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Tombs for the Living:
Andean Mortuary Practices

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Where Do They Rest?
The Treatment of Human Offerings
and Trophies in Ancient Peru

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INTRODUCTION

As its title implies, a principal focus of this volume is how mortuary practices reflect the dynamic relationship between the living, the dead, and the supernatural in the Andean world. The ritual offering of human remains, or of human lives, also appears to have functioned as an important mediator between these entities. This paper will focus on the treatment of the human body in contexts outside the boundaries of standard Andean mortuary behavior. Examples include human sacrifice, dedicatory burials, secondary offerings of human remains, and the collection and curation of human body parts. In some cases, these bodies, or body parts, were treated in a similar fashion to normal burials. In other cases, however, non-standard treatment suggests that human remains were being thought of in a very different manner.

There are three principal sources of information on these practices—ethnohistoric accounts from the early colonial period, iconographic depictions of sacrifice and related themes, and archaeological evidence of the activities themselves. Ethnohistoric accounts speak primarily about the Inka, although some chroniclers described pre-Inka practices as well. The iconographic record is relatively uninformative for the Inka, because Inka art was largely non-representational, but it is particularly valuable for earlier cultures such as the Moche and Nasca. Data from archaeological excavations are limited by several factors, including preservation, the destruction of sites by urban expansion and looting, the lack of context in materials excavated unscientifically, and by variability in the observational and recording skills of archaeologists. Although all three data sources have inherent limitations, each provides information on the different ways in which human remains were treated in ancient Peru.
Human Sacrifice

Chroniclers who described human sacrifice in the Inka empire indicated that it was not a frequent practice, but was reserved for times of great crisis, such as famines, epidemics, or major defeats on the battlefield (Rowe 1946; Fig. 1). It was reported that following important military victories, the Inka brought war prisoners and individuals selected from the defeated population to Cuzco for sacrifice (Cobo [1653] 1990: 111). In general, however, individuals chosen for sacrifice were children or young women selected from various parts of the empire during regular taxation. Hundreds of children were reportedly sacrificed following the death of an Inka ruler and during ceremonies associated with the coronation of his successor (Rowe 1946: 305-306). According to Bernabé Cobo, the bodies of sacrificed individuals "were buried with gold and silver and other things and with special superstitions" (Cobo [1653] 1990: 112). The remains of relatively few Inka sacrificial victims have been found archaeologically, although those that have are generally consistent with Cobo's description. One of the earliest discoveries was made by Max Uhle, who found the bodies of numerous sacrificed women buried at the temple of Pachacamac (Uhle 1903: 84-88). Excellent preservational conditions and careful observation by Uhle allowed him to determine that the women had been strangled with knotted ligatures. As John Rowe points out in this volume, Uhle's discovery was important in refuting Garcilaso de la Vega's claim that the Inka did not practice human sacrifice.

Inka child sacrifices have been found at several high-altitude Inka shrines in Chile and Argentina. The best documented is the child of Cerro El Plomo, discovered in 1954 in the highlands of central Chile (Mostny 1957; Rowe, this volume). The Cerro El Plomo child, an eight- to nine-year-old boy, was buried in a llama wool tunic, accompanied by gold, silver, and Spondylus shell figurines, and leather bags that contained coca leaves, hair, fingernail clippings, and deciduous teeth of the child. Other child sacrifices from high-altitude sites in Chile and Argentina contain similar offerings (Schobinger 1991; Reinhard 1992). The context and contents of these child burials are consistent with ethnohistoric descriptions of the Inka sacrificial cycle of capac huaca, in which children selected from distinct parts of the Inka empire were brought to Cuzco and then sent back to their native regions to be buried alive as sacrifices (Duviols 1976; Besom n.d.; Solomon, this volume).

While sacrifices such as the Cerro El Plomo child received elaborate mortuary treatment, this was probably not the case with war captives chosen for sacrifice. It is more likely in these cases that the body was not given a ceremonious burial. Intentional exposure of the corpse to vultures and other...
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Fig. 1 Offering of a child sacrifice to Pachacamac (after Guaman Poma de Ayala 1980, t: 268 [266]).
scavengers was a frequently described punishment for individuals who had committed serious crimes against the Inka state (Basadre 1937: 207-210; Cieza de León 1941: chap. 70; Guaman Poma de Ayala 1980: 187ff). Portions of enemies, however, were occasionally retained for ritual or display purposes (Fig. 2). War trophies collected by the Inka included necklaces of human teeth, human skin (used to cover drums or stuffed with straw to create a mannequin), and flutes made of human bones (Rowe 1946: 279). A building in Cuzco is reported to have housed the skulls of conquered enemies (Lastres 1951: 65). A more elaborate treatment of an enemy’s head was reserved for particularly important individuals:

One of Atahualpa’s favourite possessions was the head of Atoc, one of Huascar’s generals. . . Cristóbal de Mena saw this “head with its skin, dried flesh and hair. Its teeth were closed and held a silver spout. On top of the head a golden bowl was attached. Atahualpa used to drink from it when he was reminded of the wars waged against him by his brother.” (Hemming 1970: 54)

Only a few examples of Inka war trophies are known. Uhle found necklaces of human teeth in his excavations at the Inka fortress of Saqsawaman (Tello 1918). A flute made of a human arm bone is in the collections of the Amano Museum in Lima, and the Museum of Archaeology at the University of San Antonio Abad, Cuzco, has a skull which may have been modified as a drinking vessel (McIntyre 1975: 59).

Human Sacrifice in Pre-Inka Times

Ethnohistoric data on human sacrifice before Inka times are limited to a few accounts, such as Fray Antonio de la Calancha’s description of a temple in the Jequetepeque Valley on the north coast of Peru, where child sacrifices were reportedly made (Rowe 1948: 50). However, depictions of severed human heads, mutilated bodies, and scenes showing the capture and sacrifice of war prisoners can be found in the iconography of many ancient Andean societies. In Moche art, for example, the capture, arraignment, and sacrifice of war prisoners are common themes (Fig. 3), as are scenes showing victims being exposed to vultures (Donnan 1978: fig. 147; Donnan 1990). Supernatural figures holding human heads, and depictions of severed heads and limbs are also known from Moche art (Kutscher 1954: pl. 25b; Moser 1974; Donnan 1978: figs. 151,152), and earlier Formative cultures on the north coast of Peru (Cordy-Collins 1992). Scenes involving the sacrifice and mutilation of bound captives are also known from Chimu iconography (Verano 1986; Lapiner 1976: 279–282), suggesting some continuity of themes seen in Moche art.

A recent discovery of a mass burial of mutilated individuals at the site of Pacatnamu in the Jequetepeque River Valley suggests that scenes of prisoner
Fig. 2 Head of an enemy being presented to the Inka Capac Yupanqui by his son, Topa Inka Yupanqui (after Guaman Poma de Ayala 1980, 1: 130 [153]).
History, New York (Illustration by Donna Mckelheny)

Sacred activities associated with these activities are anthropomorphized black birds, possibly vultures. American Museum of Natural History, accompanying text (lower right) and activities related to ceremonial architecture. Surrounding scenes depict sacrificed bodies, a dismembered head (lower right) and activities recorded in the illustrated figure before an elaborately dressed figure scored stop.

Fig. 3 Rollout of a Moxie IV Medicine Drawing Showing Prisoners Being Brought Before an Elaborately Dressed Figure Scored Stop.
sacrifice, mutilation, and exposure of the body to scavengers are not merely symbolic statements or depictions of mythical events. In 1984, the remains of 14 adolescent and young adult males were found at Pacatnamu in the bottom of a trench outside the entrance to the principal ceremonial complex (Verano 1986). The deposit, which dates to the Late Intermediate Period (ca. A.D. 1150–1250), consists of three superimposed groups of skeletons (Fig. 4). Evidence indicates that on at least three distinct occasions, individuals were sacrificed, mutilated, and deposited in the trench. Insect remains found with the skeletons and surface weathering of bones indicate that the bodies of the victims were left exposed to scavengers rather than being promptly buried (Faulkner 1986). The skeletons show evidence of multiple injuries, including stab and cut wounds, fractures, and forced dismemberment. Two individuals had their throats slit, two were decapitated, and five appear to have had their chests cut open (Verano 1986). The radius, one of the bones of the forearm, had been forcibly removed from four of the individuals. The missing radii were not found elsewhere in the deposit, suggesting that they were intentionally collected from the victims. The articulated skeletons of two black vultures were also found associated with the human remains in the Pacatnamu mass burial. Initially assumed to be the remains of opportunistic scavengers, a detailed examination of the vulture skeletons revealed multiple fresh fractures and penetrating wounds, suggesting that the vultures had been sacrificed as well (Rea 1986).

The identity and origin of the mass burial is not known, although their ages and sex (adolescent and young adult males), and contextual evidence, such as ropes found around their ankles, suggest that they may have been war prisoners. Biometric comparisons between the mass burial victims and contemporary skeletal samples from Pacatnamu and adjacent coastal and highland sites were not conclusive in determining their population origin. However, an analysis of the isotopic composition of their bone collagen revealed that six of the 14 victims showed a nitrogen isotopic composition more than two standard deviations away from mean isotopic ratios for a contemporary sample of Pacatnamu burials (Verano and DeNiro 1993). The results suggest that these individuals had a different dietary history (and by implication, geographic origin) from the local population at Pacatnamu, and lend support to the hypothesis that these were war captives rather than members of the local population. The Pacatnamu mass burial shows a close correspondence to events depicted in scenes of prisoner sacrifice in Moche and Chimú iconography, as well as to north coast ethnohistoric descriptions of punishments involving mutilation and exposure of the body to scavengers (Rowe 1948: 49). It is important in that it provides archaeological documentation of activities previously known only indirectly from iconographic and ethnohistoric sources.
Retainer Burial

Spanish chroniclers noted that upon the death of a prominent Inka lord, certain of his wives, relatives, and servants were expected to accompany him to the grave (Cobo [1653] 1990: 251). Of course, this was not strictly true in the case of the Inka rulers, who in fact were not buried but continued to occupy their palaces in mumified form. Their sacrificed wives and retainers were buried elsewhere (see Rowe and Solomon, this volume). At the funeral of the Inka Atahualpa, following his garroting by the Spanish, Lucas Martínez Vegaso observed:

When we were in the church singing the funeral service for Atahualpa with his body present, certain ladies—his sisters, wives and other intimates—arrived with great clamour. . . . They said that the tomb must be made much larger: for it was the custom when the chief lord died for all who loved him to be buried alive with him. (Hemming 1970: 79)

Retainer burial was not a practice unique to the Inkas, but was a deeply rooted tradition in the Andes. Cieza de León, describing traditional burial
practices on the south coast of Peru, noted: “In these valleys the custom is very general of burying precious things with the dead, as well as many women and the most confidential servants possessed by the chief when alive” (Dwyer and Dwyer 1975: 145). Tombs of high-status individuals with accompanying retainer burials have been reported from a number of Andean archaeological sites (Rowe, Donnan, this volume). The presence of multiple primary interments in a single tomb does not, of course, necessarily imply sacrifice of retainers. Contextual clues such as unusual body position or the absence of grave goods may identify retainer burials. An example is the tomb of the Warrior Priest excavated at Huaca de la Cruz in the Viru Valley, where a high-status male was buried with four other individuals—an eight- to ten-year-old child, two adult females, and one adult male (Strong and Evans 1952; Donnan, this volume). The child and adult male were placed carefully in the tomb extended on their backs in standard Moche burial position, while the two females appear to have been forced into the corners, suggesting that they were retainers to the principal burial. Elsewhere in this volume, John Rowe describes a Lima period burial from the central coast of an old adult female with two retainers, identified as such by their unusual burial position.

Three high-status Moche tombs recently excavated at Sipán in the Reque Valley include retainer burials (Alva 1988, 1990; Verano n.d.a; Donnan, this volume). The two large chamber tombs (Tombs 1 and 2) each had a “guard” above the roof of the chamber and multiple burials surrounding the principal interment. Tomb 3, that of the “Old Lord” of Sipán, had a single retainer, a young female. In most cases, the bodies accompanying the principal burial appear to have been given careful mortuary treatment. Female retainers in the Sipán tombs showed substantial variability, however. The skeletons of the three females in Tomb 1 showed patterns of disarticulation suggesting that they were secondary burials, placed in the tomb after substantial soft tissue decomposition had already taken place (Verano n.d.a; Donnan, this volume). The young adult female in the second chamber tomb lay sprawled face down (Fig. 5) in a position suggesting casual treatment of the body rather than careful placement. The female retainer buried with the “Old Lord” was tightly flexed and forced face down into a small space at one end of the tomb. It is unclear why female retainers in the Sipán tombs were given such diverse treatment, although Donnan (this volume) suggests several possible explanations for the presence of secondary burials in the tomb of the Warrior Priest.

In highland Ecuador, deep shaft tombs containing elite burials and sacrificed retainers have been reported from the site of La Florida (Doyon 1988). Six high-status tombs, which date to the Regional Development period (500 B.C.–A.D. 500), contained numerous articulated skeletons that appear to be sacrifices placed with the principal burials. Articulated crania and mandi-
bles, as well as disassociated skeletal elements, were also found in the upper shaft of some of the tombs, suggesting that some individuals were decapitated and dismembered. Most of the articulated skeletons believed to be sacrifices were young females, whereas the articulated skulls and mandibles were of males (Ubelaker n.d.).

**Chan Chan**

The most impressive example of retainer burial in the Andean archaeological record is found in the royal burial platforms at Chan Chan. The platforms, which are generally considered to have been the burial places of the kings of Chimor, are associated with nine of the ten large compounds at the site (Conrad 1982; Rowe, this volume). Intensively looted during the early colonial period, most have received little systematic study by archaeologists. The Las Avispas burial platform, associated with the Laberinto Compound, has been most extensively excavated. Excavations conducted by Thomas Pozorski revealed that the structure consisted of a series of 24 rectangular cells surrounding a central T-shaped chamber. The central chamber is believed to have once held the remains of one of the kings of Chimor.
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(Pozorski n.d.; Conrad 1982). In the disturbed fill of the surrounding cells, Pozorski recovered skeletal material from at least 93 individuals. All of the bones examined were judged to be females, and approximately two-thirds were estimated to have been between 17 and 24 years of age (Pozorski n.d.). Only about 25% of the fill from the Avispas platform was excavated, and the structure originally may have contained 200–300 burials (Conrad 1982: 100).

The young females in the burial platforms at Chan Chan are believed to be sacrificial victims placed in the platforms upon the death of the king. Presumably they were interred in the secondary cells surrounding the principal burial chamber, although looting of the platforms has destroyed or thoroughly jumbled their internal contents. Pozorski was fortunate to find 13 articulated skeletons in one of the cells of the Las Avispas platform. The bodies had been placed in the cell extended on their backs, rather than seated and flexed, as is the normal Chimu burial position. Geoffrey Conrad describes them as being stacked one on top of another “like cordwood” (Conrad 1982: 99). The unusual burial position and stacking of the bodies in the cells is certainly suggestive of sacrifice.

Some of the burial platforms at Chan Chan had more than 40 secondary cells. If one assumes that all of these contained sacrificed victims, the scale of retainer burial at Chan Chan is truly impressive. Impressive also is the restricted age and sex distribution of the retainers. Pozorski’s age and sex determinations of the skeletal remains from Las Avispas indicate that only a select category of individuals was considered appropriate for such sacrifice.

Dedicatory Burials

In addition to the individuals placed in the burial platforms, young females have also been found as offerings placed under architectural features at Chan Chan. These burials contained fine textiles, ceramics, and other offerings, which might initially suggest that they were high-status individuals. However, the location and context in which they are found indicates that they were sacrifices. The burials are found in subfloor pits under U-shaped structures, or audiencias, as well as under ramps leading from courtyard floors to benches in the large compounds or ciudadelas, and appear to have been placed as offerings at the time of construction (Andrews 1974; Day 1982). Andrews concluded that all of the dedicatory burials were adolescent females, based on his examination of the skeletal remains (Andrews 1974: 250).

1 Eight of the nine burial platforms had additional cells added on to the original structure, suggesting that more sacrifices may have been made on later occasions.

2 Pozorski was an undergraduate student with limited training in osteology when he studied the skeletal material from Las Avispas. Reexamination of the Avispas material by a specialist in human osteology would be helpful in confirming the accuracy of his age and sex determinations.
Burials of adolescent or young adult females with elaborate grave goods have also been found under audiencias at the sites of Farfán (Keatinge and Conrad 1983) and Pacatnamu (Bruce 1986) in the Jequetepeque Valley, indicating that the practice was not limited to the Chimu capital. Chimu dedicatory burials share some common features with the individuals interred in the royal burial platforms, in age and sex, as well as in the types of grave goods with which they were interred. Clearly, the dedication of certain buildings was an occasion of great ritual significance, involving both human sacrifice and the offering of textiles, ceramics, and other elite goods.

**ISOLATED BONES AND BODY PARTS**

Isolated human remains occur outside normal burial contexts at many Andean archaeological sites. In attempting to classify these features, it is important to distinguish between incidental inclusions of isolated human bones or bone fragments in architectural fill or occupational refuse, and human remains, whether partial or complete, that were intentionally buried or incorporated into architectural features.

Isolated human bones are commonly found at archaeological sites with multiple or extended periods of occupation. In most cases, such findings have been interpreted as the result of the accidental disturbance of earlier burials by later occupants of a site (Strong and Evans 1952: 41; Feldman n.d.: 121-122; Wing 1980: 234; Bonavia 1982: 397; Shimada 1982, 1985). Other possible explanations, such as cannibalism, have occasionally been suggested—particularly in the case of human bones found in domestic refuse deposits (Uhle 1925; Strong and Evans 1952). Although there has been a recent revival of the cannibalism hypothesis (Lumbreras 1989: 206-211), most cases of isolated human bones in fill or refuse are probably best explained as disturbance of earlier burials. What is of interest here is evidence of the intentional manipulation, modification, or redeposition of human remains.

**Burned Human Bone**

As Rowe notes in his chapter, cremation was not a customary mortuary practice in ancient Peru. Deposits of burned human bone have been found within the context of ritual offerings, however. One such offering has been described from the Galería de las Ofrendas at Chavin de Huantar (Lumbreras 1989). A 15 to 20 cm thick deposit containing ceramics, human and animal bone, shell, and small stone objects was found covering the floor of the gallery. The human bone consisted of small fragments that showed various degrees of burning. Fracture patterns on the bones indicate that they were dry and not fleshed when burned, indicating that human skeletal material, rather than bodies or body parts, were burned and later deposited in the gallery.
Secondary cremations of human skeletal remains have also been found at two sites in the lower Jequetepeque Valley on the north coast of Peru. In 1987, the cremated remains of a partial adult skeleton were found in a deposit of ash and burned earth on the summit of an Initial Period mound located approximately 1 km east of the site of Pacatnamu (Verano and Cordy-Collins n.d.). Like the human remains at the Galería de las Ofrendas, the bones showed no warping or transverse fracture lines, indicating that they were not covered with flesh at the time of burning (Baby 1954; Binford 1963). Carbonized fragments of textile were found with the bones, suggesting that they had been wrapped in a bundle and burned. The remains were then placed on the summit of the mound and capped with a pavement of field stones. Secondary cremations of human remains have also been found in a Middle Horizon context at Pacatnamu. In this case, several bundles containing partial skeletons of adults were placed in a room along with ceramic vessels, camelid limb segments, and other offerings. The room and its contents then appears to have been intentionally burned and abandoned (Cordy-Collins n.d.).

**Secondary Deposits of Bone**

Linda Manzanilla and Eric Woodard have recently reported the discovery of the partial skeletal remains of 17 individuals buried around the temple of Akapana at Tiwanaku (Manzanilla and Woodard 1990). The remains, about half of which were children and the other half adults of both sexes, were represented by partial skeletons and disarticulated skeletal elements. While the deposit was initially thought to represent sacrifice and dismemberment, no evidence of cut marks or fresh fractures was found on the bones. Manzanilla and Woodard suggest that the remains represent offerings of secondary burials made to the temple. Rowe (this volume) describes several Late Horizon ossuaries excavated by Luis Llanos near Calca, which also appear to represent the collection and secondary burial of human skeletal remains.

**Isolated Skulls and Headless Burials**

Burials of isolated skulls have been reported from various Andean archaeological sites. Some of these appear to represent the secondary burial of skulls as dedicatory offerings. Richard Burger found four isolated skulls in the fill of a platform at Chavín de Huantar (Burger 1984: 31), and burials of single skulls and skull caches have been reported from the Middle Horizon sites of Wari and Pikillacta (Brewster-Ray 1983; McEwan 1987: 39). At Wari, isolated skulls were found in pits under the floors of rooms and courtyards of an architectural compound. Although most had been disturbed, one skull was found intact, wrapped in cloth pinned with four
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copper tupus. At Pikillacta, a single cache of ten skulls was found in a pit in the corner of a large room. A metal spike was the only object found associated with them, although the cache was disturbed and objects may have been removed. The skulls lacked mandibles, and no cut marks or other evidence of trauma was present. While the source of the skulls is unknown, the practice of removing skulls from tombs in pre-Hispanic times has been reported from various Andean sites. Jane Buikstra, for example, reports evidence of skulls being removed in ancient times from tombs in Initial Period cemeteries in southern coastal Peru and northern Chile. She suggests that this may have been done to preserve portions of the ancestors as reminders of intergenerational relationships (Buikstra, this volume). Dorothy Menzel reported similar examples of the removal of skulls and other bones from Late Horizon tombs in the Ica Valley (Rowe, this volume), and Patrick Carmichael (this volume) describes both the removal of skulls and discoveries of empty tombs (grave goods but no occupant) in some Nasca cemeteries. Occasionally, additional skeletal material (or articulated body parts) were added to tombs, such as in the case of a Moche tomb from Huanchaco, described by Christopher Donnan (this volume), which contained three additional hands.

The burial of isolated skulls in ceremonial architecture may reflect mortuary behavior related to the honoring of ancestors, but clearly not in all cases. Five skulls found at the Formative period site of Wichquana in the Ayacucho Basin appear to reflect the burial of freshly disembodied heads rather than the secondary reburial of skulls (Lumbreras 1981). The Wichquana skulls were found in individual pits that had been cut into the floor of a U-shaped ceremonial structure. Each skull had one or more cervical vertebrae still articulated, indicating that soft tissue was still present at the time of burial. Lumbreras believes that the disembodied heads were sacrifices placed as offerings during a period of modification of the structure, sometime between 1150 and 750 B.C.

In many cases it is not clear whether isolated skulls and headless skeletons represent sacrificed individuals, secondary burials, or disturbed interments. In his excavations of a Preclassic cemetery at the site of Asia on the central coast, Frederic Engel found two headless skeletons and a total of eight isolated skulls (Engel 1963). In each case, the remains were wrapped in fiber mats and buried in a similar fashion as other individuals in the cemetery. The two headless skeletons were both of adults. One had associated grave goods, including textiles and a tooth pendant; the other was simply wrapped in a fiber mat. The eight skulls were judged by Engel to pertain to three adults, two children, and three infants. Two of the skulls were individually wrapped and buried in separate pits, one bundle contained two skulls (one child and one adult), and another contained four (one adult and three infants).
The bundle with four skulls was noteworthy in several respects. In it were found the remains of several textiles, including two twined cloaks, as well as "an engraved tray holding a mirror, a necklace of bone disks, shell pendants, a bone pin, feathers, and red pigment" (Engel 1963: 95). The quantity and quality of objects buried with these four skulls indicate elaborate treatment of the remains. Some features of the adult skull, however, suggest a more complex scenario. In examining the specimen, which had desiccated skin and hair still adhering to the bone, Engel noted a deep cut across the forehead. Below the cut mark the skin of the face was missing. Engel hypothesized that the face had been intentionally flayed (Engel 1963: fig. 185). Such mutilation of the head seems inconsistent with the otherwise careful treatment of the remains and associated offerings. Perhaps the skull belonged to a member of the Asia community who was killed and mutilated elsewhere, and whose head was later recovered and buried.

It is difficult to interpret the headless skeletons and isolated skulls at Asia due to a lack of detail in the published descriptions. A general report on the skeletal material from the site has been published (Hartweg 1958), but no detailed study of the isolated skulls and headless skeletons is available. It is not clear whether any cervical vertebrae were found with the isolated skulls, or whether an examination was made for cut marks or damage to the base of the skulls. Cut marks on the cervical vertebrae of the two headless skeletons would distinguish intentional decapitation from post-mortem disturbance and reinterment. Further examination of this material is needed.

TROPHY HEADS

Spanish chroniclers reported that the practice of taking and preserving the heads of enemies was common among some Ecuadorian populations in the sixteenth century. Head-hunting continued to be practiced by some Amazonian groups until the early twentieth century. In the case of the Shuar of Ecuador, heads of enemies taken in raids were prepared by removing the skin from the skull and shrinking it (Stirling 1938; Harner 1972). In the case of the Mundurucú of Brazil, the brain was removed, but the skin and skull were otherwise left intact, resulting in a full-size preserved head (Ihering 1907).

Although common in Andean iconography, actual examples of severed human heads are rare in the Andean archaeological record, with the exception of the Paracas and Nasca cultures of the south coast of Peru. Since the first Nasca trophy heads were described by Uhle and Julio C. Tello early in this century (Uhle 1914; Tello 1918), many more examples have been discovered and described (Proulx 1971, 1989; Coelho 1972; Neira and Coelho 1972; Silverman n.d.a; Baraybar 1987, n.d.). Most of these are associated
with the Nasca culture (ca. A.D. 1–800), but some have been found in Paracas contexts (ca. 600–200 B.C.) as well.

Over the past several years I have examined collections of trophy heads in the Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología and the Museo Arqueológico de la Universidad Mayor de San Marcos in Lima, the Museo Regional de Ica, and the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. In addition, I have completed a preliminary analysis of a cache of 48 trophy heads found in 1989 at Cerro Carapo, in the modern town of Palpa (Silverman n.d.b; Verano n.d.b). The following description of Nasca trophy heads is based on my examination of 84 specimens, as well as on a review of published and unpublished reports on other examples.¹

Diagnostic Features

Trophy heads from the south coast of Peru can be recognized by the presence of two diagnostic features: (1) damage to the base of the skull, which can vary from slight enlargement of the foramen magnum to the complete removal of the base and posterior portion of the skull; and (2) a hole broken through the frontal bone (Fig. 6). These two features are important, since they are recognizable even in incomplete or poorly preserved specimens.

Well-preserved trophy heads have desiccated skin and hair, as well as other features which are useful in understanding the way in which the heads were prepared. The general procedure for trophy heads preparation can be reconstructed as follows. The head was first severed at the neck, and remaining cervical vertebrae and soft tissue structures at the base of the skull (muscles, throat structures, the tongue) were removed. The base of the skull was then broken open and the brain and supporting membranes evacuated through the opening. A hole was punched through the frontal bone in the approximate center of the forehead for the attachment of a suspensory cord. The lips, and occasionally the eyelids, were pinned shut with huarango spines. The end result of this procedure was a head complete with skin and hair, with a cord permitting easy carrying or display (Fig. 7).

One of the objectives of those who prepared Nasca trophy heads appears to have been to preserve the natural appearance of the head. The lower jaw was frequently tied to the zygomatic arches to retain it in proper articulation, with the mouth closed. Wads of textile or other materials were often stuffed in the cheeks and eye sockets to maintain a full and lifelike appearance of the face (Fig. 8). The pinning shut of the mouth and eyelids presumably functioned to prevent their retraction during desiccation of the head.

¹ I am grateful to José Pablo Baraybar and Helaine Silverman for sharing their unpublished material on trophy heads.
The result was a neutral, stoic facial expression that is characteristic of Nasca trophy heads.4

Nasca trophy heads show some variations in preparation details. The suspensory cord, for example, can be made of twined vegetable fiber, cotton textile, or hair cut from the victim's head. The cord may be very simple, or it may have tassels or other objects attached to it. In two cases I have examined, a desiccated tongue, presumably that of the victim, was tied to the suspensory cord (Fig. 9).

_Trophy Heads and Trophy Skulls_

Several investigators have noted the presence of cut marks on the external surfaces of the skull and mandible of some trophy heads (Coelho 1972; Baraybar 1987, n.d.). Baraybar found that cut marks were most numerous around attachment sites of the major neck and chewing muscles, and concluded that the marks were the result of the dissection of these muscles from the skull and mandible. He noted, however, that cut marks are sometimes

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4 The Shuar are known to pin, and later sew, shut the lips of shrunken heads to prevent the soul of the victim from escaping and causing harm (Stirling 1938). Donald Proulx (1989) has suggested that a similar concept may have existed among the Nasca.
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Fig. 7 Well-preserved Nasca trophy head with desiccated skin and hair and carrying cord. Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología, AF: 7047.
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Fig. 8 Nasca trophy head. The cheeks and eye orbits are stuffed with textile and the mandible is tied to the zygomatic arches. Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología, AF: 7053.

found on areas of the skull vault, face, and mandible that are not sites of muscle attachment, and suggested that some trophy heads may have been intentionally defleshed. Such defleshing would result in a trophy “skull” rather than a mummified head. Were some heads mummified and others defleshed? Unfortunately, cut marks can only be examined on trophy heads without overlying soft tissue. While archaeological preservation is generally excellent on the south coast of Peru, organic remains, including the skin and hair of trophy heads, are not always preserved. In the case of an isolated skull with cut marks, but no soft tissue preserved, it is difficult to know whether the head was actually defleshed, or whether the skin and hair decomposed following burial. It is possible that the skin was retracted to allow muscles and other subcutaneous tissues to be cut and scraped away, and then the skin was replaced over the skull.

A trophy head I examined in the Field Museum of Natural History suggests a solution to the defleshing question. It is a relatively well-preserved specimen, with hair, scalp, and some facial skin preserved. Close inspection of the head reveals that a plainweave textile lies between the exterior surface of the skull and the scalp (Fig. 10). Its presence between the scalp and bone
Fig. 9 Nasca trophy head with a desiccated tongue tied to the suspensory cord. Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología, AF: 7508.
Where Do They Rest?

Fig. 10 Nasca trophy head from Cahuachi that shows a layer of textile (a) lying between the external surface of the skull vault (b) and the scalp (c). Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, 171097.
suggestions that in this case, at least, preparation of the head involved removing the skin, cleaning the skull and covering it with textile, and then replacing the skin over the skull.

Although the Field Museum specimen is a single case, it is consistent with certain observations I have made on "defleshed" specimens. If some trophy heads were in fact defleshed, and the skulls curated and handled over an extended period of time, one might expect to see some evidence of surface polishing on the bone. Such polish is a diagnostic feature of trophy skulls from other areas of the world, for example, Melanesia (White and Toth 1991). I have not seen any evidence of surface wear or of environmental exposure (sun bleaching or surface cracking) on any Nasca specimens I have examined, and I am not aware of any depictions of trophy "skulls" in Nasca iconography. Trophy heads, when shown, are fleshed and with hair—they are never, to my knowledge, shown as skulls.

TROPHY HEADS IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

Although commonly depicted in Paracas iconography, relatively few trophy heads have been recovered from Paracas contexts. Alejandro Pezzia has described two trophy head caches discovered on the Hacienda Ocucaje in the Ica Valley (Pezzia 1968). In 1956, he found two trophy heads lying on a thick layer of pacae leaves in a shallow pit in a looted Paracas cemetery on Cerro Max Uhle. In 1966, he recovered a cache of 13 covered with a plainweave cotton textile in a looted Paracas cemetery on Cerro de la Cruz. The 13 specimens consisted of the frontal and facial portions of the skull only, with well-preserved skin and hair. All were lying face up under the textile. It is interesting that while both caches found by Pezzia were in cemeteries, they were not associated with burials but appear to have been isolated offerings. Five trophy heads that date to either late Paracas or Early Nasca were found during excavations at Tambo Viejo in the Acari Valley (Riddel and Belan n.d.). The heads were buried in ceramic ollas, in clay or rock-lined pits under the floor of four rooms Riddel excavated. Some of the heads were wrapped in plain cotton textile, but no other objects were associated with them. Other examples of Paracas trophy heads probably exist in museum and private collections, but the lack of provenience and associations for most specimens make it difficult to distinguish them from Nasca examples.

A large number of trophy heads have been recovered from Nasca sites. José Pablo Baraybar, who has made a concerted effort to track down and study trophy head collections, has documented more than 70 specimens (Baraybar 1987, n.d.). Combined with a recently discovered cache from

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5 This is not to be confused with the sun bleaching and weathering commonly seen on looted specimens due to recent surface exposure.
Where Do They Rest?

Palpa (described below), a conservative estimate places the number of Nasca trophy heads in museums and private collections at more than 120 specimens. Unfortunately, much of this sample comes from looted sites, and few specimens have good archaeological documentation. Some have been excavated scientifically, however, and these provide some information on burial context.

Until recently, the largest sample of provenienced trophy heads came from the site of Cahuachi in the Nazca Valley. Twenty-one specimens have been recovered in site surveys and excavations conducted by archaeologists Alfred Kroeber, Duncan Strong, Helaine Silverman, and Giuseppe Orefici (Baraybar 1987, n.d.; Silverman n.d.; Carmichael 1988; Proulx 1989). Some were found on the surface and lack specific context. Others, like those found by Kroeber, have not been published in detail. Most examples for which excavation data are available were isolated specimens found in the architectural fill of platforms, or in small pits dug into hardened dirt floors. An exception was a cache of nine heads found in a high-status tomb (Carmichael 1988: 482–483). Two trophy heads found by Silverman were wrapped in cotton textile, while those found by Orefici do not appear to have been wrapped.

Eleven trophy heads were found by Máximo Neira and Vera Coelho during excavations on the periphery of a Nasca cemetery at Chavíña in the Acari Valley (Neira and Coelho 1972; Coelho 1972). The heads were arranged in a linear fashion along the western face of a mud brick wall. Nine had been placed in small circular pits dug through a hard caliche floor, while the remaining two were placed on the hardened surface and covered with sand and domestic refuse. One head was buried inside a broken ceramic olla. Most of the heads were wrapped in plain cotton textile. One was wrapped in a dark blue textile with polychrome borders, and fragments of polychrome textile were found with another. Additional objects were found in the small pits in which the heads were placed, and within the textile wrappings themselves. Two of the pits contained guinea pig skeletons, and chili peppers were found in the textile wrappings of three of the heads. Pairs of huarango spines were also found in the mouth area of three heads. The cranial cavity of one head was filled with a variety of plant material, including corn leaves, peanut shells, pacae husks, cactus spines, and other plant remains. The authors describe these inclusions as intentional “offerings,” although they may simply represent materials used to dry and conserve the head.

The limited nature of Neira and Coelho’s excavations did not establish the specific nature of the architecture with which the trophy heads were associated. The mud brick wall was located on the perimeter of a looted cemetery, and was covered by a deposit of occupational refuse containing diagnostic Nasca ceramic sherds. The authors hypothesize that the wall was part of
John W. Verano

some ceremonial structure, and that the trophy heads were offerings associated with it. A radiocarbon determination on one of the textile wrappings gave a date of A.D. 450 +/- 70 (Neira and Coelho 1972).

Cerro Carapo, Palpa

A recently discovered group of trophy heads from Cerro Carapo, outside the town of Palpa in the Ingenio Valley, constitutes the largest single cache of Nasca trophy heads known (Silverman n.d.a; Verano n.d.b). The cache was discovered by clandestine excavators, digging on Cerro Carapo above the modern community cemetery of Palpa in 1989. Archaeologists Helaine Silverman, David Browne, and Rubén García were informed of the discovery and conducted a salvage excavation of the site. Excavation revealed a large oval pit that had been dug into a natural deposit of sand, gravel, and boulders on the side of the hill. Twenty-six trophy heads and two mandibles were found in situ; 22 others were scattered in the looters' backdirt. Although the original pit had been disturbed, the position of the undisturbed heads suggested that they were originally arranged in two concentric rings. In total, the cache contained 48 trophy heads. The only cultural material associated with the cache were remains of suspensory cords attached to some of the heads, and a Nasca 5 sherd found in a level above the pit fill (Silverman n.d.a). The Nasca 5 sherd provides a terminus post quem for the deposit; radiocarbon dating of small wooden crossmembers tied to the suspensory cords may provide a more specific date for the deposit.

The Cerro Carapo trophy head cache is an isolated find without clear links to architectural features, tombs, or other evidence of cultural activity. Strata below the cache pit were sterile, and due to the salvage nature of the operation, excavations were not extended beyond the pit area. Further excavation might establish some context for the deposit. For the present, however, the importance of the Cerro Carapo trophy head cache lies in the fact that it represents an unusually large sample from a single archaeological context.

I had the opportunity to examine the trophy heads in Palpa shortly after they had been excavated, and later to clean and study them in Lima. Organic preservation was not good at the Palpa site, and textiles, if they had been present, were not preserved. Some fragments of suspensory cords, consisting of simple braided rope, were still present, as were small wooden crossmembers used to anchor the rope inside the skull. No soft tissue was preserved on the skulls, but traces of hair, and hair impressions were present in the adherent soil matrix, indicating that hair and scalp had been present on the heads at the time they were buried. Examination of the skulls revealed cut marks distributed widely over the external surfaces of the skull vault, face, and mandible, suggesting that the heads had been prepared in a
complex manner, involving flaying of the skin, scraping away of underly-
ing soft tissue, and replacement of the skin over the skull. All 48 of the Palpa skulls showed similar patterns of cut marks, in addition to the diagnostic features of a broken skull base and a perforation through the frontal bone. Examination of the Palpa skulls indicated that all were males between the ages of approximately 20 and 45 years, with the exception of one individual 12 to 15 years old, of indeterminate sex. Most skulls showed artificial cranial deformation of characteristic Nasca form (Weiss 1958; Allison et al. 1981; Baraybar 1987, n.d.). Other than cut marks and breakage related to their preparation as trophy heads, few skulls showed evidence of violent injuries. Two skulls had healed depressed fractures, and a third had a fresh depressed fracture on the occipital bone, which may have occurred at or around the time of death.

Trophy Heads, Warfare, and Nasca Society

Since the earliest descriptions by Tello, there has been continuing debate over how trophy heads were collected and how they functioned in Nasca society. Tello argued that mummified Nasca heads were not simply war trophies, but were important religious and power symbols: “La cabeza ha sido ante todo un simbolo religioso; un simbolo de poder; fué el mas preciado atributo de los dioses” (Tello 1918: 58). Such an assertion is certainly supported by the prominent association between trophy heads and supernatural beings in Paracas and Nasca art (Dwyer and Dwyer 1975; Proulx 1971; Silverman n.d.). Tello noted that in the sample of eight trophy heads he examined, one was a child and three appeared to be female. He noted also that all eight heads were deformed in the Nasca style, and concluded that they were likely not the heads of enemies of the Nasca people.

With the discovery of more trophy heads in recent decades, the debate over whether Nasca trophy heads were really “war trophies” has continued. Vera Penteado Coelho (Coelho 1972; Neira and Coelho 1972) has argued, largely on the basis of the 11 heads found at Chavíña, that mummified Nasca heads were ritual offerings rather than war trophies. Coelho argues that the Chavíña heads are better interpreted as ritual offerings than as war trophies because they were buried with offerings, no weapons were found with them, and several females and a child, as well as males, were present. Coelho’s argument has been questioned on various grounds (Proulx 1989; Baraybar n.d.), but I would like to focus on the issue of age and sex.

Table 1 presents the age and sex distribution of 84 trophy heads I have examined. This is an adequate sample size to approach the question; the

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6 Age estimates were based on dental eruption and tooth wear, and degree of closure of the sphenoid-occipital and vault sutures. Sex determinations were based on morphological characteristics of the skull, including general size and robusticity of muscle attachment areas.
TABLE 1. AGE AND SEX OF TROPHY HEADS EXAMINED BY THE AUTHOR

AGE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collection</th>
<th>Under 12 Years</th>
<th>12-20 Years</th>
<th>Adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Museum of Natural History</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museo Regional de Ica</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cerro Carapo, Palpa</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>94.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SEX

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collection</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male?</th>
<th>Female?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Museum of Natural History</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museo Regional de Ica</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cerro Carapo, Palpa</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

small samples examined by Tello (N = 8) and Coelho (Chaviña N = 11) are not. As Table 1 indicates, trophy heads of children and adolescents, while occasionally found, are quite rare. Children under 12 years of age make up less than 3% of the sample I examined; adolescents less than 4%. At the other end of the age spectrum, old adults (over 50 years) are notably absent. In terms of sex distribution, males substantially outnumber females (85% vs. 6%). From these data it is clear that Nasca trophy heads are not a random sampling of a living population, nor do they fit the profile of revered elders; with few exceptions they are young adult males.

Such an age and sex distribution is consistent with the hypothesis that Nasca trophy heads were collected from enemy combatants rather than from revered ancestors. There is some debate, however, over whether the
victims were killed and decapitated on the battlefield, or whether they were captured and later ritually sacrificed. Nasca iconography is not particularly useful in providing an answer to this question. While depictions of supernatural beings or human figures holding trophy heads are common in Nasca art, scenes showing the act of decapitation are very rare. One of the best known examples is found on a ceramic vessel in the Amano Museum in Lima (Fig. 11). Illustrated on the vessel chamber are several elaborately dressed figures holding enemies by the hair and preparing to decapitate them with serrated knives. The scene can be interpreted as either a battle scene, as Proulx (1989) does, or as the sacrifice of prisoners. The latter interpretation is suggested by the fact that one of the elaborately dressed figures appears to be standing on elevated architecture. Several other Nasca depictions of decapitation or headless bodies have been illustrated by Proulx, who interprets them as battle scenes.

Based on his examination of actual trophy heads, José Pablo Baraybar is convinced that they are the product of ritual sacrifice rather than items brought back from the battlefield (Baraybar 1987, n.d.). He argues that cut marks he has observed on the scalp of some specimens were made while the victims were killed and decapitated on the battlefield, or whether they were captured and later ritually sacrificed. Nasca iconography is not particularly useful in providing an answer to this question. While depictions of supernatural beings or human figures holding trophy heads are common in Nasca art, scenes showing the act of decapitation are very rare. One of the best known examples is found on a ceramic vessel in the Amano Museum in Lima (Fig. 11). Illustrated on the vessel chamber are several elaborately dressed figures holding enemies by the hair and preparing to decapitate them with serrated knives. The scene can be interpreted as either a battle scene, as Proulx (1989) does, or as the sacrifice of prisoners. The latter interpretation is suggested by the fact that one of the elaborately dressed figures appears to be standing on elevated architecture. Several other Nasca depictions of decapitation or headless bodies have been illustrated by Proulx, who interprets them as battle scenes.

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Fig. 12 Nasca trophy head showing cuts through the scalp (arrows). Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología, AF: 7047.
victims were still alive (Fig. 12), and suggests that these individuals were intentionally “bled” before being decapitated, as part of a ritual that involved the public display of bloodied victims, followed by their sacrifice.7

Baraybar’s hypothesis is interesting, although it is a difficult one to test. Proulx is skeptical, arguing that he finds no convincing evidence of human sacrifice among the Nasca (Proulx 1989). From the perspective of physical anthropology, the critical issue is whether or not one can confidently distinguish between antemortem and postmortem flesh wounds on a mummified head. Baraybar argues that the cuts are antemortem, because the margins of the wounds are retracted, and that stains around some of them show a positive reaction to a chemical test for blood. I believe that neither observation is sufficient to establish a confident antemortem diagnosis. Retraction of the edges of cuts are likely to have occurred during desiccation of the soft tissues, regardless of whether the cuts were made before or after death, and blood residues are certainly to be expected on a head that was detached from

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7 A similar observation was made previously by Pedro Weiss: “La retracción de los bordes en estas heridas de las cabezas trofeos indica que fueron hechas en vida de la víctima” (Weiss 1961: 134).
a living or recently deceased body. Given our lack of detailed knowledge of how Nasca trophy heads were prepared, manipulated, and curated, it is perhaps overly optimistic to attempt to distinguish antemortem and post-mortem flesh wounds. The cut marks do exist, however, and Baraybar's hypothesis remains a possible explanation for their presence.

Curation and Burial of Trophy Heads

Nasca trophy heads show evidence of having been carefully prepared and curated. The complex treatment of the head, which included removal of the brain, major muscles, and other soft tissue structures at the base of the skull, as well as the stuffing of the cheeks and eye orbits, implies that trophy heads were prepared with long-term curation in mind. How, where, and for how long trophy heads were kept and displayed is a matter of conjecture. In Nasca iconography, trophy heads are most frequently shown being held in the hands of supernatural beings or, less commonly, humans. A ceramic olla in the Museum of the Americas in Madrid (Fig. 13) shows trophy heads suspended from poles which also support some form of banner. The latter suggests that heads were prominently displayed on certain occasions. Archaeological evidence indicates that after some period of time, the heads were ritually buried, rather than being discarded or intentionally destroyed. The most commonly observed pattern is the burial of individual heads or caches of heads under floors and within the fill of ceremonial architecture. Although three caches of trophy heads have been found in cemeteries, only rarely do such heads occur as grave offerings in Nasca tombs. In a study by Patrick Carmichael of the contents of 213 Nasca tombs, only four included trophy heads, and in one of the four cases the head appeared to belong to the tomb's occupant, reunited with its decapitated body (Carmichael 1988: 481-483). Perhaps trophy heads were not considered to be appropriate grave offerings except in unusual circumstances. Alternatively, trophy heads may have been perceived as community property rather than as the possessions of a particular individual.

The iconography of Paracas and Nasca trophy heads, particularly their association with supernatural beings, indicates that they were important objects of ritual power, and not simply war trophies. However, their age and sex characteristics are consistent with Proulx's assertion that they were collected from enemy combatants. The population affiliation of trophy head victims remains a problem. Cranial deformation, when present, is of Nasca style, indicating that the victims were of south coast origin. A number of headless Nasca burials are known (Carmichael 1988), suggesting a source for at least some trophy heads. However, there are few well-documented skeletal collections from the south coast of Peru with which to make comparisons.
CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on the treatment of human remains outside the boundaries of standard Andean mortuary practices. The topic is a broad one, encompassing behaviors related to human sacrifice, warfare, the collection of body parts, and the ritual reinterment of human remains. Ethnohistoric sources on the Inka provide a basic framework for understanding these practices, although the iconographic and archaeological record of pre-Inka societies provides much of the physical evidence, as well as important time depth, for such behaviors.

Human sacrifice was known to have been practiced by the Inka in times of crisis, and to commemorate significant events such as the coronation or death of an Inka emperor. Archaeological evidence of human sacrifice in pre-Inka times is limited for the most part to retainer burials in high-status tombs. Retainer burial reached its most extreme form in the royal burial platforms at Chan Chan, where hundreds of individuals were sacrificed upon the death of a king. The sacrifice and burial of young females as dedicatory offerings under architecture was also common at Chan Chan and other Chimu sites on the north coast of Peru.

The Inka are also known to have sacrificed war prisoners following important military victories. Certain war prisoners, as well as individuals convicted of serious crimes, were further punished by the deliberate mutilation and exposure of the body to scavengers, preventing proper burial. Artistic representations of prisoner sacrifice may date as far back as the Initial Period at the site of Cerro Sechin (Tello 1956), and they become important themes in the art of some later cultures such as the Moche. Desecration of the body by exposure to vultures is often associated with scenes of prisoner sacrifice, and the denial of proper mortuary treatment appears to have been an essential part of the ritual. A mass burial of sacrificed prisoners at Pacatnamu suggests that sacrificial scenes depicted in Moche and Chimu art were not mythical events or metaphorical statements, but are depictions of events that actually occurred.

Ritual decapitation is seen in the iconography of many ancient Andean cultures. Indeed, decapitation at the hands of supernaturals appears to be the most pervasive Andean metaphor for ritual death. The importance of the head is underscored by the Inka practice of preserving and modifying the heads of important enemies as war trophies. Similar practices have been documented in pre-Inka societies. The earliest archaeological evidence of decapitated individuals and disembodied heads may be present at the Preceramic site of Asia, on the central coast of Peru. It is among the Paracas and Nasca cultures of the south coast of Peru, however, that the iconography of decapitation and the display of disembodied heads is most closely paralleled by the physical evidence.
Offerings of isolated skulls, caches of skulls, secondary burials and burned human bone have been found associated with ceremonial architecture at a number of Andean sites. These offerings can be distinguished from sacrifices by the lack of evidence of cut marks or other trauma, the disarticulated and incomplete nature of the remains (indicating secondary burial), and by the nature of burning (dry bones vs. fleshed remains). Such offerings appear to represent rituals of a different nature from those involving the sacrifice of living victims, and perhaps are better interpreted within the framework of ancestor worship.

In discussing Andean mortuary practices, it must be kept in mind that certain individuals never reached the cemetery. Others arrived incomplete, and others still were disinterred and reburied elsewhere. Human remains were treated in very diverse ways depending on the nature and meaning of a particular human death. These non-standard treatments must be kept in mind when considering the broader subject of Andean mortuary behavior.
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