among the Moche elite—not as depictions of conquest or warfare with non-Moche politics. This interpretation is based on a number of common elements in these scenes, such as the number and placement of figures, their clothing, ornamentation and weapons, the location in which combat takes place, and the apparent focus on taking captives rather than killing the enemy. Scenes showing the display of captives and their sacrifice at rituals presided over by Moche supernaturals provide additional support for the hypothesis that Moche combat was formalized and ritual in nature.

Donnan sees similarities between the iconography of combat and of deer hunting, a ritualized activity that appears to have been reserved for the Moche elite [Donnan 1997]. Hocquenghem [1987], and more recently John and Theresa Topic (Topic and Topic 1997) see similarities with historical accounts of ceremonial combat among the young nobles of Inca Cuzco, and with ritual battles among modern highland groups in Ecuador (pucara) and Peru (tinku). A significant distinction between these ritual battles and the Moche case, however, is that most injuries incurred in ritual battles are minor (although deaths can occur), and prisoners, if taken, are later returned. In the Moche case, the stakes were considerably higher, as prisoners apparently did not return home. Whether these ritual battles are appropriate analogies for Moche combat can be questioned on a number of grounds. Let us first examine the principal iconographic elements of Moche combat and related scenes involving the presentation and sacrifice of captives.

**Combat Scenes**

Kutscher, Donnan, Hocquenghem, and others have noted a number of common themes in Moche combat scenes. First, combat is presented almost invariably as a face-to-face encounter between paired opponents who fight with close-range weapons—typically clubs (fig. 1). Although individuals occasionally carry longer-range arms such as spear throwers and slings, these are rarely shown being used against an opponent. This is in clear distinction to Moche deer hunting scenes, in which the spear-thrower is the principal weapon used. Some combat scenes show slings apparently lying on the ground near figures engaged in combat, suggesting that these longer-range weapons may have been used initially and later abandoned (fig. 2). However, discarded spears or sling stones are not shown in these scenes. Overall, the proximity of opponents and the weapons they hold emphasize close-in fighting.

Donnan (1997) notes that women, children or other noncombatants do not appear in
Moche combat scenes, and that other indications of organized warfare, such as fortified sites under siege, destroyed villages, or large numbers of soldiers are absent. The location of fighting appears to be out in the open—not within or around architecture. Mountains are often shown in the background, and plants, birds, and occasionally other objects like ceramic vessels may appear “floating” around the combatants. Donnan points out that most of the plants are desert species, suggesting that conflict took place away from agricultural fields and settlements. Hocquenghem (1987: 117) notes, however, that some of the plants are cultigens, and suggest that battles may have been part of some agrarian ritual.

Combatants are typically shown in full ceremonial regalia, including metal and feather headdresses, elaborate tunics, metal backflaps, and even nose ornaments (fig.1). Such elaborate dress and ornamentation clearly marks the participants as elites, given that commoners would probably not have access to such items (Alva and Donnan 1993; Donnan 1995). Many of the objects worn by these individuals, such as complex headdresses and nose ornaments, would be impractical, if not annoying, in an actual physical confrontation—yet they appear to be standard combat dress. This would tend to support the hypothesis that Moche combat, like deer hunting, was a ritual activity limited to the elite class.

A final and important observation regarding dress and weaponry is that with few exceptions all opponents appear to wear Moche attire and carry Moche style weapons. One of the exceptions to this rule, shown in Figure 3, is frequently illustrated simply because it stands out as an anomaly. In this scene, one group of fighters is wearing classic Moche warrior attire: conical helmets, often with crescent-shaped ornaments, tunics in classic Moche style, and crescent-shaped backflaps. They wield long war clubs with conical heads that are typically Moche as well. Their opponents are dressed in a more diverse fashion, but all sport a distinctive waistband/loincloth, and many carry a banner-like object suspended from the neck or shoulders. Their weapons are different from the first group—most carry a star-headed mace—and two are shown about to launch stones at their opponents. Star-head maces and slings are not foreign to the Moche, but they are infrequently used as weapons in combat scenes. It is primarily the dress of the second group, however, that makes them distinctive. Other examples of combat scenes with exotically dressed warriors are known, but they are rare. Most combat shown in Moche art involves opponents dressed in Moche style and carrying Moche weapons.

Taking Prisoners
Judging from what is shown in Moche iconography, the taking of captives appears to have been the principal objective of combat.
Although splayed (presumably dead) figures occasionally appear in combat scenes, they are rare. There are no examples of victims pierced by spears—something commonly seen in deer hunting—or are there any illustrations showing the dispatching, decapitating or dismembering of victims on the battlefield. What is typically shown is the overpowering or stunning of an opponent, who frequently loses his helmet, headdress, and other items, and is grabbed by the hair and taken captive. The victor strips the vanquished of his weapons and elaborate clothing, which he then hangs from his own war club. The victor then places a rope over the captive’s neck and parades him away (fig. 4).

Captives are later shown being presented before elaborately dressed individuals, who frequently sit under roofed structures or atop elevated architecture. In one of the most complex presentation scenes there is a clear status hierarchy among the captives (fig. 5). Some captives are carried in litters by other captives, and even among the litter-borne there appear to be indications of differential rank—the individual in the first litter is distinguished by a stepped seat, and only the third litter rider has a rope around his neck. This explicit hierarchy is unusual, however; captives are generally shown simply as nude individuals with ropes around their necks or with their hands bound behind their backs.


Drawing by Donna McClelland
Sacrifice

The fate of warriors captured in battle is also depicted with clarity in Moche iconography. In scenes adjacent to the presentation of prisoners, bound captives are shown having their throats slit and their blood collected by attendants. The blood appears to be collected and then presented in a goblet to a principal figure who presides over this event. Depictions of what has become known as the Sacrifice Ceremony (Alva and Donnan 1993: 127–141) have been found in fine-line and low relief on ceramic vessels (fig. 6), in painted wall murals, and in abbreviated form in metalwork. The Sacrifice Ceremony was apparently a standardized ritual that involved a cast of supernatural figures. Although the iconography of this ritual had been known for years (Donnan 1978: 158–173), its supernatural participants (fanged deities, anthropomorphized birds and felines), implied a ritual narrative rather than an actual ceremony with human actors.

Beginning in 1987, a series of archaeological discoveries at the sites of Sipán and San José de Moro (1991–1992) would provide evidence that the Sacrifice Ceremony was in fact performed by human actors—dressed as supernaturals. Chamber tombs at Sipán contained the remains of elite individuals buried with the diagnostic headdresses and ornamentation of the two principal figures in the Sacrifice Ceremony, the Warrior Priest and the Bird Priest, according to Donnan (Alva and Donnan 1993). A third major figure in the ceremony, the Priestess, was to be linked to two high-status female burials excavated at the site of San José de Moro several years later (Donnan and Castillo 1994). The discoveries at Sipán and San José de Moro, and the insight they provided into iconography found in other north coast valleys, led to several important conclusions: (1) members of the Moche elite—impersonating deities or supernaturals—indeed presided over ceremonies involving the sacrifice of captives; (2) these ritual offices were passed on through time, as indicated by the tombs of two priestesses at San José de Moro, and perhaps multiple warrior priests at Sipán; (3) the Sacrifice Ceremony was not enacted in only one location, but apparently at multiple sites extending from the Lambayeque Valley in the north to the Nepeña Valley (based on a painted mural of the Sacrifice Ceremony at the site of Pañamarca) to the south.

Recent discoveries at the sites of El Brujo complex in the Chicama Valley, and the Huaca de la Luna in the Moche Valley serve to complete the picture. Painted friezes showing combat scenes, the arraignment of prisoners, and supernatural spider “decapitators” adorn the north façade of the Huaca Cao Viejo in the El Brujo complex (Gálvez and Briceno, this volume; Franco, Gálvez, and Vásquez...
1994). The proximal end of a human femur, with cut marks indicating that it was taken from a fleshed body, was incorporated into one of these friezes (Verano, Anderson, and Lombardi 1998), suggesting that the prisoner display and decapitation scenes are not simply metaphorical. Skeletal remains of possible sacrificial victims were also found under the north courtyard of Huaca Cao Viejo in 1995 (Franco, Galvez, and Vasquez 1996).

Evidence of the sacrifice of captives is more dramatic at the Huaca de la Luna. Excavations by Steve Bourget in 1995–1996 uncovered the most extensive evidence to date: the remains of more than seventy adolescent and young adult males who were killed and deposited around the base of a rock outcrop on Platform II of the Huaca de la Luna (Bourget, this volume, and 1997a, 1997b). Osteological analysis of these remains provides, for the first time, information on the age, sex, and physical characteristics of sacrificed captives, as well as evidence of injuries they suffered in combat, how they were sacrificed, and some details about the postmortem treatment of their remains (Verano 1998). These observations will be discussed further below.

Integrating the Iconographic and Archaeological Evidence

Breakthroughs in understanding the iconography of combat, prisoner capture and human sacrifice by the Moche have come largely through these recent archaeological discoveries, which provide physical evidence of such activities. Integrating the two sources of information, scholars can now reexamine previous hypotheses about the nature of Moche warfare and the performance of sacrificial ritual. However, beyond the simple revelation that the Moche indeed “did these things” [took captives and sacrificed them in an elaborate ritual presided over by a deity-impersonating priesthood], there remain many unresolved questions. Was Moche combat simply an elite activity analogous to deer hunting? Was it fundamentally a ritual activity closely tied to Moche religious practices, or could political motives also have driven this activity? Most scholars who have studied the iconography of Moche combat make the implicit assumption that Moche artists were being accurate and realistic in their depictions. The very plausible alternative that Moche artists were presenting intentionally simplified and idealized images of “noble combat” among the elite has been largely ignored. The recent discoveries at Sipán and San José de Moro may have had the unfortunate effect of overextending the notion that the Moche were depicting “events that really happened,” leading to a search for undue realism and literalism in Moche iconography.

If most armed combat shown in Moche iconography is indeed Moche against Moche—as has been deduced from costuming and weapons—the question remains as to who the players were, and where they came from. Archaeological evidence now indicates that prisoner sacrifice rituals were performed at Moche ceremonial complexes up and down the north coast. This suggests several possibilities. Valleys may have competed against one another to obtain captives for their respective temples. Alternatively, combat may have been arranged between different centers within a single valley or perhaps between different warrior societies at a single ceremonial/population center. Finally, it is possible that the Moche were obtaining some of their captives through conflicts with neighboring non-Moche polities.

The Moche’s Highland Neighbors: What Kind of Neighbors Were They?

Archaeological surveys conducted by Christopher Donnan, Donald Proulx and David Wilson indicate that there were shifting and probably conflict-prone boundaries between the highland Recuay and the middle/lower valley Gallinazo [pre-Moche] polities of the Virú, Santa, and Nepeña valleys. Billman’s more recent survey of the Moche Valley found similar evidence of shifting boundaries between middle and upper valley populations prior to Moche consolidation of the valley (Billman 1997). The nature of Moche-Recuay interaction is poorly understood, but some scholars have suggested that combat scenes such as that in Figure 4 may depict battles between the Moche and Recuay (Disselhoff 1956; Proulx 1982). Shimada suspects that territorial conflicts may also have existed between the Moche and the highland Cajamarca polity, and suggests that “future studies may
well reveal that some of the Mochica battle scenes also depict conflict with the Cajamarca polity." (1994: 93).

Unfortunately, combat scenes showing individuals dressed in non-Moche style are rare, and to my knowledge the dress and weaponry of these "outliers" has yet to be identified unequivocally as either Recuay or Cajamarca. It is notable, however, that the best-known example of combat involving "exotic" participants adheres to the standard Moche artistic conventions of one-on-one combat, the capture, stripping and binding [rope around the neck] of captives, and other details like the presence of cacti and other plants as background elements. If the scene depicted in Figure 3 indeed shows conflict between the Moche and an outside group, it suggests one of two possibilities: (1) Moche warfare waged against "others" was ritualized to the same degree as intra-Moche combat; or that (2) Moche artists simplified this scene so as to emphasize only the classic "one-on-one" theme.

Archaeological Evidence for Warfare

If the Moche were involved in frequent warfare with their neighbors, one might expect to see archaeological evidence in the form of abandoned settlements, fortified sites along territorial frontiers, or skeletal remains showing signs of violence. To date, such evidence has been largely elusive, but many archaeological sites have been destroyed or seriously damaged by erosion, construction, and looting, and site survey and excavation has been limited in many of the areas where such conflicts may have occurred. It must also be remembered that military encounters may not leave evidence that is obvious or easy to find. For example, the military confrontation that resulted in the conquest of the Chimú state by the Inca in the late fifteenth century is invisible in the archaeological record. Nevertheless, if warfare was common in the Moche domain, evidence of fractures and other trauma should be found in Moche cemeteries.

Unfortunately, until recent years the study of Moche skeletal remains has been largely neglected, due to a focus by archaeologists on grave goods rather than on the remains of the dead. The situation has gradually improved, however, so that a number of samples of Moche skeletal remains have now been analyzed and published (Verano 1994a, 1994b, 1997a, 1997b). Examination of skeletal remains from both elite and common Moche burials has shown that evidence of violent injuries, such as fractures or projectile wounds, is rare. This is in contrast to the high frequency of healed skull fractures found in some central Peruvian highland samples from the late pre-contact period (Verano and Williams 1992). Although more cemetery samples need to be studied, my impression is that the average Moche man and woman on the street had little experience with violent encounters.

The Huaca de la Luna Sacrificial Site

The discovery of a Moche sacrificial site at the Huaca de la Luna in 1995 is of great importance because it is the first archaeological evidence of large-scale sacrifice of captives by the Moche (Bourget, this volume, and 1997a, 1997b). It is important also because the skeletal remains of the victims are well preserved and have now been studied [Bracamonte 1998; Verano 1998]. The discovery provides a rare opportunity to compare the iconography of prisoner sacrifice with archaeological and osteological evidence. Results of these preliminary analyses are consistent with a number of details presented in the iconography.

As an outgrowth of an iconographic study of Moche sacrificial scenes in the context of mountain shrines, Steve Bourget began survey and excavations at the Huaca de la Luna, a site at the base of Cerro Blanco in the Moche Valley in 1995. His excavations focused on a walled plaza and small platform that had been built around a natural rock outcrop on the west flank of Cerro Blanco, part of a late construction phase [Moch IV, c. A.D. 500–600] at the Huaca de la Luna. Excavations of the area surrounding the outcrop revealed a deposit of multiple layers of silt, hardened mud, and sand that contained abundant human skeletal remains and broken unfired ceramic vessels in the form of seated male figures. The deposit appears to represent multiple events in which the bodies of sacrificial victims were deposited around the base of the rock outcrop and left to decompose on the
surface before being buried by silt and wind-blown sand.

In 1996, archaeologist Clorinda Orbegoso conducted limited excavations in an adjacent plaza, designated Plaza 3C, under the auspices of the Huaca de la Luna Project (Orbego 1998). These excavations recovered additional skeletal remains.

In the spring of 1993, at the invitation of Bourget, I began an osteological analysis of the Plaza 3A remains, with the assistance of Florencia Bracamonte of the Universidad Nacional de Trujillo and Laurel Anderson of Tulane University (Verano 1998). The Plaza 3C material was studied in 1996. The objective of the analysis was to determine age at death, sex, and physical characteristics (stature, general health) of the remains, and to examine them for evidence of cause of death.

The skeletal remains from Plaza 3A include complete articulated skeletons, partial skeletons, isolated limbs, hands, feet, or other clusters of articulated elements, and individual isolated bones (Bourget, this volume, and 1997a, 1997b). The high frequency of disarticulation complicates the task of estimating the total number of individuals present, but skeletal element counts indicate a minimum of seventy. All remains for which sex can be determined are clearly male; no remains of females or children are present. In terms of age, all fall into the adolescent to middle adult (fifteen to thirty-nine year) age range, with most individuals estimated to have died in their early to mid twenties. Overall, the demographic composition indicates a highly selective sample of individuals.

The Plaza 3A individuals were healthy and physically active, as indicated by pronounced muscle attachment areas, general bone size, and some early arthritic changes suggesting intense physical activity. Very little evidence of nutritional or infectious disease was found, but healed fractures are quite common. Healed fractures of ribs, long bones, and depressed fractures of the skull were seen in eighteen individuals, and several of these had suffered multiple fractures (fig. 7). This is a very high frequency in comparison to Moche cemetery samples I have studied. Moreover, many of these injuries, especially skull fractures and broken ribs, are more typical of wounds incurred through interpersonal violence than from accidents. Overall, the fracture data suggest that this was a group with a history of violent encounters.

Perimortem Injuries

Perimortem injuries are those that occur at or around the time of death, when bone is flexible and responds to trauma in a different manner than dry or ancient bone (Sauer 1998). The two most common perimortem injuries
8. Cut marks on second cervical vertebra. Huaca de La Luna ARP-II, Individual XVIII a

9. Fractured left ulna in process of callus formation at time of death. HG96-102

10. Skull fracture. Huaca de La Luna ARP-II, HG96-102

seen in the Plaza 3A victims are cut marks on the cervical (neck) vertebrae and skull fractures. Approximately 75 percent of individuals with fully observable cervical spines show cut marks. These vary in number from one to more than nine distinct cuts, located on the anterior surface of the vertebral bodies or on the transverse processes [fig. 8]. Cuts to the throat deep enough to mark bone would have been mortal wounds; the likely cause of death for most individuals, therefore, was exsanguination. The location of cut marks implies that the objective was to cut the throat of victims, not to decapitate them. Cut marks on anterior surfaces of the cervical vertebrae are precisely what would be expected to be found, based on Moche sacrifice scenes that

show captives having their throats slit to collect blood.

The skull fractures indicate massive head trauma, typically with breakage of a large portion of the cranial vault (fig. 10). Most appear to have been produced by blows from blunt objects, although in a few cases the margins of broken areas suggest a weapon with sharp protuberances, such as a star-headed mace. In Moche iconography captives are typically not shown being dispatched with clubs in sacrifice scenes, so there is not a close correspondence here. However, a wooden club was

found by Bourget in 1997 in an elaborate tomb in Platform II, just above the sacrifice deposit. It was recently tested for organic residue, and was found to have a strong positive reaction to human antiserum. Bourget and Newman (1998) conclude that the residue on the club is human blood. Bourget also found evidence that rocks had been thrown at ceramic vessels, and has suggested that the
bodies, as well as some parts of the sacrificial victims may have been manipulated and intentionally arranged following death (Bourget 1997a, 1997b). Perhaps some of the skull breakage resulted from these activities.

**Healing Injuries**

An important detail that emerged from our osteological analysis is that in addition to perimortem trauma, at least twelve individuals had injuries that were in the early stages of healing at time of death. These include fractured ribs, shoulder blades, bones of the forearm (fig. 9), and in two cases, the margins of the nasal aperture (fig. 11). The fractures show various degrees of bone reaction, indicating survival for at least several weeks to perhaps a month, based on comparisons with documented clinical cases (Sledzik and Murphy 1990). Presumably these injuries were sustained either during combat or following capture. Three examples were found (fig. 9) of classic “parry” fractures of the left ulna (one of the bones of the forearm), a fracture that commonly occurs when the arm is used to block a blow (Merbs 1989). The small marginal fractures and bone reaction around the nasal aperture seen in Figure 11 appears to reflect blows to the face. Moche prisoner-capture scenes sometimes show victors striking their captives on the nose; an example can be seen in the lower right corner of Figure 5.

Fractures in the process of healing at the time of death suggests that a significant period of time (weeks to perhaps a month or more) elapsed between the time an individual was captured and the moment of death at the Huaca de la Luna. Processions of prisoners shown in Moche art may therefore be illustrating extended rituals involving the public display of captives. Alternatively, captives may have been brought to the Huaca de la Luna from some distant location.

Osteological analysis indicates that some of the sacrificial victims were physically mistreated. Small, repeated cut marks are present on hand and foot bones of several individuals (fig. 13); one skull shows multiple cut marks around the margin of the right eye socket, and one victim appears to have had a sharp object inserted between his toes. None of these injuries appear to be wounds inflicted in hand-to-hand combat; they suggest intentional mistreatment of some captives. As previously mentioned, bound captives are sometimes shown being struck by their captors, but other evidence of the mistreatment of captives is rare, although punishments such as mutilation of the nose and lips (Urteaga-Ballon 1991) and flaying of the face are known from Moche iconography.

**Skeletal Remains from Plaza 3C**

In 1995–1996, limited excavations in an adjacent courtyard, designated Plaza 3C, uncovered the largely disarticulated remains of seven individuals (Orbegoso 1998; Verano 1999).
implying that the objective was not simply to disarticulate, but to deflesh the skeletons.

Although the Plaza 3C sample is small, the remains are similar in age and sex to those in Plaza 3A—adolescent and adult males. The Plaza 3C excavations, although limited in extent, suggest that some sacrificial victims at the Huaca de la Luna received more complex treatment than was observed in Plaza 3A. Why they were defleshed is a subject for speculation, although depictions of dismembered captives are known from Moche art. Further excavation and analysis are needed to address this question.

**An Emerging Picture**

Archaeological discoveries on the north coast of Peru over the past ten years have resulted in significant revelations about both the iconography and practice of warfare, prisoner capture, and human sacrifice among the Moche. These discoveries have demonstrated that a common sacrificial ceremony was practiced at multiple ceremonial centers along the north coast, presided over by individuals who impersonated Moche deities as they toasted one another with the blood of their captives. Royal tombs at Sipán and San José de Moro contain the mortal remains and insignia of some of those who presided over these rituals, and the skeletons of sacrificial victims litter the plaza floors of the Huaca de la Luna. One essential missing piece in this puzzle remains, however: the identities of the sacrificial victims. At present these individuals stand as shadowy players in a game of “ritual combat,” with no clear function other than to provide the necessary captives and blood for the Sacrifice Ceremony. In the absence of a Moche written history or even reliable ethnohistorical sources on Moche religion and political organization, the identity of captives and the motivations for their capture are difficult questions to approach. One avenue of investigation we are currently following is an attempt to identify the population origin of the Huaca de la Luna victims using genetically determined skeletal traits, mitochondrial DNA, and bone chemistry. We have previously used several of these techniques with some success at a mass burial site dating to the Late Intermediate period in the Jequetepeque Valley (Verano and DeNiro
However, such analyses require reference populations with which to compare the unknowns, and there are surprisingly few adequate skeletal samples available for Moche, Recuay or Cajamarca. One hopes the situation will improve in future years.

Cautionary Tales

Despite recent breakthroughs in interpreting the iconography of Moche warfare and human sacrifice, there remain some potential pitfalls in the interpretive scenarios generated from them. Research on Moche iconography and archaeology is often characterized by an intense inward focus, with limited appreciation of parallels beyond the north coast of Peru. Examples of similar iconography from prehispanic central Mexico and the Maya area provides a warning against unqualified acceptance of Moche combat as strictly “ritual.”

Maya and central Mexican depictions of warfare and the capture of prisoners are strikingly similar to Moche iconography. Features such as stereotyped one-on-one confrontations, the elaborate dress and ornamentation of the combatants, the use of short-range weapons, and the taking of captives all closely parallel what is seen in Moche art. Details such as grasping captives by the hair and stripping them of their elaborate clothing and weapons are also similar. In Maya iconography, the presentation of captives before an elaborately dressed figure seated atop elevated architecture is a frequent theme. Finally, the fate of captives is often ritual sacrifice on the summit of the temple.

In the absence of other sources of information, one could use examples such as Figures 14 and 15 to argue that Maya and Aztec warfare was a ritualized activity limited to members of the elite class, and that its principal objective was to acquire captives for sacrifice. One could extend the argument to conclude that Maya and Aztec iconography depicts only ritual combat and not the conquest of one polity by another. In fact, the latter is precisely what these figures record. Figure 14, Lintel 8 from Yaxchilan, Chiapas, Mexico, shows Bird Jaguar (on the right) taking his most prized captive—Jeweled Skull—on May 9, A.D. 755 (Schele and Miller 1986: fig. V.3). Figure 15, a detail from the sacrificial stone of Motecuhzoma I [C. A.D. 1455–1469], docu-

ments the conquest of the Tenayuca polity by the Aztec ruler Motecuhzoma I, shown in the guise of the Aztec war god Huiztilopochtli, grasping the god of Tenayuca by the hair (Umberger 1996). These images communicate elegantly the essential information intended by the artist, without the need for details such as the military campaigns that led to victory, the number of soldiers involved, or the methods used to defeat the enemy. As in Moche art, there are no women, children or other noncombatants shown, nor are there fields of soldiers, buildings under siege, destroyed villages, or any other indications of organized warfare.

This is not to argue that Maya and Aztec warfare did not have ritualized elements, or that the taking of captives for human sacrifice was not an important part of warfare. The principal distinction is that in the Maya and Aztec case we know that specific historic conquests are recorded, because associated inscriptions give the names of the polities, the leaders, and in some cases, the dates when these events occurred. This kind of information is lacking in Moche iconography. Indeed, our interpretation of scenes such as Figure 5 would be dramatically enhanced if we knew the identities of the prisoners and the events preceding and following their capture. While little can be done to remedy this lack of knowledge, such difficulties underscore the need to avoid an oversimplistic approach to interpreting Moche iconography.

Given the comparative examples above, it should be evident that iconography alone cannot be used to conclude that Moche combat was principally a ritual activity of the elite. It is likely, as in the Maya and Aztec cases, that warfare indeed had ritualized elements, but we can also assume that its iconographic representation was highly formalized—and therefore cannot be interpreted literally. Given our lack of contextual knowledge, combat and prisoner arraignment scenes in Moche art must be interpreted with caution. In my opinion, many of these scenes probably depict specific events, with known participants. Whether these events recorded ritualized conflict between polities—such as competition between ceremonial centers or the periodic renewal of territorial boundaries—or whether they documented the conquest of one polity by another, cannot be answered.
from the iconography. Nevertheless, the existence of multiple ceremonial centers such as Sipán, San José de Moro, El Brujo, Moche, and Pañamarca—all showing evidence of participation in combat and the sacrifice of prisoners—would tend to support the model of Moche society as composed of a number of competing “royal courts” rather than a centralized state ruled from the Moche Valley.

The sacrificial site recently excavated at the Huaca de la Luna confirms that captives were indeed sacrificed in a manner consistent with that shown in Moche art. It is likely that skeletal remains of more sacrificial victims remain undiscovered at other ceremonial centers. Osteological analysis of the Huaca de la Luna victims indicates that they were a very select group—young males whose healed injuries indicate previous experience with combat. Their age profile, physical characteristics, and evidence of previous wounds suggest that they may have been “professionals” and not simply occasional weekend warriors. The lack of older males (forty-plus) in this sample is interesting, as it suggests either that older men did not participate directly in conflict, or that they received different treatment if captured.

Much remains to be understood about Moche armed conflict. This brief attempt to explore the nature of war and death in the Moche world underlines the significant challenges we face in attempting to reconstruct Moche society, political structure, and religion from iconographic and archaeological evidence alone.

NOTE

Field research reported here was made possible by funding from the Tulane University Committee on Research, The Council for the International Exchange of Scholars [Fulbright Commission], and Tulane University’s Center for Latin American Studies.

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