

ARTH 101: Survey of Art: Ancient to Renaissance

Research Paper

March 19th, 2022

Human Sacrifice and Human Trophies as an Art Form in Pre-Columbian Peru

[With the exception of Cristóbal de Molina's account, this paper draws the bulk of its information from archaeological site reports as opposed to relying on historical records from Columbian-era Europeans in an effort to avoid colonial bias towards indigenous people, especially in regards to practices that were viewed in a negative light by European colonialists.]

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines an art form as “an undertaking or activity enhanced by a high level of skill or refinement”, and as “an unconventional form or medium in which impulses regarded as artistic may be expressed.”¹ Using these definitions, the human sacrifices historically performed by Chimú and Inca people and the isolated heads prepared by the Nasca people are art forms, and, in the case of the latter, art itself. The Nasca (also spelled as Nazca) nation held precedence over southern coastal Peru from 100 BCE to 700 CE,² and the Chimú, northern coastal Peru from 900 CE to 1470 CE.³ The Inca Empire thrived from 1400 CE until its collapse in 1533 CE, and at its height, spread across Peru and into neighboring countries.⁴

‘Capacocha’ is a Quecha noun referring to a specific human sacrifice ceremony performed by the Inca. As Cristóbal de Molina records, offerings of infants and children⁵ as well as precious metals, clothing, bovidae, figurines, and coca were collected by the people of Cuzco,

¹ “Art Form”, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/art%20form>.

² “Nazca Lines”, History.com, <https://www.history.com/topics/south-america/nazca-lines>.

³ “Chimú”, Encyclopedia.com, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/chimu>.

⁴ Mark Cartwright, “Inca Civilization,” WorldHistory.org, September 15, 2014, https://www.worldhistory.org/Inca_Civilization/.

⁵ de Molina was a Spanish priest and chronicler of invaluable information on the Inca culture before the fall of the Empire. Infant sacrifices have yet to be supported by archaeological evidence.

the capital city, and from there brought to 'huacas': shrines or otherwise religious monuments specifically designated to receive a share of the capacocha sacrifice. Individual huacas varied in size and importance. The first sacrifice along the capacocha processional route took place in Cuzco and was in dedication to the creator god. Children were fed and given water before being suffocated or dying of trauma due to having the beating heart removed. The deceased were then buried along with the appropriate material sacrifice after the prayer and ritual pertaining to the huaca were carried out.⁶ Capacocha was an ornate and organized process, where everything from the physical health and high-ranking social status of the children to the position and direction in which the dead were buried had a meaning. There is no denying that capacocha held an important role culturally as a community-wide religious sacrifice event, but its artistic appeal becomes clear when the precision and detail of the ritual is examined as well as the high quality of the grave goods.

Outside of religious appeal in thanking the gods for good will, capacocha events served to honor the Inca empire and emperor. They also functioned to receive a divine response to a worldly ordeal, such as natural disasters or economic concerns.⁷ The Misti Volcano site shows evidence of such planned intricacies, notably that the final resting place was struck by lightning several times over the course of history. This was desirable, as it meant that Illapa, the god of weather and of emperors, had acknowledged the rather large sacrifice. The 'cocha' part of the word translates to water, and many capacocha sites were either at a body of water or at a place associated with deities who had some domain over the element, such as Ilapa and the volcano. Water is also commonly associated with fertility not only in Inca culture but in several other

⁶ Cristóbal de Molina, *Account of the Fables and Rites of the Incas*, trans. Brian S. Bauer (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 77-79.

⁷ Cristóbal de Molina, *Account of the Fables and Rites of the Incas*, 77-79.

cultures worldwide; Aphrodite of the Greeks, for example, was born from the sea and the goddess of fertility.⁸ Capacocha, then, was undertaken as a prayer for the fertility of people's lives. Fertility, both literally or in a communal wealth sense, is a subject seen in art as early as the Paleolithic period. The capacocha ritual was another example in a long line of human art depicting fertility, although it was art in motion instead of a physical piece.

The significance of capacocha extends to political and economic realms as well. Many of the artifacts found at capacocha sites were foreign-made, having been obtained by trade or war and then sacrificed for this uniquely Incan event.⁹ As capacocha was organized and overseen by priests of the empire, there was obvious political intent behind what roles were assigned to whom. Although the ritual's primary significance was spiritual, the political aspect is important as well, as it reflects a practice frequently seen in art history canon- the use of significant materials or pieces from another culture being used in the art of the conquering culture. Akin to Romans replicating Greek statues, the product of this exchange sends a message: what was yours has become ours.

The Misti site also found camelid remains with the buried children. The alpacas or llamas (undetermined as only their femurs were found in the graves themselves) were an equivalent age to the human child.¹⁰ Both numerically and relatively, far more camelid remains were found at the Huanchaquito-Las Llamas site, attributed to Chimú people. If capacocha was art for the heavy meaning of the ritual in several spheres, its technical refinement, and its inclusivity of established forms of art like pottery and textile, Chimú sacrifices were art due to their passion.

⁸ Dagmara M. Socha et. al, "Inca Human Sacrifices on Misti Volcano (Peru)," *Latin American Antiquity* 32, no. 1 (December 2020): 2, accessed March 25, 2022, https://www.academia.edu/44681322/Inca_Human_Sacrifices_on_Misti_Volcano_Peru.

⁹ Socha et. al, "Misti Volcano," 4.

¹⁰ Socha et. al, "Misti Volcano," 10.

Chimú people did not have a repeated ritual similar to *capacocha*; in fact, what happened at Huanchaquito-Las Llamas was an isolated event. It was larger than any *capacocha* event, with roughly 150 people and 200 camelids sacrificed there, and as it was at Misti, the age of the camelids parallels the age of the human children. Evidence suggests that the sacrificial event was planned in response to extreme weather conditions. Although the majority of the deceased humans were children, a few adults were found as well, as age was not as relevant in this instance as it was in *capacocha*. All of the dead were buried oriented in specific directions corresponding to age and species. Some of the human children were found with clothes and face paint. The site contained vessels and paddles that would have been used to brew beer associated with the event and then buried (not within the graves, but nearby.) No artifacts were found that directly correlated to the dead, inferring that this sacrifice was not so much an offering as an appeal to the gods.¹¹ In fact, the lack of associated objects supports the notion that this sacrifice concerned the religious and spiritual worlds of the Chimú without concern for the economic and political ones. With nothing indicating that products of trade were obtained and used in this sacrifice, this stands out as a solely Chimú event in which a natural disaster was responded to by feeding the cycle of life and death in order to gain favor with gods that had brought ruin. This feeding also demonstrates an understanding from the Chimú in regards to their relationship with their deities. Although it was transactional, like the Inca human-deity dynamic was, it is clearer to see their human sacrifice as pure dedication as opposed to the Inca understanding of a structured and repeated event being needed to keep favor. While Inca sacrifices were also undoubtedly a political tool, this Chimú one holds no such connotations and represents exactly

¹¹ Gabriel Prieto et. al, “A mass sacrifice of children and camelids at the Huanchaquito-Las Llamas site, Moche Valley, Peru,” *PLoS ONE* 14, no.3 (March 2019): 4, accessed March 25, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0211691>

the art form definition of an unconventional medium that expresses an artistic desire, in this instance, for the gods to receive this aesthetically pleasing arrangement and to bestow good will in return.

This is not dissimilar to capacocha in regards to the beautiful being sacrificed. Capacocha sacrifices were either physically healthy or their disability held an association that assigned the sacrificial person a religious role. For example, a boy found at Misti had an osteological disability that gave his legs a curved appearance— a trait associated with the cult of Ilapa. Capacocha sacrifices were also from families that had a high social status, and, if the chosen child was female, she was to be a virgin. Children were sacrificed as opposed to teenagers because they were unblemished by puberty.¹²

In both Chimú and Inca practices, it was an honor to have one's child chosen for sacrifice. Neither of the site examples or any other instances of capacocha or other Peruvian sacrifices were brutal for the sake of it; rather, they represent a religious understanding of life and death. In fact, the killing methods themselves were not particularly violent as the body was to be as unblemished as possible in both sacrificial events. While the removal of a live beating heart as de Molina mentions¹³ would have inarguably been bloody and traumatic to the body, the priests in charge of capacocha were highly experienced and would have been able to effectively and precisely perform the removal. Part of recognizing these human sacrifices as art forms is re-imagining the death acts not as senseless or wild but as controlled and practiced, with a precise meaning and spiritual desire that was fulfilled through the act.

¹² Socha et. al, "Misti Volcano," 10, 14.

¹³ Cristóbal de Molina, *Account of the Fables and Rites of the Incas*, 77.

The Nasca did not practice human sacrifice. Their great accomplishment in the realm of the human body after death in art is the isolated heads they produced.¹⁴ After the head was detached from the body, the soft tissue and brain were removed via the base of the skull. From



Fig. 1: “An isolated head from Cahuachi.”

there, small bits of cloth were arranged in areas, such as the cheekbones and eyes, to maintain a strong resemblance to how the head appeared when it was on a living person. Finally, a hole was drilled in the skull for the rope, and frequently the lips had tree thorns threaded through them to pin them shut. This may

have been for a spiritual purpose— either to prevent the dead from speaking or from inhabitation by a malevolent spirit— or a practical one, so the lips would not curl up when they decayed, or perhaps both.¹⁵ It is known that the heads were used in

ceremonies as there are several ceramics depicting this.

While the common theory has always been that these were true “trophy heads,” taken by the victors of the battle, there are two important points that argue against this theory and for the heads as spiritual works of art.

They can be considered a piece of art in their own right

as they were not simply decapitated, but rather altered and decorated in the preparation process.

Firstly, an uptick in isolated heads correlates to a time of environmental and ecological distress



Fig. 2: A Nasca ceramic from the previously cited Donald Proulx publication.

¹⁴ ‘Isolated heads’ is an alternative term to ‘trophy heads’, used by Lozada et al in their report, “Head Processing among La Ramada Tradition of Southern Peru”, as ‘trophy’ has a misleading definition when applied to the purpose of the heads.

¹⁵ Donald Proulx, *Nasca Headhunting and the Ritual Use of Trophy Heads* (Zürich: Museum Rietberg Zürich, 1999), 4.

on Nasca lands. From this fact and from ceramic artwork depicting trophy heads with plants growing from them, it is most probable that the ceremonies they were used in were prayers for agricultural fertility.¹⁶ This is not a wild idea as other cultures, like the classical Egyptians and Greeks, also held beliefs about blood and death fueling rebirth and that adding a death to the cosmos would help the land prosper as life was being fed into a greater cycle. Examples of this include the tale of Osiris and Set, and how Jason of Greek mythos sowed dragon's teeth to reap warriors. In several Central and South American traditions, the head is the center of humanity and contains the soul, and it is the most powerful body part in ceremonial use.¹⁷

This point does not put much importance on who the heads came from, but does provide inarguable and tangible evidence in the form of ceramics to argue that the heads were religious in purpose. Secondly, in regards to who the heads belonged to in life, there is artwork depicting the heads being taken in battle from enemies¹⁸. However, another theory is that heads came from the beloved dead— either from warriors killed in battle or from family members. Isolated heads of women and children have been unearthed— people who would not have fought in wars.¹⁹ Who the heads were taken from probably shifted as the need for agricultural goodwill became greater. In a ceremony for the fertility of the people, it is most probable that the heads came from members of the community. Their spiritual energy, via the presence of such a sacred body part, would have greatly assisted in the ritual.

The preparation of the isolated heads, their use in agricultural ceremonies, the age and sex of the deceased, and the context in which they were found all point to isolated heads not being trophies of war, but pieces of art that preserved the form of a deceased loved one and

¹⁶ Proulx, *Nasca Headhunting*, 2, 8.

¹⁷ Proulx, *Nasca Headhunting*, 9.

¹⁸ Proulx, *Nasca Headhunting*, 6.

¹⁹ Proulx, *Nasca Headhunting*, 5.

contained the power of their soul. The isolated Nasca heads are not as uniform as heads from the contemporary and then overtaking Wari culture. This implies that they were not placed on a stable surface and then worked on; in fact, some of the cut marks on Nasca heads could only have been made if the head was in the lap of the person preparing it.²⁰ To sit the deceased in your lap and preserve their appearance and to call for their energy in ceremonies is an act of love. Similar to the position in which you would work clay between your legs, isolated heads were transformed enough from their living state to be recognizable as objects containing heavy familial, cultural, and spiritual significance. The sheer amount of meaning associated with isolated heads is enough to diagnose them as art.

Human sacrifices and isolated heads inhabit the peculiar sphere of religious interaction with both the deceased human body and the death act itself. Although capacocha and non-capacocha sacrifices are notably different from each other and even moreso from the Nasca heads, they are united in the concepts represented by themselves as works of art. Their similarity at the root of their meaning becomes apparent when they are viewed with the understanding that religious or spiritual devotion, honor, and love are at the center of these practices.

²⁰ María Lozada et. al, "Head Processing among La Ramada Tradition of Southern Peru," in *Social Skins of the Head: Body Beliefs and Ritual in Ancient Mesoamerica and the Andes* (New Mexico: The University of New Mexico Press, 2018), 199.

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de Molina, Cristóbal. *Account of the Fables and Rites of the Incas*. Translated by Brian S. Bauer, Vania Smith-Oka, and Gabriel E. Cantarutti. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011.

There are no available primary sources from pre-colonial indigenous life across Peru due to lack of a written language. (The Inca quipu, traditionally understood as a numeric system, may have been used to convey non-numeric information, and Dr. Sabine Hyland, with assistance from the Quechua people, has decoded two quipu dating to colonial times that contain the names of families.²¹ However, more research is still being done.) Although the priest Cristóbal de Molina lived in the Inca community much later than the time period discussed in the paper, his writings give first hand accounts of Inca culture and practices, albeit from the perspective of an outsider. Notably, he recorded information on capacocha, and his account aligns with archaeological evidence.

History.com Editors. "Nazca Lines." *History.com*. Last modified August 21, 2018. Accessed March 25, 2022. <https://www.history.com/topics/south-america/nazca-lines>.

²¹ Sabine Hyland, "Unraveling an Ancient Code Written in Strings," *Scientific American*, November 11, 2017, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/unraveling-an-ancient-code-written-in-strings/>.

Hyland, Sabine. “Unraveling an Ancient Code Written in Strings.” *Scientific American*. Last modified November 11, 2017. Accessed March 25, 2022. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/unraveling-an-ancient-code-written-in-strings/>.

Lozada, María Cecilia, Alanna Warner-Smith, Rex C. Haydon, Hans Barnard, Augusto Cardona Rosas, and Raphael Greenberg. “Head Processing among La Ramada Tradition of Southern Peru.” In *Social Skins of the Head: Body Beliefs and Ritual in Ancient Mesoamerica and the Andes*, edited by Vera Tiesler and María Cecilia Lozada, 187-202. New Mexico: The University of New Mexico Press, 2018.

Lozada et al. provide a bioarchaeological analysis of isolated heads prepared by the Nasca (280 BCE - 820 CE) of southern Peru. The paper discusses not only the preparation of the heads and the context in which they were found but the problem of how to refer to these isolated heads, since “trophy” carries connotations that cannot be fairly applied in this circumstance.

Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “art form,” accessed April 25, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/art%20form>.

Prieto, Gabriel, John W. Verano, Nicolas Goepfert, Douglas Kennett, Jeffery Quilter, Steven LeBlanc, Lars Fehren-Schmitz, Jannine Forst, Mellisa Lund, Brittany Dement, Elise Dufour, Olivier Tombret, Melina Calmon, Davette Gadison, and Khrystyne Tschinkel. “A mass sacrifice of children and camelids at the Huanchaquito-Las Llamas site, Moche Valley, Peru.” *PLoS ONE* 14, no. 3 (March 2019): Abstract-Conclusions. Accessed February 26, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0211691>

This is the only source referenced that discusses the Chimú culture. The Chimú had a powerful presence in ancient Peru, but were eventually conquered by the Inca in colonial times.

Proulx, Donald A. *Nasca Headhunting and the Ritual Use of Trophy Heads*. Zürich: Museum Rietberg Zürich, 1999.

Proulx importantly includes information on painted pottery contemporary with the Nasca heads in his paper. The examples shown depict Nasca religious rituals that strengthen his argument of the purpose of the Nasca

heads, including a pot that shows an isolated head used in ceremony. The source does not focus on covering a single archaeological excavation, rather, it investigates the meaning of the heads.

Socha, Dagmara M., Johan Reinhard, and Ruddy Chávez Perea. "Inca Human Sacrifices on Misti Volcano (Peru)." *Latin American Antiquity* 32, no. 1 (December 2020): 1-16.

This paper provides a light background on Inca religious structure and rituals, and details of the excavation of a capacocha site on the Misti volcano in a bioarchaeological context, similar to Lozada et al.'s report on the Nasca and Wari heads. This source provides the historical context necessary to discuss capacocha.