SMARTHISTORY OF ART XIA - THE AMERICAS BEFORE 1500



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SmartHistory of Art XIa: The Americas before 1500

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Detailed Licensing

Licensing

*A detailed breakdown of this resource's licensing can be found in **Back Matter/Detailed Licensing**.*

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1: A beginner's guide

The Americas to 1900

Explore art made in North and South America from prehistory to 1900.

c. 14,000 B.C.E. - 1900 C.E.

1.1: Defining “Pre-Columbian” and “Mesoamerica”

1.2: Teresita Fernández on Precolumbian gold

1.3: About geography and chronological periods in Native American art

1.4: Terms and Issues in Native American Art

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1.1: Defining “Pre-Columbian” and “Mesoamerica”

Defining “Pre-Columbian” and “Mesoamerica”

by DR. MAYA JIMÉNEZ

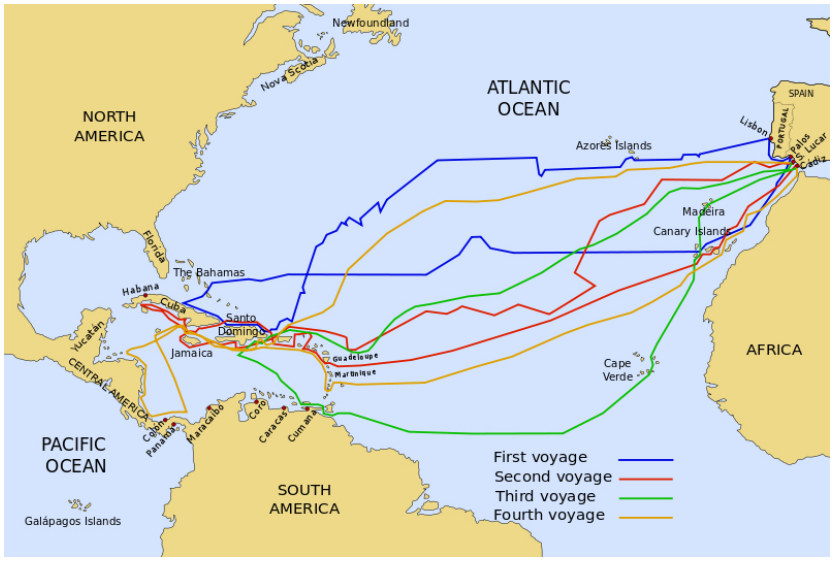


Figure **1.1.1**: The routes of the four Voyages of Christopher Columbus, 1492-1504 to the Caribbean Islands and the coast of Central America (image: **CC BY-SA 3.0**)

What does “pre-Columbian” mean?

The original inhabitants of the Americas traveled across what is now known as the **Bering Strait**, a passage that connected the westernmost point of North America with the easternmost point of Asia. The Western hemisphere was disconnected from Asia at the end of the last Ice Age, around 10,000 B.C.E.

In 1492, the Genoese explorer Christopher Columbus arrived at the islands of Cuba and Hispaniola (today Haiti and the Dominican Republic), mistakenly thinking he had reached Asia. Columbus’ miscalculation marked the first step in the colonization of the Americas, or what was then seen as a “New World.” Incorrectly referring to the native inhabitants of Hispaniola as “Indians” (under the assumption that he had landed in India), Columbus established the first Spanish colony of the Americas. “Pre-Columbian” thus refers to the period in the Americas before the arrival of Columbus.



Figure **1.1.2**: Pyramid of the Sun, Teōtīhuacān. Teōtīhuacān reached its peak from the 1st to the mid-6th century C.E. The main structures include the Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon, Avenue of the Dead, and the Temple of Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent). Teotihuacan was home to as many as 125,000 people. The name Teōtīhuacān was given by the Aztecs long after the city had been abandoned in c. 550 C.E. The original name is lost.

The Spanish *conquistadores* (conquerors) found that the “New World” was in fact not new at all, and that the indigenous people of Mesoamerica had established advanced civilizations with densely populated cities and towering architectural monuments such as at Teōtīhuacān, as well as advanced writing systems.

The term pre-Columbian is complicated however. For one thing, although it refers to the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the phrase does not directly reference any of the many sophisticated cultures that flourished in the Americas (think of the Aztec, Inka, or Maya, to name only a few) and instead

invokes a European explorer. For this reason and because indigenous peoples flourished before and after the arrival of the Europeans, the term is often seen as flawed. Other terms such as pre-Hispanic, pre-Cortesian, or more simply, ancient Americas, are sometimes used.



Figure **1.1.3**: Cylindrical vessel with ball game scene, c. 682-701 C.E., Late Classic, Maya, ceramic, 20.48 cm high (Dallas Museum of Art) (zoomable image **here**)

What does “Mesoamerica” mean?

The region of Mesoamerica—which today includes central and south Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador—consists of a diverse geographic landscape of highlands, jungles, valleys, and coastlines. Mesoamericans did not exploit technological innovations such as the wheel—though they were used in toys— and did not develop metal tools or metalworking techniques until at least until 900 C.E. Instead, Mesoamerican artists are known for producing megalithic (large stone) sculpture and extremely sharp weapons from obsidian (volcanic glass). **Featherwork** and stonework in **basalt**, turquoise, and **jade** dominated Mesoamerican artistic production, while exceptional **textiles** and **metallurgy** flourished further south, among pre-Columbian Andean and Central American cultures, respectively.

Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures shared certain characteristics such as the ritual ballgame,* pyramid building, human sacrifice, maize as an agricultural staple, and deities dedicated to natural forces (i.e. rain, storm, fire). Additionally, some Mesoamerican societies developed sophisticated systems of writing, as well as an advanced understanding of astronomy (which allowed for the development of accurate and complex calendar systems, including the 260-day sacred calendar and the 365-day agricultural calendar). As a result, cities like La Venta and Chichen Itza were aligned in relation to cardinal directions and had a sacred center. The fact that many of these cultural trademarks persisted for more than 2,000 years across civilizations as distinct as the Olmec (c. 1200–400 B.C.E.) and the Aztec (c. 1345 to 1521 C.E.), demonstrates the strong cultural bond of Mesoamerican cultures.

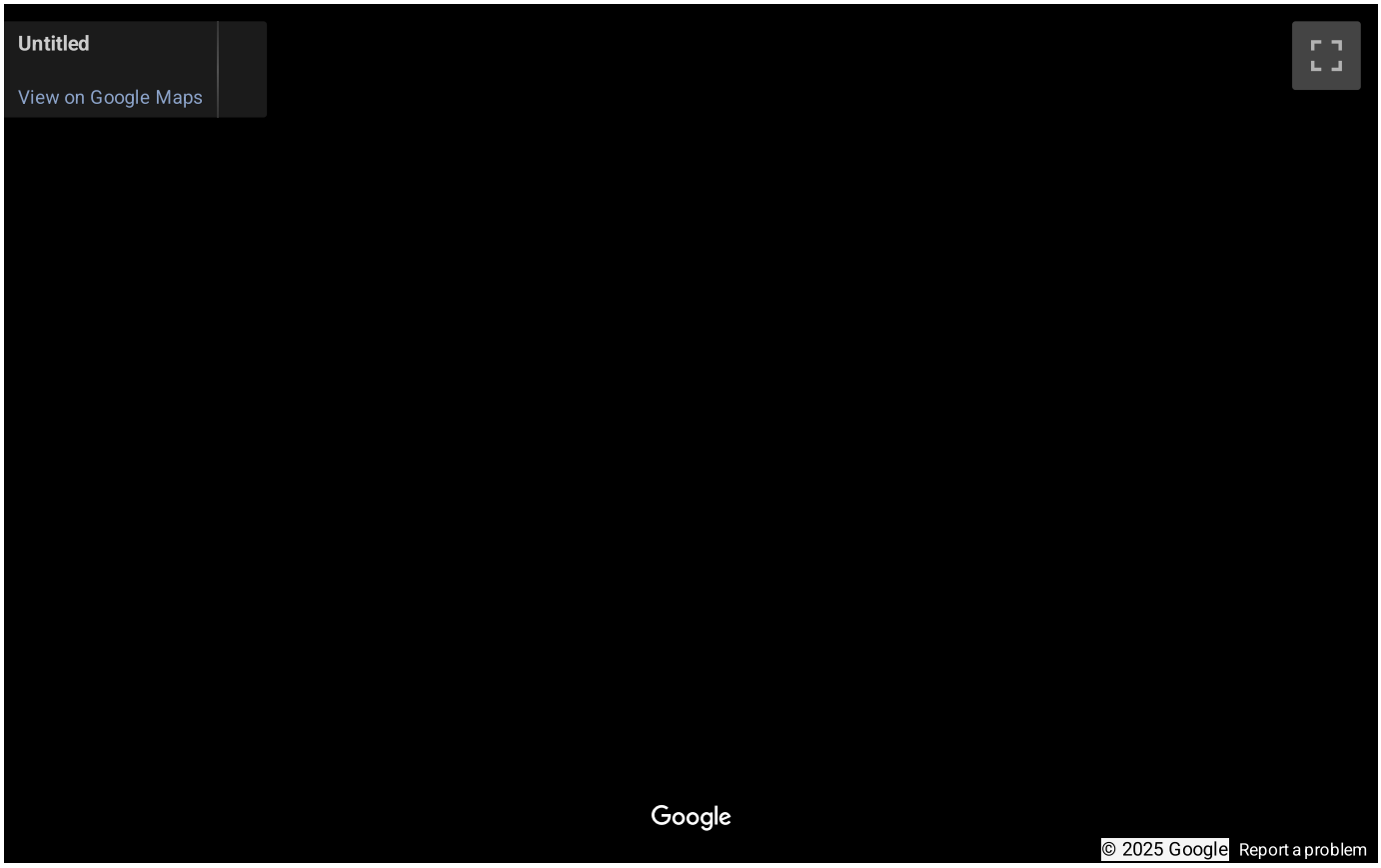


Figure **1.1.4**: El Tajín Ball Court, c. 800 – 1200 C.E., Classic Veracruz Culture (photo: **Oscar Zorrilla Alonso**, CC BY-SA 2.0)

*The ballgame was played in different iterations at different times and in different places. It was played with a rubber ball that players hit with their elbows, hips, or knees. The ballgame was considered an important ritual in Mesoamerica and was practiced first by the Olmec and last by the Aztec. Since the rubber ball was solid and heavy, players wore protective gear to avoid injury and may have tried to score the ball through a ring, which was usually located high on the wall of the ballcourt. Numerous rubber balls and ballcourts have been discovered throughout Mesoamerica in El Tajín (image above) and Monte Albán, although the largest surviving ballcourt is located in Chichen Itza. While the ballgame was played by the elite, it was believed

that the fate of the game and thus of the player was determined by the gods. As a result, the Mesoamerican ballgame held significant implications. Learn more about the ballgame **here**.

Google Street View of the Pyramid known as the Castillo, Chichen Itzá, Maya, Mexico, c. 800-900 C.E.



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1.2: Teresita Fernández on Precolumbian gold

by **THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART**



The Artist Project is an online series in which artists respond to works of art in The Met's encyclopedic collection. **http://artistproject.metmuseum.org/2/teresita-fernandez/**

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1.3: About geography and chronological periods in Native American art

About geography and chronological periods in Native American art

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK

Typically when people discuss Native American art they are referring to peoples in what is today the United States and Canada. You might sometimes see this referred to as Native North American art, even though Mexico, the Caribbean, and those countries in Central America are typically not included. These areas are commonly included in the arts of Mesoamerica (or Middle America), even though these countries are technically part of North America.

So how do we consider so many groups and of such diverse natures? We tend to treat them geographically: Eastern Woodlands (sometime divided between North and Southeast), Southwest and West (or California), Plains and Great Basin, and Northwest Coast and North (Sub-Arctic and Arctic). While this is by no means a perfect way of addressing the varied tribes and First Nations within these areas, such a map can help to reveal patterns and similarities.



Figure **1.3.1**: Map of North America showing the regions of Native American cultures

Chronology

Chronology (the arrangement of events into specific time periods in order of occurrence) is tricky when discussing Native American or First Nations art. Each geographic region is assigned different names to mark time, which can be confusing to anyone learning about the images, objects, and architecture of these areas for the first time. For instance, for the ancient Eastern Woodlands, you might read about the Late Archaic (c. 3000–1000 B.C.E.), Woodland (c. 1100 BCE–1000 C.E.), Mississippian (c. 900–c. 1500/1600 C.E.), and Fort Ancient (c. 1000–1700) periods. But if we turn to the Southwest, there are alternative terms like Basketmaker (c. 100 B.C.E.–700 C.E.) and Pueblo (700–1400 C.E.). You might also see terms like pre- and post-Contact (before and after contact with Europeans and Euro-Americans) and Reservation Era (late nineteenth century) that are used to separate different moments in time. Some of these terms speak to the colonial legacy of Native peoples because they separate time based on interactions with foreigners. Other terms like Prehistory have fallen out of favor and are problematic since they suggest that Native peoples didn't have a history prior to European contact.

Organization

We arrange Native American and First Nations material prior to circa 1600 in “North America: later cultures before European colonization”, which includes material about the Ancestral Puebloans, Moundbuilders, and Mississippian peoples. Those objects and buildings created after 1600 are in their own section, which will hopefully highlight the continuing diversity of Native groups as well as the transformations (sometimes violent ones) occurring throughout parts of North America. Artists working after 1914 (or the beginning of WWI) are not located in the Art of the Americas section, but rather in the modern and contemporary areas.

Additional resources:

Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Brian M. Fagan, *Ancient North America: The Archaeology of a Continent*, 4th ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005).

David W. Penney, *North American Indian Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004).

Karen Kramer Russell, ed., *Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

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1.4: Terms and Issues in Native American Art

Terms and Issues in Native American Art

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK

Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, the Dakotas, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Utah, Wisconsin, Wyoming—all state names derived from Native American sources. Pontiac, moose, raccoon, pecan, kayak, squash, chipmunk, Winnebago. These common words also derive from different Native words and demonstrate the influence these groups have had on the United States.

Pontiac, for instance, was an 18th century Ottawa chief (also called Obwandiyag), who fought against the British in the Great Lakes region. The word "moose," first used in English in the early seventeenth century during colonization, comes from Algonquian languages.

Stereotypes



Figure 1.4.28: "Balboa and the Indian Princess," 1906, in Frederick A., Ober, Vasco Nuñez de Balboa (New York, Harper, 1906), p. 68

Stereotypes persist when discussing Native American arts and cultures, and sadly many people remain unaware of the complicated and fascinating histories of Native peoples and their art. Too many people still imagine a warrior or chief on horseback wearing a feathered headdress, or a beautiful young "princess" in an animal hide dress (what we now call the Indian Princess). Popular culture and movies perpetuate these images, and homogenize the incredible diversity of Native groups across North America. There are too many different languages, cultural traditions, cosmologies, and ritual practices to adequately make broad statements about the cultures and arts of the indigenous peoples of what is now the United States and Canada.

In the past, the term "primitive" has been used to describe the art of Native tribes and First Nations. This term is deeply problematic—and reveals the distorted lens of colonialism through which these groups have been seen and misunderstood. After contact, Europeans and Euro-Americans often conceived of the Amerindian peoples of North America as noble savages (a primitive, uncivilized, and romanticized "Other"). This legacy has affected the reception and appreciation of Native arts, which is why much of it was initially collected by anthropological (rather than art) museums. Many people viewed Native objects as curiosities or as specimens of "dying" cultures—which in part explains why many objects were stolen or otherwise acquired without approval of Native peoples. Many sacred objects, for example, were removed and put on display for non-Native audiences. While much has changed, this legacy lives on, and it is important to be aware of and overcome the many stereotypes and biases that persist from prior centuries.

Repatriation

One significant step that has been taken to correct some of this colonial legacy has been NAGPRA, or the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1992. This is a U.S. federal law that dictates that "human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony, referred to collectively in the statute as cultural items" be returned to tribes if they can demonstrate "lineal descent or cultural affiliation." Many museums in the U.S. have been actively trying to repatriate items and human remains. For example, in 2011, a museum returned a wooden box drum, a hide robe, wooden masks, a headdress, a rattle, and a pipe to the Tlingít T'akdeintaan Clan of Hoonah, Alaska. These objects were purchased in 1924 for $500.

In the 19th century, many groups were violently forced from their ancestral homelands onto reservations. This is an important factor to remember when reading the essays and watching the videos in this section because the art changes—sometimes very dramatically—in response to these upheavals. You might read elsewhere that objects created after these transformations are somehow less authentic because of the influence of European or Euro-American materials and subjects on Native art. However, it is crucial that we do not view those artworks as somehow less culturally valuable simply because Native men and women responded to new and sometimes radically changed circumstances.

Many twentieth and twenty-first century artists, including Oscar Howe (Yanktonai Sioux), Alex Janvier (Chipewyan [Dene]) and Robert Davidson (Haida), don't consider themselves to work outside of so-called "traditional arts." In 1958, Howe even wrote a famous letter commenting on his methods when his work was denounced by Philbrook Indian Art Annual Jurors as not being "authentic" Native art:

> ***Who ever said that my paintings are not in the traditional Indian style has poor knowledge of Indian art indeed. There is much more to Indian Art than pretty, stylized pictures. There was also power and strength and individualism (emotional and intellectual insight) in the old Indian paintings. Every bit in my paintings is a true, studied fact of Indian paintings. Are we to be held back forever with one phase of Indian painting, with no right for individualism, dictated to as the Indian has always been, put on reservations and treated like a child, and only the White Man knows what is best for him? Now, even in Art, 'You little child do what we think is best for you, nothing different." Well, I am not going to stand for it. Indian Art can compete with any Art in the world, but not as a suppressed Art….*** [1]

More terms and issues

The word Indian is considered offensive to many peoples. The term derives from the Indies, and was coined after Christopher Columbus bumped into the Caribbean islands in 1492, believing, mistakenly, that he had found India. Other terms are equally problematic or generic. You might encounter many different terms to describe the peoples in North America, such as Native American, American Indian, Amerindian, Aboriginal, Native, Indigenous, First Nations, and First Peoples.

Native American is used here because people are most familiar with this term, yet we must be aware of the problems it raises. The term applies to peoples throughout the Americas, and the Native peoples of North America, from Panama to Alaska and northern Canada, are incredibly diverse. It is therefore important to represent individual cultures as much as we possibly can. The essays here use specific tribal and First Nations names so as not to homogenize or lump peoples together. On Smarthistory, the artworks listed under Native American Art are only those from the United States and Canada, while those in Mexico and Central America are located in other sections.

You might also encounter words like tribes, clans, or bands in relation to the social groups of different Native communities. The United States government refers to an Indigenous group as a "tribe," while the Canadian government uses the term "ban." Many communities in Canada prefer the term "nation."

Identity

In order to be legally classified as an indigenous person in the United States and Canada, an individual must be officially listed as belonging to a specific tribe or band. This issue of identity is obviously a sensitive one, and serves as a reminder of the continuing impact of colonial policy. Many contemporary artists, including James Luna (Pooyukitchum/Luiseño) and **Jaune Quick-to-See-Smith** (from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Indian Nation), address the problem of who gets to decide who or what an Indian is in their work.

Luna's ***Artifact Piece*** (1987) and ***Take a Picture with a Real Indian*** (1993) both confront issues of identity and stereotypes of Native peoples. In *Artifact Piece*, Luna placed himself into a glass vitrine (like the ones we often see in museums) as if he were a static artifact, a relic of the past, accompanied by personal items like pictures of his family. In *Take a Picture with a Real Indian*, Luna asks his audience to come take a picture with him. He changes clothes three times. He wears a loincloth, then a loincloth with a feather and a bone breastplate, and then what we might call "street clothes." Most people choose to take a picture with him in the former two, and so Luna draws attention to the problematic idea that somehow he is less authentically Native when dressed in jeans and a t-shirt.

Even the naming conventions applied to peoples need to be revisited. In the past, the Navajo term "Anasazi" was used to name the ancestors of modern-day Puebloans. Today, "Ancestral Puebloans" is considered more acceptable. Likewise, "Eskimo" designated peoples in the Arctic region, but this word has fallen out of favor because it homogenizes the First Nations in this area. In general, it is always preferable to use a tribe or Nation's specific name when possible, and to do so in its own language.

1. Oscar Howe and the Philbrook Museum of Art, 1958

Additional resources:

Interview with James Luna for the Smithsonian

The National Museum of the American Indian

NAGPRA explained by the NMAI

Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Brian M. Fagan, *Ancient North America: The Archaeology of a Continent*, 4th ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005).

David W. Penney, *North American Indian Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004).

Karen Kramer Russell, ed., *Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: North America before c. 1500

Canada, the United States, Mesoamerica, and Central America

Native American / First Nations

Traces of sophisticated cultures remain across what is today the United States and Canada.

2.1: Clovis culture

2.1.1: Clovis Culture, an introduction

2.1.2: Bannerstones, an introduction

2.2: Moundbuilders

2.2.1: Fort Ancient Culture- Great Serpent Mound

2.2.2: Mississippian shell neck ornament (gorget)

2.3: Ancestral Puebloan

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2.3.2: Introduction to Chaco Canyon

2.3.3: Socorro black-on-white storage jar

2.4: Mogollon

2.4.1: Introduction to Mogollon

2.4.2: Paquimé (Casas Grandes), Mogollon culture

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SECTION OVERVIEW

2.1: Clovis culture

2.1.1: Clovis Culture, an introduction

2.1.2: Bannerstones, an introduction

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2.1.1: Clovis Culture, an introduction

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The first clear evidence of human activity in North America are spear heads like this. They are called Clovis points. These spear tips were used to hunt large game. The period of the Clovis people coincides with the extinction of mammoths, giant sloth, camels and giant bison in North America. The extinction of these animals was caused by a combination of human hunting and climate change.



Figure **2.1.1.1**: Clovis Spear Point, c. 11,000 B.C.E., flint, 2.98 x 8.5 x 0.7 cm, found Arizona © Trustees of the British Museum

How did humans reach America?

North America was one of the last continents in the world to be settled by humans after about 15,000 BC. During the last Ice Age, water, which previously flowed off the land into the sea, was frozen up in vast ice sheets and glaciers so sea levels dropped. This exposed a land bridge that enabled humans to migrate through Siberia to Alaska. These early Americans were highly adaptable and Clovis points have been found throughout North America. It is remarkable that over such a vast area, the distinctive characteristics of the points hardly vary.

Typical Clovis points, like the example above, have parallel to slightly convex edges which narrow to a point. This shape is produced by chipping small, parallel flakes off both sides of a stone blade. Following this, the point is thinned on both sides by the removal of flakes which leave a central groove or “flute.” These flutes are the principal feature of Clovis or “fluted” points. They originate from the base which then has a concave outline and end about one-third along the length. The grooves produced by the removal of the flutes allow the point to be fitted to a wooden shaft of a spear.

The people who made Clovis points spread out across America looking for food and did not stay anywhere for long, although they did return to places where resources were plentiful.

Clovis points are sometimes found with the bones of mammoths, mastodons, sloth and giant bison. As the climate changed at the end of the last Ice Age, the habitats on which these animals depended started to disappear. Their extinction was inevitable but Clovis hunting on dwindling numbers probably contributed to their disappearance.

Although there are arguments in favor of pre-Clovis migrations to America, it is the “Paleo-Indian” Clovis people who can be most certainly identified as the probable ancestors of later Native North American peoples and cultures.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Additional resources:

B. Fagan, *Ancient North America* (London, 2005).

G. Haynes, *The Early Settlement of North America: The Clovis Era* (Cambridge, 2002).

G. Haynes (ed.), *American Megafaunal Extinctions at the End of the Pleistocene* (New York, 2009).

D. Meltzer, *First Peoples in a New World: Colonizing Ice Age America*(Berkeley, 2009).

S. Mithen, *After the Ice: A Global Human History 20000-5000 BC* (London, 2003).

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2.1.2: Bannerstones, an introduction

by **DR. ANNA BLUME**



Figure **2.1.2.1**: Curved Pick Bannerstone, Glenn Falls, New York, 6,000–1,000 B.C.E., banded slate, 2.7 x 13.6 cm (American Museum of Natural History DN/128)

Why is it that in schools across the United States we learn about the ancient Egyptians and Greeks and Chinese, but not about the ancient people of North America? In the Eastern half of the United States between 6000 and 1000 B.C.E., in a period known as the Archaic, thousands of nomadic Native Americans travelled and lived along the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. Amongst the art they made and left behind are enigmatic, carefully carved stones known today as bannerstones. They are generally symmetrical in shape and drilled down the center, leading 19th-century archaeologists and collectors to assume that these uniquely carved stones were placed on wooden rods hoisted in the air as "banners." Today we are far less certain why they were made or how they were used, nonetheless we still call them bannerstones.



Figure **2.1.2.1**: Curved Pick Bannerstone, Glenn Falls, New York, 6,000–1,000 B.C.E., banded slate, 2.7 x 13.6 cm (American Museum of Natural History DN/128)

Bannerstones, like the slate *Curved Pick* from Glenn Falls, New York, are carefully chosen stones that were then carved, drilled, and polished compositions. At the center of this particular stone, an Archaic sculptor carved a small ridge that marks and accentuates the off-white markings left by a worm or some other biologic element to form what is known as a trace fossil embedded into the sedimentation of the rock as it formed. The sculpted ridge and white fossil traces cross over and through the symmetrical dark natural banding of the slate (the slate was formed by two geologic processes, a sedimentation process and then a metamorphic process). Each different color of the banding from the light brown to the dark brown indicates a different layer of sedimentation hardened into the rock structure.



Figure **2.1.2.2**: Curved Pick Bannerstone (reverse), Glenn Falls, New York, 6,000–1,000 B.C.E., banded slate, 2.7 x 13.6 cm (American Museum of Natural History DN/128)

On the other side, the banding of the stone forms a noticeably different pattern, making this a naturally occurring slate with different sedimentary patterns on either side of the stone that further attracted and challenged the sculptor to compose both sides into a single complex composition with the curved form of the sculpted bannerstone echoing and accentuating the concentric forms of the dark banding. Given that slate is a relatively soft stone and easier than other stones to shape and drill, it is one of the most common stones chosen by ancient Native North Americans for the making of bannerstones, especially in the Ohio Valley.



Figure **2.1.2.3**: Curved Pick Bannerstone (top), Glenn Falls, New York, 6,000–1,000 B.C.E., banded slate, 2.7. x 13.6 cm (American Museum of Natural History DN/128)

Once the raw stone was found river-worn or quarried from a mountainside, the sculptor would take a harder stone known as a "hammerstone" to begin to peck and then grind the banded-slate, modeling their work on one of twenty-four distinct bannerstone types modern-day scholars have defined in our studies of these ancient Native American artworks.



Figure **2.1.2.4**: Twenty-four different types of bannerstones identified by Byron Knoblock in 1929

Choosing the *Curved Pick* type, one of several bannerstone forms particular to the Northeast, the sculptor worked their composition to be precisely centered on the two different faces of the banded slate, grinding the "wings" into a raised edge that runs through the

dark slate bands, and flattening, shaping, and smoothing the surface around the perforation, further individualizing their finished work. The individuality of each bannerstone in relation to recognizable forms, recognizable to the Archaic sculptor and to those of us studying these stones today, is an intrinsic component of their making and meaning.



Figure **2.1.2.56**: Different types of bannerstones (clockwise from left: American Museum of Natural History d/144 Limestone; American Museum of Natural History 13/105 Slate; NMNH A26077 Porphyry Granite; American Museum of Natural History 1/1821 Quartz)

Bannerstones were made from many types of stone including those that are sedimentary, metamorphic, and igneous. The sedimentary rock that we see in a limestone ovate bannerstone is the softest, while slate (a metamorphic stone) shows more signs of natural geologic transformation such as banding that we see in a lunate bannerstone. Igneous rock is the hardest and often has embedded elements from various minerals when magma first bubbled up from the core of the earth and cooled. This kind of complex igneous surface is evident in a porphyry granite Wisconsin wing bannerstone. Some bannerstone (like the quartz butterfly) are made out of even harder material made of minerals and crystals that would have been even more time consuming and challenging to carve. The relative hardness of the stone chosen by the sculptor would have an impact on the kinds of bannerstone forms they would or could sculpt. The thin wings of slate and even granite bannerstones could not be carved out of quartz, while the seemingly thick rounded form of a Quartz Butterfly bannerstone might appear unfinished if it were carved in slate.



Figure 2.1.2.6: Southern Ovate Preform Bannerstone; Habersham County, Georgia, 6,000 – 1,000 B.C.E., igneous, coarse-grained alkaline, 11.5 x 10.3 cm (American Museum of Natural History 2/2205)

Unfinished bannerstones

Whatever their shape or relative state of completion, all bannerstones were made using river-worn pebbled hammerstones to peck, grind, and polish the surface. Some bannerstones, however, were intentionally left in a partial state of completion known as a "preform" such as a Southern Ovate from Habershan County, Georgia.



Figure 2.1.2.7: Southern Ovate Preform Bannerstone; Habersham County, Georgia, 6,000 – 1,000 B.C.E., igneous, coarse-grained alkaline, 11.5 x 10.3 cm (American Museum of Natural History 2/2205)



Figure 2.1.2.8: Southern Ovate Preform Bannerstone; Habersham County, Georgia, 6,000 – 1,000 B.C.E., igneous, coarse-grained alkaline, 11.5 x 10.3 cm (American Museum of Natural History 2/2205)

This bannerstone is partially drilled at the spine on one side with a hollow cane or reed that grow along the banks of rivers, and undrilled at the other side. The reed itself is hollow and when rubbed briskly between the hands with the application of water and some sand, can drill through slate, granite and even quartz. With this stone the partial passing of the reed leaves concentric circles on the inside of the perforation and a small nipple visible here that would fall out the other side when the perforation was complete. The medium to coarse-grained igneous rock is left unpolished, just as the ovate form and perforation are left unfinished. Scholars believe that preforms such as these were often buried in this state, or meant to be finished at a later date by another sculptor in a different location. The kind of granite we see here is unique to this region of the Southeast and so would likely have been valuable as a trade good further west along the Mississippi where there was little or no stone available. By partially completing the Ovate form, even partially drilling the perforation the sculptor of this southeastern stone increased the value of the stone while leaving the finish work to whomever acquired this Ovate in this preform state.

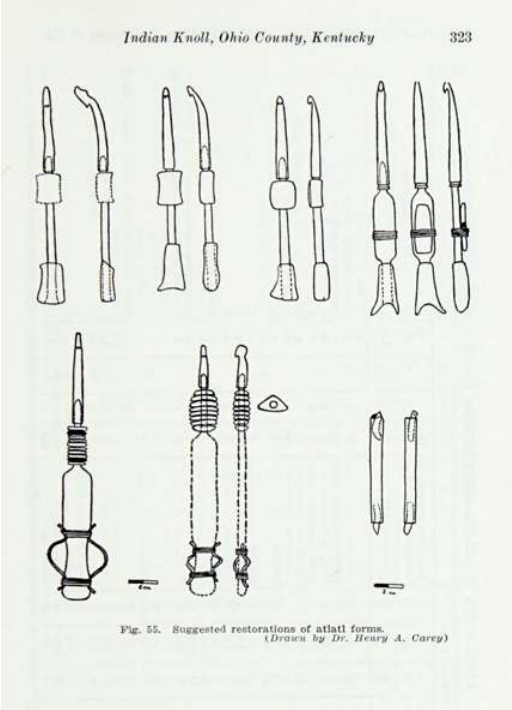


Figure **2.1.2.9**: Illustration in William S. Webb, *Indian Knoll*, 1946 (publication of his 1937 study at Indian Knoll), p. 322

Hunting tools?

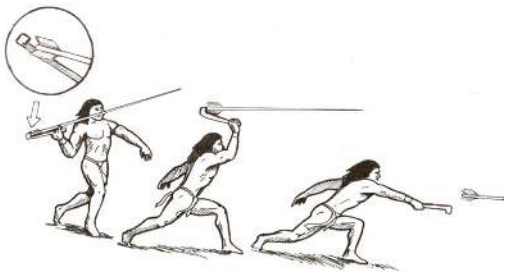


Figure **2.1.2.10**: How to use an atlatl, here with an arrow (mage: Sebastião da Silva Vieira, CC BY 3.0)

In 1937, William S. Webb, at the University of Kentucky, with his large crew of Works Projects Administration (WPA) workers funded by the New Deal in the 1930s, excavated 880 burials at the Indian Knoll site in Western Kentucky. Amongst these 880 human burials, Webb found 42 bannerstones buried with elements of throwing sticks known as atlatls. Webb proposed that the bannerstones were weights that had been made to be placed on the wooden shafts of these hunting tools. The first inhabitants of Eastern North America used atlatls instead of the bow and arrow until 500 C.E. The two-foot long shaft of the atlatl could propel a six-foot spear and point great distances with accelerated speed and accuracy. It is a tool invented and used in Eurasia and Africa as early as 40,000 B.C.E. and ubiquitous throughout the Americas after it began to be inhabited thousands of years later.

Though many scholars after Webb, including myself, agree that many bannerstones were likely carved and drilled to be placed on atlatl shafts, this particular hypothesis raises as many questions as it may appear to answer. For instance why would these Native American sculptors dedicate so much time to an atlatl accessory that appears to have nominal if any effect on the usefulness of the tool? This raises other unanswered questions about the usefulness of beauty and how aesthetics, pleasure, and play are significant, though often overlooked, elements of ancient Native North American art.



Figure **2.1.2.11**: Partially destroyed double crescent type bannerstone (American Museum of Natural History DM 333)

NAGPRA

Since Webb's 1936 excavation at Indian Knoll, Kentucky, remains and belongings of Native Americans are no longer simply there for the taking for the collector's shelf, college laboratory, or museum case. Especially with the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (known as NAGPRA), funerary remains of Native Americans (bodies and objects placed with these bodies in burials) are protected from being disturbed or excavated unless permissions have been granted by Native communities culturally affiliated with the burials. [1] Native American funerary objects already in federal agencies or museums and institutions that receive federal funding are to be made available to culturally affiliated communities that have the right to request their repatriation. Whatever the aims of post-Enlightenment science or the elucidating potential of the exhibition of artworks may be, these ideological motivations must be negotiated with and in light of the desires, memories, practices, and philosophical underpinnings of the Native American people and their descendants who often buried their dead with bannerstones and other burial remains.

Currently the **William Webb Museum** has recently removed all photographs of the 880 burials and 55,000 artifacts that Webb excavated at Indian Knoll in 1936 and will no longer allow scholars to study these remains "until legal compliance with NAGPRA has been achieved." What "legal compliance with NAGPRA" specifically means for the remains including bannerstones excavated at Indian Knoll is profoundly complex. No living communities of Native Americans trace their direct line (in legal terms, known as "lineal descendants") to the Archaic people who built this shell mound in which they buried their dead along with valued objects including broken and unbroken bannerstones. With the ratification of the **Indian Removal Act of 1830**, the Shawnee and Chickasaw communities that lived in Western Kentucky in the 19th century were forced to move west to Oklahoma. [2] How the William Webb museum will choose to adhere to NAGPRA and what they will do with burial remains from Indian Knoll will set a precedent unfolding into the present about how to collaborate with living Native American communities (even those who are not "lineal descendants"), and how to mindfully regard the past lives of the Ancient people of North American, their human remains along with the multitude of things they made, valued, and arranged in and outside of burials.

Intentionally broken?

Since the 19th century, many bannerstones were found in ancient trash piles known as “middens” as well as ritual burials of things known as “caches” and many more in human burials in subterranean or earthen mound architecture. A large number of bannerstones have also been found broken in half at the spine where they are most fragile due to the thin walls of the drilled perforations.



Figure **2.1.2.12**: Broken butterfly type bannerstone (American Museum of Natural History 20.1/5818)



Figure **2.1.2.13**: Kill hole in the center of a plate with a supernatural fish, 7th century, Late Classic Maya, earthenware and pigment, 10.5 x 40.6 x 40 cm, Guatemala (De Young Museum)

The intentional nature of these acts of breaking are evident in the placement of pieces together with no sign of wear along the broken edges, carefully arranged with other valuable objects. Archaeologists and historians of the ancient art of the Americas amongst the 8th century-Maya (of Mesoamerica) or 12th-century Mimbres art (of what is today the southwestern U.S.) have often identified this practice as “ritually killing” the object before burial. Though these bannerstones in most cases were intentionally broken by the very people who carved them (most likely just before burial), the meaning and purpose of this act further reveals something about the conceptual and even poetical importance of these sculpted bannerstone forms. Rather than “ritually killing,” bannerstone makers as well as other artists of Ancient America appear to be repurposing artworks, using them in one way at first, then reconceptualizing them to accompany their dead underground, as a kind of memory-work for the living not entirely unlike the carefully constructed exhibition spaces or storage units of our museums. For the Indigenous people of the Americas the earth itself

was often seen as a repository for cultural and personal objects, an underground space that was curated with things that continued to have meaning for the lives of communities for decades and even centuries.

Notes:

[1] More on NAGPRA can be found **here** and **here**.

[2] Read about the **Indian Removal Act** at the Library of Congress.

Additional resources

FIT Archaic Bannerstone Project

Knoblock, Byron. *Bannerstones of the North American Indian* (LaGrange: Bryon Knoblock, 1939).

Webb, William S. “Indian Knoll, Site Oh2, Ohio County, Kentucky,” in *Reports in Anthropology and Archaeology* vol. 4, no. 2 (1946): 1-365.

Cite this page as: Dr. Anna Blume, "Bannerstones, an introduction," in *Smarthistory*, March 15, 2021, accessed October 10, 2022, **https://smarthistory.org/bannerstones/**.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

2.2: Moundbuilders

2.2.1: Fort Ancient Culture- Great Serpent Mound

2.2.2: Mississippian shell neck ornament (gorget)

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2.2.1: Fort Ancient Culture- Great Serpent Mound

Fort Ancient Culture: Great Serpent Mound

by DR. KATHERINE T. BROWN



Figure **2.2.1.2**: Fort Ancient Culture(?), Great Serpent Mound, c. 1070, Adams County, Ohio (photo: **Eric Ewing**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

A serpent 1300 feet long

The Great Serpent Mound in rural, southwestern Ohio is the largest serpent effigy in the world. Numerous mounds were made by the ancient Native American cultures that flourished along the fertile valleys of the Mississippi, Ohio, Illinois, and Missouri Rivers a thousand years ago, though many were destroyed as farms spread across this region during the modern era. They invite us to contemplate the rich spiritual beliefs of the ancient Native American cultures that created them.

The Great Serpent Mound measures approximately 1,300 feet in length and ranges from one to three feet in height. The complex mound is both architectural and sculptural and was erected by settled peoples who cultivated maize, beans and squash and who maintained a stratified society with an organized labor force, but left no written records. Let's take a look at both aerial and close-up views that can help us understand the mound in relationship to its site and the possible intentions of its makers.

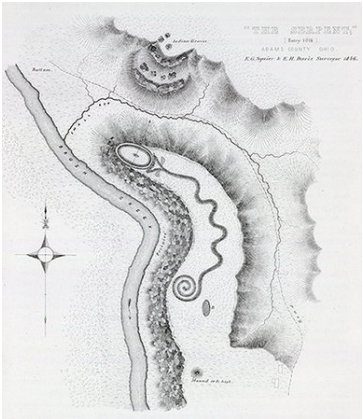


Figure **2.2.1.3**: Ephraim George Squier and E. H. Davis, "The Serpent;" entry 1014, Adams County Ohio. Pl. XXXV, *Ancient monuments of the Mississippi Valley: comprising the results of extensive original surveys and explorations*, Washington: Smithsonian institution, 1848

Supernatural powers?

The serpent is slightly crescent-shaped and oriented such that the head is at the east and the tail at the west, with seven winding coils in between. The shape of the head perhaps invites the most speculation. Whereas some scholars read the oval shape as an

enlarged eye, others see a hollow egg or even a frog about to be swallowed by wide, open jaws. But perhaps that lower jaw is an indication of appendages, such as small arms that might imply the creature is a lizard rather than a snake. Many native cultures in both North and Central America attributed supernatural powers to snakes or reptiles and included them in their spiritual practices. The native peoples of the Middle Ohio Valley in particular frequently created snake-shapes out of copper sheets.



Figure **2.2.1.4**: Aerial view of the Great Serpent Mound, c. 1070, Adams County, Ohio

The mound conforms to the natural topography of the site, which is a high plateau overlooking Ohio Brush Creek. In fact, the head of the creature approaches a steep, natural cliff above the creek. The unique geologic formations suggest that a meteor struck the site approximately 250-300 million years ago, causing folded bedrock underneath the mound.

Celestial hypotheses

Aspects of both the zoomorphic form and the unusual site have associations with astronomy worthy of our consideration. The head of the serpent aligns with the summer solstice sunset, and the tail points to the winter solstice sunrise. Could this mound have been used to mark time or seasons, perhaps indicating when to plant or harvest? Likewise, it has been suggested that the curves in the body of the snake parallel lunar phases, or alternatively align with the two solstices and two equinoxes.



Figure **2.2.1.5**: View of tail, Fort Ancient Culture(?), Great Serpent Mound, c. 1070, Adams County, Ohio (photo: **The Last Cookie**, CC BY 2.0)

Some have interpreted the egg or eye shape at the head to be a representation of the sun. Perhaps even the swallowing of the sun shape could document a solar eclipse. Another theory is that the shape of the serpent imitates the constellation Draco, with the Pole Star matching the placement of the first curve in the snake's torso from the head. An alignment with the Pole Star may indicate that the mound was used to determine true north and thus served as a kind of compass.

Of note also is the fact that Halley's Comet appeared in 1066, although the tail of the comet is characteristically straight rather than curved. Perhaps the mound served in part to mark this astronomical event or a similar phenomenon, such as light from a supernova. In a more comprehensive view, the serpent mount may represent a conglomerate of all celestial knowledge known by these native peoples in a single image.

Who built it?

Determining exactly which culture designed and built the effigy mound, and when, is a matter of ongoing inquiry. A broad answer may lie in viewing the work as being designed, built, and/or refurbished over an extended period of time by several indigenous groups. The leading theory is that the Fort Ancient Culture (1000-1650 C.E.) is principally responsible for the mound, having erected it in c. 1070 C.E. This mound-building society lived in the Ohio Valley and was influenced by the contemporary Mississippian culture (700-1550), whose urban center was located at Cahokia in Illinois. The rattlesnake was a common theme among the Mississippian culture, and thus it is possible that the Fort Ancient Culture appropriated this symbol from them (although there is no clear reference to a rattle to identify the species as such).



Figure **2.2.1.6**: View of the *Great Serpent Mound*, 1070(?), Adams County, Ohio (photo: Katherine T. Brown)

An alternative theory is that the Fort Ancient Culture refurbished the site c. 1070, reworking a preexisting mound built by the Adena Culture (c.1100 B.C.E.-200 C.E.) and/or the Hopewell Culture (c. 100 B.C.E.-550 C.E.). Whether the site was built by the Fort Ancient peoples, or by the earlier Adena or Hopewell Cultures, the mound is atypical. The mound contains no artifacts, and both the Fort Ancient and Adena groups typically buried objects inside their mounds. Although there are no graves found inside the Great Serpent Mound, there are burials found nearby, but none of them are the kinds of burials typical for the Fort Ancient culture and are more closely associated with Adena burial practices. Archaeological evidence does not support a burial purpose for the Great Serpent Mound.

Debate continues

Whether this impressive monument was used as a way to mark time, document a celestial event, act as a compass, serve as a guide to astrological patterns, or provide a place of worship to a supernatural snake god or goddess, we may never know with certainty. One scholar has recently suggested that the mound was a platform or base for totems or other architectural structures that are no longer extant, perhaps removed by subsequent cultures. All to say, scholarly debate continues, based on on-going archaeological evidence and geological research. But without a doubt, the mound is singular and significant in its ability to provide tangible insights into the cosmology and rituals of the ancient Americas.

Additional resources:

Great Serpent Mound at The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Timeline of Art History

Serpent Mound at the Ohio Historical Society

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2.2.2: Mississippian shell neck ornament (gorget)

Mississippian shell neck ornament (gorget)

by DR. DAVID W. PENNEY, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION and DR. BETH HARRIS

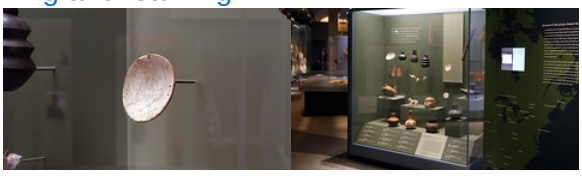


Video 2.2.2.1: Gorget, c. 1250-1350, probably Middle Mississippian Tradition, whelk shell, 10 x 2 cm (National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 18/853), a Seeing America video Speakers: Dr. David Penney, Associate Director for Museum Scholarship, Exhibitions, and Public Engagement, National Museum of the American Indian and Dr. Beth Harris

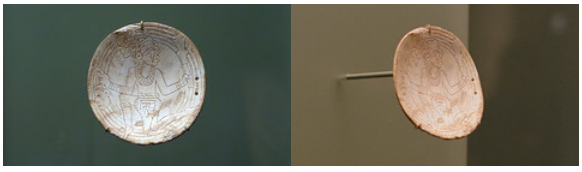
Additional resources

This object at the National Museum of the American Indian

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

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SECTION OVERVIEW

2.3: Ancestral Puebloan

2.3.1: Mesa Verde

2.3.2: Introduction to Chaco Canyon

2.3.3: Socorro black-on-white storage jar

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2.3.1: Mesa Verde

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK



Video **2.3.1.1**: Mesa Verde and the preservation of Ancestral Puebloan heritage ARCHES: At Risk Cultural Heritage Education Series Speakers: Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Steven Zucker

Wanted: stunning view

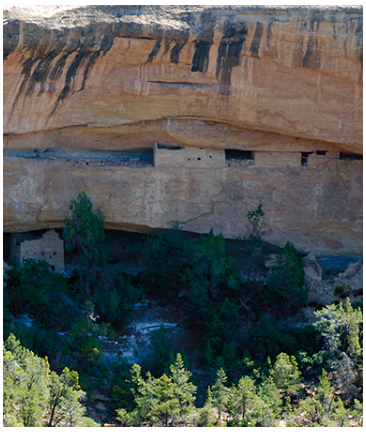


Figure **2.3.1.2**: Cliff dwellings, Ancestral Puebloan, 450–1300 C.E., sandstone, Mesa Verde National Park, (photo: Steven Zucker, CC: BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Imagine living in a home built into the side of a cliff. The Ancestral Puebloan peoples (formerly known as the Anasazi) did just that in some of the most remarkable structures still in existence today. Beginning after 1000-1100 C.E., they built more than 600 structures (mostly residential but also for storage and ritual) into the cliff faces of the Four Corners region of the United States (the southwestern corner of Colorado, northwestern corner of New Mexico, northeastern corner of Arizona, and southeastern corner of Utah). The dwellings depicted here are located in what is today southwestern Colorado in the national park known as Mesa Verde ("verde" is Spanish for green and "mesa" literally means table in Spanish but here refers to the flat-topped mountains common in the southwest).



Figure **2.3.1.3**: Ladder to Balcony House, Mesa Verde National Park (photo: **Ken Lund**, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The most famous residential sites date to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The Ancestral Puebloans accessed these dwellings with retractable ladders, and if you are sure footed and not afraid of heights, you can still visit some of these sites in the same way today.

To access Mesa Verde National Park, you drive up to the plateau along a winding road. People come from around the world to marvel at the natural beauty of the area as well as the archaeological remains, making it a popular tourist destination.

The twelfth- and thirteenth-century structures made of stone, mortar, and plaster remain the most intact. We often see traces of the people who constructed these buildings, such as hand or fingerprints in many of the mortar and plaster walls.



Figure **2.3.1.4**: View of a canyon, Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado (photo: **cfcheever**, CC: BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Ancestral Puebloans occupied the Mesa Verde region from about 450 C.E. to 1300 C.E. The inhabited region encompassed a far larger geographic area than is defined now by the national park, and included other residential sites like Hovenweep National Monument and Yellow Jacket Pueblo. Not everyone lived in cliff dwellings. Yellow Jacket Pueblo was also much larger than any site at Mesa Verde. It had 600–1200 rooms, and 700 people likely lived there (see link below). In contrast, only about 125 people lived in Cliff Palace (largest of the Mesa Verde sites), but the cliff dwellings are certainly among the best-preserved buildings from this time.



Figure **2.3.1.5**: Cliff Palace, Ancestral Puebloan, 450–1300 C.E., sandstone, Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado (photo: Steven Zucker, CC: BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Cliff palace

The largest of all the cliff dwellings, Cliff Palace, has about 150 rooms and more than twenty circular rooms. Due to its location, it was well protected from the elements. The buildings ranged from one to four stories, and some hit the natural stone "ceiling." To build these structures, people used stone and mud mortar, along with wooden beams adapted to the natural clefts in the cliff face. This building technique was a shift from earlier structures in the Mesa Verde area, which, prior to 1000 C.E., had been made primarily of adobe (bricks made of clay, sand and straw or sticks). These stone and mortar buildings, along with the decorative elements and objects found inside them, provide important insights into the lives of the Ancestral Puebloan people during the thirteenth century.



Figure **2.3.1.6**: View of Cliff Palace structures, Mesa Verde (photo: **Paul Middleton, Shadow Dancer Images**, CC: BY-NC 2.0)

At sites like Cliff Palace, families lived in architectural units, organized around kivas (circular, subterranean rooms). A kiva typically had a wood-beamed roof held up by six engaged support columns made of masonry above a shelf-like banquette. Other typical features of a kiva include a firepit (or hearth), a ventilation shaft, a deflector (a low wall designed to prevent air drawn from the ventilation shaft from reaching the fire directly), and a *sipapu*, a small hole in the floor that is ceremonial in purpose. They developed from the pithouse, also a circular, subterranean room used as a living space.

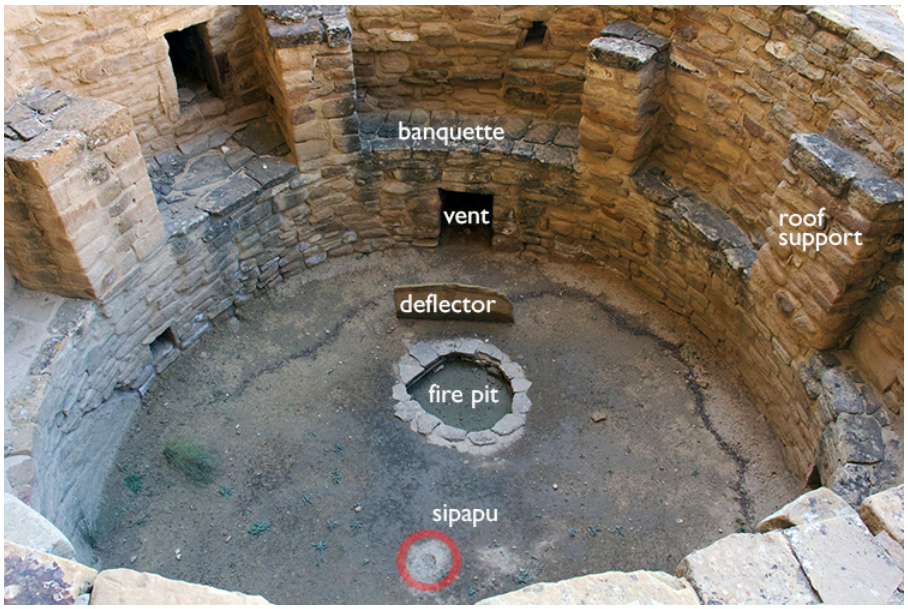


Figure **2.3.1.7**: Kiva without a roof, Cliff Palace, Mesa Verde National Park (photo: **Adam Lederer**, CC: BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Kivas continue to be used for ceremonies today by Puebloan peoples though not those within Mesa Verde National Park. In the past, these circular spaces were likely both ceremonial and residential. If you visit Cliff Palace, you will see the kivas without their roofs (see above), but in the past they would have been covered, and the space around them would have functioned as a small plaza.

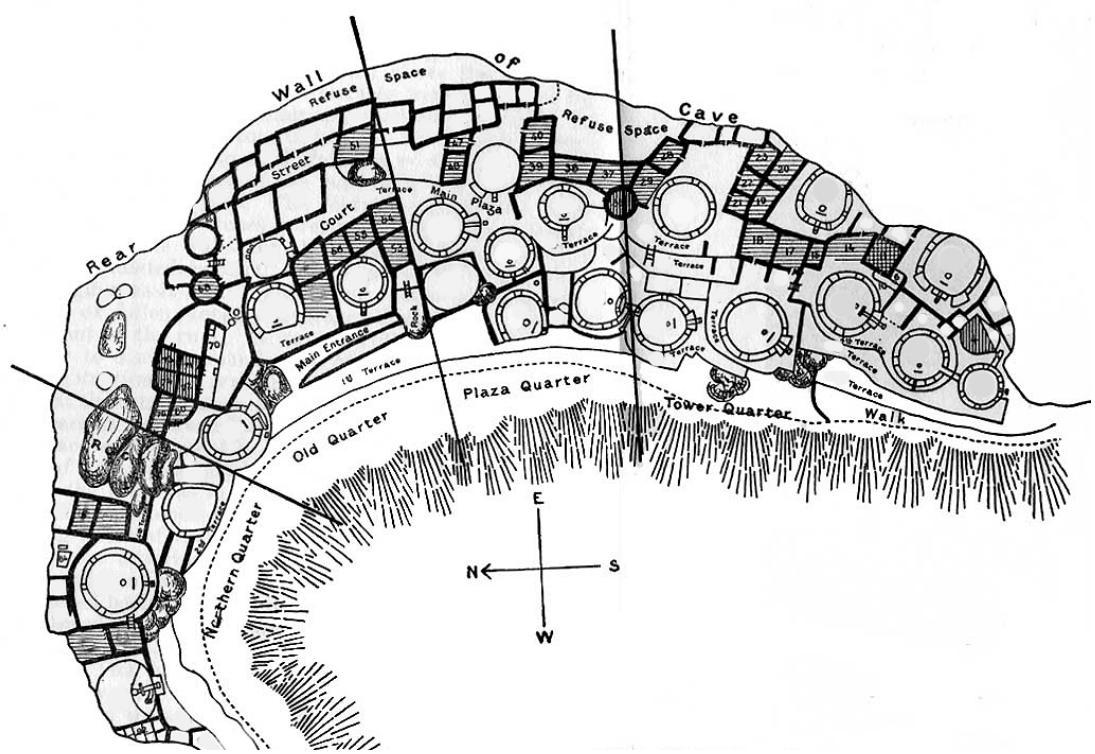


Figure **2.3.1.8**: Cliff Palace plan with circular kivas, National Park Service

Connected rooms fanned out around these plazas, creating a housing unit. One room, typically facing onto the plaza, contained a hearth. Family members most likely gathered here. Other rooms located off the hearth were most likely storage rooms, with just enough of an opening to squeeze your arm through a hole to grab anything you might need. Cliff Palace also features some unusual structures, including a circular tower. Archaeologists are still uncertain as to the exact use of the tower.



Figure 2.3.1.9: Kiva at Spruce Tree House, Mesa Verde National Park (photo: Doug Kerr, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Painted murals

The builders of these structures plastered and painted murals, although what remains today is fairly fragmentary. Some murals display geometric designs, while other murals represent animals and plants.



Figure 2.3.1.10: Mural 30, Cliff Palace, Mesa Verde National Park (photo: National Park Service)

For example, Mural 30, on the third floor of a rectangular "tower" (more accurately a room block) at Cliff Palace, is painted red against a white wall. The mural includes geometric shapes that are thought to portray the landscape. It is similar to murals inside of other cliff dwellings including Spruce Tree House and Balcony House. Scholars have suggested that the red band at the bottom symbolizes the earth while the lighter portion of the wall symbolizes the sky. The top of the red band, then, forms a kind of horizon line that separates the two. We recognize what look like triangular peaks, perhaps mountains on the horizon line. The rectangular element in the sky might relate to clouds, rain or to the sun and moon. The dotted lines might represent cracks in the earth.



Figure 2.3.1.11: Mugs found at Mesa Verde (photo: by the author, Mesa Verde Museum)

The creators of the murals used paint produced from clay, organic materials, and minerals. For instance, the red color came from hematite (a red ocher). Blue pigment could be turquoise or azurite, while black was often derived from charcoal. Along with the complex architecture and mural painting, the Ancestral Puebloan peoples produced black-on-white ceramics and turquoise and shell jewelry (goods were imported from afar including shell and other types of pottery). Many of these high-quality objects and their materials demonstrate the close relationship these people had to the landscape. Notice, for example, how the geometric designs on the mugs above appear similar to those in Mural 30 at Cliff Palace.

Why build here?

From 500–1300 C.E., Ancestral Puebloans who lived at Mesa Verde were sedentary farmers and cultivated beans, squash, and corn. Corn originally came from what is today Mexico at some point during the first millennium of the Common Era. Originally most farmers lived near their crops, but this shifted in the late 1100s when people began to live near sources of water, and often had to walk longer distances to their crops.



Figure 2.3.1.12: New Fire House, Masa Verde National Park (photo: Ken Lund, CC: BY-SA)

So why move up to the cliff alcoves at all, away from water and crops? Did the cliffs provide protection from invaders? Were they defensive or were there other issues at play? Did the rock ledges have a ceremonial or spiritual significance? They certainly provide shade and protection from snow. Ultimately, we are left only with educated guesses—the exact reasons for building the cliff dwellings remain unknown to us.

Why were the cliffs abandoned?

The cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde were abandoned around 1300 C.E. After all the time and effort it took to build these beautiful dwellings, why did people leave the area? Cliff Palace was built in the twelfth century, why was it abandoned less than a hundred years later? These questions have not been answered conclusively, though it is likely that the migration from this area was due to either drought, lack of resources, violence or some combination of these. We know, for instance, that droughts occurred from 1276 to 1299. These dry periods likely caused a shortage of food and may have resulted in confrontations as resources became more scarce. The cliff dwellings remain, though, as compelling examples of how the Ancestral Puebloans literally carved their existence into the rocky landscape of today's southwestern United States.



Video **2.3.1.2**

Additional resources:

Mesa Verde National Park site

Yellow Jacket Pueblo reconstruction

Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art, 2 ed. Oxford History of Art series* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Elizabeth A. Newsome and Kelley Hays-Gilpin, "Spectatorship and Performance in Mural Painting, AD 1250–1500," *Religious Transformation in the Late Pre-Hispanic Pueblo World*, eds. Donna Glowacki and Scott Van Keuren, Amerind Studies in Archaeology (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2011).

David Grant Noble, ed., *The Mesa Verde World: Explorations in Ancestral Pueblo Archaeology* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2006).

David W. Penney, *North American Indian Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004).

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



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2.3.2: Introduction to Chaco Canyon

AUREN KILROY-EWBANK



Figure **2.3.2.1**: Fajada Butte, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. Chacoan petroglyphs can be found at the base of the cliffs (photo: **Adam Meek**, CC BY 2.0)

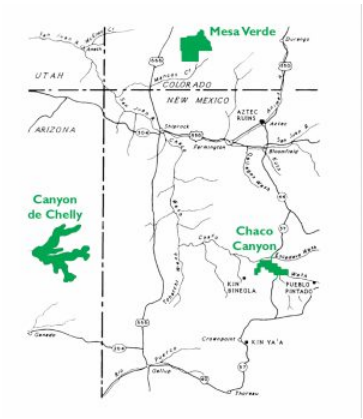


Figure **2.3.2.2**: Map of major ancestral Puebloan sites in the Four Corners region (**National Park Service**)

New Mexico is known as the “land of enchantment.” Among its many wonders, Chaco Canyon stands out as one of the most spectacular. Part of Chaco Culture National Historical Park, Chaco Canyon is among the most impressive archaeological sites in the world, receiving tens of thousands of visitors each year. Chaco is more than just a tourist site however, it is also sacred land. Pueblo peoples like the Hopi, Navajo, and Zuni consider it a home of their ancestors.

The canyon is vast and contains an impressive number of structures—both big and small—testifying to the incredible creativity of the people who lived in the Four Corners region of the U.S. between the 9th and 12th centuries. Chaco was the urban center of a broader world, and the ancestral Puebloans who lived here engineered striking buildings, waterways, and more.



Figure **2.3.2.3**: Petroglyphs, Chaco Canyon (photo: KrisNM, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Chaco is located in a high, desert region of New Mexico, where water is scarce. The remains of dams, canals, and basins suggest that Chacoans spent a considerable amount of their energy and resources on the control of water in order to grow crops, such as corn. Today, visitors have to imagine the greenery that would have filled the canyon.

Astronomical observations clearly played an important role in Chaco life, and they likely had spiritual significance. Petroglyphs found in Chaco Canyon and the surrounding area reveal an interest in lunar and solar cycles, and many buildings are oriented to align with winter and summer solstices.



Figure **2.3.2.4**: The great kiva at Chetro Ketl, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico (National Park Service)

Great Houses

"Downtown Chaco" features a number of "Great Houses" built of stone and wood. Most of these large complexes have Spanish names, given to them during expeditions, such as one sponsored by the U.S. army in 1849, led by Lt. James Simpson. Carabajal, Simpson's guide, was Mexican, which helps to explain some of the Spanish names. Great Houses also have Navajo names, and are described in Navajo legends. *Tsebida't'ini'ani* (Navajo for "covered hole"), *nastl'a kin* (Navajo for "house in the corner"), and *Chetro Ketl* (a name of unknown origin) all refer to one great house, while *Pueblo Bonito* (Spanish for "pretty village") and *tse biyaa anii-ahi* (Navajo for "leaning rock gap") refer to another.



Figure **2.3.2.5**: Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico (photo: **Paul Williams**, CC BY-NC 2.0)



Figure **2.3.2.6**: Multistoried rooms, Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico (photo: **Jacqueline Poggi**, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Pueblo Bonito is among the most impressive of the Great Houses. It is a massive D-shaped structure that had somewhere between 600 and 800 rooms. It was multistoried, with some sections reaching as high as four stories. Some upper floors contained balconies.

There are many questions that we are still trying to answer about this remarkable site and the people who lived here. A Great House like Pueblo Bonito includes numerous round rooms, called kivas. This large architectural structure included three great kivas and thirty-two smaller kivas. Great kivas are far larger in scale than the others, and were possibly used to gather hundreds of people together. The smaller kivas likely functioned as ceremonial spaces, although they were likely multi-purpose rooms.



Figure 2.3.2.7: Doorway, Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon (photo: Thomson20192, CC BY 2.0)

Among the many remarkable features of this building are its doorways, sometimes aligned to give the impression that you can see all the way through the building. Some doorways have a T shape, and T-shaped doors are also found at other sites across the region. Research is ongoing to determine whether the T-shaped doors suggest the influence of Chaco or if the T-shaped door was a common aesthetic feature in this area, which the Chacoans then adopted.

Recently, testing of the trees (dendroprovenance) that were used to construct these massive buildings has demonstrated that the wood came from two distinct areas more than 50 miles away: one in the San Mateo Mountains, the other the Chuska Mountains. About 240,000 trees would have been used for one of the larger Great Houses.

Chacoan Cultural Interactions

Traditionally, we tend to separate Mesoamerica and the American Southwest, as if the peoples who lived in these areas did not interact. We now know this is misleading, and was not the case.

Chacoan culture expanded far beyond the confines of Chaco Canyon. Staircases leading out of the canyon allowed people to climb the mesas and access a vast network of roads that connected places across great distances, such as Great Houses in the wider region. Aztec Ruins National Monument (not to be confused with ruins that belonged to the **Aztecs** of Mesoamerica) in New Mexico is another ancestral Puebloan site with many of the same architectural features we see at Chaco, including a Great House and T-shaped doorways.



Figure 2.3.2.8: Aztec Ruins National Monument, New Mexico (photo: Jasperdo, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)



Figure **2.3.2.9**: Cylindrical Jar from the Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, 3 5/8 inches in diameter (**National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution**)

Archaeological excavations have uncovered remarkable objects that animated Chacoan life and reveal Chaco's interactions with peoples outside the Southwestern United States. More than 15,000 artifacts have been unearthed during different excavations at Pueblo Bonito alone, making it one of the best understood spaces at Chaco. Many of these objects speak to the larger Chacoan world, as well as Chaco's interactions with cultures farther away. In one storage room within Pueblo Bonito, pottery sherds had traces of cacao imported from Mesoamerica. These black-and-white cylindrical vessels were likely used for drinking cacao, similar to the brightly painted **Maya vessels** used for a similar purpose.

The remains of scarlet macaws, birds native to an area in Mexico more than 1,000 miles away, also reveal the trade networks that existed across the Mesoamerican and Southwestern world. We know from other archaeological sites in the southwest that there were attempts to breed these colorful birds, no doubt in order to use their colorful feathers as status symbols or for ceremonial purposes. A room with a thick layer of guano (bird excrement) suggests that an aviary also existed within Pueblo Bonito. Copper bells found at Chaco also come from much further south in Mexico, once again testifying to the flourishing trade networks at this time. Chaco likely acquired these materials and objects in exchange for turquoise from their own area, examples of which can be found as far south as the Yucatan Peninsula.

Current Threats to Chaco

The world of Chaco is threatened by oil drilling and fracking. After President Theodore Roosevelt passed the Antiquities Act of 1906, Chaco was one of the first sites to be made a national monument. Chaco Canyon is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Chacoan region extended far beyond this center, but unfortunately the Greater Chacoan Region does not fall under the protection of the National Park Service or UNESCO. Much of the Greater Chaco Region needs to be surveyed, because there are certainly many undiscovered structures, roads, and other findings that would help us learn more about this important culture. Beyond its importance as an extraordinary site of global cultural heritage, Chaco has sacred and ancestral significance for many Native Americans. Destruction of the Greater Chaco Region erases an important connection to the ancestral past of Native peoples, and to the present and future that belongs to all of us.

Additional resources:

Chaco Canyon UNESCO World Heritage Site webpage

Chaco Research Archive

"Unexpected Wood Source for Chaco Canyon Great Houses" from the University of Arizona

Stephen H. Lekson, ed. *The Architecture of Chaco Canyon, New Mexico* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2007).

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2.3.3: Socorro black-on-white storage jar

by **THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART**



Ancestral Pueblo, Socorro black-on-white storage jar, c. 1050–100, clay and pigment, made in New Mexico, United States, 38.1 × 43.2 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art); speaker: Brian Vallo, Director, Indian Arts Research Center School for Advanced Research, Santa Fe, New Mexico

Cite this page as: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Socorro black-on-white storage jar," in *Smarthistory*, March 8, 2021, accessed October 10, 2022, **https://smarthistory.org/socorro-black-on-white-storage-jar/**.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

2.4: Mogollon

2.4.1: Introduction to Mogollon

2.4.2: Paquimé (Casas Grandes), Mogollon culture

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2.4.1: Introduction to Mogollon

by **DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK**



Figure **2.4.1.1**: Residential areas, Paquimé (Casas Grandes), c. 1150–1350 C.E., Chihuahua, Mexico (photo: HJPD, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Shell ornaments, copper bells, rubber balls, and macaws are only some of the remarkable finds from the archaeological site of Paquimé (also known as Casas Grandes) in northern Mexico. Some of these things traveled on long-distance trade networks that ran from southern Mesoamerica to what is now the southwestern United States, and west to the Gulf of California. Paquimé was a large city filled with several thousand people that flourished for two centuries, from c. 1150 until about 1350 C.E. It is one of many sites associated with the Mogollon tradition (c. 200–1450 C.E.).

Who and where were the Mogollon?



Figure **2.4.1.2**: Regions of ancient regional tribes in the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico (Ricraider, CC BY 3.0)

The Mogollon cultural area spanned across what is today northern Mexico into Arizona and New Mexico. Archaeologists named the Mogollon cultural group after a mountain range in southern New Mexico centuries later. While there are traits that characterize the broader Mogollon tradition, there were distinct features found among six more localized regions (Mimbres, Black River, San Simon, Jornada, Pine Lawn, and Forestdale) in the larger cultural area.

In addition to the Mogollon, the Greater Southwest region included the Hohokam, Ancestral Puebloan, Patayan, and Sinagua cultures. While today scholars tend to discuss them as distinct, it is likely that they are different regional variations and were more entangled than these modern-day divisions suggest.

For reasons still debated, the Mogollon disappear from the archaeological record in the mid-15th century, likely the result of them joining with **Pueblo or Hopi villages**. Today, multiple Native groups claim descent from the Mogollon or are intertwined with their history, including Zuni, Hopi, Acoma, and the Rarámuri (in Mexico). Apache peoples migrated into the Mogollon area after the 15th century—around the time that the Mogollon stopped appearing in the archaeological record.

Architecture

Existing archaeological evidence indicates that early on, small Mogollon communities were clustered on hilltops in pithouses. These were circular or oval rooms dug into the ground, which helped to maintain a comfortable temperature. Mogollon people practiced agriculture (primarily growing maize, beans, and squash), but also relied on hunting and foraging. Later on, as their numbers grew and they became an even more diverse group, they settled in other types of areas, including valleys. Around the year 1000, Mogollon peoples began to build above ground and made square living spaces. We also find large round ceremonial rooms that have been called “great kivas” beginning around 850, and which could accommodate large gatherings. These great kivas are on a scale similar to the Ancestral Puebloan city of **Chaco** to the north, which possibly served as a source. The Mogollon great kivas do not include limited entry points that restrict access to them as at Chaco—perhaps suggesting fewer hierarchical social divisions among the Mogollon.

The exact reasons for transformations (such as building above ground) are still debated.



Figure **2.4.1.3**: Kinishba, today on Fort Apache Indian Reservation, AZ (photo: salmonboy, CC0)

Shared forms, including architectural features, identifiable among the Mogollon, Ancestral Puebloan, and Hohokam peoples indicate they interacted. When Puebloan peoples migrated south in the 13th century—most likely due to drought—we find increased evidence of influence from Puebloan cultures and indicators of Mogollon and Puebloan cohabitation. Sites like Kinishba and Gila Cliff Dwellings (began after 1270) show the influence of Puebloan architectural features. For example, rather than pithouses, we now find above-ground villages built with stone as well as cliff dwellings—both characteristic of their Pueblo neighbors.



Figure 2.4.1.4: Gila Cliff Dwellings (left photo: Christopher Holden, CC BY-SA 2.0; right photo: cudinski, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Migrations were an important aspect of life at this time, and Pueblo peoples today speak about their ancestors' migrations, such as the search for the Middle Place. As is clear from what took place in the Greater Southwestern region, people were on the move. The architectural remains of communities at Kinishba and Gila Cliff Dwellings are footprints of these past movements, connecting contemporary Native communities to their ancestors.



Figure 2.4.1.5: Aerial shot of Paquimé (Casas Grandes), c. 1150–1350 C.E., Chihuahua, Mexico. Only a portion of the site has been excavated (underlying map © Google)

Paquimé

The city of Paquimé, largely built of adobe, would have rivaled other large cities and settlements of the region such as Chaco (which flourished earlier). It had large plazas and marketplaces; big domestic, multistory structures to accommodate its once sizable population (some buildings had 1000+ rooms); at least two ball courts; and platform mounds. One mound, called the Mound of the Cross, has a cross-shaped platform that is oriented toward the four cardinal directions, suggesting it played an astronomical or calendrical role perhaps to track equinoxes and solstices. The exact function of most mounds remains unknown.

Feasting areas are filled with huge ovens to be able to cook for large numbers of people. A complex water system brought water from miles away to a reservoir, from where water flowed to the city.

While today the walls of buildings are earthen colored, they were once painted—as was indicated by the Spaniard Baltasar de Obregón, who first saw Paquimé in 1565, after the city was abandoned:

> ***[There are] many houses of great size, strength, and height. They are about six and seven stories. . . . The houses contain large and magnificent patios paved with enormous and beautiful stones resembling jasper . . . and pillars of heavy timber brought from far away. The walls of the houses were whitewashed and painted in many colors.Baltasar de Obregón [1]***



Figure **2.4.1.6**: Macaw pens, Paquimé (Casas Grandes), c. 1150–1350 C.E., Chihuahua, Mexico (photo: DiSchamelrider, CC0)

Earlier archaeologists believed Paquimé was an outpost for Mesoamerican peoples (such as the Toltec) but that idea is no longer widely supported. Still, there is clear evidence for long-distance trade with Mesoamerica and the influence of ideas and practices (such as the ballgame), but also trade with coastal regions and those to the east. Macaws, brought from far south, were not only brought here, but the people of Paquimé bred them as revealed by pens found along the plazas (turkeys were also bred here). Shell and copper were imported. We also find iconographic elements popular in Mesoamerica, such as a plumed or horned serpent. Turquoise that was traded south into Mesoamerica moved through Paquimé. The city participated in a network of sites that traded and interacted with one another across vast distances for prestige materials and desired resources.

Paquimé (Casas Grandes), c. 1150–1350 C.E., Chihuahua, Mexico



Figure 2.4.1.7: The Chaco Meridian

Paquimé is typically associated with Mogollon culture, but it also had connections to developments in what is today El Paso, Texas. Some consider it a Mogollon city, while others hold that it had its own unique culture and simply traded and interacted with Mogollon people. Paquimé also shares cultural features with Chaco, leading archaeologist Steven Lekson to argue that Chacoan elites established Paquimé after migrating south. The two sites (along with the site of Aztec in New Mexico—not to be confused with the Mexica/Aztec culture) are close to the same meridian line (what Lekson has dubbed the Chaco Meridian), suggesting that people intentionally sought to connect them. Regardless of which of these ideas is true, Paquimé certainly was the largest, most complex city associated with the Mogollon tradition.

For reasons that remain elusive, Paquimé seems to have been abandoned after 1400. Despite the city's size and complexity, it has been much less studied than sites within U.S. borders—despite being part of the Greater Southwest region—and is a reminder that modern-day nation state boundaries have implications for what and how things are studied.



Figure **2.4.1.8**: Mimbres bowls, c. 8th–12th century. Left: Bowl, c. 1000–1200, clay, slip, paint, 13 cm high, 27.9 cm in diameter (The Metropolitan Museum of Art); center: Bowl, c. 850–1050, clay, slip, paint, 8.3 cm high, 55.9 cm in diameter (The Metropolitan Museum of Art); right: Bowl, c. 1000–1200, clay, slip, paint, 11 x 24 cm (NMAI, New York)

Mimbres pottery



Figure **2.4.1.9**: Bowl, Mogollon (Mimbres), 1100–1400, clay, slip, paint, 10.2 x 26.7 cm (Detroit Institute of Arts)

Mogollon ceramics are some of the finest examples of pottery from the Greater Southwest region. Pottery initially took the form of red-on-brown or plain brown wares before black-on-white (black paint on white slip) became popular by 1000. Mogollon pottery makers used a coil and scrape technique, created by coiling the clay, then scraping the exterior and interior to join the coils together, and finally creating a smooth surface.

There are different types of Mogollon pottery, but the tradition associated with Mimbres culture is the most well-known. Classic Mimbres pottery (1000–1150) has some of the most inventive and diverse subject matter depicted on it, ranging from geometric patterns to narratives with figures; the latter have sometimes been called “story bowls.” Animals and birds of wonderful variety grace the bowls, as do humans who fight, farm, hunt, give birth, and many other activities. Hybrid or sacred creatures, such as horned serpents or animal-human hybrids adorn Mimbres pottery.



Figure 2.4.1.10: Bowl with scorpions, c. 950–1150 C.E., Mogollon (Mimbres), ceramic and pigment, 14.9 cm high, 34.6 cm in diameter (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

In one we see two scorpions, their tails looping backwards towards their bodies, with their eyes wide open. Abstract patterns surround the black arachnids, both of which are set on a white background. The artist used the shape of the bowl to her advantage, positioning the scorpions so that they "read" clearly. She also created precise forms and a balanced composition, positioning the scorpions and abstract designs on opposite sides of the bowl. The black arachnids are set against a field of white, drawing our eye to them, at the same time that the abstract designs frame the fields of white.



Figure 2.4.1.11: Bowl with scorpions, c. 950–1150 C.E., Mogollon (Mimbres), ceramic and pigment, 14.9 cm high, 34.6 cm in diameter (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Typically painted on hemispheric bowls, Mimbres pottery survives in great numbers—more than 10,000 bowls survive—and many are found largely intact. The bowls were found in burials, but because they were desired as artistic objects, were removed from these graves, with little concern for the deceased ancestors and their family members and communities.

Many Mimbres bowls show light wear-and-tear, suggesting they were used (possibly in food preparation) before going underground. Most of the bowls have a hole in the base of the bowl, such as we see in the bottom of the scorpion bowl. While we do not know the exact purpose of the hole, two possibilities are that it aided the soul of the deceased by providing a path or that the hole silenced the life force or spirit of the bowl. The bowl was often placed over the face of the deceased, which echoes contemporary Pueblo accounts of the dead going to the dome of the sky as spirits. [1]



Figure **2.4.1.12**:

Left: María Martinez and Popovi Da (both from San Ildefonso Pueblo), Plate with radiating feather design, 1960s, ceramic, 5.08 cm high, 40.64 cm in diameter (**Dallas Museum of Art**); right: Bowl, Mogollon (Mimbres), c. 1000–1150, ceramic, slip, and paint, 15.6 cm high, 29.84 cm in diameter (**Dallas Museum of Art**)



Figure **2.4.1.13**: Fred Kabotie, *Designs from the ancient Mimbreños, with a Hopi interpretation* (San Francisco: Grabhorn Press, 1949)

Multiple early 0th-century Native artists and textile makers have found inspiration in and connections with Mimbres pottery, including **Maria and Julian Martinez** and their son Popovi Da and grandson Tony Da from San Ildefonso Pueblo, Hopi artist Fred Kabotie, Joe Herrera (also known as See Ru; Cochiti Pueblo), Lucy Lewis (from Acoma Pueblo), and Anishinaabe/Ojibwe artist Carl Beam. For example, a bowl by Popovi Da has radiating feathers that replicate the rhythmic geometric patterning of some Mimbres bowls, yet demonstrates the adaptability of the tradition by 20th-century Native artists. Kabotie wrote and illustrated a book called *Designs from the Ancient Mimbreños with a Hopi Interpretation*, which looked to the ways in which Hopi and Mimbres designs and ideas intersected.

Unfortunately, many Mimbres bowls were looted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As more Euro-Americans came to the region, they began to dig up the pots. The desecration was so extreme that most Mimbres villages—of which there are about 900 examples—were heavily damaged or destroyed. Besides looting, forgeries also became common.

By the 1930s, Mimbres bowls were so famous that when they traveled to Europe, some, such as the anthropologist Albert Jenks, pronounced them to be “unquestionably superior to Greeks in the field of Geometric Art.” [2] This quote suggests that people compared Mimbres to ancient Greek art as a way to elevate this Native American group, but also to position America’s history over Europe’s. The bowls became evidence of civilized peoples living in the U.S. before it was colonized by settlers, although simultaneously, people characterized the rest of the southwest area as “primitive”—and so understood Mimbres as different, as “an isolated artistic miracle.” [3] They became what art historians Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Philips call an “emblem of Indianness” along with Northwest Coast totem poles and Plains war bonnets. [4]

Mimbres vessels also became championed as bold sources for modern design, and were included in exhibitions such as the Museum of Modern Art’s 1941 *Indian Art of the United States*—their designs were even painted on the walls. Even today, many museum collections and exhibitions showcase Mimbres bowls, with little of the rest of Mogollon art visible or heralded.



Figure 2.4.1.14: Diego Romero (Cochiti Pueblo), Dough Bowl, 1994, ceramic, 14.3 cm high, 30.5 cm in diameter (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Today Native artists continue to find inspiration in Mimbres pottery, including Cochiti artist Diego Romero. His *Dough Bowl* combines an aesthetic adapted from Mimbres bowls with imagery from popular culture. Two figures appear in the center, with text below stating their name, census number, and occupation, with a statement about their lifelong ambition. It is intended to be comical, biting commentary on contemporary Native issues. [5]

Mimbres bowls have become so ubiquitously associated with this region, that they also appear on place settings, aprons, postcards, and more. They were even part of a stamp set from the US Postal Service in 2004.



Figure 2.4.1.15: Jar with Two Plumed or Horned Serpents with Birds and P-shaped Motifs, 1280–1450, ceramic and pigment, Paquimé (Casas Grandes), Ramos Polychrome, New Mexico, U.S. or Chihuahua, Mexico, 21.6 x 24.1 cm (Art Institute of Chicago)

Paquimé ceramics

The pottery affiliated with Paquimé demonstrates the wide variety of vessels in the Mogollon region. It began c. 1250 and lasted for the next two hundred years. Unlike Classic Mimbres bowls, Paquimé ceramics appear in a variety of different shapes and sizes (such as tripods, globular jars, bowls, and more), and are polychromed. Like Classic Mimbres, they display both geometric abstraction and figural forms. In one, two horned serpents zig-zag across the elaborate surface, their head and horns painted red. Their bodies are covered in black-and-white checkerboard designs, mimicking the scales of a serpent.

Horned or feathered serpents decorate not only pottery but also rock art and kiva murals. The horned serpent is not unique to Mogollon, but is found in Ancestral Puebloan regions as well. Among Pueblo groups today, the horned serpent is an important deity

(going by different names depending on the linguistic group) associated with water. They are liminal beings who can move into the earth as well as slither on top of it. The horned serpent also relates to feathered serpents, with the horns possibly relating to plumes; the avian association is likewise important because birds could move between the surface of the earth and the sky.



Figure 2.4.1.16: Male effigy figure, Paquimé (Casas Grandes), Ramos polychrome, c. 1200–1450 (Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels); right: Female effigy figure, Paquimé (Casas Grandes), Ramos polychrome, c. 1200–1450 (Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels)

We also find jars modeled into figural shapes, such as humans or animals. Seated male and female figures (what we now call effigy figures) are common, and are thought to convey ideas about gendered principles. Their genitalia are always displayed and often accentuated with design and color. Male figures tend to sit with one bent knee, while women sit with both legs straight. Women sometimes have protruding bellies or are shown with children, which has prompted scholars to think that they may have symbolized ideas about fertility. The bodies of figures often display elaborate designs—does this suggest that people had tattoos? Painted their bodies? Or does the bodily adornment of the effigies suggest something else? Researchers are not certain, but it does seem important that figures are also adorned with different types of clothing and accoutrements, such as necklaces, bracelets, ear ornaments, and armbands. The bodily decorations, clothing, and accoutrements may have signified different social ranks.

Twentieth-century artists have likewise been inspired by Casas Grandes pottery, such as Juan Quezada Celado of Mata Ortiz, Chihuahua. After encountering and studying pottery fragments, he taught himself how to pair what he saw with his own modernist impulses. The town of Mata Ortiz went on to develop a robust **local pottery tradition** in conversation with Paquimé pottery.



Figure **2.4.1.17**: Three Rivers Petroglyph Site, Mogollon (Jornada), c. 900–1400, New Mexico(photo: jaygannett, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Petroglyphs and rock paintings

The Mogollon peoples also produced a great deal of rock art, such as at Three Rivers Petroglyph site where there are more than 20,000 petroglyphs made between 900–1400. While to visitors today many such sites might seem remote and isolated, these petroglyphs were part of a dynamic landscape, one that would been dotted with pithouses, many of which have since returned to the earth. Besides carving into living rock, Mogollon people also painted on them.



Figure **2.4.1.18**: Rock drawings, or pictographs, in a restricted area of Hueco Tanks State Historic Site near El Paso in El Paso County, Texas, photograph by Carol M. Highsmith (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

At Hueco Tanks, sacred for the Jornada branch most likely, we find pictographs and paintings that adorn the walls of caves, such as birds, humans, and what are identified as masks. Many of the figures have been compared to Mesoamerican deities such as Quetzalcoatl and Tlaloc because they seem to have goggle eyes or feathered/horned serpents; as was discussed above though, figures like horned serpents were important to peoples across the Greater Southwest.

Multiple descendant groups still consider Hueco Tanks a sacred place; it is one of many footprints in the region that connect contemporary communities with their ancestors. The rock art also testifies to the important and long-standing relationship to place among Native communities in the region. Some of this stunning visual record is at risk, whether from vandalism, areas targeted for development, erosion, or industrial pollution.

A dynamic tradition

The Mogollon tradition was both diverse, expansive, and vibrant. Some of it has been destroyed or is at risk of destruction, threatening to partially erase some of the inventive and original architectural and artistic traditions are ancestral footprints and

sacred nodes for multiple Native communities today.

Notes

[1] Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 56

[2] Albert Ernest Jenks, “Geometric designs on Mimbres bowls,” *Art and Archaeology* 33, no. 3 (1932): p. 137

[3] Stephen H. Lekson, “Mimbres art and archaeology,” in *Archaeology, Art, and Anthropology: Papers in Honor of J.J. Brody*, edited by M. S. Duran and D. T. Kirkpatrick. Papers of the Archaeological Society of New Mexico, vol. 18. (Archaeological Society of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 1992), p. 214

[4] Berlo and Phillips, *Native North American Art*, p. 54

[5] See Gaylord Torrance, et al., *Art of Native America: The Charles and Valerie Diker Collection* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018).

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Tony Berlant, Evan M. Maurer, Anthony Berlant, *Decoding Mimbres Painting: Ancient Ceramics of the American Southwest* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2018)

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2.4.2: Paquimé (Casas Grandes), Mogollon culture



Paquimé, Casas Grandes, which reached its apogee in the 14th and 15th centuries, played a key role in trade and cultural contacts between the Pueblo culture of the south-western United States and northern Mexico and Mesoamerica. The extensive remains, only part of which have been excavated, are clear evidence of the vitality of a culture which was perfectly adapted to its physical and economic environment, but which suddenly vanished at the time of the Spanish Conquest.

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Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and El Salvador

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3.1.1: Mesoamerica, an introduction

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK

Avocado, tomato, and chocolate. You are likely familiar with at least some of these food items. Did you know that they all originally come from Mexico, and are all based on Nahuatl words (*ahuacatl*, *tomatl*, and *chocolatl*) that were eventually adopted by the English language?

Nahuatl is the language spoken by the Nahua ethnic group that is found today in Mexico, but with deep historical roots. You might know one Nahua group: the Aztecs, more accurately called the Mexica. The Mexica were one of many Mesoamerican cultural groups that flourished in Mexico prior to the arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century.



Figure **3.1.1.1**: Map of Mesoamerica, with the borders of modern countries

Where was Mesoamerica?

Mesoamerica refers to the diverse civilizations that shared similar cultural characteristics in the geographic areas comprising the modern-day countries of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Some of the shared cultural traits among Mesoamerican peoples included a complex pantheon of deities, architectural features, a ballgame, the 260-day calendar, trade, food (especially a reliance on maize, beans, and squash), dress, and accoutrements (such as earspools).

Some of the most well-known Mesoamerican cultures are the Olmec, Maya, Zapotec, Teotihuacan, Mixtec, and **Mexica (or Aztec)**. The geography of Mesoamerica is incredibly diverse—it includes humid tropical areas, dry deserts, high mountainous terrain, and low coastal plains. An anthropologist named Paul Kirchkoff first used the term “Mesoamerica” (*meso* is Greek for “middle” or “intermediate”) in 1943 to designate these geographical areas as having shared cultural traits prior to the invasion of Europeans, and the term has remained.

Typically when we discuss Mesoamerican art we are referring to art made by peoples in Mexico and much of Central America. When people mention Native North American art, they are usually referring to indigenous peoples in the U.S. and Canada, even though these countries are technically all part of North America. More recently, archaeologists and art historians have considered connections between the Southwestern and Southeastern U.S. and Mesoamerica, an area sometimes called either the Greater Southwest or Greater Mesoamerica. Focusing on these connections demonstrates how people were in contact with one another through trade, shared beliefs, migration, or conflict. Ball courts, for instance, are found in Arizona sites such as the Pueblo Grande of the Hohokam. It is important to remember that modern-day geographic terms—like Mesoamerica or the Southwestern U.S.—are recent designations.

This essay generalizes about Mesoamerican cultures, but keep in mind that each possessed unique qualities and cultural differences. Mesoamerica was not homogenous.

When was Mesoamerica?

Art historians and archaeologists divide Mesoamerican history into distinct periods and some of these periods are then further divided into the sub-periods—early, middle, and late.

Period	Dates	Cultures
Archaic Period	c. 3500—1500 B.C.E.	
Pre-Classic Period (or Formative Period)	c. 1800 B.C.E.—250 C.E.	Olmec, Teotihuacan, Tlatilco, Maya, Zapotec
Classic Period	c. 150—650 C.E.	Teotihuacan, Maya
Epiclassic Period	c. 650—900 C.E.	Maya, Toltec
Postclassic Period	c. 900—1519 C.E.	Toltec, Aztec (Mexica), Mixtec, Maya

Figure **3.1.1.2**: The date for the end of the Postclassic period is somewhat contested as it presumes that Mesoamerican culture largely ended with the arrival of Spaniards into the Mexica capital of Tenochtitlan in 1519, though Mesoamerican culture continued under Spanish control, albeit significantly transformed.

You might also encounter the term Pre-Columbian, which is a term designating indigenous cultures prior to the arrival of Columbus. It includes those in Mesoamerica, as well as in South America and the Caribbean. This term is problematic for several reasons, and is explored **in another essay**.

What language did people speak?

There was no single language that united the peoples of Mesoamerica. Linguists believe that Mesoamericans spoke more than 125 different languages. For instance, Maya peoples did not speak “Mayan”, but could have spoken Yucatec Maya, K’iche, or Tzotzil among many others. The Mexica belonged to the bigger Nahua ethnic group, and therefore spoke Nahuatl.

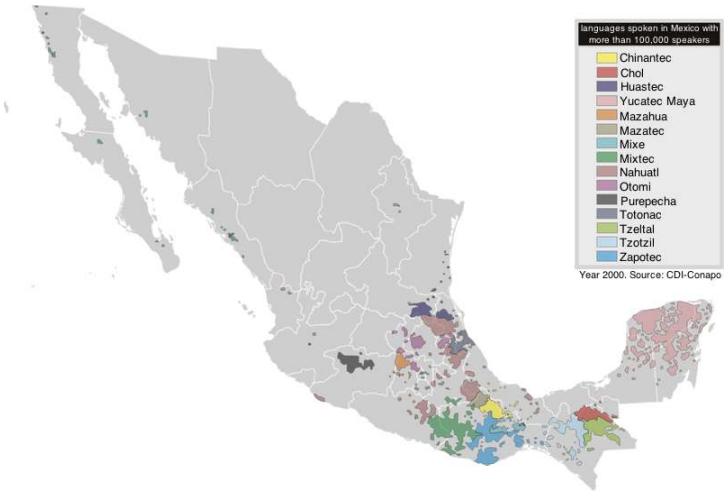


Figure **3.1.1.3**: Indigenous languages in Mexico currently spoken by more than 100,000 people

To students learning about Mesoamerica for the first time, the incredible diversity of people, languages, and even deities can be overwhelming. I recall my first Mesoamerican art history class vividly. I was intimidated by my lack of familiarity with different Mesoamerican words, languages, and cultural groups. By the end of the semester I was proud that I could differentiate between the Zapotec and Mixtec, and could spell Tlaloc. It took me a few more years to be able to spell and pronounce words like Tlacaxipehualiztli (Tla-cawsh-ee-pay-wal-eeezt-li) or Huitzilopochtli (Wheat-zil-oh-poach-lee).

Writing

Mesoamerican writing systems vary by culture. Rebus writing (writing with images) was common among many groups, like the Nahua and Mixtec. Imagine drawing an eye, a heart, and an apple. You've just used rebus writing to communicate "I love apples" to anyone familiar with these symbols. Many visual writing systems in Mesoamerica functioned similarly—although the previous example was simplified for the sake of clarity. You might encounter the phrases "writing without words" or "writing with signs" used to describe many writing systems in Mesoamerica. It is also called pictographic, ideographic, or picture writing.

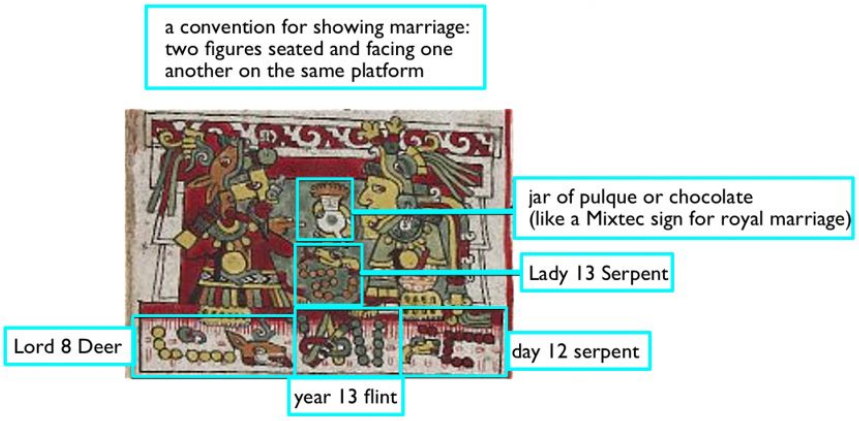


Figure **3.1.1.4**: Marriage between Lord 8 Deer and Lady 13 Serpent in the Codex Zouche-Nuttall, c. 1450 CE, Mixtec (or Ñudzavui), Late Postclassic period, deerskin, folio 27 (**The British Museum**)

Only the Maya used a writing system like ours, where signs like letters designate sounds and syllables, and combined together to create words. Maya hieroglyphic writing is logographic, which means it uses a sign (think of a picture, symbol, or a letter) to communicate a syllable or a word.

The 260-day ritual calendar vs. the 365-day calendar

Other shared features among Mesoamerican peoples were the 260-day and 365-day calendars. The 260-day calendar was a ritual calendar, with 20 months of 13 days. Based on the sun, the 365-day calendar had 18 months of 20 days, with five "extra" nameless days at the end. It was the count of time used for agriculture.

Imagine both of these calendars as interlocking wheels. Every 52 years they completed a full cycle, and during this time special rituals commemorated the cycle. For example, the Mexica celebrated the New Fire Ceremony as a period of renewal. These cycles were understood as life cycles, and so reflect creation, death, and rebirth. The Maya (especially during the Classic period), also used a Long Count calendar in addition to the two already mentioned (rather than a cyclical calendar, the Long Count marked time as if along an extended line that does not repeat).

Religion and pantheon of gods

A complex pantheon of gods existed within each Mesoamerican culture. Many groups shared similar deities, although there was a great deal of variation. Deities that had important roles across Mesoamerica included a storm/rain god and a feathered serpent deity. Among the Mexica, this storm/rain god was known as **Tlaloc**, and the feathered serpent deity was known as Quetzalcoatl. The Maya referred to their storm/rain deity as Chaac (there are multiple spellings). The equivalent of Quetzalcoatl among different Maya groups included Kukulkan (Yucatec Maya) and Q'uq'umatz (K'iche Maya). Cocijo is the Zapotec equivalent of the storm/rain god. Many artworks exist that show these two deities with similar features. The storm/rain deity often has goggle eyes and an upturned mouth/snout. Feathered serpent deities typically showed serpent features paired with feathers.



Figure **3.1.1.5**: Quetzalcoatl (Feathered Serpent), c. 1321-1521, 210 x 440 cm (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico)

It is difficult to generalize about Mesoamerican religious beliefs and cosmological ideas because they were so complex. Throughout Mesoamerica, there was a general belief in the universe's division along two axes: one vertical, the other horizontal. At the center, where these two axes meet, is the *axis mundi*, or the center (or navel) of the universe. On the horizontal plane, four directions branch off from the *axis mundi*. Think of the four cardinal directions (north, south, east, and west). On the vertical plane, we generally find the world split into three major realms: the celestial, terrestrial, and underworld.

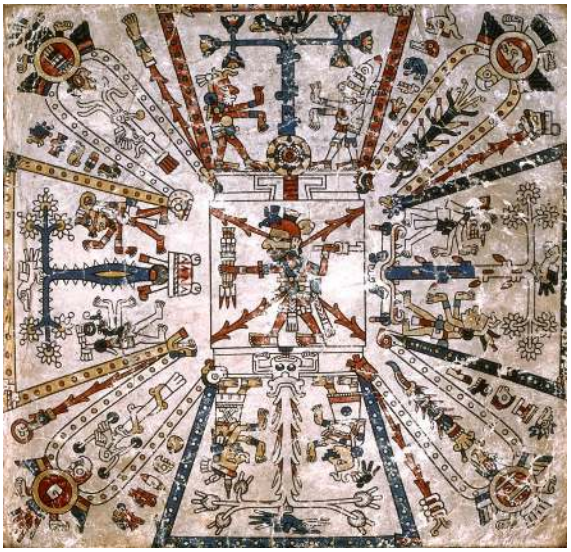


Figure **3.1.1.6**: Codex Féjervary-Mayer, 15th century, f. 1 (World Museum, Liverpool)

One Mexica example helps to clarify this complex cosmological system. An image in the Codex Féjervary-Mayer displays the cosmos's horizontal axis. In the center is the deity Xiuhtecuhtli (a fire god), standing in the place of the *axis mundi*. Four nodes (what look almost like trapezoidal petals) branch off from his position, creating a shape called a Maltese Cross. East (top) is associated with red, south (right) with green, west (bottom) with blue, and north (left) with yellow. A specific plant and bird accompany each world direction: blue tree and quetzal (east), cacao and parrot (south), maize and blue-painted bird (west), and cactus and eagle (north). Two figures flank the plant in each arm of the cross. Together, these figures and Xiuhtecuhtli represent the Nine Lords of the Night. This cosmogram describes how the Mexica conceived of the universe.



Figure **3.1.1.7**: Ball Court Model, Mexico, Nayarit, c. 200 B.C.E.–500 C.E., ceramic with slip and other pigments, 15.24 x 21.59 x 34.29 cm (**Los Angeles County Museum of Art**)

The ballgame

Peoples across Mesoamerica, beginning with the Olmecs, played a ritual sport known as the **ballgame**. Ballcourts were often located in a city's sacred precinct, emphasizing the importance of the game. Solid rubber balls were passed between players (no hands allowed!), with the goal of hitting them through markers. Players wore padded garments to protect their bodies from the hard ball.

The meanings of the ballgame were many and varied. It could symbolize a range of larger cosmological ideas, including the movement of the sun through the underworld every night. War captives also played the game against members of a winning city or group, with the game symbolizing their defeat in war. Sometimes a game was even played instead of going to war.

Numerous objects display aspects of the ballgame, attesting to its significant role across Mesoamerica. We have examples of clay sculptures of ballgames occurring on courts. Ballplayers are also frequent subjects in Maya painted ceramic vessels and sculptures. Stone reliefs at El Tajin and Chichen Itza depict different moments of a ballgame culminating in ritual sacrifice. Painted pictorial codices, such as the Codex Borgia (above), display I-shaped ballcourts, and stone depictions of ballgame clothing have been found. Today, people in Mexico still play a version of the ballgame.



Figure **3.1.1.8**: I-shaped ballcourt, Codex Borgia, c. 1500, f. 42 (**Vatican Library**)

Mesoamerican societies continue to impress us with their sophistication and accomplishments, notably their artistic achievements. Our understanding continues to expand with ongoing research and archaeological excavations. Recent excavations in Mexico City, for instance, uncovered **a new monumental Mexica sculpture** buried with some of the most unique objects we've ever seen in Mexica art. With these discoveries, our understanding of the Mexica will no doubt grow and change.

Additional resources:

The Mesoamerican Ballgame on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

The Ancient Future: Mesoamerican and Andean Timekeeping (Dumbarton Oaks)

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3.1.2: Periods in Mesoamerican history

by **DR. REX KOONTZ**



Figure **3.1.2.1**: Map of Mesoamerica, with the borders of modern countries

Historical periods are the sign posts we use to navigate the stream of **Mesoamerican** history. Historians and archeologists have defined these periods, such as Archaic and Classic, based on the changing characteristics of the material culture of this region. This essay provides a broad overview of the different periods of Mesoamerican history.

It is important to note though that historical periods are not real. No one, as far as we can tell, in ancient Mesoamerica, ever woke up and said, “This is 150 C.E. I must be now in the Classic period with a different set of characteristics.” Periods are a way for historians looking back on human growth and development to structure and assess these time periods in ways that help us think about them. In that sense, they’re not real to the history itself nor to the people who lived through that history. They’re what we call heuristic devices. They simply help us to organize this great stream of time that is Mesoamerican history.

You will notice that essays across Smarthistory might use slightly different date ranges for periods—this is because not everyone agrees on the exact boundaries of each period.



Figure **3.1.2.2**: Camelid sacrum in the shape of a canine, 14,000–7,000 B.C.E.

Archaic period, c. 14,000–1800 B.C.E.

We begin this story with the entry of humans into the Americas. People did begin to modify materials into objects similar to what we might now call art, such as an Archaic camelid sacrum in the shape of a canine, but generally throughout this entire period, we have found very few such items. Instead, during this historical period, we can talk about the foundations of Mesoamerican civilization. We can start with a simple but critical question: How did the people of this early period feed themselves? Throughout the Archaic period, hunting and gathering is the main mode of survival. They were hunters of megafauna—very large animals, many of which became extinct during this period (the mastodon for one). They also gathered plants to supplement their diet, though they did not grow these plants. When people consciously undertake agricultural activity, that is another type of lifestyle entirely, and something that we do not get with the early hunters in the Archaic period.

Pre-classic period, c. 1800 B.C.E.–150 C.E.

The next period is called the Pre-classic. It opens with the widespread adoption of ceramics. Bowls, jars, and figurines were made from a widely available material—clay—that could be shaped into storage vessels as well as expressive clay sculpture. It only takes fire to transform the wet clay into a permanent form. Ceramics develop alongside a revolutionary new technique for producing food: farming.

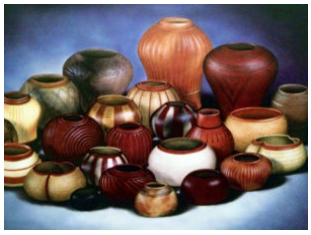


Figure **3.1.2.3**: Copy and Paste Caption here. (Copyright; author via source)

It is during the Pre-classic period that the the slow domestication of corn or maize (*maíz* in Spanish), which is so important to Mesoamerican culture, takes place. Corn begins to be planted regularly and becomes an important part of the diet. Beans and squash also become important staples alongside corn. All these need to be stored and cooked, and ceramic vessels filled this need. Some of the earliest decorated ceramic containers seem to have been used for making corn beer, an important source of safe hydration and an important feature of the ceremonies held in these first farming villages.



Figure 3.1.2.4: Tlatilco figurine of a woman with a dog, Tlatilco, c. 1200–600 B.C.E., ceramic (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The rise of agriculture is an important foundation for the Pre-classic period, but it is not the only issue that we talk about when we discuss the Pre-classic. This period also saw the rise of urban civilization. People begin to live in cities early on in this period, fully adopting agriculture and settling down; this is often described in relation to the Neolithic revolution. They are no longer hunting and gathering and moving around as their main dietary or food strategy. While people did still hunt and go out and gather food, it was not the main way that they fed themselves.



Figure 3.1.2.5: Double-faced female figurine, early formative period, Tlatilco, c. 1200–900 B.C.E., ceramic with traces of pigment, 9.5 cm. high (Princeton University Art Museum)

The rise of villages and towns occurs when people settle together to work their fields, and they develop particular cultural practices as they gather together. One example is Tlatilco, which was located close to a lake, where fishing and bird hunting became important ways to obtain food. Burials at Tlatilco included hundreds of ceramic figurines shaped like humans and animals.

Soon after the establishment of villages, more complex organizations and settlements arise, we call these cities. The difference between a village and a city is that people in cities develop specialties and hierarchies. Not everyone grows the food. This is no longer a settlement of farmers. A city is a settlement of many different paths, offices, and jobs—all working together in a complex system.

With the rise of cities comes the rise of hierarchies. This period shows the clear evidence of elites, or people at the top of the social pyramid. Elites in Mesoamerica patronize or pay for particular kinds of art to be associated with their high status. For instance, they get involved in the trade and the working of precious materials like jade; this is a really important part of Pre-classic artistic development because artists were given the time and resources to develop their skills, under the patronage of these new elites.



Figure **3.1.2.6**: Colossal Head, San Lorenzo, Mexico, c. 1200–900 B.C.E., basalt, height 7’5’’ (2.26 m)

Finally, in the middle of these cities we get monumental art and architecture. An example of major Pre-classic sites are the Olmec cities of San Lorenzo and La Venta. San Lorenzo flourished between c. 1200–900 B.C.E. and had a wealth of sculpture set into tableaux (interacting sculptural figures) in the center of the city. Archaeologists discovered a palace at San Lorenzo with an attached sculpture workshop, making clear the relationship between the elite and the emerging class of artists. The city of La Venta flourished between 900–400 B.C.E. and had a massive pyramid and large stelae (an upright flat slab of stone worked in relief on one, two, or four faces). Both Olmec cities of San Lorenzo and La Venta exhibited colossal heads of rulers, and smaller objects made in precious materials like jadeite.



Figure **3.1.2.7**: Pyramid of the Moon seen from the Avenue of the Dead with Cerro Gordo in the distance, Teotihuacan, Mexico

Classic period, c. 150–650 C.E.

The Classic period is easier to define because it's really an elaboration of the Pre-classic patterns. Monumental art and architecture in cities gets more elaborate and there are more traditions because there are more cities.



Figure **3.1.2.8**: Pyramid the Temple of Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent), Teotihuacan

The Classic period is defined by the rise of the megacity in historical writing that treats the Classic period, especially the single great metropolis called **Teotihuacan**. Teotihuacan was the sixth largest city in the world in its heyday around 400 or 450 C.E. It was a city on a grander scale than any other cities in Mesoamerica by this time, and it had a profound influence on other cities and places during the Classic period.



Figure **3.1.2.9**: Temple of the Sun, Palenque (photo: Dennis Jarvis, CC BY-SA 2.0)

In the Maya region (southern Mexico and Central America) we also find powerful and prosperous cities, including **Palenque**, **Yaxchilán**, and Tikal. Rulers of these city-states commissioned buildings and monumental sculptures to communicate messages of power and divinity, including **portrait stelae**.

Epiclassic, c. 650–950 C.E.

The single most defining characteristic of the Epiclassic period is the lack of Teotihuacan to serve as the central force in Mesoamerican civilization. By 650 C.E., when the Epiclassic begins, Teotihuacan was a shadow of its former self, with a much smaller population and little real influence outside the valley of Teotihuacan.



Figure \(\PageIndex{10}\): El Tajín Ball Court, c. 800–1200 C.E., Classic Veracruz Culture (photo: Oscar Zorrilla Alonso, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The political history of the Epiclassic is the story of the power vacuum left by Teotihuacan's demise. In many areas, that vacuum was filled by local powers, with individuals who had newfound access to wealth that was used to create monumental architecture and elite art. The Epiclassic is the story of these secondary or regional power centers, that grew up in the wake of Teotihuacan's fall. It is the story of sites like Xochicalco, Cacaxtla, and **El Tajín**. This period is marked not only by the rise of these regional centers, but also by interesting, accomplished, eclectic art styles, and a plethora of elite architecture.

In terms of art history and architectural history, it's a vibrant period. The decline and fall of Teotihuacan allowed smaller regional centers, that had been previously been held back by the dominance of Teotihuacan, to flourish artistically, economically, and politically. There was also an intense competition among these newly important centers, and much of that competition was expressed in new building programs, sculpture, and precious objects.



Figure **3.1.2.11**: Temple of Kukulcan (also known as El Castillo), 8th–12th century, Chichén Itzá, Mexico (photo: **Pascal**, CC BY 2.0)

Post-Classic period, c. 950–1519 C.E.

Finally, in the the Post-Classic period we find developing patterns from the Epiclassic, such as numerous regional centers instead of a great metropolis like Teotihuacan. These regional centers seemed to be linked commercially through ever more complex trade networks that moved everything from volcanic glass to precious jade and shell jewelry. With this economic exchange came trade in religious ideas that seem to echo across much of Mesoamerica.

The Post-Classic is distinguished from the preceding Classic/Epi-Classic by an increase in merchants, and in the importance of merchants in commercial activities on a large scale. Post-Classic art transforms large parts of the Classic artistic tradition. Some Post-Classic artists rejected the most refined elements of the Classic tradition. This is especially true among the Maya, whose Post-Classic traditions dropped the idealizing features of Classic Maya nobles and gods and instead developed a rough carving tradition with seemingly endless lines of similar figures. Sculpture at the large site of Chichen Itzá has hundreds of good examples of the Post-Classic carving style. The major related site of Tula, Hidalgo, also follows this trend.



Figure **3.1.2.12**: El Caracol (the Observatory), 8th–12th century, Chichén Itzá, Mexico (photo: Arian Zwegers, CC BY 2.0)

However, the Post-Classic is not, by any means, a complete break with the Classic period. You see people continually reflecting back on the art of the Classic period as they build their Post-Classic social and artistic patterns, at places like Chichén Itzá in the Yucatán and Mitla in Oaxaca.



Figure **3.1.2.13**: Page from the Codex Zouche-Nuttall, 1200–1521 A.D., Mixtec. Painted deer skin, 19 x 23.5 cm. The British Museum, London, Am1902,0308.1 (BM Add. MSS 39671). Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license

For instance, Oaxacan nobles in the region called the Mixteca created complex hieroglyphic books (such as the **Codex Zouche-Nuttall**) out of the glyphic tradition found in places like Xochicalco as well as nearby Monte Albán and other Oaxacan sites during the Epiclassic. These people, called the Mixtec, also created a tradition of fine metalworking in gold and silver. Precious metals had not been important to Mesoamerica before this period, although it was well-known to the south of Mesoamerica, especially in the **Andes**. Mesoamericans had preferred jade as the primary elite material since the time of the Olmecs, but the Mixtec became adept at goldwork, almost certainly learning from peoples on the Pacific Coast of Mexico who learned metal smithing (creating objects in metal) in turn from peoples farther south.



Figure **3.1.2.14**: Mexica empire

It is in the Post-Classic period that the **Mexica** (or Aztec) empire develops and grows, often incorporating elements of peoples they conquered into their art and architecture—including the Mixtec. Merchants were an important feature of the Mexica empire, and

there was also a steady stream of raw materials and goods into Tenochtitlan, the Mexica capital city.



Figure **3.1.2.15**: Coatlicue, c. 1500, Mexica (Aztec), found on the SE edge of the Plaza mayor/Zocalo in Mexico City, basalt, 257 cm high (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City), photo: **Steven Zucker** (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Spaniards arrive in 1519 and change things drastically enough that we can no longer talk about Mesoamerican civilization in the same terms that are used for the period from 14,000 B.C.E. to 1519 C.E. Indigenous artists continued to erect buildings and decorate them, and they continued to make books. They did so in an artistic landscape so changed that some scholars have spoken of the "extinction" of Indigenous Mexican art. In reality, many Indigenous artists were deeply committed to the new artistic vocabulary of church, cross, and mural, especially when they were building for their own city (*pueblo de indios*). Indigenous artists have never gone away. They are with us today, continuing to make meaningful and beautiful artistic statements.

Additional resources:

Read an introduction to Mesoamerica

Check out a **glossary** of pre-Columbian art on Smarthistory

Read about the Mesoamerican calendar

Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.

Mary Miller, *The Art of Mesoamerica from Olmec to Aztec*, 6th ed. (2009).

Michael D. Coe, Javier Urcid, and Rex Koontz, *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztec*s, 8th ed. (Thames and Hudson, 2019)

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3.1.3: The Mesoamerican Calendar

by DR. KRISTOPHER DRIGGERS



Figure **3.1.3.1**: Drawing of the Aztec **Sun Stone**, which carries references to the Aztec calendar, from Antonio de León y Gama, *Descripción histórica y cronológica de las dos piedras que con ocasión del nuevo empedrado que se está formando en la plaza principal de México, se hallaron en ella el año de 1790...*, 1792 (**Library of Congress**)

We think of calendars as utilitarian—as tools that we all use every day to organize our time. But calendars also tell us a great deal about how the cultures that produce and use them understand and structure their world.

Before Spanish conquerors invaded the Americas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Indigenous peoples of ancient Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and Honduras—an area known today as **Mesoamerica**—developed cultures over more than three millennia that were distinctive but that also held many ideas in common. Some of the features that they shared include the presence of **ballcourts** where a game was played using a heavy rubber ball, the development of complex religions with elaborate pantheons of deities, and, in works of art, a shared understanding of the importance of materials like greenstone and precious feathers.

Many Mesoamerican cultures also shared common ways of counting time. Calendars consisted of a system of two different counts that ran simultaneously. The first count tracked a cycle of 260 days (in Nahuatl, the language of the Nahua ethnic group, this was called the *tonalpohualli*), which was used for divining an individual's fate (or predicting their future); that fate was itself understood as a portrait of an individual's character. The other count, closer to our solar year, followed a cycle of 365 days (in Nahuatl, the *xiuhpohualli*); this calendar tracked the passage of the alternating wet and dry seasons. Calendars were central to Mesoamerican cultures because they were tied to major seasonal cycles, and related to ideas around individuals and their fates.

Works of Mesoamerican art often include references to calendars and time. Taking a closer look at the role of the calendar in different artistic contexts helps us to understand how knowledge about time was represented and utilized in the ancient world.



Figure **3.1.3.2**: This page from an almanac in the Codex Borbonicus represents a 13-day period from the 260-day calendar used for divination in the Mesoamerican world. Codex Borbonicus, p. 13, early 16th century, paint on amate bark paper (Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée Nationale)

Painting the ritual calendar

Painted books—known today as codices, or codex in the singular—created both before and after the arrival of Spaniards to Mesoamerica in 1519 give us an idea of how the 260-day ritual count (the count most closely related to divination and prognostication) was represented in Mesoamerican art.

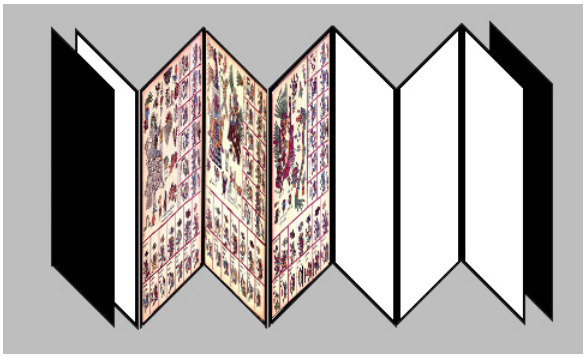


Figure **3.1.3.3**: The accordion-fold format common to Indigenous Mesoamerican codices

In the first half of the sixteenth century, a painted book (today known as the Codex Borbonicus) was created in Central Mexico using a very long strip of bark paper folded in an accordion-like format. This book was likely similar to the books typical of **Mexica** (sometimes called Aztec) visual culture, a tradition that flourished in Central Mexico in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

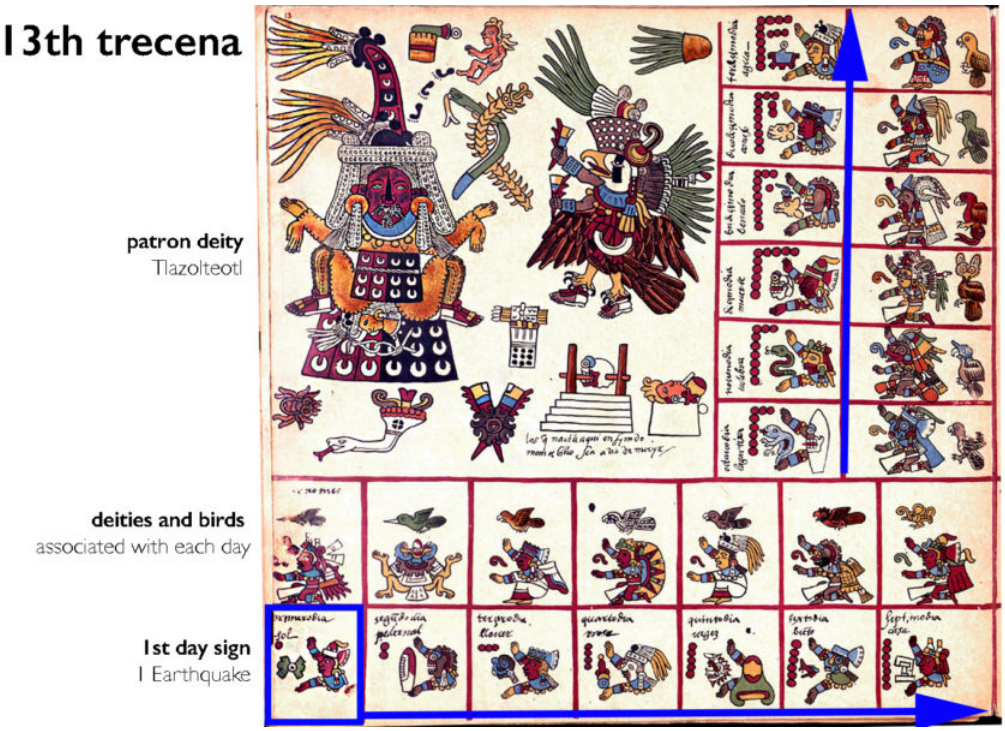


Figure **3.1.3.4**: The 13th *trecena*. Codex Borbonicus, p. 13, early 16th century, paint on amate bark paper (Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée Nationale)

One page from an almanac in the Codex Borbonicus represents a 13-day period (called a *trecena*), and each trecena had a presiding patron deity. Calendar specialists consulted images like these to interpret whether the individual days that were represented might portend good, evil, or ambiguous fates. The first section of the Codex is dedicated to these 20 months of 13 days that made up the 260-day calendar.

Let us take a close look at the 13th trecena. This complex image consists of two parts, including both the count of days in the ritual calendar and the deities who were associated with those days. In the grids that run along the sides of the page, the artist has painted a sequence of 13 glyphic signs representing each of 13 days; the count starts at the bottom left and ends and the top right. 1 Earthquake is the first day of this period.

Meanwhile, the larger space on the page is a cartouche where we see the gods who are associated with these days. On the left, a frontally oriented female deity (Tlazolteotl) is depicted in the position of giving birth, while the deity on the right is an avian god who holds two perforators for sacrifice. These gods are surrounded by insects like the spider and centipede (creatures associated with night and darkness) and by objects, like an incense burner and perforators.



Figure **3.1.3.5**: Codex Borbonicus, detail of 13th *trecena* with Tlazolteotl, p. 13, early 16th century, paint on amate bark paper (Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée Nationale)

When a calendar specialist consulted this painting, these images of deities, animals, and objects could be interpreted to understand the fates and characters associated with the set of days referenced in the painting. Each day in the 260-day count was associated with a distinct quality or fate. Some days were believed to be tied to good outcomes and good character; others were ambiguous, and others still predicted evil ends. These destinies also spoke to the identity of people born on those dates. The birthdate of a child was considered in a number of contexts to be intimately tied to their fate, and in some contexts, like in the Mixtec tradition from southern Mexico, individuals were named after their birthdates, speaking to the close tie between the calendar and identity.



Figure **3.1.3.6**: Trecena day signs, including the 13th *trecena* in the blue box. Bernardino de Sahagún and Indigenous collaborators, *General History of the Things of New Spain*, also called the *Florentine Codex*, vol. 1, book 4, 1575–1577, watercolor, paper, contemporary vellum Spanish binding, open (approx.): 32 x 43 cm, closed (approx.): 32 x 22 x 5 cm (Medicea Laurenziana Library, Florence, Italy)

Today, we have some idea of how a painting like this one might have been interpreted in the Aztec world thanks to the texts in a manuscript known as the **Florentine Codex**. This manuscript was created in the second half of the sixteenth century, after the Spanish Conquest, when the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún asked a number of Nahuatl-speaking Indigenous collaborators to explicate various facets of Nahua thought and history, including their ideas about the calendar. When these collaborators turned to describe the ritual period depicted in the above page of the Codex Borbonicus, they wrote that those born on these days had destinies that were "only half good. He who was then born, man or woman, who did penance well, who took good heed, who was well reared, succeeded and found his [rewards]. But if he did not take good heed, and were not well reared, the opposite resulted. He met misery […]"[1] In this case, the fate of the days in the painting was ambiguous. It might portend either a good or bad fate, depending on the actions taken by the person who was born then.

The solar calendar's festivals

While the 260-day ritual calendar was used for understanding individuals' fates, the 365-day count tracked the passage of time and the seasons of the solar year. In Aztec culture, the distinctive seasons of the year were times for different activities. During the rainy season, Aztec culture emphasized agricultural fertility and rites to propitiate gods related to water and sustenance. During the subsequent dry season, warfare and the expansion of the empire became major concerns. The 365-day solar calendar was divided into shorter 20-day periods (with 18 months total) when festivals were celebrated that were related to these seasonal concerns. The names of these 20-day periods speak to the character of the seasons: One period is named *Toxcatl*, "dryness," and another is called *Atlcahualo*, "the ceasing of the waters."



Figure **3.1.3.7**: Celebrants unwrap tamales for a feast marking the festival of *Atemoztli*, "Descent of the Waters," from the 365-day solar calendar. Detail from Codex Durán folio 342r, 1575, ink and wash on European paper (Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid)

In manuscript paintings made late in the sixteenth century, we find images that depict the festivals that were scheduled according to the 365-day solar calendar. Images of these rites appear in the manuscript known as the Codex Durán. These images were painted by Indigenous artists around Mexico City in the year 1575 and the text was written by the Dominican friar, Diego Durán. One painting shows how an indigenous artist living in the colonial world depicted the ancient festival from the period of *Atemoztli*, a name that means "the descent of the waters." In the painting, a group gathers upon a woven mat to eat tamales, the customary food for the celebration of this festival; the descending male figure at the top of the painting may represent the rains. Feasting was an important rite for this festival from the solar calendar; Codex Durán tells us that the tamales that the celebrants eat were considered offerings to ensure good rains and a good harvest. Unlike in the case of the Codex Borbonicus, this painting probably does not follow the format of an ancient book, since pre-Conquest references to the twenty-day festivals do not tend to include ritual scenes combined with important information about the months in the clouds. But it does show us how Indigenous artists imagined one of the festivals surrounding the agricultural cycle from the vantage point of their Colonial context.

The origins of the calendar

Manuscripts like the Codex Borbonicus and the Codex Durán show us how the calendar was visualized in the sixteenth century, but Mesoamerican calendars were in use long before that. We do not know exactly when the counts of the calendar were first adopted in Mesoamerican history, but archaeology tells us that the calendar's past lies deep in the region's history. On ancient stone monuments, solar calendar inscriptions appear by the first century B.C.E. in the region of Mexico's Gulf Coast; in Oaxaca, inscriptions have been found that may date earlier still.

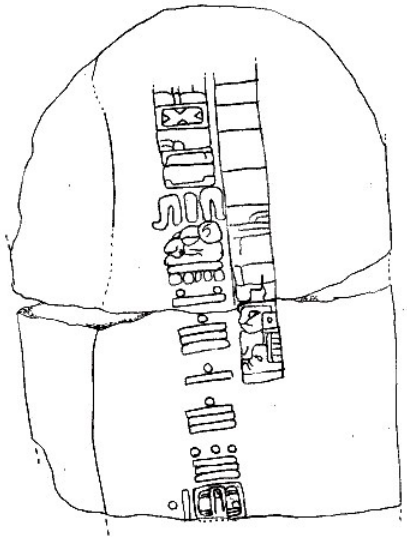


Figure **3.1.3.8**: Stela C from the site of Tres Zapotes in Veracruz, Mexico, features one of the oldest calendrical inscriptions from Mesoamerica; it names a year that corresponds to 31 B.C.E. (CC0)

One of the oldest Mesoamerican monuments with a calendrical text is a sculpture from the site of Tres Zapotes, and it includes an inscription that notes the date of 31 B.C.E. Looking closely at its inscription, the left-hand column includes a series of numerals represented as dots above horizontal bars. This part of the text enumerates the number of days that have passed from a commonly held "start" point deep in time; the effect is that the inscription precisely names a single date that we are able to reconstruct today. Thanks to this count, we know exactly which historical moment was named in the inscription, and thanks to this monument, we appreciate the deep historical origins of calendrical monuments in Mesoamerica.

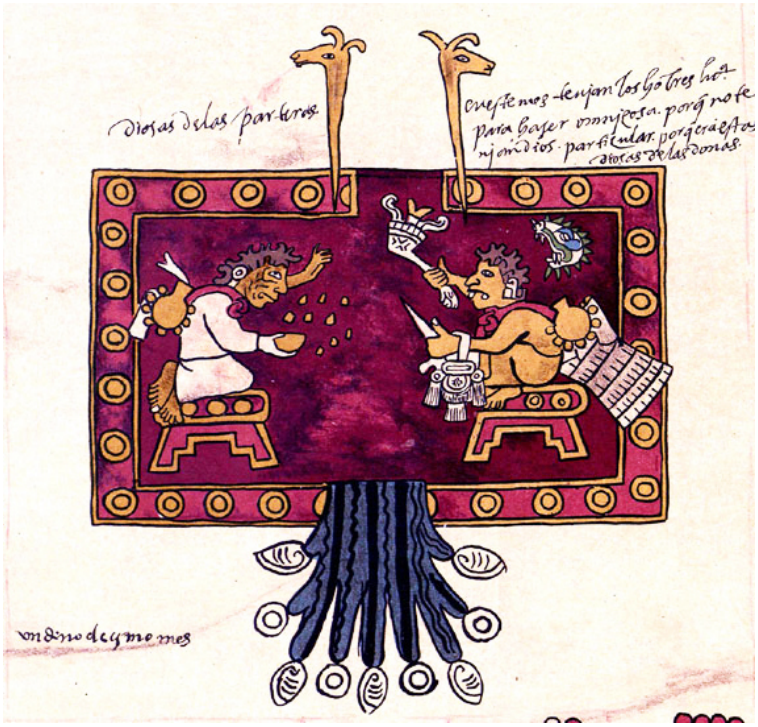


Figure \(\PageIndex{9}\): Detail of Oxomoco and Cipactonal, Codex Borbonicus, p. 21, early 16th century, paint on amate bark paper (Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée Nationale)

Although archaeology tells part of the story about the origins of the calendar, the Indigenous collaborators who created the Florentine Codex conveyed their ideas about the origins of the calendar. In their telling, the calendar had been invented by deities, including the feathered serpent known as Quetzalcoatl and a divine elderly couple named Oxomoco and Cipactonal; these elders

are also named in other Nahuatl-language texts (including the manuscript known as the Anales de Cuauhtitlan). Indigenous peoples living in the colonial period had important beliefs about the sacred origins of the Mesoamerican calendar, beliefs that should be taken into account alongside contemporary archaeology's story about the origins of the calendar.

Calendrical Inscriptions and Images of Power

Mesoamerican monuments show us that in some cases, calendrical information was deployed in support of images of power. This was the case in both the Maya and the Aztec worlds, where calendrical inscriptions contributed to visualizing the power of rulers.



Figure **3.1.3.10**: This fifth-century sculpture, Stela 31 from Tikal, Guatemala, represents the royal Siyah Chan K'awiil II dressed in elaborate finery; the back of the monument tells the story of generations of Tikal's history using precise calendrical dates (photos: Left-**Greg Willis**, CC BY-SA 2.0; right-**HJPD**, CC BY 3.0)

In Classic Maya art, a tradition that flourished between 250 and 900 C.E., freestanding stone sculptures (known as stelae) were a surface where Maya scribes used calendrical inscriptions to record important moments in the lives of kings, such as the dates when they were born or when they ascended to the throne. This was the case on Stela 31 from the site of Tikal in northern Guatemala. Dedicated in the fifth century C.E., the front side of the monument depicts a king from Tikal named Siyah Chan K'awiil II. In the image, he appears covered in elaborate royal finery and accompanied by images referring to his lineage.

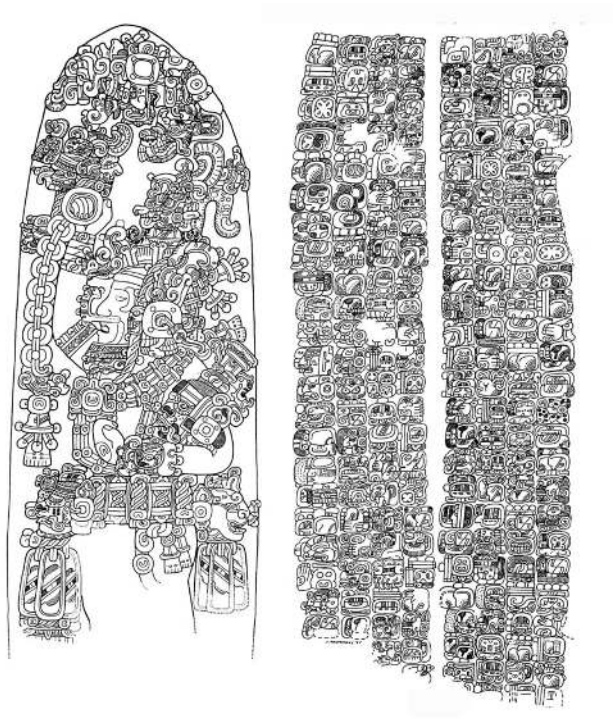


Figure **3.1.3.22**: Stela 31 from Tikal, Guatemala (drawing © John Montgomery)

On the back of the monument, a long text describes episodes from Tikal's history, from the moment when a foreign power took up leadership in the city in the previous century through Siyah Chan K'awiil II's rise to the throne in 435, all the way to the moment when the stela itself was dedicated. Precise calendrical reckoning situated the events that led to Siyah Chan K'awiil II's reign firmly in historical time and played an important role in constructing the king's image and authority in this monumental work.



Figure **3.1.3.12**: The Aztec Dedication Stone features a scene of a deceased king and his successor performing autosacrifice above a large date glyph corresponding to 1487–1488 (Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City; left: Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0; right: Zach Lindsey, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Among the Aztecs, monumental calendrical inscriptions also played an important role in constructing a ruler's power. The Aztec Dedication Stone represents an important ceremony of royal ritual autosacrifice carried out by a deceased ruler and his successor. At the top of the work, the ruler Ahuitzotl (seen at right) is shown with his royal predecessor Tizoc (left) performing autosacrifice, drawing streams of blood from their ears with sharp perforators. Their sacrificial blood feeds a hungry earth, represented as an upturned, open maw; Aztec religion involved sacrifices in which offerings were made to the earth to ensure that cosmic order was maintained. Below this scene, the sculptor depicted a very large calendrical inscription that dominates the entire composition, associating the ritual with the date 8 Reed (or 1487–1488). With the great visual weight given to this date, this politically potent monument and its concerns around succession and rule shows the importance of graphically foregrounding historical time in an image of royal power in Aztec art. Even so, time is also interestingly manipulated on this monument. Tizoc's death before Ahuitzotl's ascension suggests that the time imagined in the ritual scene is likely imaginary; what mattered instead was that the new ruler appear beside his predecessor, emphasizing his continuity with royal power.

Calendar after the Spanish Conquest

In the decades that followed the **Spanish Invasion** of the Americas, European missionary friars became interested in the Mesoamerican calendar because they sensed that it still held a powerful influence in the communities that they sought to convert to Christianity. In the Codex Durán, Diego Durán wrote that he suspected that an Indigenous town had adopted their patron saint because his feast day fell on an important day on the ancient calendar. [2] Since many of these friars believed that the practice of the ancient calendar was a way of maintaining idolatrous practices, missionaries sought to end the use of the Mesoamerican calendar altogether.

Despite Colonial efforts at extirpation, the calendar continued to constitute an important form of knowledge in some areas of Mesoamerica long after the Colonial period. Among K'iche Maya speakers in the Guatemala highlands, for example, specialists in Mesoamerican calendrical knowledge have continued to interpret and use the calendar in the twenty-first century as an integral part of their social and political milieu. The special place accorded to calendrical knowledge in these communities today speaks to the continued relevance of the Mesoamerican calendar into our own century, as well as the prestige and status accorded to the keepers of this vital form of understanding the world.

Notes:

1. Bernardino de Sahagún, Florentine Codex, Book 4: p. 85.
2. Diego Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites and The Ancient Calendar,* trans. Doris Heyden and Fernando Horcasitas [1971], pp. 409–410.

Additional resources:

The Ancient Future: Mesoamerican and Andean Timekeeping at Dumbarton Oaks

Elizabeth Hill Boone, *Cycles of Time and Meaning in the Mexican Books of Fate* (University of Texas Press, 2007).

Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens*, 2nd ed. (Thames and Hudson, 2008).

Mary Miller, *The Art of Mesoamerica from Olmec to Aztec*, 6th ed. (2009).

Barbara Tedlock, *Time and the Highland Maya*, revised ed. (University of New Mexico Press, 1993).

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3.1.4: Camelid sacrum in the shape of a canine

by DR. BETH HARRIS

Prehistoric art around the globe

When we think about prehistoric art (art before the invention of writing), likely the first thing that comes to mind are the beautiful cave paintings in France and Spain with their naturalistic images of bulls, bison, deer and other animals. But it's important to note that prehistoric art has been found around the globe—in North and South America, Africa, Asia, and Australia—and that new sites and objects come to light regularly, and many sites are just starting to be explored. Most prehistoric works we have discovered so far date to around 40,000 B.C.E. and after.

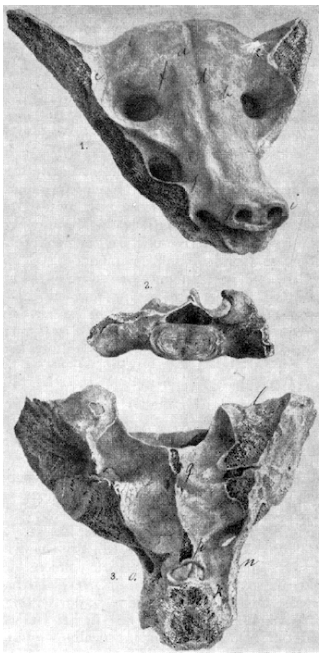


Figure 3.1.4.1: Lithograph of the sacrum as illustrated by Mariano Bárcena, published in *Anales del Musei Nacional*, vol. 2 (1882)

This fascinating and unique prehistoric sculpture of a dog-like animal was discovered accidentally in 1870 in Tequixquiac, Mexico—in the Valley of Mexico (where Mexico City is located). The carving likely dates to sometime between 14,000–7000 B.C.E. An engineer found it at a depth of 12 meters (about 40 feet) when he was working on a drainage project—the Valley of Mexico once held several lakes. The geography and climate of this area was considerably different in the prehistoric era than it is today.

What is a camelid? What is a sacrum?

The sculpture was made from the now fossilized remains of the sacrum of an extinct camelid. A camelid is a member of the Camelidae family—think camels, llamas, and alpacas. The sacrum is the large triangular bone at the base of the spine. Holes were cut into the end of the bone to represent nostrils, and the bone is also engraved (though this is difficult to see in photographs).

Issues

The date of the sculpture is difficult to determine because a stratigraphic analysis was not done at the find spot at the time of discovery. This would have involved a study of the different layers of soil and rock before the object was removed. Another problem is that the object was essentially lost to scholars between 1895 and 1956 (it was in private hands).

In 1882 the sculpture was in the possession of Mariano de la Bárcena, a Mexican geologist and botanist, who wrote the first scholarly article on it. He described the object in this way:

"…the fossil bone contains cuts or carvings that unquestionably were made by the hand of man…the cuts seem to have been made with a sharp instrument and some polish on the edges of the cuts may still be seen…the articular extremity of the last vertebra was utilized perfectly to represent the nose and mouth of the animal." [1]

Bárcena was convinced of the authenticity of the object, but over the years—due to the lack of scientific evidence from the find spot—other scholars have questioned its age, and whether the object was even made by human hands. One author, in 1923, summarized the issues:

> ***To allow us to state that the sacrum found at Tequixquiac was a definite proof of ancient man in the area the following things must be proven: (1) That the bone was actually a fossil belonging to an extinct species. We cannot doubt this since it has been affirmed by competent geologists and paleontologists. (2) That it was found in a fossiliferous deposit and that it had never been moved since it found its place there. This has not been proved in any convincing manner. (3) That the cuttings of the bone can actually be attributed to the hand of man and that it can never have occurred without human intervention. This has not been proved either. (4) That the carving was made while the species still existed and not in later times when the bone had already become fossilized. [2]***

Today, scholars agree that the carving and markings were made by human hands—the two circular spaces that represent the nasal cavities were carefully carved and are perfectly symmetrical and were likely shaped by a sharp instrument. However, the lack of information from the find spot makes precise dating very difficult. It is quite common, in prehistoric art, for the shape of a natural form (like a sacrum) to suggest a subject (dog or pig head) to the carver, and so we should not be surprised that the sculpture still strongly resembles a sacrum.

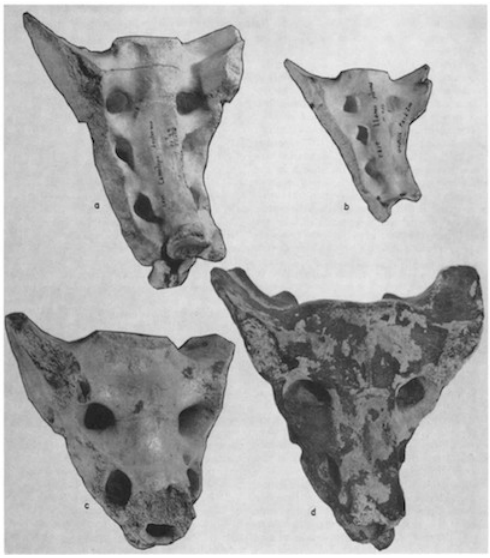


Figure **3.1.4.2**: Sacra from various forms of camel, illustration from: Luis Aveleyra Arroyo de Anda, "The Pleistocene Carved Bone from Tequixquiac, Mexico: A Reappraisal," *American Antiquity*, vol. 30, (January 1965), p. 269.

Interpretation

Because the carving was made in a period before writing had developed, it is likely impossible to know what the sculpture meant to the carver and to his/her culture. One possible way to interpret the object is to look at it through the lens of later Mesoamerican cultures. One anthropologist has pointed out that in Mesoamerica, the sacrum is seen as sacred and that some Mesoamerican Indian languages named this bone with words referring to sacredness and the divine. In English, "sacrum" is derived from Latin: os sacrum, meaning "sacred bone." The sacrum is also—perhaps significantly for its meaning—located near the reproductive organs.

"Language and iconographic evidence strongly suggests that the sacrum bone was an important bone indeed in Mesoamerica, relating to sacredness, to resurrection, and to fire. The importance attached to this bone and its immediate neighbors is not limited to Mesoamerica. From ancient Egypt to ancient India and elsewhere, there is abundant evidence that the bones at the base of the spine, including especially the sacrum, were seen as sacred." [3]

As appealing as this interpretation is (and the argument the author makes is quite convincing), it is wise to be wary of connecting cultures across such vast geographic distances (though of course there are some aspects of our shared humanity that may be common across cultures). At this point in time, we have no direct evidence to support this interpretation, and so we can not be certain of this object's original meaning for either the artist, or the people that produced it.

[1] As quoted in Luis Aveleyra Arroyo de Anda, "The Pleistocene Carved Bone from Tequixquiac, Mexico: A Reappraisal," *American Antiquity*, vol. 30, (January 1965), p. 264.

[2] As quoted in Luis Aveleyra Arroyo de Anda, "The Pleistocene Carved Bone from Tequixquiac, Mexico: A Reappraisal," *American Antiquity*, vol. 30, (January 1965)

[3] Brian Stross, "The Mesoamerican Sacrum Bone: Doorway to the otherworld," *FAMSI Journal of the Ancient Americas* (2007) pp.1-54.

Additional resources:

Luis Aveleyra Arroyo de Anda, "The Pleistocene Carved Bone from Tequixquiac, Mexico: A Reappraisal," *American Antiquity*, vol. 30, (January 1965), pp. 261-77 (available online).

Paul G. Bahn, "Pleistocene Images outside of Europe," *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 57, part 1 (1991), pp. 91-102.

Brian Stross, "The Mesoamerican Sacrum Bone: Doorway to the otherworld," *FAMSI Journal of the Ancient Americas* (2007), pp.1-54 (pdf available online).

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3.1.5: Late pre-classic Mesoamerica, an introduction

by **DR. REX KOONTZ**



Figure **3.1.5.1**:Stele 50, Izapa, pre-classic period (photo: Gary Todd, public domain)

Basic characteristics of the late Pre-classic period

This essay examines the late Pre-classic period, especially its basic characteristics. The late Pre-classic runs from 400 B.C.E. to 150 C.E.. It is bracketed on one side by the dissolution of the Olmec culture, and on the other by the rise of Teotihuacan as the Mesoamerican mega city.

Period	Dates	Cultures
Archaic Period	c. 3500—1500 B.C.E.	
Pre-Classic Period (or Formative Period)	c. 1800 B.C.E.—250 C.E.	Olmec, Teotihuacan, Tlatilco, Maya, Zapotec
Classic Period	c. 150—650 C.E.	Teotihuacan, Maya
Epiclassic Period	c. 650—900 C.E.	Maya, Toltec
Postclassic Period	c. 900—1519 C.E.	Toltec, Aztec (Mexica), Mixtec, Maya



Figure \(\
PageIndex
{2}\):
Map of Mesoamerica, with the borders of modern countries

It is important to remember that no one woke up on January 1st, 400 B.C.E. and said, “We are no longer Olmec.” The dissolution of that culture was not so abrupt, and elements of it were mixed into later cultures throughout Mesoamerica. In fact, the Olmec legacy is a large question in Mesoamerican art history. Just how important were the Olmec and in what way?

In the same way, no one woke up at Teotihuacan in 150 C.E. and said, “We are now ancient Mesoamerica’s metropolis.” Now, this is a little easier to see. You would have been able to experience in 150 C.E. pyramids on a scale that rarely, if ever, were seen in ancient Mesoamerica before, since, or in other places during that period. You would have been seeing a city that had grown to a size that ancient Mesoamerica had not experienced before. Granted, you might have felt like there was a new era dawning if you paid attention to such markers.



Figure **3.1.5.3**: Panoramic view of Monte Alban, initially constructed in the pre-classic period (photo: Eke, CC BY-SA 3.0)

I want to stress that these period dates are not real. They are simply helpful. Because it is the case that the years between 400 B.C.E. and 150 C.E. saw the creation of numerous capital cities outside of the old Olmec heartland, while there was an explosion of regional art styles at the same time, as groups took on the idea of urban civilization but gave it their own twist.

The story of the late Pre-classic is this regionalization of the urban civilization model. This is especially apparent in the different styles of monumental art and architecture seen throughout the region during this period. That said, it is during this period when monumental art and architecture became especially important for any Mesoamerican capital. This is what you needed to have—monumental art and architecture—to be a capital, to communicate to other Mesoamericans, “We are somebody that you need to deal with. We have arrived in that way.”

This explosion of regional art styles may be seen most fully, however, in the precious elite objects in jade and other fine materials that were circulating throughout Mesoamerica by this time.



Figure **3.1.5.4**: Map of Pre-classic Mesoamerica with Izapa and Monte Alban (underlying map © Google)

For the remainder of this essay, I want to go over some important characteristics of two of these new regional capitals, Izapa on the Pacific Coast and Monte Alban in the modern Mexican state of Oaxaca. I am not proposing these two capitals were more important than others. There were several important urban civilizations that were developed during the late Pre-classic away from the Gulf Coast. They do, however, serve as useful examples of the trends developing at this time.

Izapa, Pre-classic period

Izapa

Let’s start with Izapa, which is located on a hot, humid part of the Pacific Coast. We often associate the Gulf Coast with heat and humidity and the Pacific Coast with a little bit more temperate climate, and certainly drier, but this is not the case at the very southern edge of Mexico on the Pacific Coast, where we find the site of Izapa. It’s as hot and humid as anywhere in the tropics.

It’s a great place to grow cacao, which is exactly what the Izapans were doing, almost certainly by the late Pre-classic. Cacao, or chocolate as it’s known in English, is and was the most valuable crop in this area. In fact, for ancient Mesoamerican elites, the value of chocolate is hard to overstate. Much later, or almost 2,000 years later when the Spanish arrived, cacao was the exclusive province of upper levels of society. The ability to drink chocolate, the ability to buy chocolate and then have it made into what we would call hot chocolate, was an elite prerogative. It’s one of the things that made you elite. Almost certainly, this goes all the way back to the late Pre-classic in the development of the regional elites during this time. Izapa was one of the places where cacao could be grown at a scale that Mesoamerica needed by this time.

Each of the green structures protects Izapan stone sculptures, including stele, Pre-classic period



Figure **3.1.5.5**: Izapa Stela 25, Pre-classic period

There's another really important characteristic found at Izapa, but this one doesn't have to do with food. It has to do with the art. Izapan art, unlike all of these regional capitals, had a number of monumental art objects placed in the center of their city. In fact dozens of stelae, or large dressed stones that then were carved in relief with a scene of what we think is part of the story that becomes the Popol Vuh. We have a particular kind of art format, which is the monumental stone stelae—dressed and flattened and given a planar surface on which to make a relief that tells a story.



Figure **3.1.5.6**: Izapa Stela 25 drawing (CC BY-SA 3.0)

This kind of art making is called narrative art, or story-making art. It's the first time that we see narrative art in such an elaborate way, worked out over the course of many stelae at the site. It is fairly clear that the **iconographers** who have worked on these stelae are agreed that some of the scenes seem to be proto-versions (very early versions) of scenes in the story of the Popol Vuh that we will find much later on.

Izapa was important: it introduces narrative art. It is one of the early cultivators of cacao and distributors of chocolate for the elite and in the late Pre-classic. It was a central place, an important player, in the Mesoamerican political and artistic landscape.

The same can be said, just north and a little west, in Oaxaca, where the site of Monte Alban rose to prominence by the late Pre-classic. In fact, Oaxaca's history opens in the late Pre-classic with the dominance of Monte Alban in and around 400 B.C.E.

Monte Alban

Monte Alban

Monte Alban is a special, impressive place because it's on top of a mountain that has been flattened. The peak of it has been cut off and then developed into a monumental center for art and architecture. This started in 400 B.C.E. or a little before, and gives you a

sense of just how much power and work these leaders could call upon as they were building their early Mesoamerican cities.



Figure **3.1.5.7**: Stela 6 with typical Zapotec writing that begins on the upper left. It says something like “In the Year 10 Deer a man named 2S was captured.” Monte Alban, Pre-classic period (photo: HJPD, CC BY 3.0)

In addition to just flattening the place and creating a huge plaza that then served as the foundation for the monumental art and architecture, we also see very early writing, and lots of it, by the late Pre-classic period at Monte Alban. Stele with writing are not always in the same place that they were during the late Pre-classic. Monte Alban was continuously inhabited, and they had the tendency, which is somewhat frustrating to archaeologists, of moving their monuments around quite a bit over the course of Monte Alban’s history. Nevertheless we can date with some confidence many of the stones that have hieroglyphic writing to the late Pre-classic period.

A time of flowering regional cultures

To sum up, the late Pre-classic is a really interesting time of the flowering of regional cultures. By the late Pre-classic period we see this urban civilization pattern exploding almost everywhere in Mesoamerica, and it will of course then come to a certain kind of fruition in the megalopolis of Teotihuacan in 150 C.E., and that’s when we see the late Pre-classic ending and a new era beginning —what we call “the Classic Period.”



Figure **3.1.5.8**: Copy and Paste Caption here. (Copyright; author via source)

Teotihuacan, Mexico, main structures c. 50–250 C.E.

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3.1.6: Mesoamerican art in context- an excerpt from an origin story (Popol Vuh)



“In the Denver Art Museum’s Art of the Ancient Americas galleries, we worked with Mexico City-based animators Hola Combo to create animations to help tell the origin stories that explain the relationship between ancient American communities and the their environment. For Mesoamerica we chose an excerpt from the “Popol Vuh,” a sixteenth-century book in K’iché Maya, that recounts the formation of the earth and the first peoples, among other tales. The K’iché people live in the highlands of Guatemala and speak one of the many Mayan languages. Despite its sixteenth-century origins, the stories in the Popol Vuh exhibit a strong connection with ancient Maya objects. Many of the same characters from the book appear on vessels and other ancient Maya visual material as Dr. Oswaldo Chinchilla-Mazariegos illustrates in his book *Art and Myth of the Ancient Maya*.”

Watch the story in **Spanish**

Watch the story in **K’iché Maya**

Cite this page as: Denver Art Museum, "Mesoamerican art in context: an excerpt from an origin story (Popol Vuh)," in *Smarthistory*, April 7, 2022, accessed October 10, 2022, **https://smarthistory.org/mesoamerican-art-in-context-origin-story-popol-vuh/**.

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A glossary of basic terminology that is often used in discussions about pre-Columbian art. Click on any icon to make it larger.

aclla	A “chosen woman” in the Inka Empire who weaved fine cloth for gods and nobles.
accoutrements	Accoutrements are additional items, such as jewelry, that are worn or used by a person.
adobe	Adobe buildings are typically earthen brick structures made of sand, silt, clay, and straw. 
adzes	An adze is like an axe but its blade is set at a right angle to the handle.  Votive Adze “Kunz Axe,” c. 1200-500 B.C.E., jadeite, 31 x 16 x 11 cm, Olmec Formative Period (American Museum of Natural History, Washington D.C.)
alpaca	A type of camelid found in the Andean region. Alpacas have soft wool and were sheared to make textiles. 
amanteca	The name for Nahua featherworkers, who comprised their own special social class. In the Mexica capital of Tenochtitlan, they lived in a neighborhood called *Amantla*, whic why they were called *amanteca*.
ancestral Puebloans	The ancestral Puebloans were an ancient culture residing in the Four Corners region. Many Pueblo people today consider themselves descendants of this culture. The ancestra Puebloans have sometimes been referred to as the Anasazi, but this term, which is a Navajo word meaning “enemy ancestors,” is considered objectionable by many modern Pueblo people.
The Andes	“The Andes” can refer to the mountain range that stretches along the west coast of South America, but is also used to refer to a broader geographic area that includes the coa deserts to the west and into the tropical jungles to the east of those mountains. This region is seen as home to a distinct cultural area—dating from around the fourth millenn B.C.E. to the time of the Spanish conquest—and many of these cultures still persist today in various forms.   Map of South America showing the Andes
Andean highlands	Located between the coastal deserts and snow-capped Andean mountains, the highlands are home to fertile valleys, plateaus, and grasslands. The highlands are above 8,000 f Valleys can have temperate climates, while the plateaus and grasslands can have much colder, more severe weather.
anthropomorphic	Anthropomorphic means having a human form.
archaic	The word “archaic” refers to art of earlier cultures.
art for art’s sake	This term refers to art made purely for the purpose of enjoyment.
atl-tlachinolli	Fire and water, known in Nahuatl as *atl-tlachinolli* (“burnt water”; pronunciation: at-ul tlach-ee-no-lee), symbolized war, which was essential to the expansion of the Me empire.
ayllu	A Quechua word that denotes a network of families that often have a common ancestor.
axis mundi	Axis mundi is a Latin term that refers to the concept of a central pole or axis that connects heaven and earth.
Aztec	They formed part of a larger ethnic group known as the Nahua from Central Mexico whose pre-Hispanic empire was defeated by the Spanish in 1521. This group of people actually called themselves the Mexica. The name Aztec comes from the word Aztlan (their homeland), and it was appended to this group by the German naturalist and explor Alexander von Humboldt in the 19th century.
bloodletting	The act of shedding one’s own blood, often in a ritual context. Reasons for doing it include to honor deities, and to maintain the cosmos and power.

blackware	Vessels fired in a kiln deprived of oxygen (referred to as a “reducing atmosphere”), causing the iron compounds in the clay to turn black. The general term for Andean cerami made this way is “blackware.”
camelid	A camelid is a member of the Camelidae family—think camels, llamas, and alpacas.
celts	Celts are smooth, flat implements that are ground from stone, usually tapered, with a cutting edge on at least one of the two ends.  The six celts from La Venta Offering No. 4 (granite figure on far left, photo: 1955 (R.F. Heizer collection, National Anthropological Archives, Catalogue ID: heizer_0131)
ceque	Imaginary lines, called *ceques*, connected the Inka Qorikancha to shrines throughout the Cusco valley.
Chiapas region	Chiapas is a southern Mexican state bordering Guatemala.
Chibcha	Also known as the Muisca, who were the last pre-Columbian culture to occupy the Eastern Cordillera of the Colombian Andes and who rose to prominence in 600 C.E. Indigenous people who at the time of the Spanish conquest occupied the high valleys surrounding the modern cities of Bogotá and Tunja in Colombia.
chicha	A type of beer made from maize that was an integral part of Inka social rituals.
Chimor	The Chimú kingdom that ended after their conquest by the Inka.
chinampas	Chinampas, or floating gardens, provided the food necessary to sustain the Aztec empire. They consisted of human-made islands where crops could be grown. Food sta included maize, squash, and beans.
coca	There are several species of coca plants. Erythroxylum coca is the variety typically cultivated in the Andean regions discussed here. Coca leaves are the source of the drug cocaine, but when consumed in its organic form, it has less extreme effects. Because of drug trafficking, the cultivation of coca plants is now strictly regulated.
cochineal	The cochineal is an insect that lives as a parasite on the prickly pear cactus. When dried and ground, it was used as a red pigment.  Dried cochineal insects. (Photo: H. Zell, CC BY-SA 3.0)
codex	A word commonly used for screenfold manuscript books.
cohoba	Cohoba is a hallucinogenic snuff that was commonly used in Taíno rituals. It was commonly used among indigenous peoples in the Caribbean prior to the arrival of the Spaniards.
conquistadors	Conquistador means conqueror, and in this case refers to the Spaniards who invaded Mesoamerica.
contour rivalry	Contour rivalry occurs when an image can be interpreted in multiple ways, for instance, when a particular figure can be seen when looked at one way, and a different one appears when the image is turned another way.  Raimondi Stele, Chavin de Haunter, Peru, c. 400 B.C.E.
cornices	A cornice is an architectural element that projects from the top of a wall, either where a wall meets the ceiling, or at the top edge of the exterior of a building.
cosmology	Cosmology refers to belief about the order and structure of the universe.
ear flare/earspool	A type of jewelry. A cylinder is passed through the earlobe. Earspools were worn by people across the Americas.  Chimú earspools
El Niño	El Niño and La Niña are the warm and cool phases of a recurring climate pattern across the tropical Pacific, the El Niño-Southern Oscillation.
flowery war	The flowery wars were ritual wars fought by the Aztecs.
Four Corners	The Four Corners region includes southeastern Utah, northeastern Arizona, northwestern New Mexico, and southwestern Colorado.
Gateway of the Sun	This name was given to the structure long after the Tiwanaku civilization had collapsed. We do not know if the Tiwanakus associated this structure with the sun.
geoglyph	Designs formed on the earth. They are usually constructed from strong natural material, such as stone, and are notably large in scale.  Hummingbird, Nasca Geoglyph, over 300 feet in length, formed approximately 2000 years ago (photo: Diego Delso, CC BY-SA 4.0)
gesso	Gesso is a white mixture consisting of a binder, often glue, mixed with chalk, gypsum, or pigment.
glosses	Glosses are explanations or interpretations of texts.

glyph	A glyph is a symbolic figure or a written character that is based on a picture.  Detail of Codex Telleriano-Remensis, folio 45v, showing the glyph for Chapultepec
Great Houses	A great house is a large, multi-storied Ancestral Puebloan structure.  Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon
Greater Antilles	The Greater Antilles refers to islands in the Caribbean, including Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and also the Cayman Islands. Hispaniola is formed by the Dominican Republic and Haiti.
hanan	Upper. The city of Cuzco was divided into *hanan* and *hurin*.
Highland Maya region	Located in Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras. The Maya highlands are above 2,600 ft above sea level. The highlands are located south of the lowlands. See also Lowland M region.  Map of the Maya region
huey tlatoani	The Mexica ruler was known as the *huey tlatoani* (“chief speaker”; pronunciation: whey-tla-toe-anee). There were eleven *tlatoque* (the plural form of *tlatoani*) of Tenochti beginning with Acamapichtli in 1375 and ending with Cuauhtemoc in 1525.
huipil	A square-cut blouse worn by indigenous women in Mexico and Central America.
Huitzilopochtli	Huitzilopochtli, a god of war who was associated with the sun, is pronounced “Wheat-zil-oh-poach-lee.”
hurin	Lower. The city of Cuzco was divided into *hanan* and *hurin*.
indigo	Indigo is a natural dye derived from the leaves of certain plants. In South America, this is usually the anil plant.
Inti	The Inka sun deity.
Isthmian	The Isthmian region refers to the North American Isthmus, todday, Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua.
keru/kero	A ceremonial drinking vessel used by the Inka.  Keru. Inka. 15th – early 16th c.. Wood. H. 5 3/4 in. (14.6 cm). (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)
La Venta	La Venta is a Middle Formative period (1000–400 B.C.E.) Olmec culture site located in the Mexican state of Tabasco
lintel	The beam at the top of a doorway.
Lowland Maya region	Located in the northern part of Central America, in the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize. The Maya Lowlands range from 25 feet to 2,600 ft above sea le The lowlands are divided into the northern and southern lowland region. See also Highland Maya region.
maguey	Maguey is a type of agave plant. It had several uses, including as an alcoholic beverage and as a glue.
maize	Another word word for corn that originally derives from Spanish.
manioc	Manioc is a root vegetable, also known as cassava.
Mesoamerica	The region of Mesoamerica—which today includes central and south Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador—consists of a div geographic landscape of highlands, jungles, valleys, and coastlines. Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures shared certain characteristics such as the ritual ballgame, pyra building, human sacrifice, maize as an agricultural staple, and deities dedicated to natural forces. Some Mesoamerican societies developed sophisticated systems of writing well as an advanced understanding of astronomy. Many of these cultural trademarks persisted for more than 2,000 years across civilizations as distinct as the Olmec (c. 12 400 B.C.E.) and the Aztec (c. 1345 to 1521 C.E.). Read more here.

Period	Dates	Cultures
Archaic Period	c. 3500—1500 B.C.E.	
Pre-Classic Period (or Formative Period)	c. 1800 B.C.E.—250 C.E.	Olmec, Teotihuacan, Tlatilco, Maya, Zapotec
Classic Period	c. 150—650 C.E.	Teotihuacan, Maya
Epiclassic Period	c. 650—900 C.E.	Maya, Toltec
Postclassic Period	c. 900—1519 C.E.	Toltec, Aztec (Mexica), Mixtec, Maya



Map of Mesoamerica, with the borders of modern countries

Mexica	The Mexica (or Aztecs) formed part of a larger ethnic group known as the Nahua from Central Mexico whose pre-Hispanic empire, the Aztec empire, was defeated by the Spanish in 1521. Mexica is pronounced "Mesh-ee-ka."
Mimbres pottery	The Mimbres occupied southwestern New Mexico from about 1000 to 1250 C.E. Mimbres pottery is known for distinctive feather and grid patterns, as well as figurative elements, including birds, bats, turtles, mountain goats, and humans. These pots influenced later Pueblo potters.
mit'a	Originally an Inka tax paid in labor, it was adopted by the Spanish but without the social reciprocity it originally included
mnemonic device	A mnemonic device is a memory aid.
mummy bundle	In the Andes, mummy bundles could be wrapped in textiles, and could be buried with offerings of food and jewelry to accompany the deceased into the afterlife. Some of the most elaborate mummy bundles come from Paracas.
Nahua	The Mexica (or Aztecs) formed part of a larger ethnic group known as the Nahua from Central Mexico whose pre-Hispanic empire was defeated by the Spanish in 1521.
Nahuatl	Nahuatl was the language of the Mexica. Approximately 1.5 million people speak it today, making it one of the most widely-spoken indigenous languages of the Americas.
paccha	A ritual watering device, pronounced in Quechua as POCK-cha.
pictograph	Visual representations of people, places, and events act like writing.
pigments	Pigments are substances used in paint to give it a particular hue. They are often derived from minerals.
pre-Columbian	"Pre-Columbian" refers to the period in the Americas before the arrival of Columbus. It is a problematic term, discussed in more depth here.
puquio	Gradually descending tunnels that tap ancient subterranean aquifers and water channels. They have been described as wells, and formed part of ancient irrigation systems.  Puquio, South Coast of Peru
pututu	Carved Strombus shells turned into trumpets, some of which have been found at Chavín.
pyroengraving	A technique used to decorate wood or other materials like gourds with burn marks created with a heated object used to engrave or incise the surface of the object.
Qhapac Ñan	The Inka Empire was connected by a road system—the Qhapaq Ñan—that was used for official Inka business only.
qompi	The highest quality woven textiles of the Inka Empire.
Quechua	The primary language of the Inka, Quechua is still spoken today by approximately 10 million people in South America, primarily Peru and Bolivia.
quetzal	Quetzals are colorful birds native to Mexico and the southern United States.
quipu	A quipu (or khipu in Quechua) is a knotted string implement that recorded narratives and other types of information.  Inka quipu (Museo Larco, Lima, Peru; photo: Claus Ableiter, CC BY-SA 3.0)
Raimondi Stele	The stele is named after the Italian-Peruvian geographer and scientist Antonio Raimondi, who first documented the stele in 1874.
relief	Relief sculpture remains attached to a surface.
repoussé	Repoussé is the technique of hammering silver or other metal into relief from the back side.
roof comb	A roof comb is a decorative element on the roof of many Maya structures, sometimes solid stone and decorated with mosaic or stucco and sometimes an open lattice.
sapote	A fruit-bearing tree found in Mexico, Central America, and parts of South America.
schistose	A form of metamorphic rock prone to flaking.

screenfold	A single sheet of paper that is then folded like an accordion. The screenfold is a Mesoamerican construction, strikingly different from European manuscripts whose pages are bound on the left side so the reader sees two pages at a time.  Diagram showing a screenfold book
sherds	Pottery sherds, or potsherds, are broken pieces of ceramic material.
slip	Slip is a liquid mixture of clay and/or other materials suspended in water, it can be used as a paint to decorate ceramics before they are fired.
Spondylus shell	Spondylus shells are not native to Peru; they thrive in the warm coastal waters of what is now Ecuador, hundreds of kilometers from Chavín.  *Spondylus Princeps* shell
stela (or stele)	An upright flat slab of stone worked in relief.
stirrup spout	A vessel type commonly used by the Moche culture of the Andes. It is composed of a hollow tube of clay bent into an upside-down U shape, with another tube piercing it at t apex of the curve.  Left: Fox Warrior Bottle, c. 4th – 6th century C.E., Moche, Peru, ceramic, 26.7 cm and right: Fox Warrior Bottle, 7th-8th century C.E., Moche. Peru, ceramic, 29.46 cm (Metropolitan Museum of Art)
Strombus shell	Strombus can be found in Peruvian waters, but that is the southernmost reach of their range—they are more common in the north.  Carved Strombus shell trumpet (pututu), Chavín (photo: Dr. Sarahh Scher)
talud-tablero	A sloping wall, talud, that is surmounted by a vertical wall, tablero.  Pyramid the Temple of Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent), Teōtīhuacān
Tawantinsuyu	The Inka called their empire *Tawantinsuyu*, usually translated as “Land of the Four Quarters” in their language, Quechua
Tenochtitlan	Tenochtitlan was the capital of the Mexica empire. Today it is known today as Mexico City. It is pronounced “Ten-oach-teet-lan.”
tenon head	Sculptures of heads which are set into a wall, anchored by a post called a tenon, but extend out from the surface.  Tenon heads in a wall of the Semi-subterranean Court, Tiwanaku, Bolivia, 300–400 CE (photo: Phil, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)
teocalli	A *teocalli* is a Mesoamerican pyramid with a temple on top.
thatch	Thatch roofs are usually made of straw, leaves, or a similar organic material.
Timucua	Timucua, pronounced Tee-MOO-qua, were native Floridians. This once populous people ceased to exist by the early 19th century as a result of European disease, enslavemer and other pressures.
Tlaloc	Tlaloc, a rain and agricultural god.  Tlaloc (detail), from the Codex Borgia, original c. 1500, reproduction 1825-1831 (The British Museum)
Tlaxcala	Tlaxcala was a city-state in central Mexico.

tocapu/t'qapu	Tocapu are compartmentalized geometric designs found in Inca textiles. 
tonalpohualli	The Aztecs had two different calendars: a 260-day ritual calendar called the tonalpohualli (day count), and a 360-day (plus 5 extra days) calendar called the xiuhpohualli (count).
tribute	Tribute is a form of payment made to a ruling power or state.
tumbaga	Tumbaga is an alloy composed mostly of gold and copper. The proportions can be manipulated to change the color of the metal.
tumi	A ceremonial knife used in the Andean region.  Knife (tumi) with Removable Figural Handle
urpu	A storage vessel that was produced in large quantities throughout the Inka empire. They are characterized by two handles on the lower sides of the vessel and a nub or small projection near the neck, which allowed a rope to be passed through the handles and looped over the nub so that it could be carried on a person's back or as part of a llama's pack. The pointed bottom of the vessel allowed it to be pushed into the earth for stability when being stored.
xiuhpohualli	The Aztecs had two different calendars: a 260-day ritual calendar and a 360-day (plus 5 extra days) calendar called the *xiuhpohualli* (year count). The *xiuhpohualli* was divi into eighteen months of twenty days each, and each of these months had a festival that honored a specific deity or deities.

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3.2: Tlatilco

by **DR. REX KOONTZ**



Tlatilco figurines, c. 1200–600 B.C.E., ceramic, Tlatilco, Mesoamerica (present-day Mexico) (includes examples from the National Museum of Anthropology as well as the Female Figure at the Princeton University Art Museum); speakers: Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Steven Zucker

We don't know what the people here called themselves. Tlatilco, meaning "place of hidden things," is a Nahuatl word, given to this "culture" later. Around 2000 B.C.E., maize, squash and other crops were domesticated, which allowed people to settle in villages. The settlement of Tlatilco was located close to a lake, and fishing and the hunting of birds became important food sources.

Archaeologists have found more than 340 burials at Tlatilco, with many more destroyed in the first half of the 20th century.



Figure **3.2.1**: Double-faced female figurine, early formative period, Tlatilco, c. 1200–900 B.C.E., ceramic with traces of pigment, 9.5 cm. high (Princeton University Art Museum)

Intimate and lively

Tlatilco figurines are wonderful small ceramic figures, often of women, found in Central Mexico. This is the region of the later and much better-known **Aztec empire**, but the people of Tlatilco flourished 2,000–3,000 years before the Aztec came to power in this Valley. Although Tlatilco was already settled by the Early Preclassic period (c. 1800–1200 B.C.E.), most scholars believe that the many figurines date from the Middle Preclassic period, or about 1200–400 B.C.E. Their intimate, lively poses and elaborate

hairstyles are indicative of the already sophisticated artistic tradition. This is remarkable given the early dates. Ceramic figures of any sort were widespread for only a few centuries before the appearance of Tlatilco figurines.

Appearance

The Tlatilco figurine at the Princeton University Art Museum has several traits that directly relate to many other Tlatilco female figures: the emphasis on the wide hips, the spherical upper thighs, and the pinched waist. Many Tlatilco figurines also show no interest in the hands or feet, as we see here. Artists treated hairstyles with great care and detail, however, suggesting that it was hair and its styling was important for the people of Tlatilco, as it was for many peoples of this region. This figurine not only shows an elaborate hairstyle, but shows it for two connected heads (on the single body). We have other two-headed female figures from Tlatilco, but they are rare when compared with the figures that show a single head. It is very difficult to know exactly why the artist depicted a bicephalic (two-headed) figure (as opposed to the normal single head), as we have no documents or other aids that would help us define the meaning. It may be that the people of Tlatilco were interested in expressing an idea of duality, as many scholars have argued.



Figure **3.2.2**: Double-faced female figure figurine, early formative period, Tlatilco, 1200–900 B.C.E., ceramic with traces of pigment, 9.5 cm. high (Princeton University Art Museum)

The makers of Tlatilco figurines lived in a large farming villages near the great inland lake in the center of the basin of Mexico. Modern Mexico City sits on top of the remains of the village, making archaeological work difficult. We don't know what the village would have looked beyond the basic shape of the common house—a mud and reed hut that was the favored house design of many early peoples of Mexico. We do know that most of the inhabitants made their living by growing maize (corn) and taking advantage of the rich lake resources nearby. Some of the motifs found on other Tlatilco ceramics, such as ducks and fish, would have come directly from their lakeside surroundings.



Figure **3.2.3**: Reconstruction of a house, c. 1200 B.C.E., central Mexico



Figure **3.2.4**: Shaman, Middle Preclassic (1200–600 B.C.E.), Tlatilco, 9.5 cm high (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City)

Male figures are rare

Tlatilco artists rarely depicted males, but when they did the males were often wearing costumes and even masks. Masks were very rare on female figures; most female figures stress hairstyle and/or body paint. Thus the male figures seem to be valued more for their ritual roles as priests or other religious specialists, while the religious role of the females is less clear but was very likely present.

How they were found

In the first half of the 20th century, a great number of graves were found by brick-makers mining clay in the area. These brick-makers would often sell the objects—many of them figurines—that came out of these graves to interested collectors. Later archaeologists were able to dig a number of complete burials, and they too found a wealth of objects buried with the dead. The objects that were found in largest quantities—and that enchanted many collectors and scholars of ancient Mexico—were the ceramic figurines.



Figure **3.2.5**: Tlatilco figurine of a woman with a dog, Tlatilco, c. 1200–600 B.C.E., ceramic (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Craftsmanship

Unlike some later Mexican figurines, those of Tlatilco were made exclusively by hand, without relying on molds. It is important to think, then, about the consistent mastery shown by the artists of many of these figurines. The main forms were created through pinching the clay and then shaping it by hand, while some of the details were created by a sharp instrument cutting linear motifs onto the wet clay. The forms of the body were depicted in a specific proportion that, while non-naturalistic, was striking and effective. The artist was given a very small space (most figures are less than 15 cm high) in which to create elaborate hairstyles. Even for today's viewer, the details in this area are endlessly fascinating. The pieces have a nice finish, and the paint that must indicate body decoration was firmly applied (when it is preserved, as in the two-headed figure above). Many scholars doubt that there were already full-time artists in such farming villages, but it is certain that the skills necessary to function as an artist in the tradition were passed down and mastered over generations.

Additional resources:

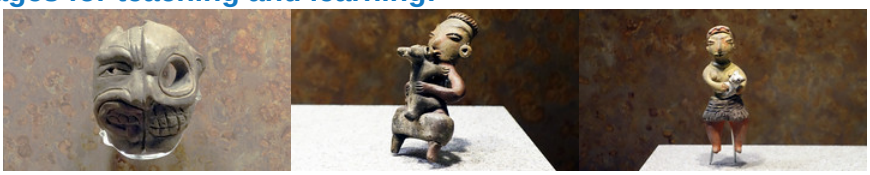
Examining Tlatilco Figurines (LACMA)

Double-faced female figurine at the Princeton Art Museum

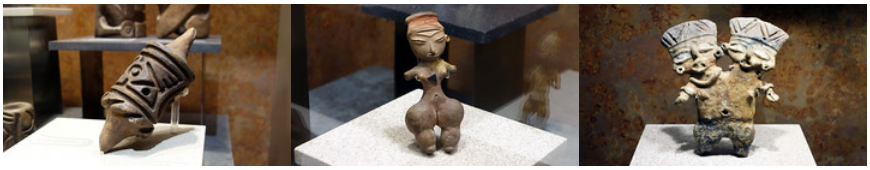
Ceramics from Tlatilco (including the two headed figurine at the Princeton Art Museum)

National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City

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SECTION OVERVIEW

3.3: Olmec

The Olmecs flourished on the Gulf Coast, creating works in stone and jade that had a profound influence on later cultures.

c. 1200 - 400 B.C.E.

3.3.1: Kunz Axe (Olmec)

3.3.2: Offering #4, La Venta

3.3.3: Olmec Jade

3.3.4: Olmec mask

3.3.5: Olmec mask at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

3.3.6: Olmec figurine

3.3.7: Olmec stone mask

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3.3.1: Kunz Axe (Olmec)

by DR. REX KOONTZ and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER



Additional resources:

Olmec art on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History (by Dr. James Doyle)

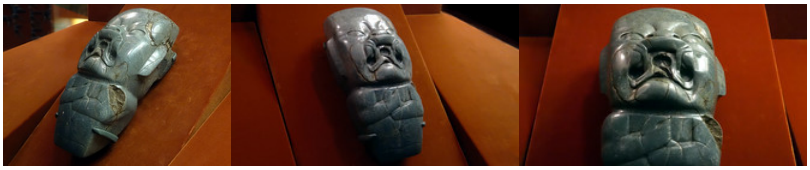
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- **11.2: North America before c. 1500** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

3.3.2: Offering #4, La Venta

by DR. BILLIE FOLLENSBEE



Figure **3.3.2.1**: Offering #4 (Olmec), c. 900 – 400 B.C.E., serpentine, jadeite, and granite, figures 6-5/16 to 7-15/16 inches tall, celts 9-5/16 to 10-3/4 inches tall, La Venta, Mexico (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City)

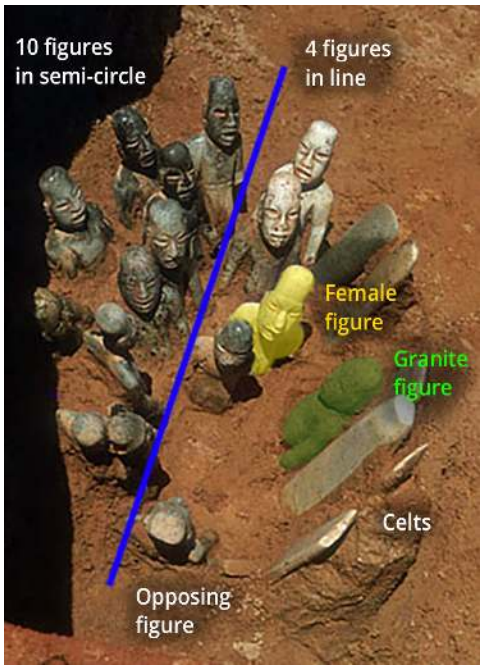


Figure **3.3.2.2**: Diagram of La Venta Offering No. 4; photo 1955 during excavation (R.F. Heizer collection, National Anthropological Archives, catalogue ID: **heizer_1145**)

Offering #4 from La Venta is perhaps the most dramatic assemblage of Olmec small stone figures yet discovered. As found *in situ* (in the original place and arrangement that the Olmec people left them), the group consisted of seventeen stone figurines arranged in front of a flat row of six slender jade celts, all securely set upright in a base of sand. Only fragments remained of one figure, but the surviving sculptures illustrate a striking, enigmatic scene: A single figure stands with its back to the celts (see granite figure in diagram left), while four figures appear to process in front of this figure, apparently walking toward a fifth figure that faces them (see opposing figure in diagram). The ten remaining figures gather in a close semi-circle, facing the celts as if watching the procession.

Material and style

The material and style of this group of figures represents the artistic culmination of Olmec small stone carving. After focusing most of their efforts on making large stone sculptures during the Early Formative period (2000–1000 B.C.E.), the Olmec of the Middle Formative period began to produce these much smaller, portable stone sculptures as well.

The stone used to produce many of these sculptures also indicates the importance of Offering #4. While one unusual figure in Offering #4 is made of now-rough, eroded granite, and the fragmentary figure (likely its companion, also standing with back to the celts—not shown) was badly decomposed schistose—both victims of La Venta's highly acidic soils—the remaining 21 sculptures are made of greenstone, a material that Mesoamericans valued above all others. Greenstone includes all green and bluish-green stones, with the most highly coveted form being jadeite, the American form of jade. Thirteen of the figures are composed of greenish serpentine, while two figures and all six of the celts are jade.



Figure **3.3.2.3**: Several Offering #4 figures (granite figure first on the left; female figure third from the left), photo: 1955 (R.F. Heizer collection, National Anthropological Archives, catalogue ID: **heizer_0114**)

The figures all take the typically Olmec style often referred to as the "baby-face," with an elongated head and a face with a down-turned mouth, puffy almond-shaped eyes, a triangular nose with drilled nostrils, and long, narrow ears with drilled holes in the lobes. The figures also all have nearly flat, slender bodies and take the classic pose of standing baby-face figures, with slightly bent knees and legs apart in a V, and arms held stiffly out to each side, with slightly bent elbows.



Figure **3.3.2.4**: The six celts from La Venta Offering No. 4, photo: 1955 (R.F. Heizer collection, National Anthropological Archives, catalogue ID: **heizer_0131**)

The six celts, meanwhile, are especially thin and narrow, clearly decorative objects rather than utilitarian axes or adzes.

Repurposing and recycling

Taken all together, the figures and celts of Offering #4 are similar in style, but their individualized features reveal that no single artist or workshop produced all of the sculptures; in other words, the Olmec did not create these sculptures as one group, expressly for this offering, but assembled this scene by repurposing and even recycling other small stone sculptures.



Figure **3.3.2.5**: Offering #4 (Olmec), c. 900 – 400 B.C.E., serpentine, jadeite, and granite, figures 6-5/16 to 7-15/16 inches tall, celts 9-5/16 to 10-3/4 inches tall, La Venta, Mexico (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City)

While the figures all take the classic baby-face style, they vary in color and details. Their heights and proportions vary, as do specific facial features such as the mouths; some have open, empty mouths, while others display a bare gum ridge, and still others have detailed teeth. Several figures were also already worn and broken, with missing hands, arms, or feet, when this offering was assembled. Other figures show evidence of reworking; for example, while some have deeply carved and well-modeled chest features and loincloths, others have only rudimentary, incised chests and loincloths that contrast with the original fine carving of the figure. The drilled ear holes, open poses, and elongated heads also strongly suggest that the figures may once have worn ornaments, clothing, headdresses, or possibly even wigs—and their dress could have changed for different occasions.



Figure **3.3.2.6**: Offering #4 (Olmec), c. 900 – 400 B.C.E., serpentine, jadite, and granite, figures 6-5/16 to 7-15/16 inches tall, celts 9-5/16 to 10-3/4 inches tall, La Venta, Mexico (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City)



Figure **3.3.2.7**: Drawing of the engraved design on one jade celt from La Venta Offering No. 4, photo: 1955 (R.F. Heizer collection, National Anthropological Archives, catalogue ID: heizer_0008)

The six celts, meanwhile, may have assumed their final, thin forms for the scene portrayed in Offering #4, but four of the celts illustrate the remains of incised imagery on one side, revealing that they had previous incarnations as parts of other objects. Placing a mirror next to one celt shows that it once formed half of a jade object incised with the image of an Olmec supernatural; another celt illustrates incomplete geometric shapes. The last two incised celts reveal their secrets when placed side-by-side; together, they illustrate the image of a richly attired, prone man with his head facing forward—a well-known Olmec image called "the flying Olmec"—and show that the two celts were once part of a larger object.

None of this is surprising, however, as scholars have established that the Olmec reworked and re-carved their large stone sculptures, sometimes completely transforming them into other sculptures, and that the Olmec arranged and re-arranged large stone sculptures into different historical or mythological scenes. La Venta Offering #4 offers strong evidence that the Olmec likewise used and re-used figurines and celts to create scenes on a smaller scale

Possible meanings

The meaning of the scene portrayed in Offering #4 has long been a mystery, although most scholars concur that it represents some sort of important mythological or historic event. Some have speculated that the scene might portray a group of priests involved in an important ritual or procession to honor a visiting dignitary, or that perhaps it is a gathering to prepare a human sacrifice. Recent research has established that the row of celts forming the backdrop of the scene likely represent stelae—upright standing stones that are often covered in relief sculpture—and that the scene therefore takes place at an important site. Other studies have revealed that two of the figures–the second figure in the procession and one figure in the on-looking crowd—have chest and groin features suggesting that they are female.

The female in the procession is one of the two jade figures, and it is the most stylized figure of Offering #4, with an especially large head and a very light blue-green color. The other jade figure is the figure facing the procession—a larger, finely carved male figure of bright green jadeite that wears a prominent incised loincloth. If the jade material was particularly significant, these two figures might be interpreted as the main actors of the event, with the remaining figures of the procession perhaps acting as attendants, and the granite figure facing the crowd (and possibly the now-disintegrated schistose figure) acting as priest or important witness. If so, Offering #4 might represent a meeting of two dignitaries, the establishing of an important alliance, or, if the jade figure in the procession is in fact female, even the marriage of two people of high status—all types of scenes that also appear to be recorded in Olmec relief sculpture (see below).

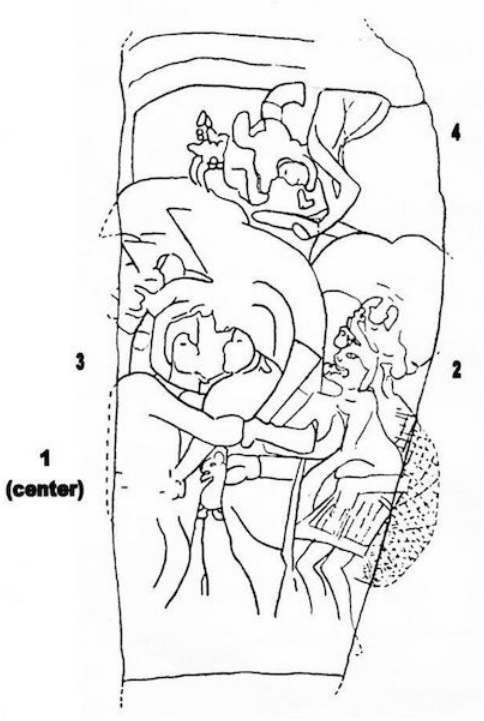


Figure 3.3.2.8: Line drawing by author of La Venta Stela 5. In this scene, two high-status male figures meet (1 and 3). The central figure (1) has his arm hooked around the arm of an elderly, high-status woman (2), possibly supporting her. What appears to be a pregnant, high-status female spirit or ancestor reaches down from the sky above and offers a celt to the group below (4).

An important offering

Whatever the meaning behind Offering #4, the Olmec clearly assembled the objects into this scene as an important offering, since before the figures were placed into position, they were covered in red cinnabar and hematite pigment—a treatment reserved for high-status offerings and burials. The Olmec also completely buried the scene in specially cleaned, pure white sand immediately after they placed the figures and celts into position, then covered the mound of sand with clean fill, and finally constructed a large platform on top.



Figure 3.3.2.9: Offering #4 (Olmec), c. 900 – 400 B.C.E., serpentine, jadeite, and granite, figures 6-5/16 to 7-15/16 inches tall, celts 9-5/16 to 10-3/4 inches tall, La Venta, Mexico (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City)

Offering #4 and the event that it commemorates apparently lingered long in Olmec collective memory as well. According to the original excavation reports, about 100 years after the original deposit, a later generation dug a small, precisely oriented oval pit down through four layers of platform flooring, through the fill, and into the white sand of the deposit. However, they dug just down

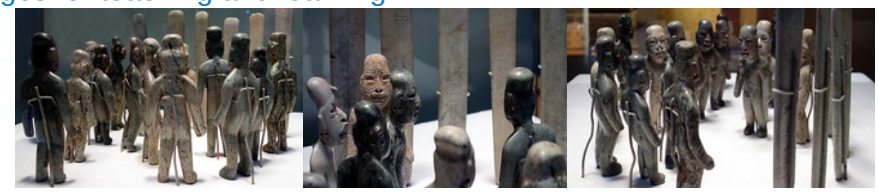
to the tops of the celts and the figurines' heads, as if to check and verify that the scene was undisturbed—and then immediately reburied them once again.

Additional resources:

Olmec art on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History (by Dr. James Doyle)

Phillip Drucker,, Robert F. Heizer, and Robert Squier. *Excavations at La Venta* (Tabasco. *Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* 170. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC.,1959), pp. 152-161 and plates 30-36.

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3.3.3: Olmec Jade

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure **3.3.3.1**: Jade votive axe, 1200-400 B.C.E., Olmec, 29 x 13.5 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

Jade votive axe

The Olmec fashioned votive axes in the form of figures carved from jade, jadeite, serpentine and other greenstones. The figures have a large head and a small, stocky body that narrows into a blade shape. They combine features of a human and other animals, such as jaguar, eagle or toad. The mouth is slightly opened, with a flaring upper lip and the corners turned down. The flaming eyebrows seen on this example are also a recurrent feature, and have been interpreted as a representation of the crest of the harpy eagle.

Most axes, including this one, have a pronounced cleft in the middle of the head. This cleft has been interpreted by scholars variously as the open fontanelle (soft spot) on the crown of newborn babies, the deep groove in the skull of male jaguars, or that found on the head of certain species of toads. In some instances vegetation sprouts out of some of them. These combinations of human and animal traits and representations of supernatural beings are common in Olmec art.

Jade perforator



Figure **3.3.3.2**: Jade perforator, 1200-400 B.C.E., Olmec, jadite, 38 x 3 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

Perforators were used in self-sacrifice rites, which involved drawing blood from several parts of the body. Some representations of Olmec rulers show them holding bloodletters and/or scepters as part of their elaborate ritual costume.



Figure **3.3.3.3**: Jade perforator (detail of handle), 1200-400 B.C.E., Olmec, jadite, 38 x 3 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

Bloodletting was performed by the ruler to ensure the fertility of the land and the well-being of the community. It was also a means of communication with the ancestors and was vital to sustain the gods and the world. These rituals were common throughout Mesoamerica.Olmec jade perforators are often found in graves as part of the funerary offerings. Bloodletting implements were also fashioned out of bone, flint, greenstones, stingray spines and shark teeth. They vary in form and symbolism. Handles can be plain, incised with a variety of symbols associated to certain deities, or carved into the shape of supernatural beings. The blades, ending in a sharp point, are sometimes shaped into the beaks of certain birds, such as the hummingbird, or into a stingray tail.

This large perforator was probably not used as a bloodletting instrument; it might have been placed in a grave as an offering, or may have served a symbolic function.

Jade pectoral



Figure **3.3.3.4**: Jade pectoral (with Maya glyphs), c. 1000-600 B.C.E., Olmec, Middle Preclassic period, jadeite, 10.5 x 11 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

This pectoral (chest ornament), broken on both sides, was carved by an Olmec artist and reused by the Maya, as shown by the two Maya glyphs on the left side. The edges framing the head at the top and bottom indicate that it could also have been part of a larger pectoral.

Jade objects in Olmec style have been found throughout Mesoamerica and as far south as Costa Rica. Those found in areas of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala and Honduras, are decorated with different motifs and shapes from those found in the Olmec heartland, centered in present-day Southern Veracruz and Tabasco.

Although contacts between the Maya area and the Olmec heartland seem to have been limited, jade objects in Olmec style appear in Maya deposits dated to the Middle Preclassic (about 1000-400 B.C.E.). Its presence was probably the result of contact between the two areas or with areas that shared the same cultural traditions and similar imagery. Objects found in later deposits, for example at the Cenote of Sacrifice, in Chichen Itza, an Early Postclassic site (900-1200 C.E.), would have been reused over generations or found in earlier graves.

This portrait is a remarkable example of the finest Olmec lapidary art. It was designed to be worn as a pectoral and the pair of Maya name glyphs inscribed on one flange indicate that it was later reused by a Maya lord as a treasured heirloom. Unusually the glyphs are drawn backward so that they face the Olmec portrait, hinting at the power of the object as a symbol of ancestral, dynastic authority. The depressed iris of the eyes and the pierced nose probably bore additional shell work and ornament.

Suggested readings:

Michael Coe, *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership* (Princeton, N.J., Art Museum, Princeton University in association with Harry N. Abrams, 1996).

E. Benson (ed.), *The Olmec and their neighbors* (Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks, 1981).

E. Benson and B. de la Fuente (eds.), *Olmec art of ancient Mexico* (Washington, National Gallery of Art, 1996).

C. McEwan, *Ancient Mexico in the British* (London, The British Museum Press, 1994).

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3.3.4: Olmec mask

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER



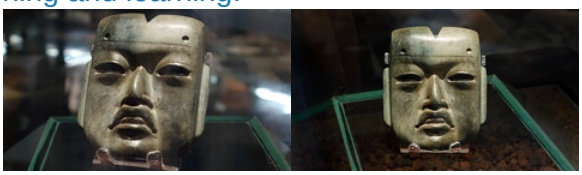
The Olmecs are known as “rubber people,” a name given to the peoples of the Gulf Coast after the Spanish Conquest. We don’t know what they called themselves.

Items buried in offerings included ceramic vessels, stone sculptures, obsidian blades, seashells, greenstone, and objects gathered from earlier locales (like Olmec sites and the city of Teotihuacan). Jadeite was quarried in the Sierra de las Minas in Guatemala, and was imported to the Gulf Coast of Mexico. Items acquired via trade or tribute (by the Aztecs) included feathers, obsidian, jadeite, cotton, cacao, and turquoise.

Additional resources:

Olmec art on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History (by Dr. James Doyle)

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3.3.5: Olmec mask at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

by THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



Video **3.3.5.1**: Mask, 10th–6th century B.C., Olmec (Mexico), jadeite, 6 3/4 x 6 5/16″ / 17.1 x 16.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Video from The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Additional resources:

Olmec art on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History (by Dr. James Doyle)

View this work on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's website

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3.3.6: Olmec figurine

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Hollow pottery figures such as this are referred to as “baby-faces,” since their plump bodies and facial features are similar to those of an infant. The eyes are almond-shaped, elliptical, or a simple slit. A protruding head, probably the result of cranial deformation, is another common feature. They are usually seated, with legs spread and arms raised or resting on their legs. Infants were a recurring theme in Olmec art.

Baby-face figurines



Figure **3.3.6.1**: Seated pottery figure, 1200 BC – 400 B.C.E., Olmec, pottery, 15.5 x 11.5 cm, Mexico © The Trustees of the British Museum

Baby-face figurines often present a mixture of human and animal traits, with features such as a feline mouth with down-turned low corners, a flaring upper lip and ‘flaming’ eyebrows. Their bodies are naked and show no indication of gender. These “were-jaguar” infants are also carved on monumental altars and stone sculptures, lying on the lap or in the arms of a person.

The different sections of the body were produced separately and joined together at a later stage. The finished product was covered by a thick white slip and then polished to a lustrous appearance. Red cinnabar or haematite powder was often applied to highlight symbolic details or features incised on the figures. These pigments were also used in human burials and probably had a significant role in Olmec rituals.



Figure \(\PageIndex{2\): Seated pottery figure, 1200 BC – 400 B.C.E., Olmec, pottery, 15.5 x 11.5 cm, Mexico © The Trustees of the British Museum

One rare find of a group of Olmec figurines, excavated in situ, revealed standing figures arranged in a semicircle, apparently engaged in an act of collective veneration or worship. This figure may once have formed part of such a scene.

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3.3.7: Olmec stone mask

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure **3.3.7.1**: Olmec stone mask, c. 900-400 B.C.E. Olmec, greenstone, 13 x 11.3 x 5.7 cm © Trustees of the British Museum

This mask was probably worn around the neck as a pendant and may have given the wearer a new identity, perhaps that of an ancestor or a god. It was made by the Olmecs, the earliest known settled civilization of Central America.

The Olmec

The Olmecs lived in the low-lying Gulf Coast area of what is now Mexico in about 1200-400 B.C.E. at sites such as San Lorenzo, Tres Zapotes, Laguna de los Cerros and La Venta.

These and the other Olmec centers were well planned and included many of the features that would be associated with later civilization in Central America including the Mexica (Aztecs) and Maya. Alongside impressive public spaces and large platform-mounds made of earth, there is evidence of a ceremonial ball game and complex astrological calendars.

Olmec art is very distinctive and clearly reflects their religion. Jaguars feature prominently because the Olmecs believed that, in the distant past, a union between a woman and a jaguar produced an earlier race of were-jaguars.

The Olmecs worked mainly in stone and particularly favored jade, or greenstone, which they believed had distinctive properties linked with fertility and procreation. These sought-after materials were brought into the region through long distance trade networks.

Earliest known writing in America



Figure **3.3.7.2**: Side of mask showing gylphs (detail), *Olmec stone mask* , c. 900-400 B.C.E., Olmec, greenstone, 13 x 11.3 x 5.7 cm
© Trustees of the British Museum

The head above is made from a dark green stone called serpentinite and would have been worked by skilled craftspeople using hand tools.

On either side of the mouth (detail above) there are two Olmec glyphs (picture signs). Olmec glyphs are the earliest known writing in America. These fine-line motifs symbolically define the four quarters of the human world with the king as ruler at the center. The Olmec art style is found on objects as far afield as the Valley of Mexico to the north and the Pacific coast of Chiapas to the south. This suggests a widely-shared set of beliefs that was to have a profound influence on many later Mesoamerican stylistic traditions.

Suggested readings:

M. Coe, et al., *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership* (New York, 1996).

R. Diehl, *The Olmecs: America's First Civilization* (London, 2004).

M. Miller, and K. Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion* (London, 1993).

C. Pool, *Olmec Archaeology and Early Mesoamerica* (Cambridge, 2007).

K. Taube, *Olmec Art at Dumbarton Oaks* (Washington D.C., 2004).

S.T. Evans, *Ancient Mexico and Central America: Archaeology and Culture History* (London, 2008).

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SECTION OVERVIEW

3.4: West Mexico

3.4.1: Pottery dog, Colima culture

3.4.2: Rock paintings of Sierra de San Francisco

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3.4.1: Pottery dog, Colima culture

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure **3.4.1.1**: Dog, Colima culture, c. 300 B.C.E.–300 C.E., slipped pottery, Mexico, from Colima, 36 cm in diameter (© Trustees of the British Museum)

This hollow figure represents a dog, the most commonly portrayed animal in the art of Colima. Dogs were believed to assist the dead in their journey to the Underworld. During the sixteenth century, the dog was also a central figure in the myths of creation, according to sources which themselves referred to Colima's ancient inhabitants.

The type of dog depicted here is a hairless breed, which was eaten at feasts. The same breed is found in Ecuador and on the coast of Peru and may have been introduced from there to West Mexico. Dogs are not the only animals portrayed in the ceramics of Colima: fauna (ducks, fish, crabs, parrots and serpents, for example), and flora (such as squashes, fruits and cacti) are all realistically represented. Human representations include hunchbacks and dwarfs, musicians playing a variety of instruments, and males holding bowls. Women are rarely depicted.

The ceramics of Colima represent a wider diversity of themes and shapes than those of Jalisco and Nayarit, but there is less variety in style. They generally exhibit a great naturalism. Best known are the hollow figures with a glossy slip. Their color varies from deep red to light orange, although some of them are blackened as a result of the firing process.

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3.4.2: Rock paintings of Sierra de San Francisco

by UNESCO



From c. 100 B.C.E. to 1300 C.E., the Sierra de San Francisco (in the El Vizcaino reserve, in Baja California) was home to a people who have now disappeared but who left one of the most outstanding collections of rock paintings in the world. They are remarkably well-preserved because of the dry climate and the inaccessibility of the site. Showing human figures and many animal species and illustrating the relationship between humans and their environment, the paintings reveal a highly sophisticated culture. Their composition and size, as well as the precision of the outlines and the variety of colors, but especially the number of sites, make this an impressive testimony to a unique artistic tradition.

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3.5: Zapotec Ancestor figure

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure **3.5.1**: Ancestor figure, Zapotec, c. 200 B.C.E.–800 C.E., pottery, from Oaxaca, Mexico, 35 x 27 cm (© Trustees of the British Museum)

Offering vessels like this one have been found in the tombs of high-ranking Zapotec lords and noblewomen in the Oaxaca Valley in Mexico.

Zapotec nobles were buried in tombs set around the central plaza of their capital at Monte Albán, which was founded in the 6th century B.C.E. and flourished between the 3rd and 7th centuries C.E.. This imposing site was located on the top of a hill with views of the Oaxaca Valley and surrounding mountains. The supporting population, which at its height numbered around 25,000, lived on the terraced slopes in the valley below.



Figure **3.5.2**: Ancestor figure, Zapotec, c. 200 B.C.E.–800 C.E., pottery, from Oaxaca, Mexico, 35 x 27 cm (© Trustees of the British Museum)

Royal ancestor worship was the focus of Zapotec belief and ceremonial practice and the powerful figures depicted on offering vessels—or funerary urns as they are also known—are thought to represent these ancestors rather than deities. The importance of ancestry lies in the Zapotec use of genealogy and ancestral lines to pass on power and wealth.

Figures like this have been found inside tombs, positioned alongside bodies, as well as in niches in the walls. They've also been found buried in the floors of ceremonial centers, seemingly as offerings.



Figure **3.5.3**: Ancestor figure, Zapotec, c. 200 B.C.E.–800 C.E., pottery, from Oaxaca, Mexico, 35 x 27 cm (© Trustees of the British Museum)

The figure on this example wears a mask and headdress representing the depicted ancestors' potent supernatural force. The chest ornament features a glyph or sculpted symbol of a day in the 260-day Zapotec ritual calendar.

The exact use and purpose of these vessels is unknown. The container, or urn, itself—usually a cylindrical vessel hidden behind the sculpted figure—may simply have been used to hold perishable offerings, as remains have been found inside.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

3.6: Teotihuacan

3.6.1: Teotihuacan

3.6.2: Pyramid of the Moon and Pyramid of the Sun

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3.6.1: Teotihuacan

by DR. MAYA JIMÉNEZ



Metropolis

An impressive city of 125,000-200,000 inhabitants, by the 6th century, Teotihuacan was the first large metropolis in the Americas. Teotihuacan, as the city is called, is a Náhuatl name that means “the place where the gods were created” and was given by the Aztec centuries after it was abandoned in the 7th century. The Aztecs attributed names and significance to its buildings but had no contact with this earlier culture. Very little is known of the people who built Teotihuacan, and as a result much of our knowledge of the site, its art, and Teotihuacan culture is derived from Aztec sources. Largely created before 250 C.E., Teotihuacan is a testament to the ambition of its people, who built the first American city on a grid plan.



Figure **3.6.1.1**: Pyramid of the Moon seen from the Avenue of the Dead with Cerro Gordo in the distance, Teotihuacan, Mexico

Due to an absence of (or as of yet undiscovered) royal palaces and graves, the lack of evidence for a cult of personality, and the as-of-yet undeciphered hieroglyphs, the governing system of Teotihuacan remains largely elusive to scholars. Nevertheless, the dramatic monumental architecture and dense urban fabric reveal a complex environment carefully planned to support a large population but also structured by the surrounding natural environment and in relation to specific constellations and planetary events. In keeping with the stratified nature of other Mesoamerican societies, Teotihuacan also benefited from rulers, or a ruling

elite, who commissioned massive architectural landmarks such as the Pyramids of the Sun and Moon, and who spread Teotihuacan's sphere of influence throughout Mesoamerica—even into the Maya region as far away as Guatemala.



Figure **3.6.1.2**: Pyramid the Temple of Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent), Teotihuacan, Mexico

Plan and pyramids

The **city of Teotihuacan** is aligned, like other Mesoamerican cities such as **La Venta**, on a north-south axis. This alignment is made explicit by the central artery, known as the Avenue of the Dead, which extends more than 1.5 miles across the city. Entering the city from the south, the Avenue of the Dead leads visitors to the city's three main architectural monuments, the ***Ciudadela***, a sunken plaza at the southernmost tip that contained temples, including the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent (above), the Pyramid of the Sun further down the avenue (below), and the Pyramid of the Moon (top of page) located at the northernmost point. In the distance and behind the Pyramid of the Moon, visitors can also catch a glimpse of the impressive Cerro Gordo, an extinct volcano that frames the pyramid and demonstrates the harmonious relationship between architecture and natural topography. Running perpendicular to the Avenue of the Dead another street follows the San Juan River. These axes help to define the grid of intersecting horizontal and vertical corridors that structure and organize the city plan. The urban grid helped to establish order for religious, domestic, and commercial complexes and a structural coherence that supported the management of the city and its population. Thousands of apartment complexes also reflect the ordered planning of the site.



Figure **3.6.1.3**: Pyramid of the Sun and the Avenue of the Dead, Teotihuacan, Mexico

The Pyramid of the Sun, which reaches a height of over 200 feet, was the tallest structure in the Americas at the time. Built over a cave, it is unclear who, or what, the pyramid was built to commemorate although art historians have suggested that creation mythology may be at issue, since Aztec and Maya sources refer to caves as places of origin and fertility. The pyramid was meant to be viewed and approached from the East. Visitors can still climb the pyramid's steep staircase, which originates near the Avenue of

the Dead and rises over five levels to what is now a bare flattened top (above). Keep in mind that this pyramid was heavily reconstructed in the modern era, so its original shape may have appeared somewhat differently than it does today.



Figure **3.6.1.4**: Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent), Teōtīhuacān

The Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent occupies a prominent place in the *Ciudadela*, a large open space that offers a respite from the massive presence of the Pyramid of the Sun and Pyramid of the Moon. Like so much else at Teotihuacan, the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent was built in the talud-tablero style. The temple stands out for its sculptural ornamentation depicting the feathered serpent, known by its Aztec name Quetzalcoatl. The feathered serpent is associated with water imagery and is depicted numerous times on the exterior of the temple as an undulating snake navigating among seashells (above). Two faces project outwards, one of which depicts the feathered serpent (above left). The identification of the other head is more challenging. One interpretation is that it represents an early version of the Aztec god Tlaloc (known for his goggled eyes) and associated with rain and warfare (above right). However, some scholars identify the head as an early precedent of Xiuhcoatl, or Fire Serpent, and who was associated with warfare, fire, and time (or the calendar). Most scholars agree that the temple was associated with warfare and human sacrifice, as confirmed by numerous skeletal remains (presumably of warriors) that were discovered by archeologists in the 1980s. Speculation has also arisen about whether the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent may have contained the body of a ruler.



Figure **3.6.1.5**: Reconstruction of mural from Tepantitla in Teotihuacan in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City

Paintings

Teotihuacan was a heavily painted site, with murals found throughout the city. For example on the walls of the apartment complex in the Tepantitla district, we find an elaborate mural showing a figure often identified as the Great Goddess and more recently as a

mountain-tree. The female figure stands frontally while a blossoming tree with butterflies and spiders emerges from her head (potentially a reference to the heavenly realm), while her feet remain attached to the underworld. The inverted u-shape found below the mountain-tree may function as a symbolic womb, similar to the cave found at the Pyramid of the Sun.

The identity of the two individuals to her side, possibly priests, have sparked interest. Considering the cosmopolitan nature of the city, it had been thought that Teotihuacan's figurative art was not portraiture, but rather generic representations that sought to unify a diverse population. Recently however, some painted signs have been recognized as representing the names of individuals, leading to a re-examination of whether Teotihuacan artists portrayed specific individuals and reminding us that there is still much to learn about this complex and ancient city.

Archeologists have dated the city's collapse to the seventh century when many of Teotihuacan's buildings were destroyed.

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3.6.2: Pyramid of the Moon and Pyramid of the Sun

by **DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK** and **DR. BETH HARRIS**



The Pyramid of the Moon and the Pyramid of the Sun, Teotihuacan, c. 1st century C.E., Mexico; speakers: Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Beth Harris

Key terms and concepts:

- Teotihuacan
- Pyramid of the Sun and Pyramid of the Moon
- Avenue of the Dead
- sacred landscape: mountains and caves
- talud-tablero
- adosada

Additional resources:

Learn about Mesoamerica

Learn more about Teotihuacan

Read a glossary for Pre-Columbian art

Matthew Robb, ed., *Teotihuacan: City of Water, City of Fire* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2017)

Annabeth Headrick, *The Teotihuacan Trinity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013)

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SECTION OVERVIEW

3.7: Classic Veracruz Culture

3.7.1: The Mesoamerican ballgame and a Classic Veracruz yoke

3.7.2: El Tajín

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3.7.1: The Mesoamerican ballgame and a Classic Veracruz yoke

by DR. REX KOONTZ and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER

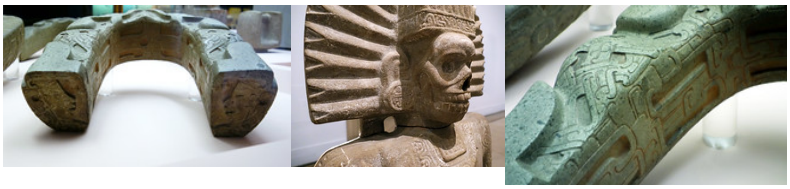


Video **3.7.1.9**: Yoke, c. 1 – 900 C.E., Classic Veracruz culture, greenstone, 11.5 x 38 x 41.5 cm (American Museum of Natural History, Washington D.C.)

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3.7.2: El Tajín

by **UNESCO**



Located in the state of Veracruz, El Tajin was at its height from the early 9th to the early 13th century. It became the most important centre in north-east Mesoamerica after the fall of the Teotihuacan Empire. Its cultural influence extended all along the Gulf and penetrated into the Maya region and the high plateaux of central Mexico. Its architecture, which is unique in Mesoamerica, is characterized by elaborate carved reliefs on the columns and frieze. The 'Pyramid of the Niches', a masterpiece of ancient Mexican and American architecture, reveals the astronomical and symbolic significance of the buildings. El Tajin has survived as an outstanding example of the grandeur and importance of the pre-Hispanic cultures of Mexico.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

3.8: Maya

The ancient Maya were united by belief systems and cultural practices that included a distinct architectural style and a writing system.

1000 B.C.E. - 1521 C.E.

3.8.1: The Maya, an introduction

3.8.2: Maya glyphs, a basic introduction

3.8.3: Plaque of a Maya king from Teotihuacan

3.8.4: Mirror-Bearer

3.8.5: Vessel with a mythological scene

3.8.6: Politics and History on a Maya Vase

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3.8.9: Classic Maya portrait stelae

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3.8.1: The Maya, an introduction

by DR. MAYA JIMÉNEZ



Figure **3.8.1.1**: Map showing the extent of the Maya civilization (red), compared to all other Mesoamerica cultures (black). Today, these sites are located in the countries of Mexico, Belize, Honduras and Guatemala (image: **CC BY-SA 3.0**)



Figure **3.8.1.2**: Vessel, Mythological Scene, 7th-8th century, Guatemala, Mesoamerica, Maya, ceramic, 14 x 11.4 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The Maya are a culturally affiliated people that continue to speak their native languages and still often use the ancient 260-day ritual calendar for religious practices. The ancient Maya were united by belief systems, cultural practices that included a distinct architectural style, and a writing system. They were also joined by political interaction in the form of warfare and intermarriage. They left an artistic legacy that ranges from intricately carved monolithic sculptures to complex mural cycles. The ancient Maya are credited with creating the most advanced Mesoamerican writing system, which was logo-syllabic, meaning that it consists of pictorial symbols or glyphs that represent either entire words or syllables. It is the only pre-Hispanic writing system of Mesoamerica that has been largely deciphered (see image below).

The Maya are also known for their advanced understanding of time, which they acquired through their study of astronomy and which allowed for the development of a complex calendrical system.

Public inscriptions—which decorated temples and palaces—have also contributed to our knowledge of the Maya, providing archeologists with important dates, names, and ritual information.

Periods in Maya history

Historians divide Maya history into three periods:

Pre-Classic: 1000 B.C.E.-250 C.E.
Classic: 250-900 C.E.
Post-Classic: 900-1521 C.E.

The Classic Period is divided into Early Classic: 250-550 C.E. and Late Classic: 600-900 C.E. During the early Classic Period, the Maya had built only a few cities in Mesoamerica. By the Late Classic Period however, the population had grown and Maya cities had been founded throughout the region. Important Maya cities include Tikal in the east (in what is today Guatemala), Palenque in the west (what is today Mexico), and Copán in the south (in what is today Honduras).



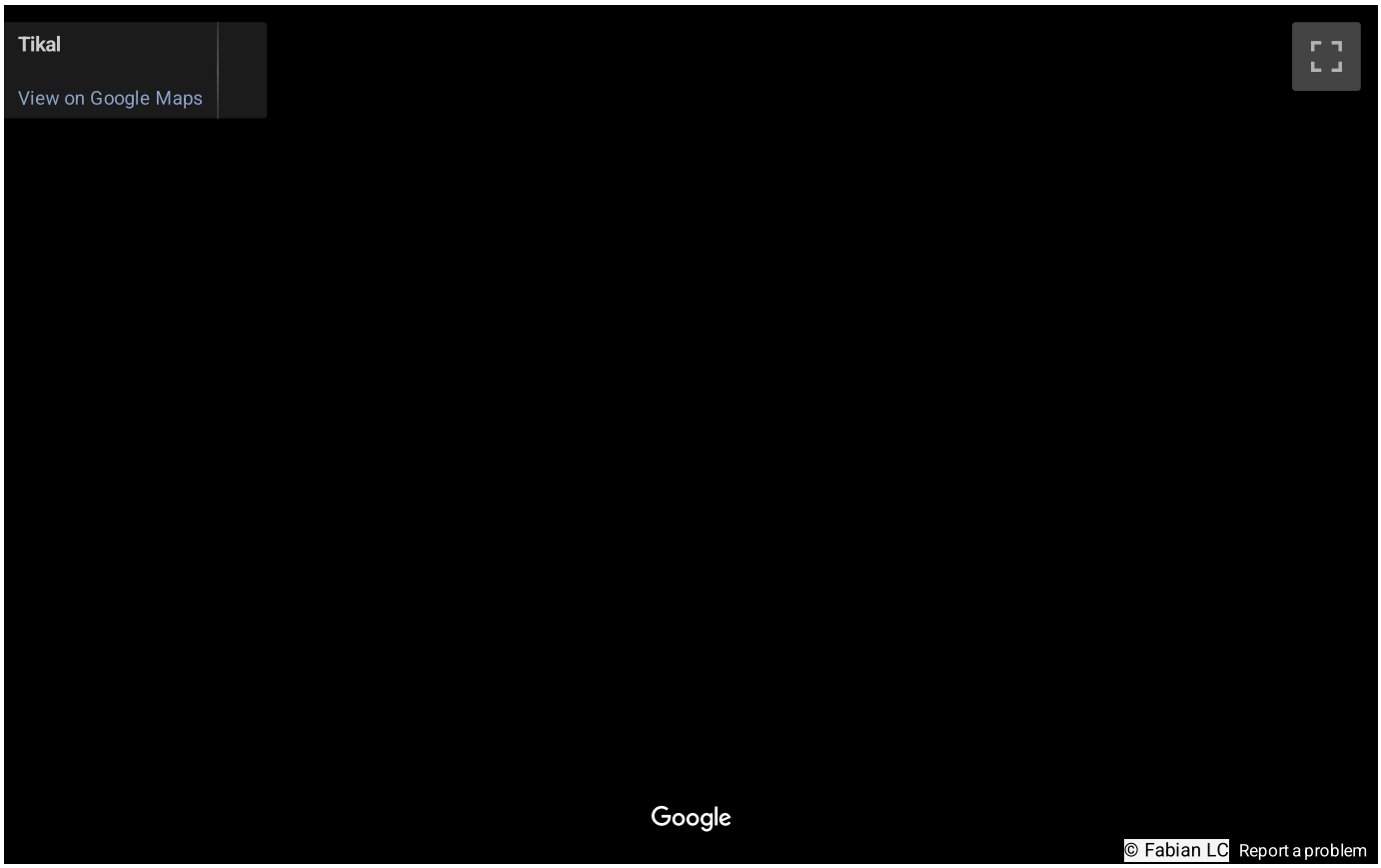
Figure **3.8.1.3**: Glyphs from Lintel 25, c. 725, Structure 23, Yaxchilán, Classic Maya, limestone, 121 x 85.5 x 13.5 cm (The British Museum)

City States, ruled independently

With a population ranging in the millions and scattered throughout a vast region, the Maya were organized into small independent kingdoms or, more accurately, into city states. Each city state was ruled by a divine lord or *ajaw*/*ahau* who controlled territory around the capital city and frequently fought with neighboring states for preeminence. Political and economic rivalries among the Maya lords were fueled by an interest in acquiring territory and controlling trade routes—activities made more complicated by the remoteness of many Maya cities as well as their diverse geographies (Maya cities could be found in lowland rainforests and mountainous highlands). Different from the later Aztec, who centralized power and created a true empire, Maya power remained de-centralized and was spread throughout numerous kingdoms.

The collapse of Maya cities in the tenth century is not fully understood but may have resulted from complex factors including climate change (and resulting drought and crop failures), overpopulation, and political unrest. Following this collapse, Maya civilization continued on the northern tip of the Yucatán Peninsula, where Chichen Itza emerged as an important city of the Post-Classic Period. Though the city was abandoned by the thirteenth century, it was the arrival of Hernan Cortés and his Spanish fleet in the early 16th century that marked the end of the Maya civilization.

Tikal National Park (Tikal Guatemala)



Additional resources:

The British Museum and Google Cultural Institute resources on Maya Culture

James Doyle, “Ancient Maya Sculpture.” on The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

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3.8.2: Maya glyphs, a basic introduction

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure 3.8.2.1:Codex Dresden, also known as Codex Dresdensis, P 1–3, original from c. 1500, facsimile from 1825–31, Lowland Maya region, south eastern Mexico and Guatemala, comprising of 74 leaves (© Trustees of the British Museum)



Figure 3.8.2.2: Structure 23, Lintel 25, Yaxchilán (Maya) (© Trustees of the British Museum)

Across the Pacific Ocean, the Maya civilization was at its height between 300 and 900. Inscriptions have been found on monumental sculpture, public buildings, murals, pottery, shell, obsidian, bone, wood, jade, and screenfold books called codices. They were only identified as a writing system by scholars during the nineteenth century.

The majority of surviving examples of Maya writing are from the Classic period (250–900) although some date to the Late Preclassic (B.C.E.–250 C.E.). Inscriptions record calendar and astronomical information, and historical events such as alliances, wars, lineages, and marriages.

Maya glyphs were inscribed in blocks placed in horizontal and vertical rows. One or more glyphs were set in each block. It is generally read from left to right and top to bottom. The text sometimes appears in single columns, but can appear in L-shaped or other arrangements, such as on the carved lintels from the city of Yaxchilán.

Maya hieroglyphs were first identified as a writing system during the nineteenth century, when the bar-and-dot numerical system was deciphered. In the 1950s it was discovered that the script combined signs representing whole words with signs representing syllables. Certain glyphs were recognized as naming specific people and cities (known as Name Glyphs and Emblem Glyphs respectively). There were major breakthroughs in decipherment in the second half of the twentieth century and approximately 85% of the glyphs can now be read.



Figure **3.8.2.3**: Yaxchilan lintel 35, Maya, Late Classic period, 600-800, From Yaxchilán, Mexico, (© Trustees of the British Museum)

Glyphs from a Maya temple

This limestone lintel was found by A. P. Maudslay in 1882 among the rubble where it had fallen from Structure 12 at Yaxchilán. Eight lintels were housed in this building. Commissioned around 500, they record nine generations of rulers at Yaxchilán and the accession of Mah K'ina Skull II, the tenth king of Yaxchilán. Mah K'ina Skull II commissioned this lintel, Lintel 35, which records a series of captures that he made in the surrounding region, concluding with a triumph over the great northern city of Calakmul, dated to 537. More than two centuries later (around 760), Bird Jaguar IV, the main character in Lintels 15, 16, and 17, reset the lintels recording his ancestry in Structure 12. The last three hieroglyphs tell us that the captives were seen as the 'food' of Yaxchilán's patron deities.

Writing on ceramic vessels

Polychrome ceramic vessels were a symbol of status and power for the Maya. They were used by the elite and are found as offerings in rich burials. A large number of beautiful polychrome vases, bowls and dishes from the Late Classic period have been recovered from the Maya area, at sites such as Tikal, Holmul, and Seibal in the lowlands, and Nebaj in the highlands.



Figure 3.8.2.1: The Fenton Vase, 600-800 C.E., Maya, Late Classic period, polychrome ceramic, 17.2 cm diameter, Nebaj, Guatemala © Trustees of the British Museum

The vessels provide an important source of information about Maya society in the Classic period, with text and image illustrating historical and mythological events. The scenes depict scribes, merchants, rulers and other members of society.



Figure 3.8.2.1: The Fenton Vase, 600-800 C.E., Maya, Late Classic period, polychrome ceramic, 17.2 cm diameter, Nebaj, Guatemala © Trustees of the British Museum

This beautiful example was found at Nebaj, a Maya site in the highlands of Guatemala. The most common themes on Nebaj style polychrome vessels are tribute and warfare. The scene here represents the delivery of tribute to a seated lord. Above the basket presented to him are a series of six hieroglyphs which indicate his name and titles, while the other glyph panels correspond to those of the four figures in the scene. Their jewelry, clothing and spangled turbans adorned with flowers suggest that they are members of the elite.

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Additional resources

Coe, *Breaking the Maya code* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1992)

Coe and J. Kerr, *The art of the Maya scribe* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1997)

Schele and M.E. Miller, *The blood of kings: dynasty and ritual in Maya art* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1986)

Tate, *Yaxchilan: the design of a Maya ceremonial city* (University of Texas Press, 1992)

McEwan, *Ancient Mexico in the British Museum* (London, The British Museum Press, 1994)

Martin and N. Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya kings and queens* (Thames and Hudson, 2000)

D.R. Budet, *Painting the Maya universe: royal ceramics of the Classic period* (Durham, London, Duke University Press in association with Duke University Museum of Art, 1994)

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3.8.3: Plaque of a Maya king from Teotihuacan

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure 3.8.3.1: Map of Mesoamerica (from FAMSI)

The great city of Teotihuacan thrived between 100 B.C.E. and 650 C.E. in central Mexico. Several hundred kilometers to the south, the Maya civilization was flourishing. Similarities in architecture and ceramics between Teotihuacan and the Maya area indicate that contact existed. The nature of this connection, however, is far from clear.

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Figure 3.8.3.1 :Plaque of a Maya king, c. 400–800 C.E., jadeite, found at Teotihuacan, 14 x 14 cm (© Trustees of the British Museum)

The scene on this plaque, carved in the so-called ‘Nebaj style’ of Guatemala, shows a Maya lord or ruler seated on a throne with a smaller figure at his feet. The lord wears earplugs, a large pectoral, armlets, wristlets, a belt with a mounted head and a zoomorphic headdress decorated with long feathers. On his left arm he carries a shield with a representation of the Jaguar God, a god of the Underworld.

Much scholarly discussion has centered around the influence of Teotihuacan on the Maya area. However, relatively little attention has been paid to Maya presence in Teotihuacan. This plaque is one of relatively few imported Maya objects ever found at Teotihuacan and indicates that interaction between the two cultures went both ways. Similar plaques have been found at other sites, including at the Cenote of Sacrifices (the Sacred Well) in Chichen Itza, where they were thrown as offerings.

The color of the plaque varies, with a darker hue on the left where the smaller figure was carved. This is due to the different chemical components of the jade and depends on its source. The main source of Maya jade is the Motagua Valley, in Guatemala.

The plaque is broken around the edges, which may indicate that it was reused.

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Additional resources:

More about Maya kings in art

Read about Mesoamerica

A glossary for pre-Columbian art

Cite this page as: The British Museum, "Plaque of a Maya king from Teotihuacan," in *Smarthistory*, May 24, 2021, accessed October 22, 2022, **https://smarthistory.org/plaque-maya-king-from-teotihuacan/**.

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3.8.4: Mirror-Bearer

by DR. JAMES DOYLE and DR. BETH HARRIS



Video **3.8.4.10**: Mirror-Bearer, 6th century (Classic Maya), wood and red hematite, 35.9 x 22.9 x 22.9 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

James Doyle, "Ancient Maya Sculpture" on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

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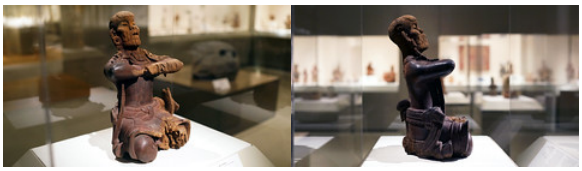
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3.8.5: Vessel with a mythological scene

by DR. JAMES DOYLE and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER



Video **3.8.5.11**: Vessel, Mythological Scene, 7-8th century C.E., Maya (Classic Maya), 14 x 11.4 cm, ceramic (1978.412.206) (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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3.8.6: Politics and History on a Maya Vase

ARA GRACE TREMAIN



Figure **3.8.6.1**: Painted Vessel (Enthroned Maya Lord and Attendants), c. 650-750 C.E., Maya, cylinder vase, ceramic, 16.51 x 20.32 cm (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D.C.)

The rich and famous

Getting up close and personal to the rich and famous is not something that many of us have the opportunity to experience in our lifetimes. While we may not be able to rub shoulders with them, television, magazines, and the internet provide us with a glimpse into their lives. Just as media is a form of advertising and communication today, art was a means of communication for the ancient Maya. In a world where most of the population was illiterate, the visual arts were an important tool used to record historical events and communicate political and religious ideals.

Monumental architecture and sculpture of rulers and elites were often set in public spaces for the entire populace to see, as a constant reminder of their control and authority. In restricted elite spaces, which commoners did not have access to, grandiose visual arts were unnecessary signs of wealth. Affluence and authority were instead communicated via much smaller items manufactured from exotic materials by the finest craftsmen. Painted vases were especially favored and were commissioned to portray the lives and activities of those in and around power in the ancient world. These scenes included historical individuals such as the ruler and his family, mystical deities, and natural representations of flora and fauna. They survive today as a visual snapshot into the lives of the rich and famous Maya over 1000 years ago.

by



Figure **3.8.6.2**: Ruler sitting with legs crossed and back resting on a large cushion as an attendant offers him a small dish, *Painted Vessel (Enthroned Maya Lord and Attendants)*, c. 650-750 C.E., Maya, cylinder vase, ceramic, 16.51 x 20.32 cm (Dumbarton Oaks Museum)

This painted ceramic, in the collection of the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection in Washington, D.C., shows us an intimate scene involving a ruler and the members of his court. Its style can be dated to the Late Classic period (650-850 C.E.)—a time in which painted ceramics were manufactured in large quantities, many depicting scenes of the royal court.

The ancient Maya were not a unified kingdom but were organized into different city-states, each controlled by a different ruler. The ruler was generally male, although there were a few instances in which there were female Maya rulers. Just as monarchs, prime ministers, and presidents today are supported by an administrative body, ancient Maya rulers were aided by members of their royal court. In addition to providing administrative support, courtiers also provided entertainment for rulers and we see evidence for this in the representation of musicians and dancers on Maya vases.



Figure **3.8.6.3**: Two figures (detail), *Painted Vessel (Enthroned Maya Lord and Attendants)*, c. 650-750 C.E., Maya, cylinder vase, ceramic, 16.51 x 20.32 cm (Dumbarton Oaks Museum). Photograph by Alexandre Tokovinine

Maya hieroglyphic writing was commonly painted around the rim of vases, to announce its owner and describe the contents inside (frequently a chocolate drink known as *cacao*). The writing states that the vase is a drinking vessel, belonging to *K'ebij Ti Chan* (the spelling of this name is uncertain and the first word may have alternatively been *K'ebix* or *Kexik*). He was the son of *Sak Muwaan* (whose name translates as White Bird), ruler of the site Motul de San Jose in Guatemala, whose exact period of reign is unknown but is likely to have been before 701 C.E. or somewhere between 711 and 726 C.E.. *K'ebij Ti Chan* is not the individual seated on the throne in this scene, but may be the individual seated to the left of the ruler (occupying a privileged position close to the throne). The individual on the throne is a ruler from the Naaman polity, which was based at the site of La Florida. **Here is a diagram** identifying what we see on the vase.

The importance of the ruler on this vase is emphasized by his placement on a throne, above the other figures in the scene. He sits with his legs crossed and back resting on a large cushion, which is in front of a chest that seems to hold sporting equipment and costume for the ballgame (more about the ballgame **here**). To his right a kneeling attendant offers him a small dish, perhaps containing food, but the ruler turns away toward the two attendants seated on the ground. Two additional attendants (image left), who may be in a separate room, are seen conversing with each other. Interestingly, three of the attendants are wearing the same body paint as the ruler, and all attendants wear somewhat similar jewelry and accoutrements. The representation of the outfits in this scene is in stark contrast to the large, lavish, outfits depicted on sculpture and other media. This suggests that extravagant outfits were not part of the daily life of the Maya court.



Figure **3.8.6.4**: Rollout view, *Painted Vessel (Enthroned Maya Lord and Attendants)*, c. 650-750 C.E., Maya, cylinder vase, ceramic, 16.51 x 20.32 cm (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection). Image courtesy Justin Kerr.



Figure **3.8.6.5**: Hieroglyphics, *Painted Vessel (Enthroned Maya Lord and Attendants)*, c. 650-750 C.E., Maya, cylinder vase, ceramic, 16.51 x 20.32 cm (Dumbarton Oaks Museum)

While excavations have uncovered architectural thrones, demonstrating that rulers did indeed sit on thrones like those depicted in this scene, materials used to manufacture cushions and costume elements are usually not recovered from ancient Maya sites. Unfortunately, because of the humid environment and acidic soils in the Maya region, many organic remains from royal court settings such as this one are not preserved in the archaeological record. Consequently, our knowledge about their use and importance within the court is largely taken from the visual record. Therefore, although this vase is unprovenienced (meaning it was not discovered from a scientifically controlled excavation) it is important to the study of ancient Maya culture and can reveal information about the past that is otherwise unavailable.

How did the Maya make these ceramics?

A cylinder-shaped vase (meaning straight-walled), like this one, was manufactured by hand from local clays available in the Maya region. Recent research shows that these vases were built up from coils placed on top of one another. Once the shape was created, it was left to dry so that it could be painted prior to firing in an open kiln. The Maya obtained different colored pigments from vegetation, minerals, and insects, and applied them using brushes made from hair, fibre, or feathers. Firing the ceramic after painting it ensured a durable, long-lasting, design.

The lack of appendages on cylinder vases required them to be held in both hands, creating a close relationship between object and person. Embellishing the exterior of vases that were in such close contact with the body allowed for an intimate and privileged means of communication. Only a select few individuals would have been privy to holding and viewing vases such as this one. Thus, care was taken to produce painted scenes of the highest quality as a means of impressing whoever came into contact with them. It is likely there were specialized workshops that produced painted vases such as this one, with artists that were in high demand and much sought-after for their skills.

What did the Maya use painted ceramics for?

The Maya used painted ceramics in feasting events to serve food and beverages, and as gifts for elites and rulers from neighboring sites. Feasts were not only a means of celebration and festivity, but were also important political events that fostered relationships between different sites. Ceramics therefore played an important social and political role as objects that were used and gifted. More significantly, the painted scenes that decorated these ceramics became valued elements in their own right and would have stimulated trade between sites that manufactured them, and sites that desired them. Consequently, vases of this kind were used, gifted, and traded between sites all throughout the ancient Maya region.

Presenting food and drink in vases such as this one is akin to serving dinner using the best family tableware, and, presumably, they were afforded the same care and high regard. Many painted vases have been recovered from burials and offerings at archaeological sites, where they were included for their ritual, symbolic, and economic value.

Additional Resources:

James Doyle, “Ancient Maya Sculpture.” on The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

This vase at Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection

This vase on the Google Art Project (zoomable image)

What can we learn from a Maya vase?

Maya Area, 500-1000 A.D. on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

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3.8.7: Maya- The Fenton Vase

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure **3.8.7.1**: The Fenton Vase, 600-800 C.E., Maya, Late Classic period, polychrome ceramic, 17.2 cm diameter, Nebaj, Guatemala © Trustees of the British Museum

This vase shows a Maya ruler sitting cross-legged on a bench, wearing an enormous headdress to show that he is important. He is pointing to a basket full of corn bread gifts called tamales. This vase illustrates the delivery of a tribute, with glyphs naming the figures whose jewelry and turbans identify them as members of the Maya elite. The six hieroglyphs in boxes to his left list his name and titles.

Glyphs

The Maya had begun to write as early as 400 B.C.E., but from the sixteenth century Spanish missionaries destroyed their codices (screenfold books) and made them learn the Spanish alphabet. As a result, the Mayan language was lost and there was no way of deciphering the glyphs on their monuments or the handful of codices that survived.

In the eighteenth century, however, European travelers began to rediscover the Maya civilization. In particular, the publication of Antonio del Río's report on his expedition to the ancient city of Palenque (1787) included the first illustrations of Maya script carved on stone monuments.



Figure **3.8.7.2**: The Fenton Vase, 600-800 C.E., Maya, Late Classic period, polychrome ceramic, 17.2 cm diameter, Nebaj, Guatemala © Trustees of the British Museum

By the early nineteenth century, European scholars were beginning to recognize that Maya glyphs were a writing system. They made efforts to record the glyphs in drawings, engravings and casts, and collected vases and other artifacts with glyphs on them. The first European to accurately depict Maya glyphs was Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), who illustrated pages from the Dresden Codex in 1810. But, scholars did not finally understand the meaning of Maya glyphs until the twentieth century.

Tribute and warfare

Polychrome ceramic vessels were a symbol of status and power for the Maya. They were used by the élite and are found as offerings in rich burials. A large number of beautiful polychrome vases, bowls and dishes from the Late Classic period have been recovered from the Maya area, at sites such as Tikal, Holmul and Seibal in the lowlands, and Nebaj in the highlands.

The vessels provide an important source of information about Maya society in the Classic period, with text and images illustrating historical and mythological events. The scenes depict scribes, merchants, rulers and other members of society. This beautiful example was found at Nebaj, a Maya site in the highlands of Guatemala. The most common themes on Nebaj style polychrome vessels are tribute and warfare.

Suggested readings:

D.R. Budet, Painting the Maya universe (Durham, London, Duke University Press in association with Duke University Museum of Art, 1994).

M. Coe and J. Kerr, The art of the Maya scribe (London, Thames & Hudson, 1997).

K. Sloan with A. Burnett (ed.). *Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century* (London: The British Museum Press, 2003).

M. Coe, *Breaking the Maya code* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1992).

L. Schele and M.E. Miller, *The blood of kings* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1986).

R. Sharer, *Daily life in Maya civilization* (London, Greenwood Press, 1996).

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3.8.8: Chakalte', Relief with Enthroned Ruler

by DR. JAMES DOYLE and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER



Video **3.8.8.1**: Chakalte', Relief with Enthroned Ruler (lintel from La Pasadita, Guatemala), late 8th century (Classic Maya), limestone and paint, 88.9 x 87.6 x 7 cm (1979.206.1047) (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

James Doyle, "Sacrifice, Fealty, and a Sculptor's Signature on a Maya Relief"

James Doyle, "Maya Sculpture" on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

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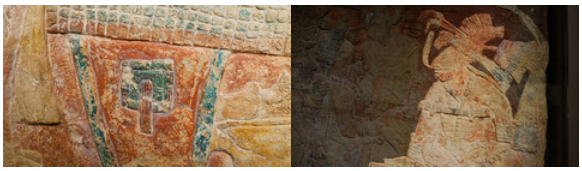
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3.8.9: Classic Maya portrait stelae

by DR. CATHERINE E. BURDICK



Figure **3.8.9.1**: A Mayan ruler in ritual dress, Stela 51, Calakmul, Campeche, Mexico, 731 C.E.,(Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico D.F.)

Kings in stone

In 1839, American lawyer and amateur archaeologist John Lloyd Stephens and English artist Frederick Catherwood were the first outsiders to venture into the rainforests of Central America. They brought back their romanticized accounts and drawings of the remains of ancient Maya civilization to an eager England. In their publications, Stephens and Catherwood conveyed that they had uncovered the ruins of a great civilization that was uniquely American—one that had developed without contact with Egypt, India, or China.

Solemn and strange

Among the many strange and wonderful sites they encountered, it was the monuments that most aroused their interest and sparked their Victorian sensibility for engaging past civilizations. In regard to these hefty carved stones, Stephens penned the following excerpt, “standing as they do in the depths of the forest, silent and solemn, strange in design, excellent in sculpture, rich in ornament…their uses and purposes and whole history so entirely unknown….”

Over the past thirty years, scholars have made substantial advances in understanding the “uses and purposes” of Maya stone sculptures, and of the ancient peoples that produced them. This progress is due in no small part to developments in the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphics, which has escalated in recent decades. Epigraphers and art historians have labored to reconstruct the history and culture of the flourishing Classic period (c. 250-900 C.E.) expressed on the sculptures found throughout México, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Belize.

We now understand that the sculptors who chiseled these monuments were commissioned by privileged elites who lorded over vast city-states. These regional political and geographic partitions were dominated by singular powerful city-centers that vied for control of land and resources. Such cities were immense, and within them architects built grand pyramids and temples embellished with sculptures. Sculpted stone was an enduring record, and as early explorers witnessed, the remains of hundreds of carved monoliths still grace the ruins of these ancient Maya cities.



Figure **3.8.9.2**: Portrait of '18-Rabbit' from Stela A, Copán, Honduras, 731 C.E. (photo adapted: **Dennis Jarvis**)

The stone monuments over which Stephens and Catherwood marveled were crucial to the social and political cohesion of ancient Maya city-states. While small-scale art objects were cloistered behind the walls of privileged homes and courts, larger stone sculptures served as the principal medium for presenting political and religious rhetoric to the public.

The most vital and imposing format was the stela—an upright flat slab of stone worked in relief on one, two, or four faces. Their placement at the base of immense pyramids or in open plazas facing small stage-like platforms suggests that they were intended to be viewed by vast audiences in conjunction with other public spectacles. These *lakam-tuun* "banner stones," conveyed a broad and complex set of ideologies concerning royal history and politics, ceremonial activity, and calendrical reckoning. Their just-over human scale renders them ideal for presentations of engaging and awe-inspiring ruler portraits. In the tense political atmosphere of the Classic period, enduring images of powerful leaders ensured that the public recognized the authority of the ruler, the fortitude of his or her dynasty, and of the favor of deities.

Iconography and text carved onto stelae illuminated the king's visionary power. Contemporary notions of idealization prescribed that rulers appear youthful, handsome, and athletic. They wore a vast inventory of authoritative garb that included jade ornaments, various symbols of kingship, and an unwieldy, oversized headdress that must have been highly impractical for regular use. These figures act out one of a standard set of rites of passage: they wear battle garb to emphasize their military prowess, ritually let blood in offering to the deities, "scatter" sacred substances with outstretched hands, or participate in ritual dance. Imagine trying to dance while balancing a headdress that is half your own height! Accompanying hieroglyphic texts elaborated on the life of the ruler and his ancestors.



Figure 3.8.9.3: Portrait of King Tahn Te' K'inich in the garb of a warrior from Stela 6, Aguateca, Guatemala, ruled 770-802 C.E. (Museo Chileno del Arte Precolombino, Santiago, Chile)

As regional conflicts became more frequent in 8th century, military themes on portrait stelae increased.

Stela 6 from Aguateca, Guatemala (left) exemplifies the archetype of the conquering ruler, responsible for defeating enemies and procuring captives for ritual sacrifice. Although the hieroglyphs on this monument are eroded, the portrait appears to depict King Tahn Te' K'inich (ruled 770-802 C.E.) as he brandishes a spear and shield and stands victoriously over two bound enemy captives.

Although Classic-period Maya stelae are no longer shrouded in mystery, numerous questions remain in regard to how they functioned. Perhaps most importantly, they provide only one side of the story, that of the ruler and of royal ideology. Stelae offer us little information regarding how they were received by the public, and we can only guess as to how effectively they impacted the common person. Although we know far more about ancient Maya stelae than Catherwood and Stephens ever imagined possible, the haze of mystery and intrigue through which they viewed these monuments has hardly evaporated.

Additional resources:

James Doyle, "Ancient Maya Sculpture." on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Lords of Creation: The Origins of Sacred Maya Kingship (video)

Mayan art of the Americas from The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya at the National Gallery of Art

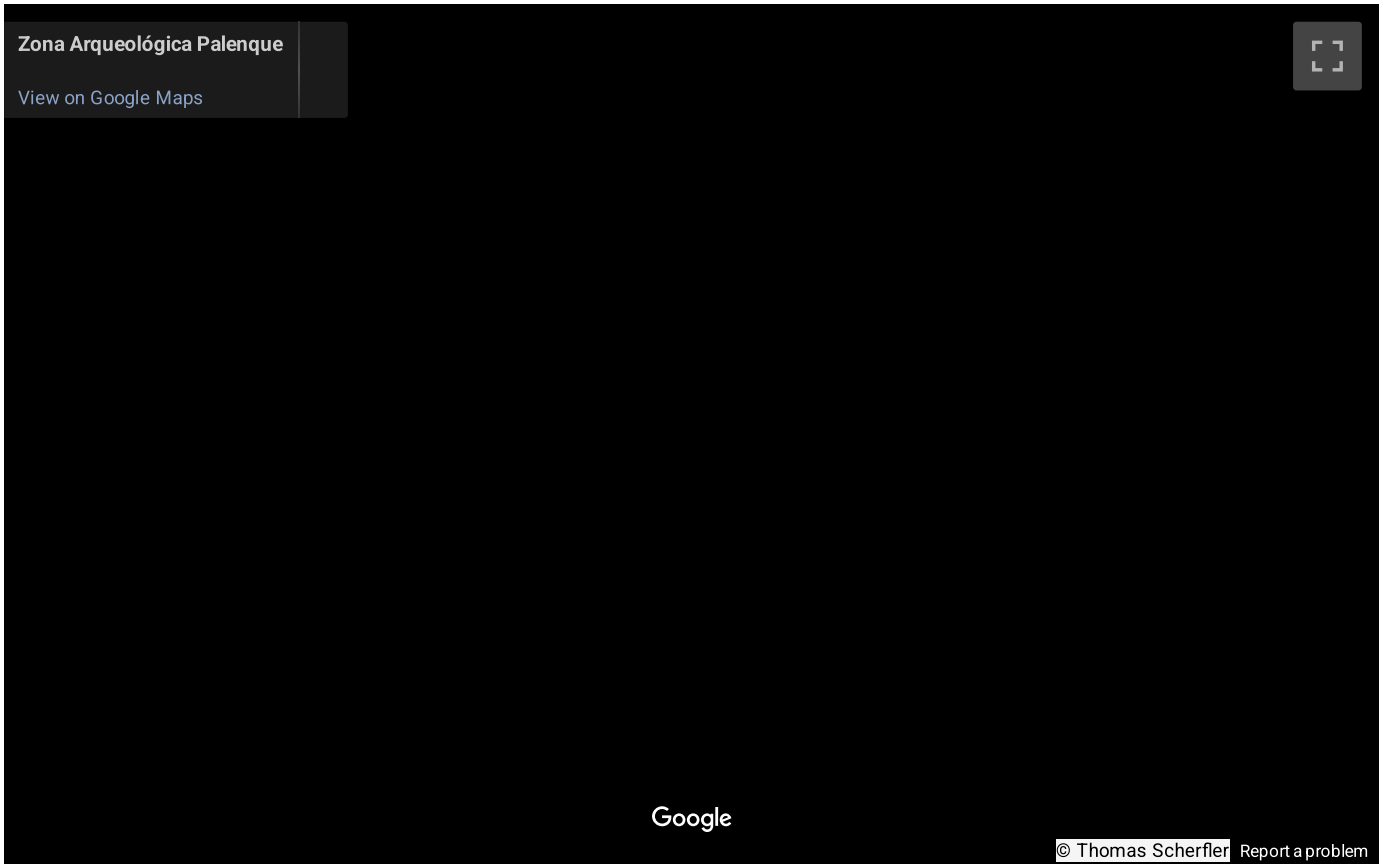
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3.8.10: Palenque (Classic Period)

by DR. MAYA JIMÉNEZ

Google photosphere of Palenque: view of the Temple of Inscriptions from the Palace



King Pakal and the expansion of Palenque

According to Maya glyphic inscriptions, the city of Palenque (in what is today southern Mexico)—comprised of temples, a ballcourt, and the largest surviving Maya palatial complex—was established in 432 C.E. However, it was not until 600-700 C.E. that the city grew in importance. The rule of the king K'inich Janaab' Pakal, from 615 to 683 C.E., initiated an ambitious architectural expansion at Palenque, an endeavor that was continued by his sons. Local lords such as Pakal, and other like him, each ruled over one of the many Maya city states, each with their own royal court.



Figure **3.8.10.1**:

The palace complex is located in the center of the city, flanked by the Temple of the Inscriptions and a ballcourt. Both buildings echo the uneven terrain of the Chiapas region, and in some cases they are built into the rolling hills—as in the case of the Temple of Inscriptions.

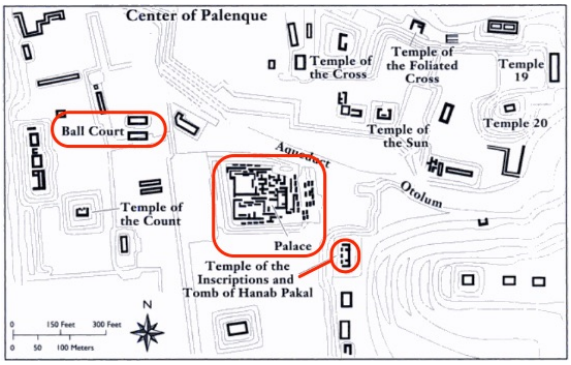


Figure **3.8.10.2**: From: Lynn V. Foster and Peter Mathews, *Handbook to Life in the Ancient Maya World*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 227 (annotated).

King Pakal lived and ruled from the Palace, where various royal ceremonies took place. The unroofed portion to the east of the palace (to the right in the photo below) is believed to be the throne room where kings were crowned. Built like the city, over the course of 200 years and in various stages, the palace features a prominent tower near the center (that scholars believe may have been used as either an observatory or a watchtower).



Figure **3.8.10.3**: The Palace, Palenque (photo: **Daniel Mennerich**, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The roofed portions that remain reveal the typical roof comb architecture of the Maya, most obviously seen in the **Temple of the Sun** (photo: Dennis Jarvis, CC BY-SA 2.0). While the palace occupies a prominent place in the city of Palenque and features a façade with multiple staircases, access to the building was limited and its enclosed spaces purposely guaranteed privacy.

A funerary pyramid



Figure **3.8.10.4**: Temple of the Inscriptions, Palenque, Maya, 5th-8th centuries (photo: Carlos Adampol Galindo, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The Temple of the Inscriptions has been called the greatest Maya funerary pyramid and gets its name from the relief panels inside the temple containing an unusually long glyphic inscription that includes a history of the city and its most famous ruler, Pakal (find a translation here). The enclosure at the top was decorated with the iconic Maya roof comb, and decorated with Maya inscriptions.

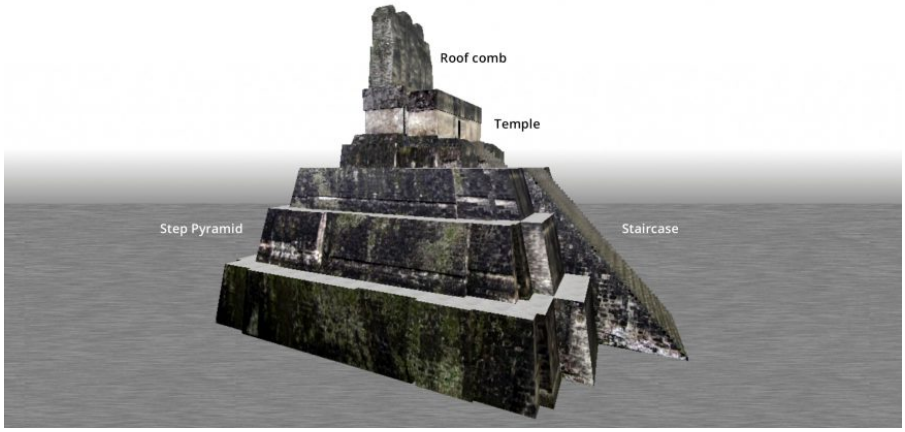


Figure 3.8.10.5: Diagram of a Maya pyramid (Temple II, 8th century, Tikal), **Cyark reconstruction**

The pyramid consists of nine levels—the same number of stages found in the Maya underworld (this same numerological association, which was pan-Mesoamerican, is also seen at Temple I in Tikal and El Castillo in Chichen Itza). Long considered a simple pyramid with a temple on top, in 1952, Mexican archeologist Alberto Ruz Lhullier discovered that the Temple of the Inscriptions also contains an interior burial chamber. The tomb of King Pakal is found at the nadir, or lowest point, of the pyramid in a burial chamber that may have once been accessible by an interior stairway but was eventually sealed.

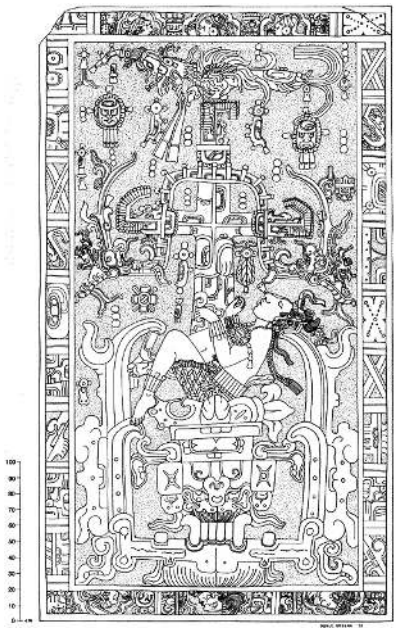


Figure 3.8.10.6: Drawing of the carving on the lid of Pakal's Tomb, Palenque, Mexico, 5th-8th century CE, Museo Nacional de Antropologia, Mexico City (as drawn by Merle Greene Robertson)

The location of the tomb is significant since King Pakal is buried in a subterranean chamber directly below the pyramid—and is therefore connected to the "earthly" realm. In this way, Pakal inhabits both the world of the living and the dead. The lid of the sarcophagus (a sculpted coffin placed above ground), which was carved out of a single piece of stone features a depiction of the king suspended over the jaws of the underworld (above). On the lid, as in his tomb, Pakal is positioned in an intermediary space, between the heavens—symbolized by the world tree and bird above him—and *Xibalba*, the Maya underworld.



Figure 3.8.10.7: Portrait Head of Pakal, Palenque, Mexico, c. 650-83, stucco (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City)

In addition to the remains of Pakal, precious materials such as jade, shells, pearls, and obsidians were discovered inside the sarcophagus. This idealized portrait of Pakal (image left) associates the king with the Maya maize god (his hair is meant to resemble corn silk). It was also found in the tomb and reveals the Maya ideal of beauty, as seen in the king's oval face, elongated nose, and high cheekbones. His finely sculpted features and realistic portrayal reveal the naturalism of Classic Maya figurative sculpture.

While the tomb of Pakal was largely hidden from view until 1952, archeologists believe that at some point it was made accessible to those who wished to worship the ruler after his death. They also believe that—because construction of the tomb began before Pakal's death in 683 C.E.—the Temple of the Inscriptions was most likely built to the ruler's specifications. However, some archaeologists, after studying the skeleton's teeth, hold that the tomb contains the remains of a man 40 years younger than Pakal—a reminder that Maya archaeology remains a dynamic area of study.

Additional resources:

James Doyle, "Ancient Maya Sculpture." on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

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3.8.11: Maya- The Yaxchilán Lintels

Yaxchilán: a significant Maya center

Yaxchilán is located on the south bank of the Usumacinta River, in Chiapas, Mexico. It was a significant Maya center during the Classic period (250-900 C.E.) and a number of its buildings stand to this day. Many of the exteriors had elaborate decorations, but it is the carved stone lintels above their doorways which have made this site famous. These lintels, commissioned by the rulers of the city, provide a lengthy dynastic record in both text and image.



Figure **3.8.11.1**: Yaxchilán lintel 16 (commissioned by Bird Jaguar IV for Structure 21), after 752 C.E., Maya, Late Classic period, limestone, 76.2 x 75.7 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum.

Lintels 24, 25 and 26, set above the three doorways of Structure 23, depict a series of rituals performed by Shield Jaguar II and his wife. Structure 21, commissioned by Bird Jaguar IV, housed lintels 15, 16 and 17. Bird Jaguar was Yaxchilán's most prolific builder and at least a dozen major structures were initiated or remodelled during his reign.

In this lintel above, Bird Jaguar IV dominates a captive. Scenes representing the public display of captives occur frequently in Maya art. The capture of sacrificial victims was an essential aspect of Maya warfare, as they were necessary for many rituals. Accession rituals, for example, entailed the offering of dedicatory human sacrifices to mark the enthronement of a new ruling lord.



Figure **3.8.11.2**: Yaxchilán lintel 24, structure 23, after 709 C.E., Maya, Late Classic period, limestone, 109 x 78 x 6 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

Lintels 24 and 25 are on permanent display in the British Museum's Mexican Gallery. Lintel 26, the third in the series, is in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, in Mexico City.

Royal blood-letting

This limestone lintel, considered one of the masterpieces of Maya art, is one of a series of three panels from Structure 23 at Yaxchilán, where it was set above the left (south-east) doorway.

The scene represents a bloodletting ritual performed by the king of Yaxchilán, Shield Jaguar the Great (681-742), and his wife, Lady K'ab'al Xook (Itzamnaaj Bahlen III).



Figure 3.8.11.3: Lady K'abal Xook pulling a thorned rope through her tongue (detail), *Yaxchilán lintel 24*, after 709 C.E., Maya, Late Classic period, limestone, 109 x 78 x 6 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

Wearing an exquisitely woven "huipil," Lady K'abal Xook pulls a thorned rope through her tongue in the principal form of blood sacrifice perfomed by royal women. The rope falls on to an open codex. Her pierced tongue allowed her blood to flow as part of a ritual communication with gods and spirits. This sacrifice mirrored the Maya story of creation, when the gods let their blood to create the human race. By choosing to take part in the ritual, the queen demonstrated both her moral and physical strength to the people, and her suitability as a Maya royal. Scrolls of blood can be seen around her mouth. She kneels in front of Shield Jaguar who holds a great torch described in the text as a "burning spear" illuminating a ritual that was probably held at night or set in the dark recess of a private chamber.



Figure 3.8.11.4: Shield Jaguar (detail), *Yaxchilán lintel 24*, structure 23, after 709 C.E., Maya, Late Classic period, limestone, 109 x 78 x 6 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

Both king and queen are richly attired with Sun God pectorals. The human head worn by Shield Jaguar over his brow may be a shrunken battle trophy.

Bloodletting was a common practice in Maya life from the Late Preclassic period (400 B.C.E.- 250 C.E.) onwards, and an essential part of rulership and of all public rituals. The Maya élite drew blood from various parts of their bodies using lancets made of stingray spine, flint, bone or obsidian. These objects are often found in burials and other archaeological contexts, though other perishable materials, like the rope and the bark-paper strips seen on the lintel, are now lost.

The first two glyphs in the text at the top of the lintel indicate the event and the date on which it took place, October 24, 709 C.E. (5 Eb, 15 Mak in the maya calendar). The last glyph represents the Emblem Glyph (that is, the city name in Maya hierolglyphs) of Yaxchilán. The text on the left of the panel contains the name and titles of Lady K'ab'al Xook. The lintel has traces of Maya blue, turquoise and red pigment.

The site of Yaxchilán was only rediscovered in the 19th century as it stood in the midst of the dense tropical forest, and Maya glyphs only began to be translated in the 1960s.

Suggested readings:

V.R. Bricker, "Advances in Maya epigraphy," *Annual Review of Archaeology*, 24 (1995), pp. 215–235.

J. Marcus, "The Iconography of Power Among the Classic Maya," *World Archaeology*, 6 (1974), pp. 83–94.

N. Grube and Simon Martin, *Chronicle of the Mayan Kings and Queens: Deciphering the Dynasties of the Ancient Maya* (London, Thames and Hudson, 2008).

V.E. Miller, *Yaxchilan: the Design of a Maya Ceremonial City* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1992).

D. Freidel and L. Schele, *A Forest of Kings: the Untold Story of the Ancient Maya* (London, 1990).
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3.8.12: Yaxchilán—Lintels 24 and 25 from Structure 23 and structures 33 and 40

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK



Figure 3.8.12.1: Near the Usumacinta River in Chiapas (photo: Daniel Mennerich, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Floating down the Usumacinta River in southeastern Mexico and northwestern Guatemala, various Maya sites materialize out of the dense jungle, some rising above the canopy and others subsumed by a tangle of green growth. One such site is Yaxchilán (pronounced Yash-chee-LAN) located in Chiapas, Mexico (close to the border of Guatemala) between the famous Maya cities of Copán and Palenque. The site is host to an impressive number of structures and monuments—over 100—and is especially famous for its high-quality relief carvings.



Figure 3.8.12.2: Map of Maya sites (**source**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Yaxchilán's ruling dynasty rose in the 4th century C.E., but its heyday followed several hundred years later (during what art historians call the Classic period), with Lord Shield Jaguar II who ruled for 60 years beginning in 681. He commissioned some of the most famous sculptural works at the site. His son and heir, Bird Jaguar IV, continued this tradition. Some of the most impressive Maya buildings and sculptures were created during this late-Classic period before the city-state collapsed in the 9th century.

Structure 23: Royal Life and Power

Shield Jaguar II's commissions at Yaxchilán's central complex of buildings (called the Central Acropolis) include **carved lintels** (the beam at the top of a doorway), stairs faced with hieroglyphic writing, and stele (upright wood or stone slab monuments).

Some of the most famous lintels are those on Structure 23—a *yotoot* (palace building) showing Shield Jaguar II's wife, Lady K'abal Xook. Anyone entering Structure 23 would **pass underneath the limestone lintels** when entering the doorways; the lintels are thus situated in a liminal space between exterior and interior.

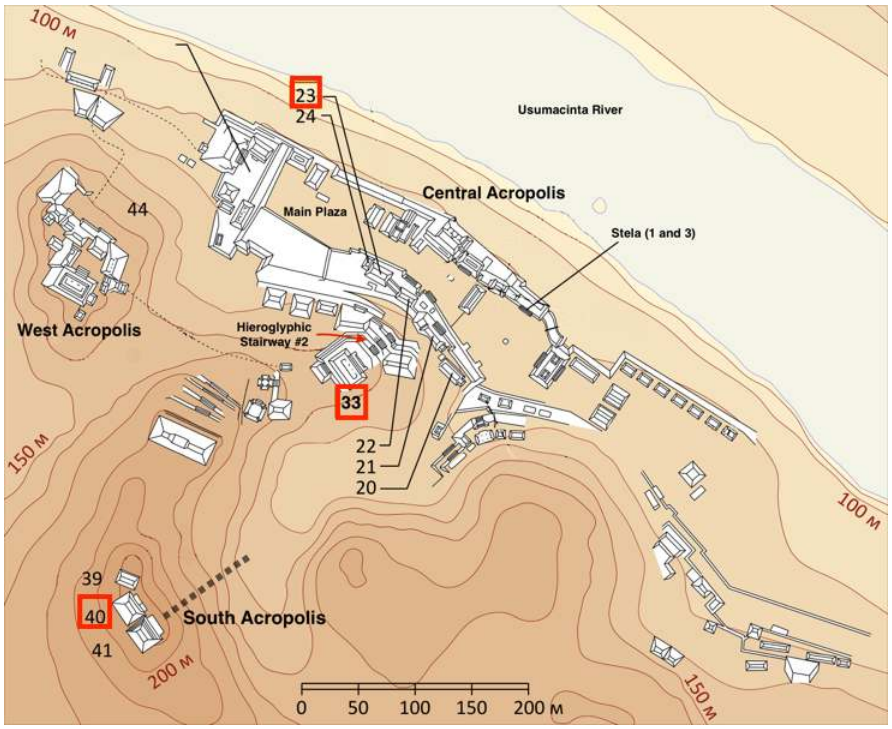


Figure **3.8.12.3**: Map of Yaxchilán (**source**, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Before the construction of Structure 23, there was a hiatus in building at Yaxchilán for about 150 years. This building's construction is therefore important, and so too are the individuals it showcases. But why focus on Lady Xook rather than Shield Jaguar II exclusively? It might be that the ruler wanted to promote his lineage and power through his principal wife (who had more prestige than his other wives). Structure 23 is therefore important not only for advertising Shield Jaguar II's power, but also for highlighting the important role of royal women in Maya culture. Other relief sculptures, such as **Lintel 45 on Structure 44**, show Shield Jaguar II with war captives to commemorate his victory in battles against rival city-states.

Three important lintels

The three lintels on Structure 23—known as lintels 24, 25, and 26—depict different ritual moments in the life of Lady Xook. While they appear to have been carved years apart from one another, they seem to show a narrative. Note: the monuments and objects uncovered at Yaxchilán are numbered in the order in which they were found—so Lintel 1 is not the oldest, but rather the first to be excavated by archaeologists.



Figure 3.8.12.4: Lintel 24, Structure 23, Yaxchilán (Maya) (The British Museum) (**view a diagram of this relief and locate this relief on a map**)

On Lintel 24, Lady Xook pulls a thorned cord through her tongue so that she can **bleed onto paper that fills a basket** on the ground before her. She is engaged in bloodletting—the ritual shedding of blood. Her husband, Shield Jaguar II, holds a lit torch above her. The glyphs (writing) on the top note Lady Xook's titles, and mention that the events depicted occurred on 28 October 709 C.E.



Figure 3.8.12.5: Lady Xook pulls a thorned cord through her tongue (detail), Lintel 24, Structure 23, Yaxchilán (Maya) (The British Museum)



Figure 3.8.12.6: Lintel 25, Structure 23, Yaxchilán (Maya) (The British Museum) (**view a diagram of this relief and locate this relief on a map**)

Lintel 25 & 26

Lintel 25 (left)—from the central doorway—also focuses on a bloodletting ritual carried out by Lady Xook. Bloodletting was a common ritual among elites and it is one of the most frequent subjects in Maya art. A ruler or other elites (including women), would let blood to honor and feed the gods, at the dedication ceremony of a building, when children were born, or other occasions. Rulers needed to shed blood in order to maintain order in the cosmos. The ruler was believed to be a descendent of the gods, and the act of bloodletting was of critical importance in maintaining their power and order in the community. Bloodletting was also an act related to rebirth and rejuvenation.

On Lintel 25 (left), the effects of bloodletting are on display. The loss of blood and the burning of incense produced hallucinations, which were desired in certain ritual contexts to access other realms. In this lintel, Lady Xook (in the lower right) kneels before a vision serpent, from whose mouth emerges a figure. Look closely at the detail below. Lady Xook holds a bowl in her left hand while she looks up towards the rising serpent. In addition to her patterned *huipil* (square-cut blouse), Lady Xook is festooned with a headdress, elaborate bracelets, earrings, and a necklace—likely made of jade. In the bowl are pieces of paper stained with her blood. She has likely burned the paper to allow the blood to ascend to the gods, and to bring about the vision serpent.



Figure **3.8.12.7**: Lady Xook (detail), Lintel 25, Structure 23,, Yaxchilán (Maya) (The British Museum)

In the image below, you can see that the figure emerging from the vision serpent's mouth is armed with a shield, spear and a war helmet. He, too, wears an elaborate headdress, a breastplate and ear spools. The identity of this figure is debated; some scholars claim it is an ancestral figure while other believe it is Shield Jaguar II or perhaps even Lady Xook.



Figure 3.8.12.8: Figure emerges from the mouth of a vision serpent (detail), Lintel 25, Structure 23, Yaxchilán (Maya) (The British Museum)

A glyphic inscription (oddly, written backwards) in the upper left corner of Lintel 25 notes the date of Shield Jaguar II's ascension to the throne in October 681. The image and the inscription both reinforce the reign of the ruler and his dynastic ties, in this case via his wife.



Figure **3.8.12.9**: Lintel 26, Structure 23, Yaxchilán (Maya) represents Lady Xook helping to dress her husband for battle (Museo Nacional de Antropologia, Mexico) (**view a diagram of this relief and locate this relief on a map**)



Figure **3.8.12.10**: Diamond pattern on Lady Xook's huipil (detail), Lintel 24, Structure 23, Yaxchilán (Maya) (The British Museum)

Skilled carving

The lintels exemplify the skilled carving of Maya artists at Yaxchilán—and the Maya more generally. The scenes are carved in high relief with carefully incised details decorating the raised surfaces. A beautiful diamond pattern decorates Lady Xook's *huipil*, for instance, in Lintel 24 (left).

The contour and incised lines of the lintels possess a calligraphic quality, as if they were drawn or painted rather than carved. Such careful attention to detail as well as the formal qualities of the line compare to other Maya sculptures, as well as vase painting and murals.

The Yaxchilán lintels were originally painted, although only traces remain, including red on Lady Xook's clothing and the brilliant Maya blue color on the background of Lintel 24.

Structures 33 and 40: Royal Dynasties and Legitimizing Rule

Also located within the Central Acropolis near Structure 23, Structure 33 (dedicated around 756 C.E.) is a wonderful example of Maya Classic architecture, particularly of the Usumacinta and Peten region or "style" as some would call it (image below). It was most likely built by Bird Jaguar IV, who like his father Shield Jaguar II engaged in a series of building projects and commissioned various monuments as part of his campaign to legitimate his rule. Bird Jaguar ascended the throne ten years after his father died, suggesting that there was perhaps a conflict about who was to become Yaxchilán's ruler.



Figure **3.8.12.11**: Structure 33, Yaxchilán (Maya) (photo: **Graham Duggan**, CC BY-ND 2.0)

Structure 33 rests on the side of the main plaza, making it a focal point for the area. The building itself is narrow, only one vault deep, so it was not intended to hold many people. Three entryways punctuate the exterior—which is embellished with stucco ornamentation. An elaborate roof-comb (a masonary "wall" that rises upwards above a building to give the impression that it is taller than it actually is), arguably the most famous component of the temple, incorporates a decorative frieze, niches, and sculptural elements, including a sculpted human being in the central niche. It is possible that this is Bird Jaguar IV. Intricate latticework covers the symmetrical roof-comb and the building's overall style is reminiscent of buildings found at other important Classic Maya city-states like Palenque.

Like Structure 23, carved lintels form the underside of each of the doorways on Structure 33. **Lintel 1**, for example, shows Bird Jaguar festooned in the fantastic clothing of a Maya ruler. The other lintels show a similar concern with rulership. **Lintel 2** displays Bird Jaguar and his son and heir, Chel Te' Chan K'inich (later known as Shield Jaguar IV), while **another** depicts Bird Jaguar once again dressed in royal regalia.*

Hieroglyphic Stairway #2 leads up to the building. The top step of Structure 33 displays rulers, including Bird Jaguar IV and his father and grandfather playing **the ballgame** in a series of thirteen carved limestone blocks (today protected by an overhang and glass, see the image above). They play against Yaxchilán enemies—such as Lord Jeweled Skull who Bird Jaguar defeats.

Structure 40



Figure **3.8.12.12**: Structure 40, Yaxchilán (Maya) (photo: **Skylla UK**, CC BY-NC-ND 2.5)

Bird Jaguar IV also had Structure 40 built as part of his political campaign to secure his rulership. Structure 40 (above) sits in the South Acropolis, flanked by two other structures. It displays the typical Yaxchilán architectural style—a rectangular vaulted building with a stuccoed roof comb. Like many other Yaxchilán buildings it had stele associated with it, such as **Stela 11** that showed Bird Jaguar IV towering over war captives accompanied by his parents. The stela, like the buildings and other commissioned works, were intended to advertise Bird Jaguar IV's dynastic lineage and thus his right to rule.

*Source for line drawings

Additional resources:

James Doyle, "Ancient Maya Sculpture." on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Yaxchilán from the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (Harvard)

Michael D. Coe, *The Maya*, 9 ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015).

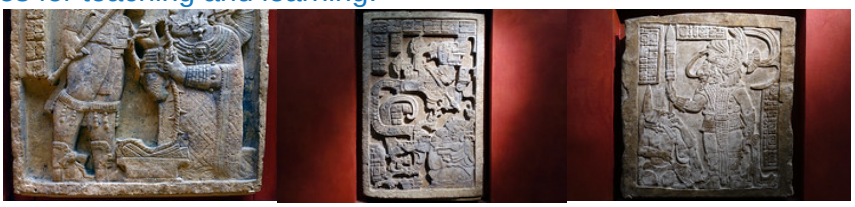
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3.8.13: Tikal



by **UNESCO**

In the heart of the jungle, surrounded by lush vegetation, lies one of the major sites of Mayan civilization, inhabited from the 6th century B.C. to the 10th century. The ceremonial center contains superb temples and palaces, and public squares accessed by means of ramps. Remains of dwellings are scattered throughout the surrounding countryside.

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3.8.14: Tikal Stela 16

by **DR. CAITLIN EARLEY**

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Figure **3.8.14.1**: Copy and Paste Caption here. (Copyright; author via source)



Stela 16, c. 711 C.E. (Classic Period), Tikal, Guatemala, 3.5 x 1.28 m (photo: Dennis Jarvis, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Have you ever used an Instagram filter to make someone or something appear more perfect? When we post on social media, we can use filters to digitally manipulate images, removing some features and emphasizing others. The idea of creating a flawless image of yourself is not a new one. From ***Augustus of Primaporta*** to contemporary presidential portraits, rulers throughout history have commissioned works that depict them as they want to be seen. The **Maya** of **Mesoamerica** were no exception: Tikal Stela 16 is an example of a **royal portrait stela**, and it depicts Jasaw Chan K'awiil, a ruler of Tikal, an important Maya city in what is today Guatemala. Maya artists carved this stela during the **Classic period** (c. 300–900 C.E.). This extravagant representation of the king reveals layers of meaning about his wealth and power—and the rituals he completed as ruler related to time and the maintenance of world order.



Figure **3.8.14.1**: Map showing the extent of the Maya civilization (red), compared to other Mesoamerica cultures (black). Today, these sites are located in the countries of Mexico, Belize, Honduras and Guatemala (image: CC BY-SA 3.0)

The Maya were never a unified empire. Instead, during this era of Maya history, a number of important polities struggled for power, and rulers throughout the Maya area commissioned sculptures that used figural imagery and hieroglyphic writing to proclaim their importance and record specific actions.

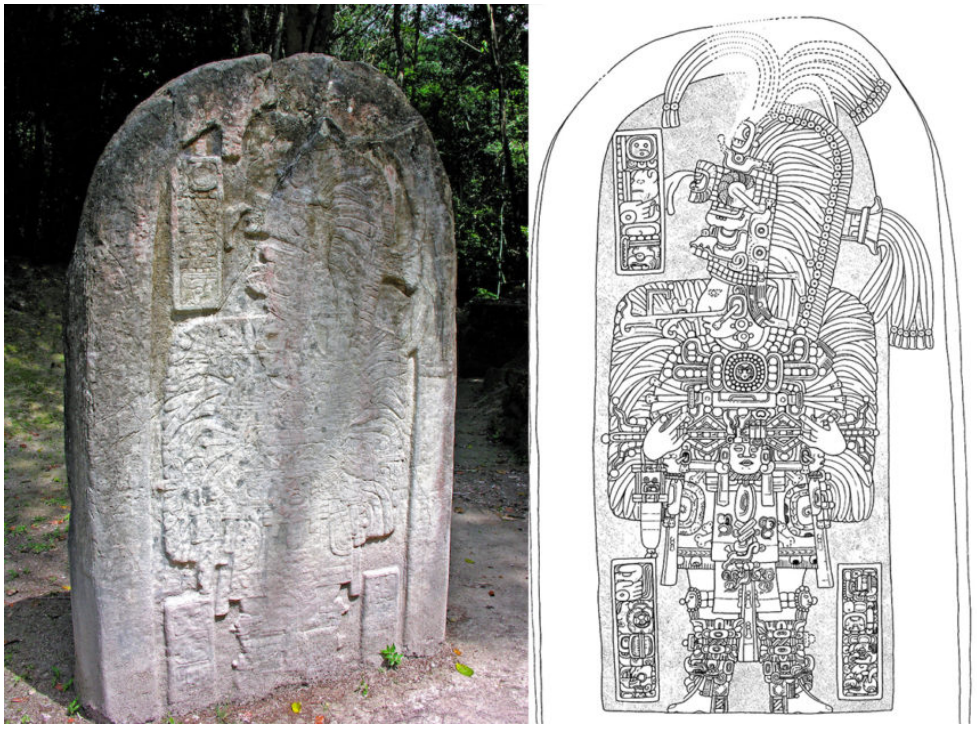


Figure **3.8.14.2**: Left: Stela 16, c. 711 C.E., Classic Period, from the site of Tikal, Guatemala, 3.5 x 1.28 m (photo: Dennis Jarvis, CC BY-SA 2.0); right: line drawing of Stela 16. This sculpture was recovered by archaeologists in an architectural complex just to the west of the city center.

The royal body

The image of the king is carved in low relief. Although the detailed carving is difficult to see today (in this case, largely due to weathering), it once would have been brightly painted, which would have helped viewers “read” the image. As we can see on the stela and the line drawing of it (created by archaeologists to help us see the images more clearly), the king stands in the center of the composition, wearing formal dress. The body of Jasaw Chan K’awiil is frontal, but his face is turned to the right so that his features are in profile. This was a standard method for the depiction of Classic Maya rulers.

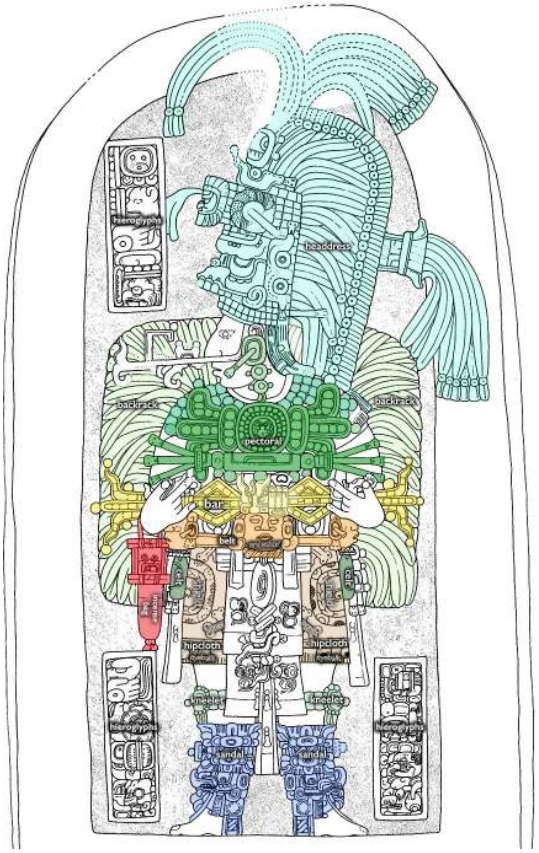


Figure **3.8.14.3**: Annotated image of Stela 16, Tikal. The colors used in this image are not the actual colors that were once painted on the stela, but are used here to help readers see the stela.



Figure **3.8.14.4**:Quetzal (photo: Harleybroker, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The depiction of Jasaw Chan K’awiil emphasizes his wealth, power, and performance. He is bedecked with rich clothing and jewelry, made of materials likely traded over long distances and worked by specialized artisans. He wears an enormous amount of jade, the most valuable material in the Classic Maya world. The blue-green color of jade recalled the green of growing maize and

the blue of rushing water, and it emphasized fertility and growth. In the image on the stela, the king wears large jade earspools, which are large round ear ornaments. The king's pectoral, or chest ornament, is made up of round jade beads.

From his hip belt dangle celts, oval-shaped jade ornaments that would have rung like bells when they came into contact with one another. The head at the center of his belt is also made of jade, and most likely represents an ancestor. Maya kings often wore representations of their ancestors on their belts to emphasize the legitimacy of their rule. Jade kneelets (like bracelets, but worn around the knee) complement the other jade jewelry, as do the king's elaborate sandals.

Another indication of wealth are the quetzal feathers that ornament the king's royal regalia. The quetzal—today the national bird of Guatemala—is a reclusive bird that lives in cloud forests. Each male bird grows two long green tail feathers, and these feathers were key parts of ceremonial dress for Maya elites. Jasaw Chan Kawiil's headdress is covered in quetzal feathers, which splay to the top and side.



Figure 3.8.14.5: Detail of the headdress and feathered backrack in the upper portion of Stela 16, c. 711 C.E., Classic Period, from the site of Tikal, Guatemala, 3.5 x 1.28 m (photo: Luis Alveart, CC BY-NC 2.0)



Figure 3.8.14.6: Maya Vessel with a Procession of Warriors, c. 750–850 C.E., Late Classic Period, polychromed ceramic, 16 cm diameter (Kimbell Art Museum)

He also wears a "backrack," likely a wooden or papier mache frame worn on the back and covered with feathers. We can see these feathers emerging all around his torso.

The jade and quetzal feathers emphasize the wealth and symbolic power of the king—but other elements point to military power as well. His hipcloth, in particular, is covered with references to warfare. The large, round objects that decorate the skirt are shields, like those carried into battle by Classic Maya warriors. Surrounding the shields are crossed bones, and the fringe at the bottom of

the skirt is decorated with eyeballs. These most likely represent trophies, body parts taken from conquered enemies during battle. The skirt reminds viewers that the ruler wielded military as well as religious power.

Single rows of hieroglyphs hover in three corners of the sculpture, and they describe what's going on. At the upper left, the first two glyphs record the date, which corresponds to 711 C.E. The next glyphs describe what the king is doing: participating in a ritual related to the passage of time.



Figure **3.8.14.7**: Detail of the lower portion, with glyphs to the right and left of the ruler's legs, Stela 16, c. 711 C.E., Classic Period, from the site of Tikal, Guatemala, 3.5 x 1.28 m (photo: Luis Alveart, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Accomplished astronomers, the Maya maintained multiple calendar systems and kept detailed records of when specific events happened. The inscription goes on to include more calendrical information as well as the name and title of the king, identifying him as the holy lord of Tikal. The inscription ends by referring to Jasaw Chan K'awiil as a "three k'atun lord." "A k'atun is a period of twenty years, and this indicates that Jasaw Chan K'awiil was between 39 and 59 years old when this event took place.

Rituals related to time

What is Jasaw Chan K'awiil doing here? The hieroglyphic inscription indicates that the stela commemorates a ritual performed by the king. The image supports this statement, showing us what the ritual may have looked like when performed live. In his hands, the king holds an object that scholars call "the ceremonial bar." It is unclear what the bar is made of, or what exactly it meant to viewers, but rulers on stelae throughout the southern Maya lowlands carry the bar in various scenes. The bag that dangles from his right wrist is an incense bag. This indicates that the rite Jasaw Chan K'awiil participated in probably involved the burning of incense. Scattering incense into braziers was considered a way to communicate with otherworldly forces.

The ritual commemorated on this stela celebrated the completion of a k'atun (again, a twenty-year period). For the ancient Maya, the orderly passage of time was not a given. Instead, kings were responsible for completing rituals to ensure that time would continue as expected, and the completion of major periods of time was commemorated in artwork. At Tikal, kings commissioned special architectural complexes to mark the end of a k'atun that we now call twin pyramid complexes. They included two buildings and a walled enclosure arranged around a large patio. Inside the enclosure was a stela, placed vertically in the ground in front of an altar, a low cylindrical stone with images and hieroglyphs carved on its flat surface.

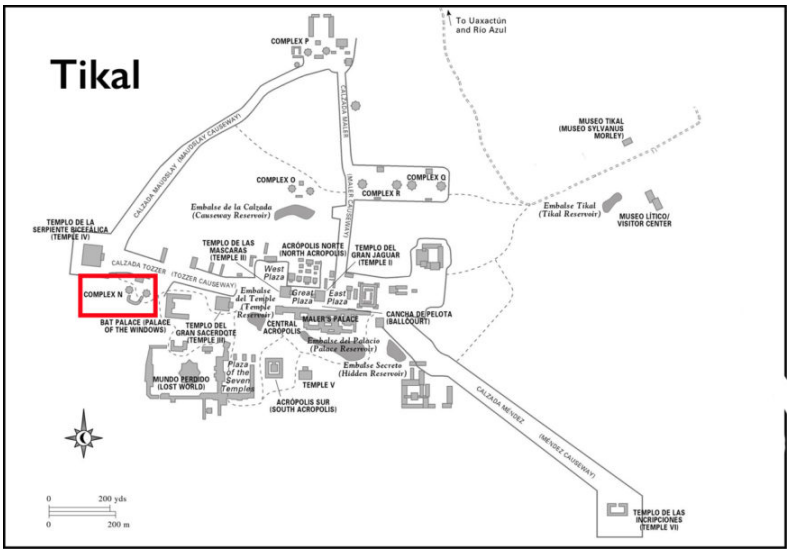


Figure 3.8.14.8: Map of Tikal with Twin Pyramid Complex N, where Stela 16 and Altar 5 were located

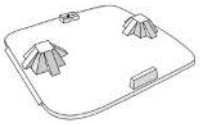


Figure 3.8.14.9: Plan of a typical twin pyramid complex

Stela 16 was found in Twin Pyramid Complex N, placed in front of Altar 5. Offerings of incense, flowers, or even blood would have been placed on the altar and burned as part of rituals. Although it is unclear exactly who would have seen the events recorded on this stela, some Maya sculptures and painted ceramics show nobles in attendance during rituals like this one.



Figure 3.8.14.10: Altar 5, Tikal, Guatemala (left photo: HJPD, CC BY 3.0); right drawing: public domain)



Figure 3.8.14.11: Stela 16 and Altar 5 are no longer arranged as they would have been originally, but they would have looked like these stele and circular altars at Complex Q, Tikal.

The archaeological context of Stela 16—where it was found, and what was found around it—suggests the ritual depicted was related to death as well as time. It stood in front of Altar 5, which is an altar carved in low relief. The altar depicts two individuals on either side of a pile of bones. The individuals are Jasaw Chan K'awiil and the lord of Maasal, a smaller site affiliated with Tikal. The text of the altar describes an event in which people re-entered the tomb of a dead queen. Although this is very different from funerary practice in many places today, tomb re-entry was common for Classic Maya royals. Usually done as a way to honor the deceased individual, it was considered a way to "activate" the legacy and power of the person buried inside the tomb. The pile of bones depicted on the altar was presumably extracted from the tomb of the queen.

Why do we take this scene literally? In part, because archaeologists excavating this part of the complex found a skull and bones underneath Stela 16. These are probably the same bones depicted on Altar 5. From this context, we can understand that the stela and altar worked together to tell viewers that the ritual in which Jasaw Chan K'awiil is participating on Stela 16 was related to time, death, and renewal.

A sensory experience in stone



Figure 3.8.14.12: Stela 16, c. 711 C.E., Classic Period, from the site of Tikal, Guatemala, 3.5 x 1.28 m (photo: Dennis Jarvis, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Combined, the various elements recorded on Stela 16 would have created a sensory experience for viewers when they were performed live. The iridescent color of the feathers would have shifted as the king moved in the sunlight, appearing first blue, then green. Viewers would have heard the rustle of feathers and the resonant ringing of jade pieces. They may have smelled incense and listened to the recitation of important texts, histories, and prayers.

Stela 16 recalls those sensory experiences: for the Classic Maya, sculptures were not simple representations. Instead, images could contain part of the *k'uh* (the vital essence) of the person they represented. Maya viewers would have understood that this image was still active. Not only did the king perform this ritual in 711 C.E., but through his depiction on this stela, he was understood to be perpetually performing it. Sculptures like this one combined religious belief—the idea that specific actions are necessary to

maintain world order—with political might. This stela tells us about a specific event in Maya history, but it also reveals how Jasaw Chan K'awiil wished to be remembered: as a powerful and pious king.

Additional resources:

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Cite this page as: Dr. Caitlin Earley, "Tikal Stela 16," in *Smarthistory*, November 4, 2021, accessed October 22, 2022, **https://smarthistory.org/tikal-stela-16/**.

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3.8.15: Copán

by **UNESCO**



Discovered in 1570 by Diego García de Palacio, the ruins of Copán, one of the most important sites of the Mayan civilization, were not excavated until the 19th century. The ruined citadel and imposing public squares reveal the three main stages of development before the city was abandoned in the early 10th century.

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3.8.16: Quiriguá

by **UNESCO**



Inhabited since the 2nd century, Quiriguá had become during the reign of Cauac Sky (723–84) the capital of an autonomous and prosperous state. The ruins of Quiriguá contain some outstanding 8th-century monuments and an impressive series of carved stelae and sculpted calendars that constitute an essential source for the study of Mayan civilization.

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3.9: Xochicalco

by **UNESCO**



Xochicalco is an exceptionally well-preserved example of a fortified political, religious and commercial centre from the troubled period of 650–900 that followed the break-up of the great Mesoamerican states such as Teotihuacan, Monte Albán, Palenque, and Tikal.

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3.10: Cholula Pottery vessel, Mixteca-Puebla style

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure **3.10.1**: Mixteca-Puebla pottery vessel, c. 1300–1521, from Cholula, Puebla, Mexico, 12.8 cm high (© Trustees of the British Museum)

Located in the Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley, in the central Mexican highlands, Cholula became an important city in **Mesoamerica** during the Late Postclassic period (1200–1521). It is known for its beautiful polychrome ceramics, particularly dishes, bowls (with and without supports) and vases. They show a clear influence from the Mixteca (modern states of Oaxaca and Puebla) and the Gulf Coast regions. This ceramic style is referred to as Mixteco-Puebla, a term also applied to a set of religious symbols shared throughout Mesoamerica during the Postclassic, and to the 'Mixtec Codex style', a narrative style found in **codices**, murals, and ceramics in the Mixteca-Puebla region.



Figure **3.10.2**: Similar types of symbols and styles are visible in the Codex Borgia, c. 1500, f. 25 (Vatican Library)

A wide range of motifs are painted on Cholula polychrome pottery, many of which were shared by other Mesoamerican cultures during the Postclassic. These include: geometric designs, including grecas or stepped-fret motifs (*xicalcoliuhqui*); elements related to the feathered serpent; **calendrical signs**; representations of human figures and deities; elements related to sacrifice, such as severed hands, hearts, and sacrificial knives; skulls and crossed bones; shells, and many other symbols.

Polychrome vessels were intended for use by the élite and were traded widely. The **Aztecs**, for example, were great consumers of Cholula wares and the decorative techniques were sometimes used in conjunction with Aztec iconography.

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3.11: Huastec - Huastec- Life-Death Figure

by DR. REX KOONTZ



Figure \(\PageIndex{1}: *Life-Death Figure* (front and back), c. 900–1250, Huastec (found between San Vicente Tancauyalab & Tamuin, San Luis Potosi, Northern Veracruz, Mexico), sandstone with traces of pigment, 158.4 x 66 x 29.2 cm (**Brooklyn Museum**)



Figure \(\PageIndex{2}\Figure (front), c. 900-1250, Huastec (found between San Vicente Tancauyalab & Tamuin, San Luis Potosi, Northern Veracruz, Mexico), sandstone with traces of pigment, 158.4 x 66 x 29.2 cm (Brooklyn Museum)

High civilization

This sculpture is an exquisite example of art from ancient Mesoamerica, an area of high civilization that includes the territory of Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and parts of El Salvador and Honduras. Long before the coming of the Spanish in the sixteenth century, this area independently developed cities and created monumental architecture and sculpture in the city center. Cities were thriving before 1000 B.C.E., or 2,000 years before this sculpture was carved. Important ancient Mesoamerican beings—noble men and women as well as deities—were often immortalized in stone and placed in important public places. We don’t know if the young man seen on the front of this stela represented a young ruler or a god, but we can say that this was an important figure that would have been placed in the center an ancient city, as a focal point for religious ritual.



Figure **3.11.3**: Roller Seal, c. 800-400 B.C.E., Olmec (found Veracruz or Tabasco, Mexico), ceramic and pigment, 7.6 x 5.4 cm (Art Institute of Chicago)

The piece is close to life size. Its surface is elaborately incised, with most of the body's "skin" covered in designs. Many of these designs may be recording body paint. Across the
Huastec area we find small ceramic rollers (see image left) with similar designs. These rollers were likely used to apply paint to skin. Other symbols seen here may have been marked permanently on the body through tattooing and scarification. Many of these designs would have been painted in bright colors in the sculpture before us, but these colors have long ago faded. We do not know what most of these symbols meant, but we do know that Mesoamericans greatly valued such decoration, for the practice was very ancient. Some of these symbols seem to locate the human or god in sacred space and time, suggesting a deeply religious function for the painting. Other symbols, such as the large ear ornaments worn by the young man, also identify the figure as a deity or a ruler.



Figure **3.11.4**: Earflare Frontal, c. 10th–13th century, Huastec (Veracruz), shell, clay (?), pigment, 2.5 cm (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

In addition to the incised detail covering the body, the most striking thing about this sculpture is the juxtaposition of a serene young man on one side with a grotesquely expressive skeleton on the other. Why did the artist highlight this juxtaposition of living serenity and ghoulish death? Is this an example of the close relationship between life and death sometimes seen in Mesoamerican culture, or are we projecting our ideas of life/death symbolism onto a work done 1,000 years ago, when America was a completely different place? These questions lead us into the mystery of the Brooklyn Museum's *Life-Death Figure*.



Figure \(\PageIndex{5}: c. 900-1250, Huastec, Northern Veracruz, Mexico), sandstone with traces of pigment, 158.4 x 66 x 29.2 cm (Brooklyn Museum)

A marker of rule



Figure **3.11.6**: Classic Maya Portrait Stela A, Copán, Honduras, 731 C.E., Portrait of '18-Rabbit' of Copán.

The young man wears a solemn expression. His face is so expressionless that it appears mask-like, much like the solemn stone masks found in earlier periods in ancient Mesoamerica. There is little room for individual characteristics or personality in this tradition. Instead, ancient Mesoamericans in general seem to have been more interested in the office a person (or god) inhabited and the symbols of that office. The large headdress that forms a halo around the man's head served a similar function, as a marker of rule, or a sort of crown. The main artistic focus throughout the piece, whether we look at the incised body decoration, the ideal face, or the headdress, is to identify an important office or deity.

The main task of an artist, then, was to capture the ideal image of the office or status, and not the personality of the individual. The serene, youthful appearance was the appropriate bearing of a ruler or god. This ideal view of rulers and gods was true not only in the Huastec area, but among many ancient Mesoamerican peoples.

This sculpture would have been set in the center of the city, much like the earlier Classic Maya portrait stelae (see image at left). Whether it was placed outside in a public area, or in the interior of a temple, we are not certain. It is remarkably well preserved, with the delicate details in low relief still easily visible on the arms and legs, which leads one to believe that this was kept indoors, perhaps in a shrine. In such a shrine, the figure could have been worshiped as a god, or the statue could be the record of a ruler who

did the worshiping. In either case, the sculpture would have been seen as the envelope for the living essence of the god or ruler and thus the focus of religious ritual.

Teomama

The insights above do not explain the presence of the animated skeletal figure on the other side of the sculpture. If you look closely, you can pick out the outline of a rectangular form immediately behind this figure. This form probably represents cloth. Further, the skeletal figure is not a separate figure, but is attached to the back of the young man. It is probable that the young man was seen as carrying the skeletal figure on his back.



Figure \(\PageIndex{7}: Figure (back), c. 900-1250, Huastec, Northern Veracruz, Mexico, sandstone with traces of pigment, 158.4 x 66 x 29.2 cm (Brooklyn Museum)

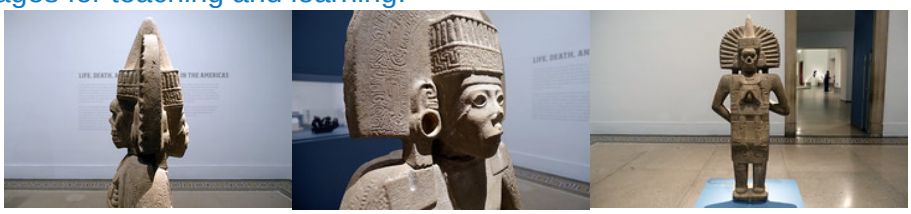
Often religious officials and rulers would carry the remains of revered ancestors on their backs, with the ancestor's bones wrapped in a cloth bundle. Here the cloth bundle is unwrapped, revealing the skeletal figure inside. The Aztec of Central Mexico who flourished at the same time as the Huastec even had a name for this office, *teomama*. Thus it is possible that the skeletal figure represents a sacred ancestor whose skeleton has been placed in cloth wrap and carried through the city by the somber young man during an important religious rite. The entire sculpture may be seen as a commemoration of that rite placed in the center of an ancient Huastec city.

Additional resources:

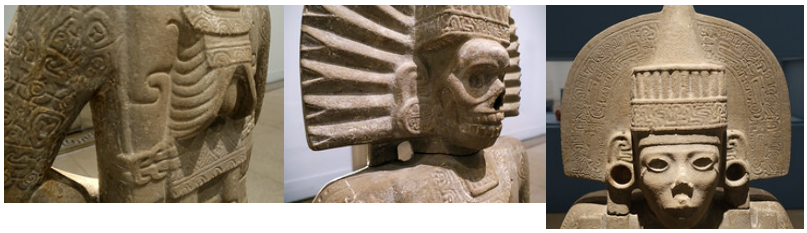
Neil Mcgregor, *Sculpture of Huastec goddess*, A History of the World in 100 Objects, The British Museum/BBC audio

Archaeology of the Huasteca: The Ekholm Collection (American Museum of Natural History, New York)

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SECTION OVERVIEW

3.12: Paquimé (Casas Grandes)

3.12.1: Paquimé, Casas Grandes

3.12.2: Paquimé jars

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3.12.1: Paquimé, Casas Grandes

by **UNESCO**



Paquimé, Casas Grandes, which reached its apogee in the 14th and 15th centuries, played a key role in trade and cultural contacts between the Pueblo culture of the south-western United States and northern Mexico and the more advanced civilizations of Mesoamerica. The extensive remains, only part of which have been excavated, are clear evidence of the vitality of a culture which was perfectly adapted to its physical and economic environment, but which suddenly vanished at the time of the Spanish Conquest.

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3.12.2: Paquimé jars

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER



Effigy jar, c. 1200–1450, clay and paint, Paquimé, Chihuahua, Mexico, 23 x 18 cm; and jar with parrot design, c. 1150–1450, coiled and hand built, painted clay, attributed to Paquimé, Chihuahua, Mexico, 20 x 24 cm (National Museum of the American Indian, NYC)

Additional resources

More about the effigy jar at the National Museum of the American Indian

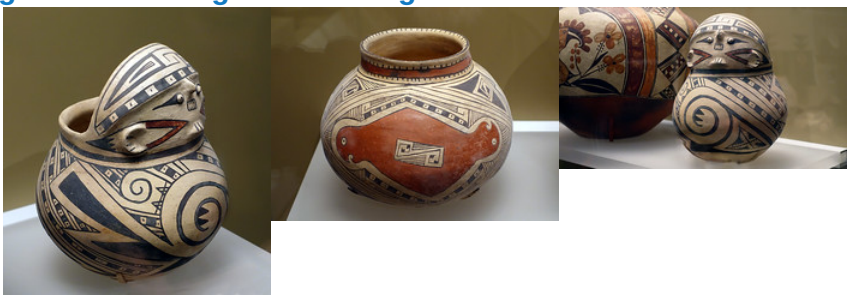
Read an introduction to the Mogollon.

Burrison, John A. *Global Clay: Themes in World Ceramic Traditions* (United States: Indiana University Press, 2017).

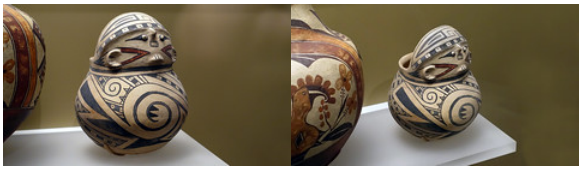
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SECTION OVERVIEW

3.13: Mixtec

3.13.1: Codex Zouche-Nuttall

3.13.2: Gold pendant depicting a ruler

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3.13.1: Codex Zouche-Nuttall

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure **3.13.1.1**: Folio one and two, *Codex Zouche-Nuttall*, 1200-1521, C.E., Mixtec, Late Postclassic period, deer skin, 47 leaves, each 19 x 23.5 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

This is one of a small number of known Mexican codices (screenfold manuscript books) dating to pre-Hispanic times. It is made of deer skin and comprises 47 leaves.



Figure **3.13.1.2**: Folio fifty enthroned Mixtec ruler, Eight Deer Jaguar-Claw (detail), *Codex Zouche-Nuttall*, 1200-1521, C.E., Mixtec, Late Postclassic period, deer skin, 47 leaves, each 19 x 23.5 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

The powerful ruler Eight Deer Jaguar-Claw can be seen here (above), sitting on a throne with his name next to him (8 circles and a deer's head).

The *Zouche-Nuttall Codex* contains two narratives: one side of the document relates the history of important centres in the Mixtec region, while the other, starting at the opposite end, records the genealogy, marriages and political and military feats of the Mixtec ruler, Eight Deer Jaguar-Claw. This ruler is depicted at top center, next to his calendric name (8 circles and a deer's head). It was made by the Mixtec people, some of whom joined the Aztec empire. It uses a kind of picture-writing showing important Mixtec events, with special signs for names and dates.



Figure **3.13.1.3**: Folio fifty, *Codex Zouche-Nuttall*, 1200-1521, C.E., Mixtec, Late Postclassic period, deer skin, 47 leaves, each 19 x 23.5 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

Very few Mesoamerican pictorial documents have survived destruction and it is not clear how the *Codex Zouche-Nuttall* reached Europe. In 1859 it turned up in a Dominican monastery in Florence. Years later, Sir Robert Curzon, 14th Baron Zouche (1810-73), loaned it to The British Museum. His books and manuscripts were inherited by his sister, who donated the Codex to the Museum in 1917. The Codex was first published by Zelia Nuttall in 1902.

Suggested readings:

E.H. Boone, *Stories in red and black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2000).

Z. Nuttall, *Facsimile of an Ancient Mexican Codex Belonging to Lord Zouche of Harynworth, England* (Cambridge, Mass., Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 1902).

G. Brotherstone, *Painted books of Mexico* (London, The British Museum Press, 1995).

C. McEwan, *Ancient Mexico in the British* (London, The British Museum Press, 1994).

F. Anders, M. Jansen and G. A. Pérez Jiménez, *Códice Zouche-Nuttall, facsimile with commentary and line drawing* (Madrid, Sociedad Estatal Quinto Centenario; Graz, Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt; Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992).

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3.13.2: Gold pendant depicting a ruler

by **THE BRITISH MUSEUM**



Figure **3.13.2.1**: Claims to hereditary nobility were based on racing ancestral lineage and proclaiming military prowess through dress and ornament. Gold pendant depicting a ruler, Mixtec, lost wax-casting, gold, 9 x 4.6 cm, from Tehuantepec, Mexico (© Trustees of the British Museum)

This pendant represents a nobleman wearing a necklace, earrings and a lip plug from which hangs a mask with three suspended bells. He carries a staff in his right hand and a shield in the left.The pendant was found, together with three other gold objects, in Tehuantepec while carrying out building works at a private house in the 1870s.

This object and one with a head from which hang four chains, with three links and a bell each were acquired by the British Museum in the 1880s. The other two went to the Museum für Völkerkunde, in Berlin.

Also in Oaxaca, at Monte Albán, 121 gold objects were found in a rich tomb. Pendants similar to this one, rings, ear, and lip plugs, discs, and other types of jewelry, were placed as burial offerings together with highly prized objects made of shell, obsidian, jade, crystal rock, *tecali* (a translucent stone), and other precious materials.

A sixteenth-century Spanish friar, Bernardino de Sahagún, described the techniques employed by indigenous metalsmiths, including the lost-wax method, used to cast this pendant. The skills exhibited by these talented artisans were greatly admired by the Spaniards and other Renaissance Europeans.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

3.14: Aztec (Mexica) art

The Aztecs called themselves the Mexica—the root of the name for today's Mexico.

1325-1521 C.E.

3.14.1: Introduction to the Aztecs (Mexica)

3.14.2: More on the Aztecs (Mexica)

3.14.3: Serpents in Mexica culture

3.14.4: The Templo Mayor and the Coyolxauhqui Stone

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3.14.8: Coyolxauhqui Monolith

3.14.9: Monolith of Tlaltecuhtli (Earth Lord)

3.14.10: Pottery model temples

3.14.11: Wooden slit-drum (teponaztli)

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3.14.13: Turquoise mosaics

- 3.14.13.1: Turquoise mosaics, an introduction
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3.14.14: The House of the Eagles, and sculptures of Mictlantecuhtli and Eagle Warrior

3.14.15: Eagle Warrior (Mexica)

3.14.16: Seated figure of Xochipilli

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3.14.18: Xiuhcoatl (fire serpent)

3.14.19: Brazier of Chicomecoatl

3.14.20: Aztec feathered headdress

3.14.21: Aztec art and feasts for the dead

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3.14.24: Stone kneeling figure of Chalchiuhtlicue

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3.14.1: Introduction to the Aztecs (Mexica)

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK



Video **3.14.1.1**: Speakers: Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Beth Harris



Figure **3.14.1.2**: Coatlicue, c. 1500, Mexica (Aztec), found on the Southeast edge of the Plaza Mayor/Zocalo in Mexico City, basalt, 257 cm high (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City) (**SmartHistory video and essay on this Coatlicue sculpture**)

If you travel to Mexico City today, chances are you might visit museums such as the **Templo Mayor** Museum in the heart of the city or the National Museum of Anthropology in Chapultepec Park. Either is sure to dazzle you with an impressive array of exquisitely crafted objects (that we typically label as “artworks”), ranging from monumental stone sculptures and shell mosaics to colorfully painted ceramics and figurines. At both museums, Aztec art is the centerpiece: excavations at the Aztec Templo Mayor fill the onsite museum, and Aztec art similarly occupies the central galleries within the Anthropology museum. The Aztecs were only one group that made up the diverse indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica, but they were among those groups that encountered Europeans when they arrived in the Americas. Collections like those at the Templo Mayor museum or National Museum of Anthropology attest to the skill and creativity of Aztec artists.



Figure **3.14.1.3**: Ruins of the Templo Mayor, 1375-1520, Tenochtitlan, (Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico City) (photo: **Dr. Steven Zucker**) (**SmartHistory video on the Templo Mayor**)



Figure **3.14.1.4**: Alexander von Humboldt,"Basalt Relief representing the Mexican Calendar," plate VIII from *Vues des Cordillères et monumens des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique*, 1814-40 (Paris: G. Dufour) (**Bibliothèque nationale de France**)

What's in a name?

The German explorer and scientist Alexander von Humboldt arrived in Mexico in 1803 after traveling throughout parts of Latin America. Impressed by what he experienced and saw in Mexico City, he became interested in the country's indigenous past (the country was then still **New Spain**). He wrote about the Aztecs and created illustrations of their sculptures. In 1810, he used the name "Aztecs" to describe the powerful Mesoamerican people who had built a vast empire in Mexico and who encountered the Spaniards in 1519. He adapted the name Aztec from the Nahua word Aztlan, which referred to their mythical homeland. Several decades later, the historian William H. Prescott popularized the term, and it is still common today.

But what did the Aztecs call themselves? They referred to themselves as the Mexica. Those who lived in their capital city, Tenochtitlan, were the Tenochca-Mexica. The Mexica formed part of a larger ethnic group known as the Nahua, who spoke Nahuatl. Unfamiliar with this language? You might know a few words: chocolate, chipotle, coyote, tomato, and avocado derive

from Nahuatl words. Even the name Mexico, adopted after Mexicans gained independence from Spain in 1821, comes from Mexica.



Figure **3.14.1.5**: Chicomoztoc, illustration from *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, 16th century, folio 29 (**Bibliothèque nationale de France**)

Where did the Mexica come from?



Figure **3.14.1.6**: Huitzilopochtli carried on the back of a person, *Boturini Codex*, c. 1530-41, detail of folio 4 (Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City)

Several myths describe the migration of the Mexica from Aztlan, thought to be somewhere in northern Mexico or the southwestern United States. The Mexica departed Chicomoztoc at the urging of their patron deity, Huitzilopochtli, to journey to establish a new settlement.

Early colonial codices (books), like the *Codex Boturini*, show this migration, with footprints indicating the direction the ancestors walked on their journey. In this particular codex, we even see Huitzilopochtli carried on the back of one of the individuals migrating, alluding to his role in the migration.

Huitzilopochtli told the Mexica to look for a sign—an eagle on a cactus—that would tell them where to settle. Their migration led them to the Valley of Mexico. They were generally disliked by other groups who found the Mexica uncivilized or unrefined, largely because they were foreigners who worked initially as mercenaries for other people living around Lake Texcoco.



Figure **3.14.1.7**: The flag of Mexico with an eagle perched atop a cactus (source: **Alex Covarrubias**, CC0)

According to Mexica mytho-historical textual sources (written down in the early colonial period), they finally witnessed the sign on an island in the middle of Lake Texcoco in the year 1325. It was there that they established Tenochtitlan, their capital city. They connected the city to the mainland with causeways to make coming and going to the city more efficient. If you look at the Mexican flag today, you will see a reference to this origin story. In the center of the flag an eagle is represented on a cactus, and the eagle stands on a glyph for stone and water.

Forging an empire

As they developed their city and gained more prominence in the Valley of Mexico, the Mexica formed an alliance with Texcoco (Tetzcoco) and Tlacopan (today, Tacuba), known as the Triple Alliance. Really, when we refer to the "Aztecs," we are talking about the people who formed this alliance.



Figure **3.14.1.8**: Map of the Aztec Empire under the Triple Alliance, 1519 (source: **Yavidaxiu**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

War was common in the Aztec empire. There were two main types of wars: one was primarily for conquest and expansion of the empire, while the other involved a more ritualized form of battle, called "flowery wars." The flowery wars may have served several functions, including training soldiers, capturing individuals for sacrifice, or weakening enemies.

The Triple Alliance had a large and powerful military that conquered many peoples throughout Mesoamerica. Tribute was gathered from those the Alliance controlled, and we can see a record of this in the mid-sixteenth-century **Codex Mendoza**. Tribute lists show what items, like bird feathers, greenstone or jade, and textiles, that peoples controlled by the Mexica sent back to Tenochtitlan.

Uprisings against Aztec control were common, meaning that armed conflicts occurred with regularity. Many of these conquered peoples, or even those who successfully managed to maintain independence but still disliked the Aztecs, joined with Hernan

Cortés's army when he journeyed towards Tenochtitlan in 1519.

Mexica rulers

The Mexica ruler was known as the *huey tlatoani* ("chief speaker"; pronunciation: whey-tla-toe-anee). There were eleven *tlatoque* (the plural form of tlatoani) of Tenochtitlan, beginning with Acamapichtli in 1375 and ending with Cuauhtemoc in 1525. The *huey tlatoani* was tasked with maintaining the city, participating in important rituals, and overseeing the military. They lived in large, sumptuous palaces. Moteuczoma II Xocoyotzin's palace had rooms for living quarters, meetings, and storage, but also had gardens, a zoo, and even an aviary. The colonial ***Florentine Codex*** describes the zoo as having "ocelots, bears, mountain lions, and mountain cats… eagles… and various birds." The royal palaces bordered the most important location in the capital—the sacred precinct—which was thought to symbolize the navel of the universe, or *axis mundi*.



Figure **3.14.1.9**: House with animals, detail from Bernardino de Sahagún and collaborators, *Florentine Codex*, Book 8, folio 30v, 1575-77 (Medicea Laurenziana Library, Florence, Italy)

Sustaining an empire

Tenochtitlan was a bustling city, with more than 100,000 people living in it. Food and water were of great concern, especially because the city was located on an island in a lake. *Chinampas*, or floating gardens, provided the food necessary to sustain the Aztec empire. They consisted of human-made islands where crops could be grown. Food staples included maize, squash, and beans. Some *chinampas* were even used to grow flowers exclusively. If you visit Xochimilco today, you can get a sense of what *chinampas* look like, with people still navigating canals amidst floating gardens.



Figure 3.14.1.11: Traditional floating gardens (*chinampas*) in Xochimilco, Mexico City today (photo: Px-lga, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Large aqueducts brought fresh water to the capital. These massive engineering projects were supported by the *huey tlatoani* because they were critical to the survival of his people.

A complex pantheon of deities

The Mexica had numerous deities in their religious pantheon. The two most important deities were Huitzilopochtli and **Tlaloc**, a rain and agricultural god. Their significance was symbolized by the twin temples atop the **Templo Mayor** in the center of Tenochtitlan.

Placed within the heart of the sacred precinct, the Templo Mayor was the largest and most important temple in the empire. One side symbolized Tlaloc, and included objects, symbols, and colors (like blue-green) associated with the rain god. The other side symbolized Huitzilopochtli, and similarly used a variety of means to convey his warrior and solar associations. Together, Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli communicated the Mexica focus on warfare. Fire and water, known in Nahuatl as *atl-tlachinolli* (“burnt water”; pronunciation: at-ul tlach-ee-no-lee), symbolized war, which was essential to the expansion of the Mexica empire.

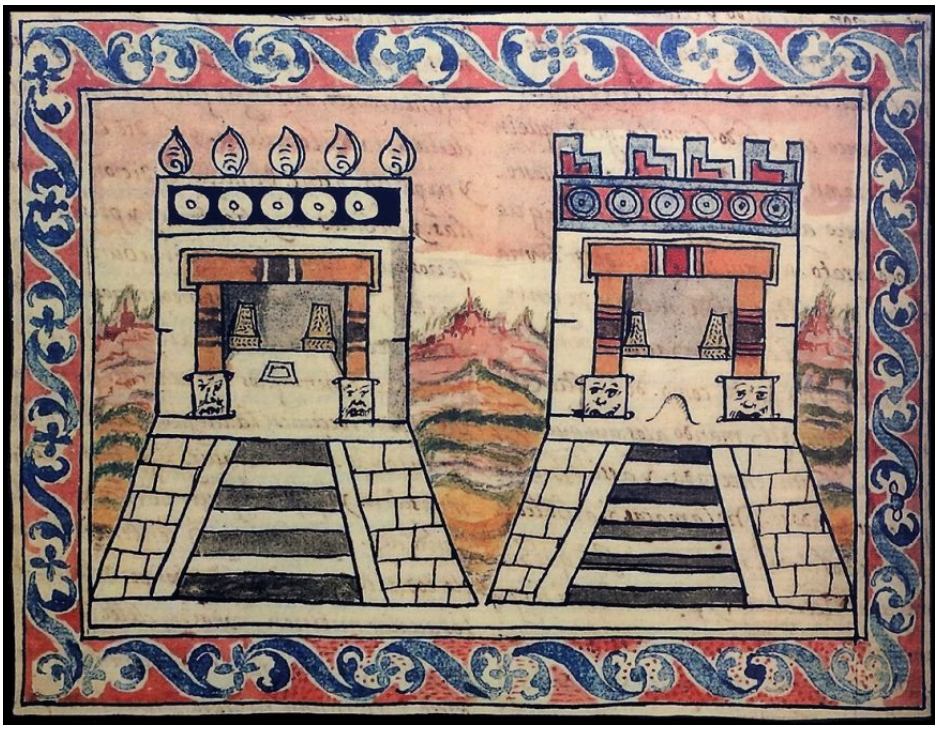


Figure **3.14.1.12**: Diego Durán, illustration of the Templo Mayor with the twin temples of Tlaloc (left) and Huitzilopochtli (right), from *The History of the Indies of New Spain*, 1579 (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid)

Other important deities included:

- Tezcatlipoca (“Smoking Mirror”), patron of rulers. He is also associated with sorcery, symbolized by the obsidian mirror that he wears
- Quetzalcoatl (“Feathered Serpent”), a god with a long history in Mesoamerica. He was associated with the planet Venus, with wind, and also with fertility
- Chalchiuhtlicue (“She of the Jade Skirt”) a goddess of water fertility, and associated with Tlaloc. While Tlaloc presided over rain, she was associated with bodies of water like lakes and rivers
- Chicomecoatl (“Seven Serpent”) and Cinteotl (“Maize God”), both associated with maize and sustenance
- Mictlancihuatl (“Lady of Mictlan”) and Mictlantecuhtli (“Lord of Mictlan”), deities of death and who presided over Mictlan, the underworld



Figure **3.14.1.13**: Illustration of Ochpaniztli from Bernardino de Sahagún and indigenous collaborators, *Codices matritenses (Primeros Memoriales)*, 1558-85, f251v (Royal Library, Madrid)

Aztec calendars

The Aztecs had **two different calendars**: a 260-day ritual calendar called the *tonalpohualli* (day count), and a 360-day (plus 5 extra days) calendar called the *xiuhpohualli* (year count). The *xiuhpohualli* was divided into eighteen months of twenty days each, and each of these months had a festival that honored a specific deity or deities.

These festivals often included music, dancing, offerings, and sacrifice (whether self-sacrifice or human sacrifice). For instance, the eleventh month had the festival of Ochpaniztli ("sweeping of the roads"), which occurred sometime between August to September (or September to October by some accounts), and was intended to celebrate the fall harvest. It honored the earth goddess(es) Tlazolteotl and Toci, and involved sweeping. Sweeping here related literally to cleaning, but also symbolically to fertility, because Tlazolteotl was a goddess associated with filth, but also childbirth. She was a patron of midwives and adulterers.

Aztec art



Figure **3.14.1.14**: Olmec mask, c. 1200-400 B.C.E., jadeite, 4 x 3-3/8 x 1-1/4 inches, found in offering 20, buried c. 1470 C.E. at the Aztec Templo Mayor (Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico City) (photo: **Dr. Steven Zucker**)

Aztec artists worked in a number of different media, from monumental stone sculptures, terracotta sculptures, and murals to codices, featherworks, and mosaics. Stone sculptures like **Coatlicue** (top of the page) demonstrate the expertise and skill of stone carvers. The sculpture is over-life size, and is carved from a single stone. The patterning on the serpents that form her skirt replicate actual serpent skin. The combination of naturalistic elements paired with more abstract ones is characteristic of Aztec art in general.

The Aztecs were also interested in the arts of earlier cultures, and would bring objects back to Tenochtitlan where they might be buried as part of offerings. At the Templo Mayor, for instance, we find **Olmec masks** dating to more than a thousand years earlier that were reburied in ritual offerings at the main Aztec temple. Some Aztec art is intentionally archaizing, or fashioned to look like older "archaic" art like that found at **Teotihuacan**.

Writing with pictures



Figure **3.14.1.15**: Illustration with the glyph for Chapultepec, *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, 16th century, folio 45v (Bibliothèque nationale de France)

Aztecs used picture-writing rather than an alphabetic script like the one you are reading here. A combination of glyphs and images made up this form of writing. For instance, the image of a hill designated a place, and a specific image accompanying the symbol for hill designated the specific place. Chapultepec, for example, would include a hill (*tepetl*) and a grasshopper (*chapolin*). A scroll

placed in front of someone's mouth indicated talking or speech (in Nahuatl, this is called *tlatolli*). The *huey tlatoani* Motecuzoma Ilhuicamina's name means "arrow piercing sky," and his name glyph shows an arrow piercing the sky.

The Spanish conquest

The Aztec empire crumbled after the defeat of Tenochtitlan in 1521. Cortés and his men, along with thousands of indigenous allies who despised the Aztecs, eventually defeated them after cutting off their water supply. People in the capital city fell sick largely because they lacked immunity to European diseases, and their military forces were weakened.

Aztec culture did not disappear, however. Mesoamerican traditions and art continued into what we call the **colonial or viceregal era**. Even though some forms disappeared, others were transformed, and still others continued unchanged.

Ongoing excavations in and around Mexico City continue to alter our understanding of this diverse and fascinating culture as they reveal more Mexica art and architecture. Recent excavations near the Templo Mayor uncovered the largest Aztec monolith to date, called the **Tlaltecuhtli Monolith**. It is believed that this monolith may mark the spot of a *huey tlatoani*'s tomb, and some of the items discovered underneath this monolith are helping us to rewrite what we know about Aztec culture and art.

Additional resources:

Tenochtitlan on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Aztec stone sculpture on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Aztec Empire from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Templo Mayor virtual visit (in Spanish)

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3.14.2: More on the Aztecs (Mexica)

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure 3.14.2.1: Turquoise mosaic mask (human face), 1400-1521 C.E., cedrela wood, turquoise, pine resin, mother-of-pearl, conch shell, 16.5 x 15.2 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

During the twelfth century C.E. the Aztec (or Mexica*) were a small and obscure tribe searching for a new homeland. Eventually they settled in the Valley of Mexico and founded their capital, Tenochtitlan, in 1345. At the beginning of the sixteenth century it was one of the largest cities in the world.

The Mexica were a migrant people from the desert north who arrived in Mesoamerica in the 1300s. This previously nomadic tribe was not welcomed by the local inhabitants who viewed them as inferior and undeveloped. Legend tells that as a result the Mexica wandered waiting for a sign to indicate where they should settle. It is said that in 1325 C.E. this sign, an eagle and serpent fighting on a cactus, was seen at Lake Texcoco prompting the Mexica to found their capital city, Tenochtitlan.

Tenochtitlan

The Aztec capital city, Tenochtitlan, was founded on a small piece of land in the western part of Lake Texcoco. The city was contained within high mountains and surrounding lake and marshes. To create living and farming space the Aztecs sank piles into the marshes and formed small land masses called chinampas, or floating gardens. Tenochtitlan was highly developed with causeways between islands for transport, aqueducts to carry fresh water and sewers to dispose of waste. The city developed into a metropolis led by a ruling leader and supported by noble classes, priests, warriors and merchants. By the early 1500s it contained an array of pyramids, temples, palaces and market places.



Figure **3.14.2.2**: Mexica capital city, Tenochtitlan © Trustees of the British Museum

By 1430 C.E. the Mexica had assimilated aspects of the surrounding tribes and developed into a structured society. Their military became powerful and campaigns were fought and won. The Triple Alliance was created with the lords of Texcoco (situated on the eastern shores of Lake Texococo) and Tlacopan (sometimes referred to as Tacuba, situated on the western shores of Lake Texococo) further strengthening Aztec power.

A huge empire



Figure **3.14.2.3**: Empire of Moctezuma II in 1519 © Trustees of the British Museum

Warfare was extremely important for the Mexica people and led them to conquer most of modern-day central and southern Mexico. They controlled their huge empire through military strength, a long-distance trading network and the tribute which conquered peoples had to pay. The Mexica went to war for two main reasons; to exact tribute and to capture prisoners. They needed prisoners because they believed that the gods must be appeased with human blood and hearts to ensure the sun rose each day. Conquering new regions brought the opportunity to capture slaves who were an important part of Mexica society. Under a succession of rulers armies were sent further across Mexico. By the start of the 1500s the Mexica empire stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific and into Guatemala and Nicaragua.

The Mexica designed roads for travel by foot because there were no draught animals. These roads were well maintained and boosted trade both for the Mexica and for the tribes under their control. They also enabled the Aztecs to be informed of events across their empire. The Mexica exported luxury items such as jewelry and garments manufactured from imported raw materials. They also exported goods such as lake salt and ceramic goods. Exotic luxuries such as animal skins, feathers, rubber and jade came from the distant southern tropics. Beautiful manufactured goods such as jewelry, textiles and pottery came from craft centers, a famous example of which is Cholula (in the modern Mexican state of Puebla). Traded goods even came from as far away as southern New Mexico and raw materials from Central America appeared in the markets of Tenochtitlan.

Complex religious beliefs

Stone sculpture in the British Museum collection reflects the Mexica's complex religious beliefs and the large pantheon of gods they worshipped. Their sophisticated ritual calendar reflected the rhythms of the agricultural year and their ceramic sculptures are noted for their visual impact. Musical instruments such as drums were decorated with intricate carvings, probably because of the importance of music during Mexica rituals.



Figure **3.14.2.4**: Seated figure of Mictlantecuhtli, c. 1325-1521 C.E., Mexica, sandstone, 60 x 27 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

This sculpture represents Mictlantecuhtli, an Aztec god associated with death. It is made from a sandstone which is not found in the Mexican highlands and was probably obtained in Veracruz. The figure bears three glyphs, carved on his back: "Two Skull," "Five Vulture," and "Four House."

Mictlantecuhtli, and his counterpart Mictlancihuatl, inhabited the lowest of the nine levels in which the Underworld (Mictlan) was divided. The "soul" of the deceased went to a particular level in Mictlan according to the circumstances of their death. Those who died of natural causes went to the ninth level and had to negotiate all sorts of obstacles to reach it. To help the "souls" in their dangerous journey the deceased were cremated with some of their possessions, especially the tools they used in life.

Two spectacular ceramic figures of Mictlantecuhtli were recovered in the 1980s from the "House of the Eagles," a building located in the Sacred Precinct of the Mexica capital, Tenochtitlan. These colossal figures had traces of blood on them. This is consistent with depictions in the codices (screenfold books) of ceremonies in which an image of Mictlantecuhtli, or a person representing him, is bathed with blood.

Craftsmen also worked in gold, turquoise mosaic and feathers. Most pieces were destroyed by the Spanish invaders, but the British Museum holds a number of turquoise mosaics, the most beautiful of which were produced by Mixtec craftsmen and sent to the Mexica as tribute.

Spanish rule

Hernán Cortés and his small Spanish army arrived in 1519 and overthrew the Mexica ruler Moctezuma Xocoyotzin with relative ease. This was partly due to the latter's weakness, as well as the Spaniards' superior weaponry, their unfamiliar battle tactics and the devastation of the Mexica population by European disease. Mexico remained under Spanish rule until gaining independence in 1821 C.E.

*The people and culture we know as "Aztec" referred to themselves as the Mexica (pronounced 'Mé-shee-ka').

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3.14.3: Serpents in Mexica culture

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure **3.14.3.1**: Stone serpent, Mexica, 1325–1521, from Mexico, 21.5 x 26 x 37 cm (© Trustees of the British Museum)

The serpent played a very important role in Mexica* religion and many finely carved stone sculptures have survived. The majority of the serpents represented are rattlesnakes, often depicted with striking realism. In this example the body has been shortened into a highly stylized coil, a posture adopted by rattlesnakes when they are ready to attack. The pose, the bulging eyes and protruding fangs convey their power and strength.



Figure **3.14.3.1**: Coatlicue, c. 1500, Mexica (Aztec), found on the SE edge of the Plaza mayor/Zocalo in Mexico City, basalt, 257 cm high (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City), photo: Steven Zucker (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The word for serpent in Nahuatl, the language spoken by the Mexica, is *coatl*. Serpents were associated with several gods such as Quetzalcoatl (‘Feathered Serpent’), Xiuhcoatl (‘Fire Serpent’), Mixcoatl (‘Cloud Serpent’) or Coatlicue (‘She of the Serpent Skirt’), mother of the Mexica god Huitzilopochtli. The word *coatl* is also part of many place names, such as Coatepec (‘the hill of the serpents’). Coatepec is one of the most important places in Mexica mythology, the birthplace of the god Huitzilopochtli, the principal Mexica god.



Figure **3.14.3.3**: Snake balustrade and undulating serpent (photo: Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank)

Serpents were also used as architectural elements. For example, a wall of serpents (*coatepantli*) was used to delimit sacred spaces within a ceremonial area. At the Mexica capital, Tenochtitlan, such a wall was surrounding part of the Great Temple.

*The people and culture we know as 'Aztec' referred to themselves as the Mexica (pronounced Me-shee-ka).

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Additional resources:

M. E. Miller and K. Taube, *An illustrated dictionary of t* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1997)

H.B. Nicholson and E. Quiñones Keber, *Art of Aztec Mexico, treasures* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1983)

C. McEwan, *Ancient Mexico in the British* (London, The British Museum Press, 1994)

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3.14.4: The Templo Mayor and the Coyolxauhqui Stone

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK



Video **3.14.4.1**: Unearthing the Aztec past, the destruction of the Templo Mayor (Mexico City) . Speakers: Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Steven Zucker



Figure **3.14.4.2**: The Coyolxauhqui Stone, c. 1500. volcanic stone, found: Templo Mayor, Tenochtitlan (Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico City) (photo: **Thelmadatter**, public domain)

In 1978, electrical workers in Mexico City came across a remarkable discovery. While digging near the main plaza, they found a finely carved stone monolith that displayed a dismembered and decapitated woman. Immediately, they knew they found something special. Shortly thereafter, archaeologists realized that the monolith displayed the Mexica (Aztec)[1] goddess Coyolxauhqui, or Bells-Her-Cheeks, the sister of the Mexica's patron god, Huitzilopochtli (Hummingbird-Left), who killed his sister when she attempted to kill their mother. This monolith led to the discovery of the Templo Mayor, the main Mexica temple located in the sacred precinct of the former Mexica capital, known as Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City).



Figure **3.14.4.3**: View of the Templo Mayor excavations today in the center of what is now Mexico City (photo: Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank)

The Templo Mayor



Figure **3.14.4.4**: Map of Lake Texcoco, with Tenochtitlan (at left) Valley of Mexico, c. 1519 (created by **Yavidaxiu**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The city of Tenochtitlan was established in 1325 on an island in the middle of Lake Texcoco (much of which has since been filled in to accommodate Mexico City which now exists on this site), and with the city's foundation the original structure of the Templo Mayor was built. Between 1325 and 1519, the Templo Mayor was expanded, enlarged, and reconstructed during seven main building phases, which likely corresponded with different rulers, or tlatoani ("speaker"), taking office. Sometimes new construction was the result of environmental problems, such as flooding.

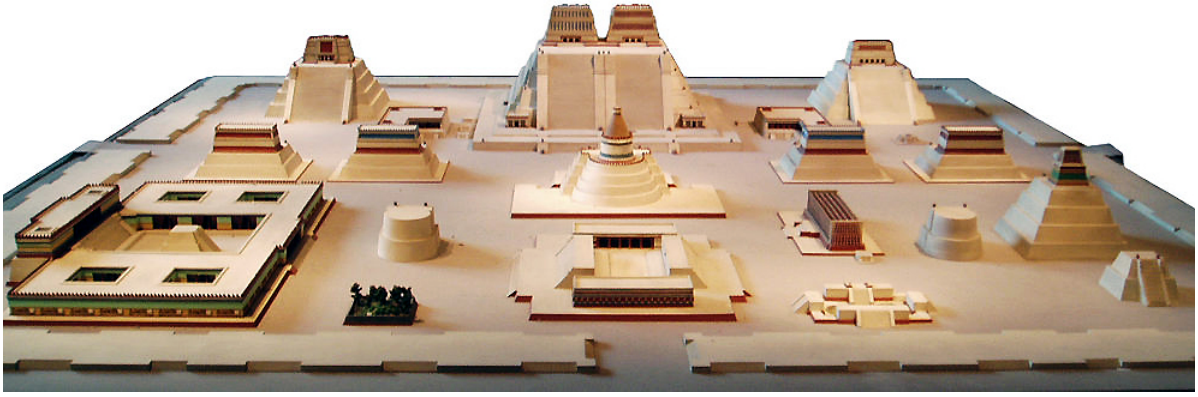


Figure **3.14.4.5**: Model of the sacred precinct in Tenochtitlan (National Anthropological Museum, Mexico City) (photo (edited), Steve Cadman, CC BY-SA 2.0)

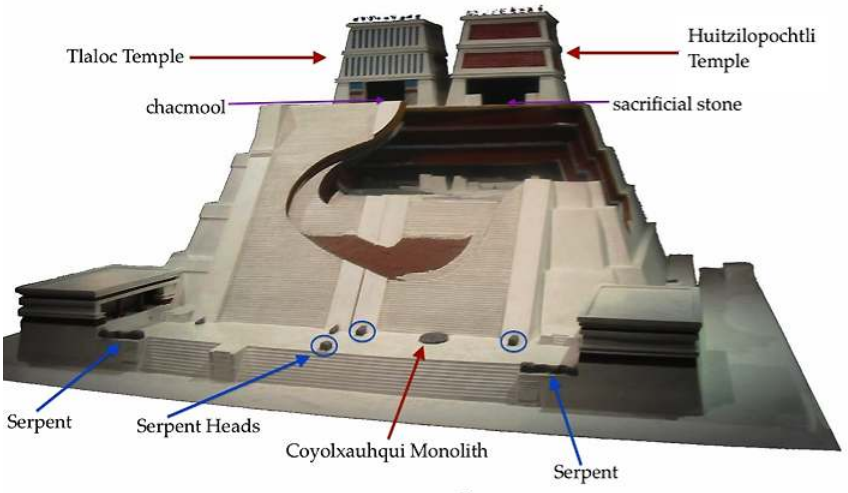


Figure **3.14.4.6**: Templo Mayor (reconstruction), Tenochtitlan, 1375–1520 C.E.

Located in the sacred precinct at the heart of the city, the Templo Mayor was positioned at the center of the Mexica capital and thus the entire empire. The capital was also divided into four main quadrants, with the Templo Mayor at the center. This design reflects the Mexica cosmos, which was believed to be composed of four parts structured around the navel of the universe, or the *axis mundi*.

The Templo Mayor was approximately ninety feet high and covered in stucco. Two grand staircases accessed twin temples, which were dedicated to the deities Tlaloc and Huitzilopochti. Tlaloc was the deity of water and rain and was associated with agricultural fertility. Huitzilopochtli was the patron deity of the Mexica, and he was associated with warfare, fire, and the Sun.



Figure 3.14.4.7: Standard bearers (photo: Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank)

Paired together on the Templo Mayor, the two deities symbolized the Mexica concept of atl-tlachinolli, or burnt water, which connoted warfare—the primary way in which the Mexica acquired their power and wealth.

The Huitzilopochtli Temple

In the center of the Huitzilopochtli temple was a sacrificial stone. Near the top, standard-bearer figures decorated the stairs. They likely held paper banners and feathers. Serpent balustrades adorn the base of the temple of Huitzilopochtli, and two undulating serpents flank the stairs that led to the base of the Templo Mayor as well.



Figure 3.14.4.8: Snake balustrade and undulating serpent (photo: Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank)

But by far the most famous object decorating the Huiztilopochtli temple is the *Coyolxauhqui monolith*, found at the base of the stairs. Originally painted and carved in low relief, the *Coyolxauhqui monolith* is approximately eleven feet in diameter and displays the female deity Coyolxauhqui, or Bells-on-her-face. Golden bells decorate her cheeks, feathers and balls of down adorn her hair, and she wears elaborate earrings, fanciful sandals and bracelets, and a serpent belt with a skull attached at the back. Monster faces are found at her joints, connecting her to other female deities—some of whom are associated with trouble and chaos. Otherwise, Coyolxauhqui is shown naked, with sagging breasts and a stretched belly to indicate that she was a mother. For the Mexica, nakedness was considered a form of humiliation and also defeat. She is also decapitated and dismembered. Her head and limbs are separated from her torso and are organized in a pinwheel shape. Pieces of bone stick out from her limbs.



Figure **3.14.4.9**: The Coyolxauhqui Stone (detail), c. 1500. volcanic stone, found: Templo Mayor, Tenochtitlan (Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City) (photo: Thelmadatter, public domain)

The monolith relates to an important myth: the birth of the Mexica patron deity, Huitzilopochtli. Apparently, Huitzilopochtli's mother, Coatlicue (Snakes-her-skirt), became pregnant one day from a piece of down that entered her skirt. Her daughter, Coyolxauhqui, became angry when she heard that her mother was pregnant, and together with her 400 brothers (called the Centzonhuitznahua) attacked their mother. At the moment of attack, Huitzilopochtli emerged, fully clothed and armed, to defend his mother on the mountain called Coatepec (Snake Mountain). Eventually, Huitzilopochtli defeated his sister, then beheaded her and threw her body down the mountain, at which point her body broke apart.



Figure **3.14.4.10**: Coyolxauhqui stone reconstruction with possible original colors (photo: **miguelão**, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The monolith portrays the moment in the myth after Huitzilopochtli vanquished Coyolxauhqui and threw her body down the mountain. By placing this sculpture at the base of Huiztilopochtli's temple, the Mexica effectively transformed the temple into Coatepec. Many of the temple's decorations and sculptural program also support this identification. The snake balustrades and serpent heads identify the temple as a snake mountain, or Coatepec. It is possible that the standard-bearer figures recovered at the Templo Mayor symbolized Huitzilopochtli's 400 brothers.

Ritual performances that occurred at the Templo Mayor also support the idea that the temple symbolically represented Coatepec. For instance, the ritual of *Panquetzaliztli* (banner raising) celebrated Huitzilopochtli's triumph over Coyolxauhqui and his 400 brothers. People offered gifts to the deity, danced and ate tamales. During the ritual, war captives who had been painted blue were killed on the sacrificial stone and then their bodies were rolled down the staircase to fall atop the *Coyolxauhqui monolith* to reenact

the myth associated with Coatepec. For the enemies of the Mexica and those people the Mexica ruled over, this ritual was a powerful reminder to submit to Mexica authority. Clearly, the decorations and rituals associated with the Templo Mayor connoted the power of the Mexica empire and their patron deity, Huitzilopochtli.

The Tlaloc Temple

At the top center of the Tlaloc temple is a sculpture of a male figure on his back painted in blue and red. The figure holds a vessel on his abdomen likely to receive offerings. This type of sculpture is called a *chacmool*, and is older than the Mexica. It was associated with the rain god, in this case Tlaloc.



Figure **3.14.4.11**: Chacmool on Tlaloc temple platform (photo (edited): **Adriel A. Macedo Arroyo**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

At the base of the Tlaloc side of the temple, on the same axis as the chacmool, are stone sculptures of two frogs with their heads arched upwards. This is known as the Altar of the Frogs. The croaking of frogs was thought to herald the coming of the rainy season, and so they are connected to Tlaloc.



Figure **3.14.4.12**: Altar of the Frogs (photo: Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank)

While Huiztilopochtli's temple symbolized Coatepec, Tlaloc's temple was likely intended to symbolize the Mountain of Sustenance, or Tonacatepetl. This fertile mountain produced high amounts of rain, thereby allowing crops to grow.

Offerings at the Templo Mayor

Over a hundred ritual caches or deposits containing thousands of objects have been found associated with the Templo Mayor. Some offerings contained items related to water, like coral, shells, crocodile skeletons, and vessels depicting Tlaloc. Other deposits related to warfare and sacrifice, containing items like human skull masks with obsidian blade tongues and noses and sacrificial knives. Many of these offerings contain objects from faraway places—likely places from which the Mexica collected tribute. Some offerings demonstrate the Mexica's awareness of the historical and cultural traditions in Mesoamerica. For instance, they buried an

Olmec mask made of jadeite, as well as others from Teotihuacan (a city northeast of modern-day Mexico City known for its huge monuments and dating roughly from the 1st century until the 7th century C.E.). The Olmec mask was made over a thousand years prior to the Mexica, and its burial in Templo Mayor suggests that the Mexica found it precious and perhaps historically significant.



Figure 3.14.4.13: Olmec-style mask, c. 1470, jadeite, offering 20, hornblende, 10.2 x 8.6 x 3.1 cm

The Templo Mayor today

After the Spanish Conquest in 1521, the Templo Mayor was destroyed, and what did survive remained buried. The stones were reused to build structures like the Cathedral in the newly founded capital of the Viceroyalty of New Spain (1521-1821). If you visit the Templo Mayor today, you can walk through the excavated site on platforms. The Templo Mayor museum contains those objects found at the site, including the recent discovery of the largest Mexica monolith showing the deity Tlaltecuhtli.

1. The Aztec referred to themselves as Mexica

Additional resources:

Virtual Tour of the Templo Mayor museum (in Spanish)

The Templo Mayor and its Symbolism (Guggenheim Museum)

Templo Mayor on the Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Aztec World, ed. By Elizabeth Baquedano and Gary M. Feinman (New York: Abrams in association with the Field Museum, 2008).

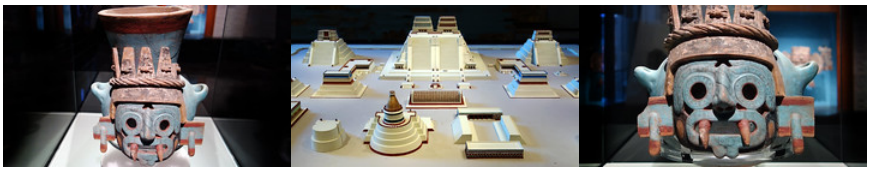
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3.14.5: Coatlicue

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK



Video **3.14.5.1**: Coatlicue, c. 1500, basalt, 257 cm high, Mexica (Aztec), found on the SE edge of the Plaza mayor/Zocalo in Mexico City (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City)



Figure **3.14.5.1**: Coatlicue, c. 1500, Mexica (Aztec), found on the SE edge of the Plaza mayor/Zocalo in Mexico City, basalt, 257 cm high (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City)

Mother, goddess, sacrificial offering?



Figure **3.14.5.2**: Coatlicue, c. 1500, Mexica (Aztec), found on the SE edge of the Plaza mayor/Zocalo in Mexico City, basalt, 257 cm high (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City), photo: **Steven Zucker** (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Coatlicue sculpture in Mexico City's National Museum of Anthropology is one of the most famous Mexica (Aztec) sculptures in existence (her name is pronounced "koh-at-lee-kway"). Standing over ten feet tall, the statue towers over onlookers as she leans toward them. With her arms bent and pulled up against her sides as if to strike, she is truly an imposing sight.

Numerous snakes appear to writhe across the sculpture's surface. In fact, snakes form her entire skirt, as well as her belt and even her head. Coatlicue's name literally means Snakes-Her-Skirt, so her clothing helps identify her. Her snake belt ties at the waist to keep a skull "buckle" in place. Her upper torso is exposed, and we can just make out her breasts and rolls in her abdomen. The rolls indicate she is a mother. A sizable necklace formed of hands and hearts largely obscures her breasts.

Two enormous snakes curl upwards from her neck to face one another. Their bifurcated, or split, tongues curl downwards, and the resulting effect is that the snake heads and tongues appear to be a single, forward-facing serpent face. Snakes coming out of body parts, as we see here, was an Aztec convention for squirting blood. Coatlicue has in fact been decapitated, and her snaky head represents the blood squirting from her severed neck. Her arms are also formed of snake heads, suggesting she was dismembered there as well.



Figure **3.14.5.3**: Snakes facing one another (detail), Coatlicue, c. 1500, Mexica (Aztec), found on the SE edge of the Plaza mayor/Zocalo in Mexico City, basalt, 257 cm high (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City)

You might read elsewhere that Coatlicue was decapitated by her daughter or beheaded when her son was born from her severed neck (the idea has been adopted in part to explain this monumental sculpture). However, the myth from which this story derives does not actually state that Coatlicue suffered this fate. For this reason, it is useful to review the myth—one of the most important for the Aztecs.

Battle atop Snake Mountain

The primary myth in which Coatlicue is involved recounts the birth of the Aztec patron deity, Huitzilopochtli (pronounced “wheat-zil-oh-poach-lee”). This myth was recorded in the later sixteenth century after the Spanish Conquest of 1521. The main source from which we learn about it is the *General History of the Things of New Spain*, also called *The Florentine Codex* (written 1575–77 and compiled by the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún, indigenous authors and artists, and indigenous informants).[1]



Figure **3.14.5.4**: Illustration of the Battle of Coatepec from Bernardino de Sahagún, General History of the Things of New Spain (The Florentine Codex), 1575–77, volume 1, page 420

One day Coatlicue, an earth goddess, was sweeping atop Coatepec (or Snake Mountain), when a feather fell into her apron. At that moment, she immaculately conceived a son, whose name was Huitzilopochtli (a sun and warrior god). Upon hearing that her mother was pregnant, Coyolxauhqui (or Bells-Her-Cheeks, pronounced “coy-al-shauw-kee”) became enraged. She rallied her 400 brothers, the *Centzonhuitz-nahua*, to storm Snake Mountain and kill their mother.

One of the brothers decided to warn Coatlicue. Upon hearing of this impending murder, Coatlicue became understandably afraid. But Huitzilopochtli comforted her, telling her not to worry. At the moment Coyolxauhqui approached her mother, Huitzilopochtli was born, fully grown and armed. He sliced off his sister’s head, and threw her body off the mountain. As she fell, her body broke apart until it came to rest at the bottom of Snake Mountain.

But what became of Coatlicue, the mother to the victorious Huitzilopochtli and the defeated Coyolxauhqui? The myth does not mention her decapitation and dismemberment (only her daughter’s), so why would this famous sculpture display her in this manner?

Why was Coatlicue decapitated?

More recently, a new interpretation has been offered for Coatlicue’s appearance that is based on another myth (recounted in different Spanish Colonial source) concerning the beginning of 5th era, or 5th sun.The Aztecs believed that there were four earlier suns (or eras) prior to the one in which we currently live. The myth notes that several female deities (perhaps Coatlicue among them), sacrificed themselves to put the sun in motion, effectively allowing time itself to continue. They were responsible for preserving the cosmos by offering their own lives.



Figure **3.14.5.5**: Snakes and torso (detail), Coatlicue, c. 1500, Mexica (Aztec), found on the SE edge of the Plaza mayor/Zocalo in Mexico City, basalt, 257 cm high (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City)

After this point, these female deities were then symbolized by their skirts (called *mantas*), which could explain the careful attention paid to Coatlicue's snaky skirt. It functions as a reminder of her name—Snakes-Her-Skirt—as well as symbolizing her as a deity and reminding the viewer of her past deeds. This might also explain why—in place of her head—we have two snakes rising from her severed neck. They represent streaming blood, which was a precious liquid connoting fertility. With her willing sacrifice, Coatlicue enabled life to continue.

Some details on the sculpture support this newer and enticing interpretation. There is a date glyph, 12 Reed, inscribed on the sculpture's back which might relate to the beginning of a new solar era. Archaeologists have also found the remains of several other monumental sculptures of female deities similar to Coatlicue, but each display different skirts. One of these sculptures (see photo at top of the page) stands near to Coatlicue in the Anthropology Museum, but hearts adorn her skirt instead of snakes.



Figure **3.14.5.6**: Coatlicue de Cozcatlán, c. 1500, Mexica (Aztec), 115 cm high (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City)

Despite her fame in one of the most important Aztec myths concerning their patron god, Coatlicue did not have numerous stories recorded about her during the sixteenth century (that we know of at least). Few surviving Aztec objects display her. However, another stone sculpture in the National Museum of Anthropology—on a much smaller scale—shows Coatlicue with her head intact. We can identify her by her snaky skirt. Her face is partly skeletonized and de-fleshed. Her nose is missing, revealing the cavity. Yet she still has flesh on her lips, which are open to reveal bared teeth. Even with her head, this version of Coatlicue still seems intimidating to us today. But was she perceived as terrifying by the Aztecs or is this only a twenty-first century impression of her?

Terrifying and respected

Prior to the Spanish Conquest, Coatlicue related to other female earth deities, such as Toci (Our Grandmother). Several sixteenth-century Spanish Colonial sources mention that Coatlicue belonged to a class of deities known as *tzitzimime* (deities related to the stars), who were considered terrifying and dangerous. For example, outside of the 360-days that formed the agricultural calendar (called the year count or *xiuhpohualli*), there were five extra "nameless" days. The Aztecs believed this was an ominous time when bad things could happen. The *tzitzimime*, for instance, could descend to the earth's surface and eat people or at least wreak havoc, causing instability and fear. In Spanish Colonial chronicles, the *tzitzimime* are depicted with skeletonized faces and monster claws —similar to what we see in Coatlicue sculptures discussed here. These sources also call the *tzitzimime* demons or devils.

For all their ferociousness, however, the *tzitzimime* also had positive associations. Ironically, this group of deities were patrons of midwives, or women responsible for helping mothers with their babies. People also invoked them for medical help and they had associations with fertility. For these reasons, they had a more ambivalent role than as simply good or bad deities, and so they were both respected and feared.

Created, buried, found, buried, found again

After the Spanish Conquest, the monumental Coatlicue sculpture was buried because it was considered an inappropriate pagan idol by Spanish Christian invaders. After languishing in obscurity for more than 200 years, it was rediscovered in 1790.

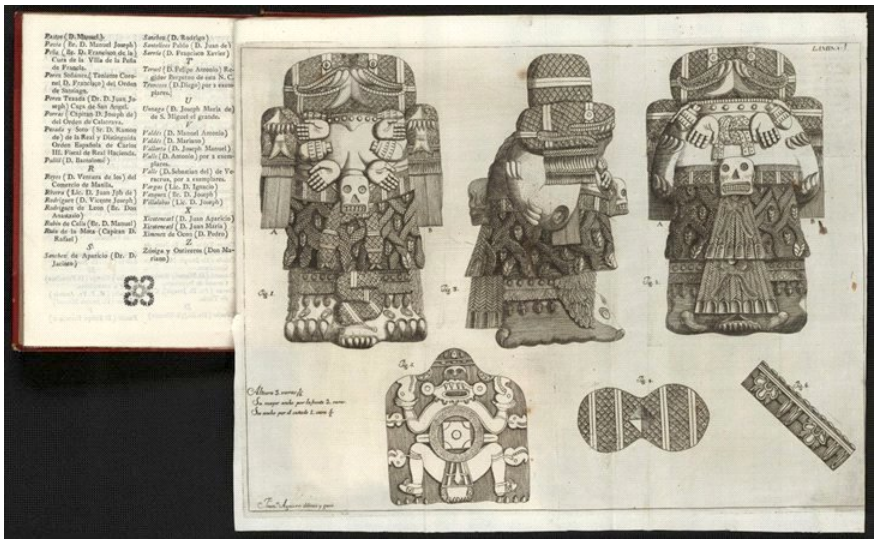


Figure **3.14.5.7**: Image published in Antonio León y Gama's 1792 book, Descripción histórica y cronológica de las dos piedras que con ocasión del nuevo empedrado que se está formando en la plaza principal de México, se hallaron en ella el año de 1790

Antonio León y Gama, a curious historian, astronomer, and intellectual living in Mexico City at the time, drew illustrations of the sculpture and offered his interpretation of who it displayed (he claimed it was Teoyaomiqui). Not long after it was found, however, Coatlicue was reburied—she was considered too frightening and pagan. Eventually, she was uncovered again in the twentieth century, becoming one of the crowning objects of the National Anthropology Museum and a famous representative of Aztec artistic achievements in stone sculpture.

[1] There are several other myths that make mention of Coatlicue, but the most frequently cited myth is the one in the Florentine Codex discussed in the text.

Additional resources:

Famsi on Aztec monumental sculpture

Antonio León y Gama's text in Spanish from the Kislak Collection

Elizabeth M. Brumfiel and Gary M. Feinman, eds., *The Aztec World* (New York: Abrams, 2008).

Cecelia Klein, "A New Interpretation of the Aztec Statue Called Coatlicue, 'Snakes-Her-Skirt'," *Ethnohistory* vol. 55, no. 2 (Spring 2008), pp. 229-250.

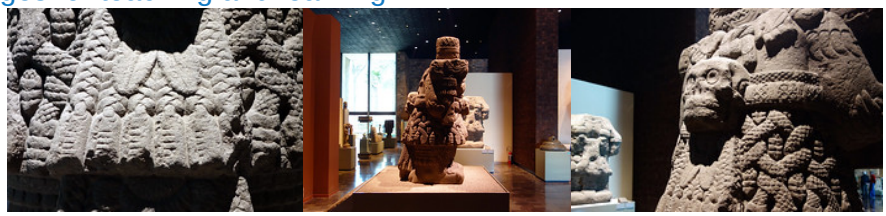
Esther Pasztory, *Aztec Art* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1983).

Richard Townsend, *The Aztecs*, 3 ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009).

Davíd Carrasco and Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, eds. *Moctezuma's Mexico: Visions of the Aztec World*, revised (University Press of Colorado, 2003).

For myths in the Florentine Codex, see Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. O. Anderson, eds. *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, 12 vols., (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1950–82).

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3.14.6: Tlaloc vessel

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK



Tlaloc vessel, c. 1440-70, found Templo Mayor, Tenochtitlan, ceramic (Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico City)

Terms and key ideas

- the importance of Tlaloc in Mexica culture
- the color known as Maya blue
- Tlaloc's basic iconography and connection to water
- offerings associated with the Templo Mayor

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Additional resources:

Tenochtitlan: Templo Mayor on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

The Aztecs and the making of colonial Mexico (from the Newberry Library)

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3.14.7: The Sun Stone (or The Calendar Stone) (Aztec)

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK and DR. BETH HARRIS



The Sun Stone (or *The Calendar Stone)*, Aztec, reign of Moctezuma II (1502–20), discovered in 1790 at the southeastern edge of the Plaza Mayor (Zocalo) in Mexico City, stone (unfinished), 358 cm diameter x 98 cm depth (Museo Nacional de Antropología)

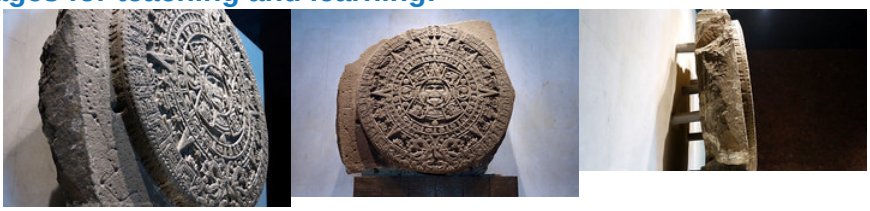
Terms and key concepts

- polychromy
- Mexica (or Aztec) understanding of the creation of the cosmos
- Tonatiuh?
- Nahui-Ollin
- Mesoamerican calendar
- Tenochtitlan
- glyphs

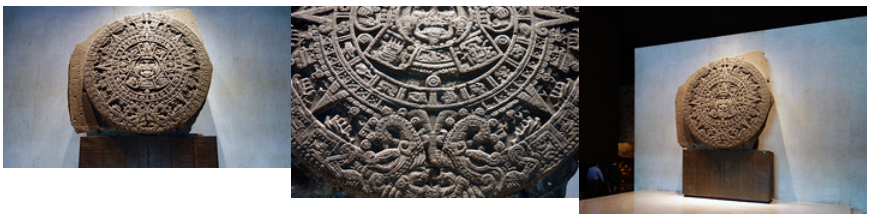
Additional resources

The Sun Stone on Google Arts and Culture

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3.14.8: Coyolxauhqui Monolith

by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK



Coyolxauhqui Monolith, c. 1500, volcanic stone, Aztec, found at Templo Mayor, Tenochtitlan, excavated 1978 (Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico City)

Key terms and concepts:

- Mexica (Aztecs)
- Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan
- Huitzilopochtli
- gender messages
- mythology and myth of Coatepec (Snake Mountain)
- Panquetzaliztli and monthly feasts/rituals

Additional resource:

Aztecs: Monumental Sculpture

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



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3.14.9: Monolith of Tlaltecuhtli (Earth Lord)

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER



Monolith of Tlaltecuhtli (Earth Lord), 1502, Mexica (Aztec), 4.19 x 3.62 m (Museo del Templo Mayor, Mexico City)

Key terms and concepts:

- Aztec (Mexica)
- Tlaltecuhtli
- sacred precinct of Tenochtitlan
- Templo Mayor
- relief carving
- Ahuitzotl (ruler or *huey tlatoani*)
- *tzitzimime*

Additional resources:

Another Tlaltecuhtli monolith at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Information on the Tlaltecuhtli excavations from The Great Temple Project (pdf)

Report on the installation of the *Monolith of Tlaltecuhtli* at the Museo Templo Mayor

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3.14.10: Pottery model temples

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure 3.14.10.1: Group of pottery model temples, Mexica (Aztec), 1325–1521, from Mexico (© The Trustees of the British Museum)



Figure 3.14.10.2:Diego Durán, illustration of the Templo Mayor, from The History of the Indies of New Spain, 1579 (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid)

Most Mexica* temples were razed to the ground by the Spaniards. However, we do know what they looked like through archaeological excavations, descriptions in sixteenth-century chronicles, and depictions in codices from the sixteenth century. These pottery models add valuable details to our knowledge of Mexica religious architecture.

Most temples consisted of a truncated, rectangular pyramid with a stairway leading to a sanctuary erected on top. The stone used for their construction was covered with stucco (plaster) and painted.



Figure **3.14.10.3**: Group of pottery model temples, Mexica (Aztec), 1325–1521, from Mexico, left one: 14.7 x 10.5 cm (© The Trustees of the British Museum)

The miniature temple on the left is an example of this standard plan. A sacrificial stone can be seen on the platform in front of the shrine.

Some were round or semi-circular, like the miniature temple in the middle here. These were the temples dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, in his aspect as Ehecatl, the Wind God. The beak-shaped mask worn by the figure on top of the platform is characteristic of Ehecatl.

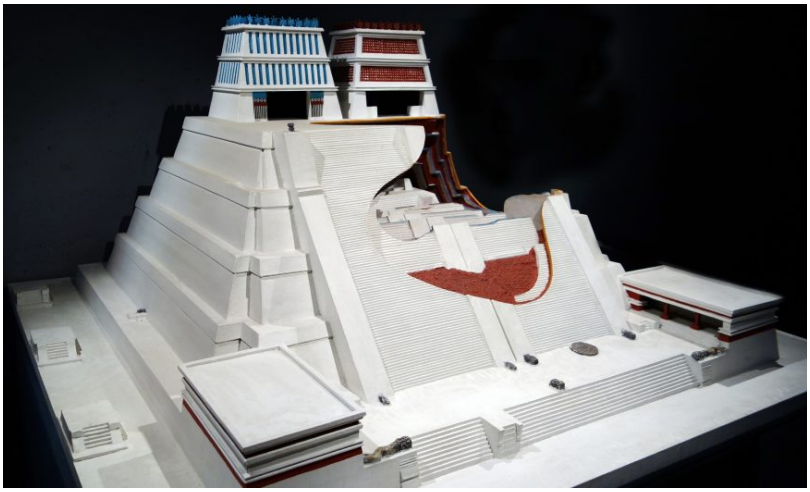


Figure **3.14.10.4**: Templo Mayor (reconstruction), Tenochtitlan, 1375–1520 C.E.

The Great Temple at Tenochtitlan, the Mexica capital, was a twin temple dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, the Mexica patron god (and god of war) and to Tlaloc, the Rain God. Two stairways lead to each sanctuary, the former with painted symbols in red and white and the latter in blue and white.

*The people and culture we know as 'Aztec' referred to themselves as the Mexica (pronounced Me-shee-ka).

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Additional resources:

E. Pasztory, *Aztec art* (New York, Abrams, 1983)

R.F. Townsend, *The Aztecs* (London, Thames and Hudson, 2000)

J.K. Kowalski, *Mesoamerican architecture as a* (Oxford University Press, 1999)

C. McEwan, *Ancient Mexico in the British* (London, The British Museum Press, 1994)

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3.14.11: Wooden slit-drum (teponaztli)

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure **3.14.11.1**: Wooden slit-drum (teponaztli), Mexica, AD 1325–1521, from Mexico, 16.5 x 50 cm (© Trustees of the British Museum)

A horned owl

This is an example of an Mexica slit-drum called a *teponaztli* in Nahuatl, the language spoken by the Mexica. It was hollowed-out and carved from a piece of hardwood. Two tongues were slotted at the top, carefully carved to achieve different tones when struck with drumsticks. *Teponaztli* were generally decorated with designs in relief or carved to represent human figures or animals. The origin of the instrument is not known but it is likely to go back many centuries before Mexica times. Different sources from the colonial period illustrate its use in various ceremonies, which involved also dancing.



Figure **3.14.11.2**: An illustration of the "One Flower" ceremony. The two drums are the *teponaztli* (foreground) and the *huehuetl* (background). Bernardino de Sahagún and collaborators, *General History of the Things of New Spain*, also called the Florentine Codex, vol. 1, 1575–1577, watercolor, paper, contemporary vellum Spanish binding, open (approx.): 32 x 43 cm, closed (approx.): 32 x 22 x 5 cm (Medicea Laurenziana Library, Florence, Italy)

This *teponaztli* is the only known example that represents a horned owl, here carved on the front of the drum. Owls were considered to be creatures of ill omen. Their presence and nocturnal calls were believed to foretell death or misfortune. Owls were also associated with Mictlantecuhtli, the Lord of the Underworld, and with the powers of darkness. Since the owl was supposed to

serve as a messenger to Mictlantecuhtli, it has been suggested that this particular *teponaztli* could have been use in funerary ceremonies.

*The people and culture we know as ‘Aztec’ referred to themselves as the Mexica (pronounced Me-shee-ka).

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Additional resources:

M. E. Miller and K. Taube, *An illustrated dictionary of the gods and symbols of Ancient Mexico and Maya* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1997)

R.F. Townsend, *The Aztecs* (London, Thames and Hudson, 2000)

C. McEwan, *Ancient Mexico in the British Museum* (London, The British Museum Press, 1994)

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3.14.12: Codex Borgia

by DR. HELEN BURGOS ELLIS



Figure **3.14.12.1**: Codex Borgia, c. 1500, p. 25 (Vatican Library)

Mesoamericans made screenfold manuscripts of great artistic beauty. One of them is the Codex Borgia, an **Aztec** manuscript made during the late Post-Classic period, which stretched from about 1250 until about 1521. It has been studied for centuries, and scholars continue to study this complex manuscript in order to better understand its original meaning and use.

While manuscripts were both ubiquitous and esteemed in Mesoamerica, only twelve survived the destruction related to the conquest of the Aztecs by Spain, when most were burned or otherwise destroyed. Each of the surviving manuscripts bears the name of its European owner or the institution where it was or is now kept. For example, the Codex Borgia is named after its former owner, Cardinal Stefano Borgia, an avid collector of coins and manuscripts.

Based on geographic origin and style, scholars classify the 12 pre-conquest manuscripts into three groups:

> ***Borgia***
>
> ***Codex Borgia***, *Codex Cospi*, *Codex Fejérváry Mayer*, ***Codex Laud***, ***Codex Vaticanus B***
>
> ***Mixtec***
>
> *Codex Colombino-Becker*, ***Codex Bodley***, *Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus 1*, *Codex Zouche-Nuttall*
>
> ***Maya***
>
> *Dresden Codex*, ***Madrid Codex***, *Paris Codex*

Making screenfold manuscripts



Figure **3.14.12.2**: Codex Borgia, facsimile edition published by Testimonio Compañía Editorial, 2008

Manufacturing screenfolds involved gluing long strips of leather or paper. These measured different widths, but were of approximately the same height to form an even longer strip that was folded back and forth, accordion-like, to make "pages." Scholars call the screenfold's front "obverse" and its back "reverse." Two pages, a large section, or even an entire side—obverse or reverse—can be viewed simultaneously. The screenfold is a Mesoamerican construction, strikingly different from European manuscripts whose pages are bound on the left side so the reader sees two pages at a time. Artists covered the screenfold's obverse and reverse with white gesso to prepare it for painting.

Describing the Codex Borgia

When completely unfolded, the Codex Borgia measures approximately 1,030 centimeters (more than 33 feet) in width. When folded, its nearly square pages, each measuring approximately 26.5 by 27 centimeters, can be individually appreciated. The screenfold consists of 39 double-sided pages or 78 single pages, though only 76 of these are painted. The two outermost pages served as covers to which wooden panels were attached (only the Codex Vaticanus B retains these panels).



Figure **3.14.12.3**: Codex Borgia, c. 1500, p. 23 (Vatican Library), note: the Vatican Library watermarks digital images

The Codex Borgia features images with precise contour lines and painted with polychrome washes. In its dense imagery, human figures (usually representing gods) predominate, although plants, trees, animals, water, architectural features, celestial bodies, shields, and tools and accoutrements also appear. These are sketched with fine black lines, which in most instances are delicate and precise, such as the outline of the bird's beak on folio (page) 23. Other outlines are rendered with somewhat thicker strokes, as is visible in the human figure's legs and the feathers on the bird's outstretched wings. Sometimes lines are executed as if to evoke shading, such as the narrow blue band at the base of the figure's headdress. In the bird's claw, diagonal lines coming from opposite directions simulate texture.



Figure **3.14.12.4**: Detail, Codex Borgia, c. 1500, p. 23 (Vatican Library)

Studying the Codex Borgia

Pre-conquest manuscripts like the Codex Borgia help us to understand indigenous thought before the arrival of Europeans and Africans; however, the writing is extraordinarily difficult to decipher as it consists entirely of images and glyphs (characters or symbols). For example, page 28 features five compartments—one in each corner and one in the center—each with a male hovering above a female.

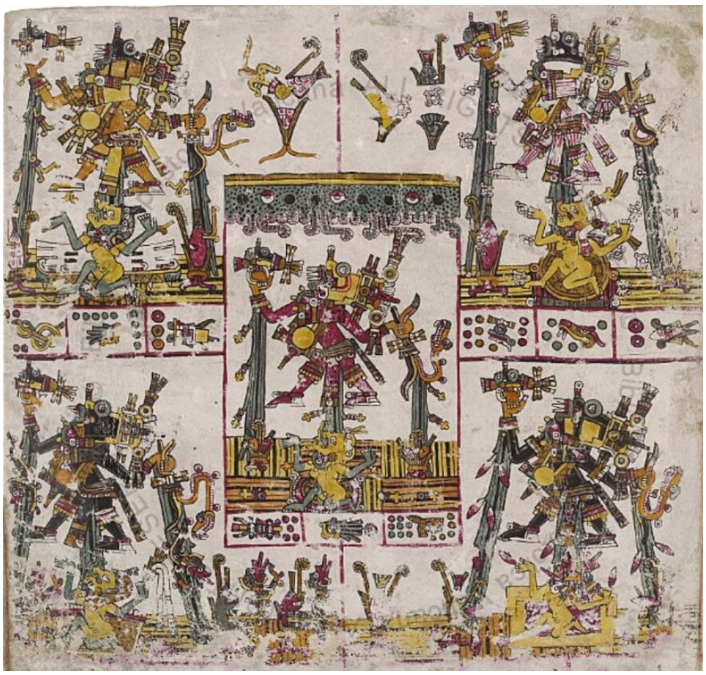


Figure 3.14.12.5: Codex Borgia, c. 1500, p. 28 (Vatican Library), note: the Vatican Library watermarks digital images.

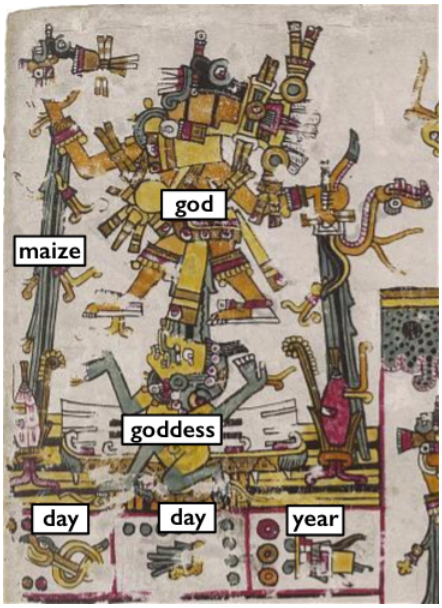


Figure 3.14.12.6: Glyphs for the days and year, Tlaloc (god) wearing the costume elements of Xiuhtlecuhtli (Fire Lord) and a goddess wearing the headdress of Chalchitlucue, Codex Borgia, c. 1500, p. 28 (Vatican Library)

Each female wears an elaborate headdress but is otherwise naked. The male-female couple appears amid maize, an important Mesoamerican plant. Below each compartment are three rectangles each containing a glyph. How do we decipher these images and glyphs? In the early colonial period, indigenous scribes, friars, conquistadors, and other Spanish officials compiled documents—what we call the ethnohistoric record—including chronicles and manuscripts with illustrations by indigenous artists that featured imagery with explanatory glosses in Spanish, Nahuatl (the language of the Mexica, or Aztecs), Latin, and/or Italian. These help us to understand writing in pre-Columbian manuscripts.

For example, page 28 of the Codex Borgia depicts Tlaloc, the god of rain whose iconography includes goggle eyes and fangs. Tlaloc wears costume elements and paraphernalia of additional creator gods, which, starting in the lower right and following a counter clockwise direction, are: Tezcatlipoca (Smoking Mirror), Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli (Lord of Dawn), Xiuhtlecuhtli (Fire Lord), Quetzalcoatl (Wind God), and Xochipilli (Flower Prince). The ethnohistoric sources also help us to identify the female figures and glyphs. The females wear the headdress of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, the wind god (lower right), Xochiquetzal, the Flower Quetzal

(upper right), and Chalchitlucue, the water goddess (the other compartments). The glyphs are day signs recording dates. In each compartment two glyphs represent days and one represents a year (page 28 records five consecutive years)

It is generally believed that the glyphs record the movements of the planet Venus and other celestial bodies, which would link the iconography of page 28 to astronomy and rainfall patterns. Because some of the glyphs are severely worn, there is some disagreement about exactly what they represent. Overall, the page's iconography relates to maize, creating what some would call an "agricultural almanac."

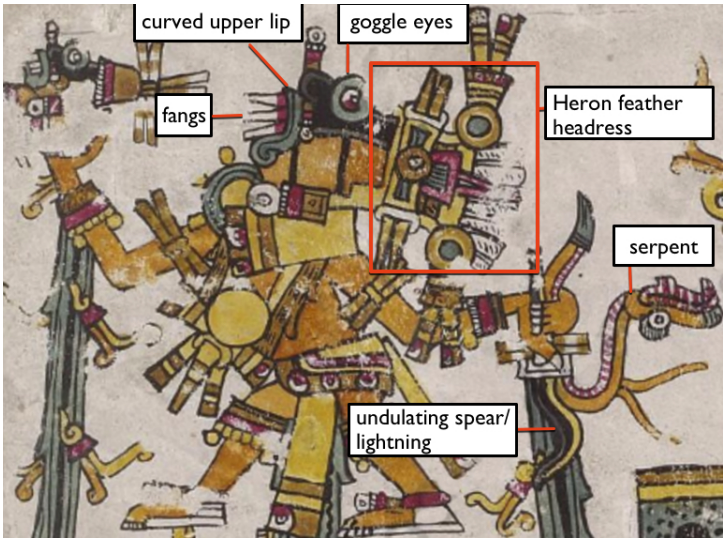


Figure **3.14.12.7**: Tlaloc (detail), Codex Borgia, c. 1500, f. 28 (Vatican Library)

The Codex Borgia's scholarship is extensive and includes discussions of its materials, construction, style, origin, and interpretation (of specific figures, pages, or sections). In the 1790s, the Jesuit José Lino Fábrega wrote a pioneering commentary arguing that the manuscript relays messages about divination (predicting the future). Eduard Seler's 1904 page-by-page iconographic analysis of the Codex Borgia, which continues to be an essential tool in the study of Mesoamerican manuscripts, contends that the Codex Borgia conveys messages about both divination and astronomy. Subsequent scholars have shown that the Codex Borgia also records historical, ritual, mythological, and most recently, botanical information. For example, I have argued with iconographic, ethnographic, and scientific evidence that page 28 represents pollination. Because so few original codices survive, the continued study of the Codex Borgia is essential for our understanding of the pre-conquest cultures of the Americas.

Additional resources:

This manuscript at the Vatican library

Ferdinand Anders, Maarten Jansen, and Luis Reyes García, *Los templos del cielo y de la oscuridad, oráculos y liturgia: Libro explicativo del llamado Códice Borgia* (Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt; Madrid: Sociedad Estatal Quinto Centenario; Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993) (in Spanish).

Juan José Batalla Rosado, *Codex Borgia. El Códice Borgia: Una guía para un viaje alucinante por el inframundo* (Madrid, España: Biblioteca Apostólica Vaticana, Testimonio Compañía Editorial, 2008). (Written in Spanish, but the accompanying facsimile is stunning; UCLA Special Collections has a copy)

Elizabeth Hill Boone, *Cycles of Time and Meaning in the Mexican Books of Fate* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007).

Gisele Díaz and Alan Rodgers, The Codex Borgia: A Full-Color Restoration of the Ancient Mexican Manuscript (New York: Dover, 1993).

Helen Burgos Ellis, "Maize, Quetzalcoatl, and Grass Imagery: Science in the Central Mexican Codex Borgia" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2015).

Helen Burgos Ellis, "Did the Aztecs use Sulfuric Acid? The Evidence Provided by the Six Burned Pages of the Pre-Columbian Codex Borgia" in *La Historia del Arte en diálogo con otras disciplinas. IX Jornadas de Historia del Arte*, edited by Raquel Abella, Angela Brandão, and Fernando Guzmán (Museo Histórico Nacional, Ministerio de Educación de Chile, 2016).

Eduard Seler, *Comentarios al Códice Borgia*, translated by Mariana Frenk. 3 vols. (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1963 [1904–9]) (in Spanish).

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SECTION OVERVIEW

3.14.13: Turquoise mosaics

3.14.13.1: Turquoise mosaics, an introduction

3.14.13.2: Double-headed serpent

3.14.13.3: Serpent mask of Quetzalcoatl or Tlaloc

3.14.13.4: Mosaic mask of Tezcatlipoca

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3.14.13.1: Turquoise mosaics, an introduction

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM

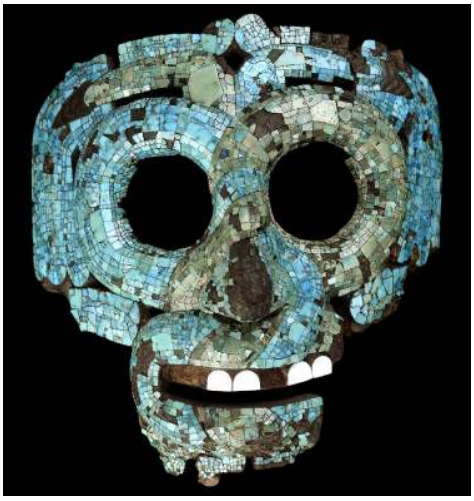


Figure 3.14.13.1.1: Mosaic serpent mask of Quetzalcoatl/Tlaloc, 15th–16th century C.E., Mexica/Mixtec, cedrela wood, turquoise, pine resin, gold, conch shell, beeswax, 18.2 x 16.5 x 12.5 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

Mexican turquoise mosaics



Figure 3.14.13.1.2: Turquoise mosaic mask (human face), 1400–1521 C.E., cedrela wood, turquoise, pine resin, mother-of-pearl, conch shell, 16.5 x 15.2 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

Ancient Mexico is renowned for the production of vivid greenstone mosaics. Early Zapotec and Maya examples from the Classic period were made predominately of jade. Later, turquoise became the material of choice. The finest examples of turquoise mosaics date to the Late Post-Classic period and were probably fashioned by highly skilled Mixtec craftsmen who excelled both in stone and metal work.

A variety of objects were decorated with mosaic, such as masks, shields, staffs, knives, discs, and animal forms. These objects, as well as raw chunks of turquoise, were sent to Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, as tribute and used to adorn images of the gods, as well as priests and the nobility.



Figure **3.14.13.1.3**: *Mosaic skull of Tezcatlipoca*, c. 15th-16th century C.E., Mixtec/Mexica, turquoise, pyrite, pine, lignite, human bone, deer skin, conch shell, agave, 19 x 13.9 x 12.2, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

The mosaic work on these objects usually overlies carved wood, although a number of human skulls decorated in this way are also known. Although the mosaics are usually described as 'turquoise' they in fact incorporate a diversity of materials. Various types of shell and many minerals were used in the mosaic work and to fashion inlays. Some elements were gilded and the mosaic was held in place using plant resins (usually pine resin).

Around 25 mosaics are known in Europe and most of these are thought to date to the time immediately before the Spanish conquest of Mexico in 1521. Mosaics are listed in the early colonial inventories of objects that were sent to Europe at this time, although the descriptions are not sufficiently detailed to identify the exact object to which they refer. More mosaics are preserved in collections in Mexico and the United States, including recently excavated and reconstructed examples of discs or shields from the Toltec capital, Tula and from offering caches made at the **Templo Mayor** in the heart of what is now Mexico City. There are nine Mexican mosaics are in the collection of the British Museum.



Figure **3.14.13.1.4**: Wooden ceremonial shield with mosaic inlay, Mexica/Mixtec, 15th-16th century, from Mexico, 31.6 cm in diameter (© Trustees of the British Museum)

An intricate mosaic which illustrates the Mexica universe

This mosaic covered wooden disc was probably once the central element of a striking ceremonial shield. Among the many ceremonial shields listed in inventories of shipments sent to Spain by Hernán Cortés (1485–1547) 25 were decorated with turquoise mosaic. A companion of Cortés, the 'anonymous conqueror', observed that mosaic shields were 'not of the kind borne in war but only those used in the festivals and dances which they are accustomed to have.

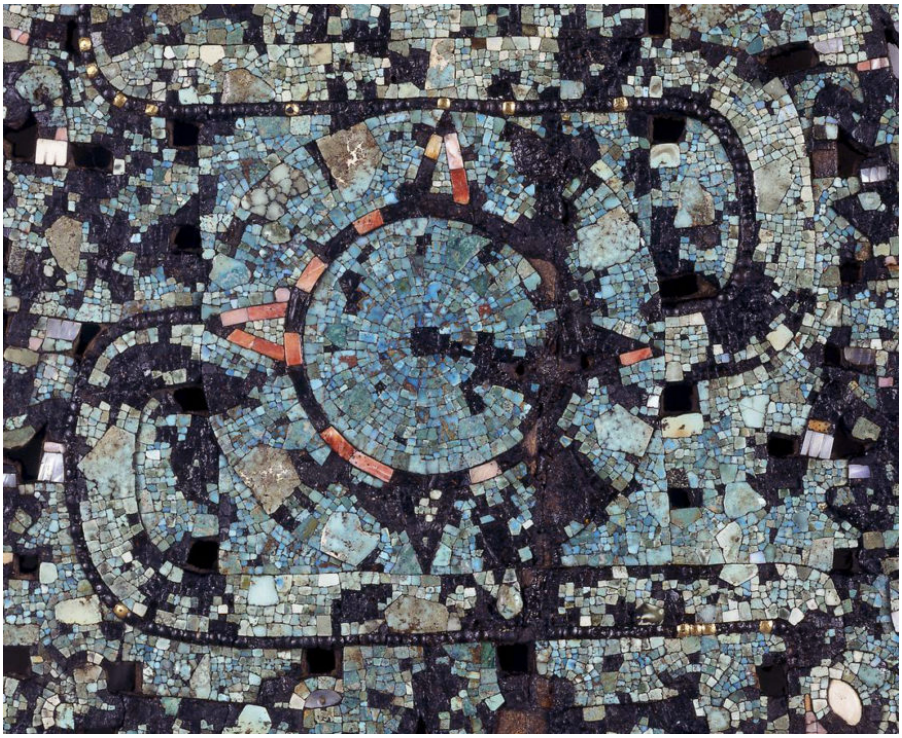


Figure **3.14.13.1.5**: Wooden ceremonial shield with mosaic inlay, Mexica/Mixtec, 15th-16th century, from Mexico, 31.6 cm in diameter (© Trustees of the British Museum)



Figure **3.14.13.1.6**: Wooden ceremonial shield with mosaic inlay, Mexica/Mixtec, 15th-16th century, from Mexico, 31.6 cm in diameter (© Trustees of the British Museum)

The mosaic on this shield is worked in turquoise and shell from *Strombus* (conch), *Spondylus* (thorny oyster) and *Pinctada* (mother-of pearl). 'Beads' of pine resin covered with gold leaf are also used in the design which portrays the principal divisions of the **Mexica** universe. At the centre is a solar disc, picked out in bright red *Spondylus* shell. The four rays emanating from the solar disc divide the earth into four quarters. In each quarter stands a figure with raised arms, these are skybearers, gods whose role was to support the sky. The shield also displays a vertical design in the form of a **serpent** which emerges from toothed jaws and coils around a tree. The tree represents a 'world axis' connecting the underworld, earthly and celestial realms.

Pine was a source both of the resin adhesive used on this shield and the wood from which it was carved. The surface of the wood was carved to delineate the design by giving relief prominence to certain elements such as the serpent and the skybearers. Numerous perforations in the shield further emphasize the outlines of the skybearers.

Around the edge of the shield the wood is not decorated but is pierced by a series of fairly regularly spaced holes. These may have been used to attach feathers. According to sixteenth-century descriptions, colored feathers were used to decorate the edges of mosaic shields.

*The people and culture we know as ‘Aztec’ referred to themselves as the Mexica (pronounced Me-shee-ka).

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Additional resources:

McEwan, A. Middleton, C.R. Cartwright, R. Stacey. *Turquoise mosaics fromMexico* (London, The British Museum Press, 2006)

R. Cartwright and N. D. Meeks, ‘Aztec conch shell working: high- tech design’,*British Museum Technical Research Bulletin*1, (2007), 35-42

J. Stacey, C. R. Cartwright and C. McEwan ‘Chemical Characterisation of Ancient Mesoamerican ‘Copal’ Resins: Preliminary Results’. *Archaeometry*48, (2006), 323-340

McEwan, *AncientMexico in the British Museum* (London, The British Museum Press, 1994)

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3.14.13.2: Double-headed serpent

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure **3.14.13.2.1**: Mosaic of a Double-headed Serpent, c. 15th-16th century, cedrela wood, turquoise, pine resin, oyster shell, hematite, and copal, 20.5 x 43.3 x 6.5 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

An icon of Mexica (Aztec) art, this striking object was probably worn on ceremonial occasions as a pectoral (an ornament worn on the chest). It is carved in wood (Cedrela odorata) and covered with turquoise mosaic. The wood is hollowed at the back.

Serpent imagery

Serpent imagery occurs throughout the religious iconography of Mesoamerica. The serpent played a very important role in Aztec religion. The word for serpent in Nahuatl, the language spoken by the Aztecs, is *coatl* and is associated with several gods such as Quetzalcoatl (Feathered Serpent), Xiuhcoatl (Fire Serpent), Mixcoatl (Cloud Serpent) or Coatlicue (She of the Serpent Skirt), the mother of the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli. The habit of snakes to shed their skin each year probably led to them being used to convey ideas concerning renewal and transformation. Likewise the ability of many species to move freely between water, earth and the forest canopy helped underline their symbolic role as intermediaries between the different layers of the cosmos (underworld, earth and sky).



Figure **3.14.13.2.2**: Head of Serpent (detail), *Mosaic of a Double-headed Serpent*, c. 15th-16th century, cedrela wood, turquoise, pine resin, oyster shell, hematite, and copal, 20.5 x 43.3 x 6.5 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

The word *coatl* is also part of many place names, such as Coatepec (“the hill of the serpents”). Coatepec is the birthplace of the god Huitzilopochtli, the principal Aztec god, and thus one of the most important places in Aztec mythology.

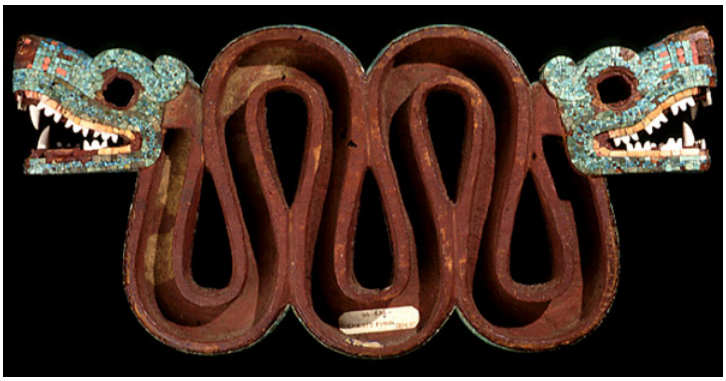


Figure 3.14.13.2.3: Back of Serpent (detail), *Mosaic of a Double-headed Serpent*, c. 15th-16th century, cedrela wood, turquoise, pine resin, oyster shell, hematite, and copal, 20.5 x 43.3 x 6.5 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

Serpents were also used as architectural elements, for example, a wall of serpents (*coatepantli*) was often used to mark out sacred spaces within a ceremonial area. At the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, such a wall surrounded part of the Great Temple, which was the ritual focus for the entire city.

Materials

Spondylus (thorny oyster) shell was used for the bright red details around the nose and mouth of both of this object's serpent heads. Strombus (conch) shell was used for the white teeth. Within the gaping mouths the resin adhesive was colored bright red with hematite. Beeswax adheres to the edges of the empty eye sockets which were probably originally inlaid, perhaps with iron pyrites.

The reverse of the body is undecorated, although the surface may have originally been gilded, but the heads are worked in mosaic on both sides. Resins from pine and Bursera (copal) were used as adhesives for the mosaic.

Suggested readings:

C. R. Cartwright and N. D. Meeks, "Aztec conch shell working: high- tech design," British Museum Technical Research Bulletin 1, (2007), 35-42.

C. McEwan, A. Middleton, C.R. Cartwright, R. Stacey, *Turquoise mosaics from Mexico* (London, The British Museum Press, 2006).

C. McEwan, Ancient Mexico in the British Museum (London, The British Museum Press, 1994).

R. J. Stacey, C. R. Cartwright and C. McEwan "Chemical Characterization of Ancient Mesoamerican 'Copal' Resins: Preliminary Results." *Archaeometry* 48, (2006), 323-340.

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3.14.13.3: Serpent mask of Quetzalcoatl or Tlaloc

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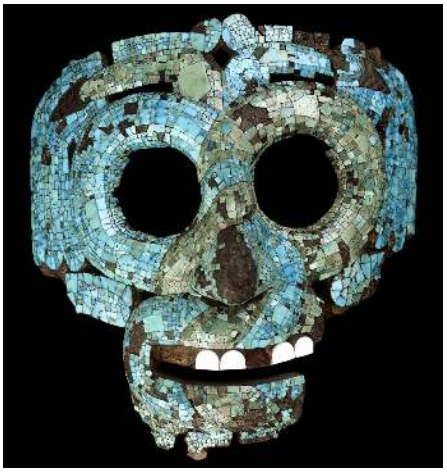


Figure 3.14.13.3.1: Mosaic serpent mask of Quetzalcoatl/Tlaloc, 15th-16th century C.E., Mexica/Mixtec, cedrela wood, turquoise, pine resin, gold, conch shell, beeswax, 18.2 x 16.5 x 12.5 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

Intertwined looped serpents

This mask is believed to represent Quetzalcoatl or the Rain God Tlaloc; both are associated with serpents. The mask is formed of two intertwined and looped serpents worked in contrasting colors of turquoise mosaic; one in green and one in blue that twist across the face and around the eyes, blending over the nose. Turquoise mosaic feathers hang on both sides of the eye sockets. The mask is made of “cedro” wood (Cedrela odorata) with pine resin adhesive. The teeth are made of conch (Strombus) shell and the resin adhesive in the mouth is coloured red with hematite. The rattles of the serpent tails were originally gilded. They are molded from a mixture of beeswax and pine resin; the same resin mixture coats the interior surface of the mask.

The Spanish friar Bernardino de Sahagún, writing in the sixteenth century, describes a mask like this one. It was a gift of the Aztec emperor Motecuhzoma II to the Spanish captain Hernán Cortés (1485-1547). The Aztec ruler thought that Cortés was the god Quetzalcoatl (Feathered Serpent) returning from the East. This mask was part of the adornments associated with this god. According to Sahagún’s description it was worn with a crown of beautiful long greenish-blue iridescent feathers, probably those of the quetzal (a bird that lives in the tropical rain forest).



Figure 3.14.13.3.2: Side view of mask (detail), *Mosaic serpent mask of Quetzalcoatl/Tlaloc*, 15th-16th century C.E., Mexica/Mixtec, cedrela wood, turquoise, pine resin, gold, conch shell, beeswax, 18.2 x 16.5 x 12.5 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

Quetzalcoatl?

Though the Rain God Tlaloc was also sometimes represented with serpents twisting around his eyes, the feathers are more consistent with the image of Quetzalcoatl. The earliest image of Quetzalcoatl as the Feathered Serpent appears at Teotihuacan in Central Mexico, on the façade of the temple that now bears his name.

Tlaloc?



Figure **3.14.13.3.3**: Close up on eyes of mask (detail), *Mosaic serpent mask of Quetzalcoatl/Tlaloc* (detail), 15th-16th century C.E., Mexica/Mixtec, cedrela wood, turquoise, pine resin, gold, conch shell, beeswax, 18.2 x 16.5 x 12.5 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

The goggled-eyed effect created by the twining serpents is typical of Tlaloc. The mask has also been associated with the feather serpent, Quetzalcoatl, mainly because of the plumes that hang down from the tails of the two serpents. Two serpents of blue and green turquoise mosaic entwine to form this stylized mask. Their interwoven bodies create the prominent twisted nose and goggle eyes associated with Tlaloc, the god of rain. The eyebrows double as the two rattles from the serpents' tails.

Snakes copulate by intertwining, sometimes in a vertical position. In Mesoamerica, this act of procreation may have been observed and adapted, both visually and metaphorically, to symbolize the fertilizing rains sent by Tlaloc. The striking green and blue colors of the mosaic evoke the waters and vegetation covering the earth's surface. On the mask's forehead an engraved mosaic tile in the shape of a bivalve shell may symbolize water, while the large green mosaic tile on the opposite snake perhaps represents vegetation, both aspects associated with Tlaloc. Mosaic representations of feathers flanking the face may have mimicked part of a larger headdress that once complemented the mask.

Open cavities in the eyes and suspension holes indicate that this mask may once have been worn. The priest who served Tlaloc in the Templo Mayor at Tenochtitlan was known as Quetzalcoatl Tlaloc Tlamacazqui, and may have worn a mask like this as part of his ritual attire. Another example of a Tlaloc wooden mask, painted in blue, has recently been excavated from the Templo Mayor. It bears similar perforations and may have been worn by a deity impersonator.

Suggested readings:

C. R. Cartwright and N. D. Meeks "Aztec conch shell working: high- tech design," *British Museum Technical Research Bulletin* 1, (2007), 35-42.

C. McEwan, *Ancient Mexico in the British Museum* (London, The British Museum Press, 1994).

C. McEwan, A. Middleton, C.R. Cartwright, R. Stacey, *Turquoise mosaics from Mexico* (London, The British Museum Press, 2006).

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3.14.13.4: Mosaic mask of Tezcatlipoca

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure **3.14.13.4.1**: Mosaic skull of Tezcatlipoca, c. 15th-16th century C.E., Mixtec/Mexica, turquoise, pyrite, pine, lignite, human bone, deer skin, conch shell, agave, 19 x 13.9 x 12.2, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

The skull of the Smoking Mirror



Figure **3.14.13.4.2**: Codex Zouche-Nuttall (detail with skull ornament), Mixtec, Late Postclassic period, 1200-1521, C.E., deer skin, 47 leaves, each 19 x 23.5 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

This mosaic is believed to represent the god Tezcatlipoca, or “Smoking Mirror,” one of four powerful creator deities, who were amongst the most important gods in the Mexica* pantheon. Tezcatlipoca is often depicted with obsidian mirrors at the head and is conventionally cast as an adversary to Quetzalcoatl. The name “Smoking Mirror” derives from the Nahuatl (Mexica) word *tezapoctli*, meaning “shining smoke” and representations of Tezcatlipoca are typically characterised by distinctive black stripes on the face and a smoking mirror generally displayed in his headdress, at his temple or in place of a torn-off foot.

The base for the mosaic is a human skull. The skull is cut away at the back and lined with deer skin on which the movable jaw is hinged. Long deerskin straps would have allowed the skull to be worn as part of priestly regalia. Skull ornaments like this are depicted in the Mixtec *Zouche-Nuttal Codex.*

The mosaic decoration is worked in alternate bands of bright blue turquoise and black lignite. The eyes are made of two orbs of polished iron pyrite framed by rings made of white conch (Strombus) shell. The nasal cavity is lined with plates of bright red Spondylus (thorny oyster) shell.

Farthest reaches of the Mexica empire



Figure **3.14.13.4.3**: Mosaic skull of Tezcatlipoca (view of right side), c. 15th-16th century C.E., Mixtec/Mexica, turquoise, pyrite, pine, lignite, human bone, deer skin, conch shell, agave, 19 x 13.9 x 12.2, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

The turquoise, lignite, pyrite and shell were all procured from the farthest reaches of the Mexica empire and beyond. The effort made in assembling this diverse selection of exotic materials emphasises the divine "other-worldly" nature both of the mosaic and whoever wore or displayed it.

Turquoise was sent as tribute to the Aztec capital from several provinces of the empire. Some of those provinces were located in present-day Veracruz, Guerrero and Oaxaca. The turquoise was sent as raw chunks or as cut and polished mosaic tiles decorating a variety of objects, such as masks, shields, staffs, discs, knives and bracelets. We know from a tribute list issued by the emperor Moctezuma II that ten turquoise mosaic masks, made by skilled Mixtec artisans, were sent each year from a province in Oaxaca.

*The people and culture we know as "Aztec" referred to themselves as the Mexica (pronounced "Mé-shee-ka").

Suggested readings:

C. R. Cartwright and N. D. Meeks, "Aztec conch shell working: high- tech design," British Museum Technical Research Bulletin 1, (2007), 35-42.

C. McEwan, A. Middleton, C. Cartwright, R. Stacey, *Turquoise mosaics from Mexico* (London, The British Museum Press, 2006).

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C. McEwan, *Ancient Mexico in the British Museum* (London, The British Museum Press, 1994).

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3.14.14: The House of the Eagles, and sculptures of Mictlantecuhtli and Eagle Warrior

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER



House of the Eagles, sacred precinct of Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City), c. 1400–1521, and *Mictlantecuhtli* and *Eagle Warrior*, c. 1400–1521, terracotta and plaster, life-size, found in the House of the Eagles (The Templo Mayor Museum, Mexico City); a conversation between Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Steven Zucker

Important terms:

- Mexica/Aztec
- House of the Eagles
- Tenochtitlan
- Sacred Precinct
- Mictlantecuhtli
- jaguar and eagle warriors
- terracotta
- Mictlan
- bloodletting
- zacatapayolli

Additional resources:

Introduction to the Aztecs (Mexica)

Introduction to the Templo Mayor

Tenochtitlan on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Aztec stone sculpture on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Aztec Empire from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Templo Mayor virtual visit (in Spanish)

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3.14.15: Eagle Warrior (Mexica)

DR. MAYA JIMÉNEZ



Figure **3.14.15.1**: Eagle Warrior from the House of the Eagles, c. 1400–1521 C.E., Tenochtitlan (today, Mexico City) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Eagle Warrior is a life-sized ceramic sculpture made by **Mexica** (sometimes called Aztec) artists that shows a warrior dressed in an eagle costume. Made of terracotta, a type of earthenware known for its reddish color, the life-sized *Eagle Warrior* was originally painted and adorned with feathers and weapons. His outstretched wings and arms suggest a gesture of flight. This sculpture was discovered during excavations at the main Mexica temple, called the **Templo Mayor**. This temple was located in the ceremonial center of Tenochtitlan, the capital city of the Mexica empire. The Templo Mayor consisted of a twin-towered stepped pyramid dedicated to Tlaloc, the god of Rain, and Huitzilopochtli, the patron god of the Mexica, usually associated with war and fire.

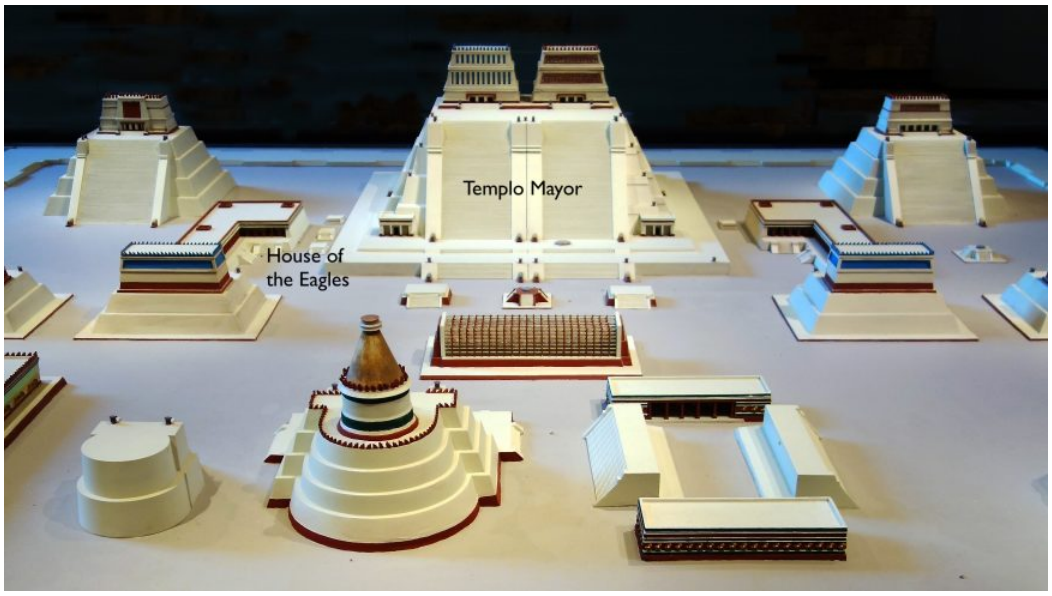


Figure **3.14.15.2**: Model of the Sacred Precinct in the Mexica capital of Tenochtitlan, today, Mexico City (photo: **Steven Zucker**, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The sculpture was recovered at the House of the Eagles, the meeting place of eagle and jaguar warriors, two of the most prestigious of the Mexica military classes. The House of the Eagles was just beside to the Templo Mayor, and highlighted the association of the Mexica's most important temple with warfare. The Templo Mayor itself symbolized warfare in its combination of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli.



Figure **3.14.15.3**: House of the Eagles, c. 1400–1521 C.E., Tenochtitlan (today, Mexico City) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

For the Mexica, the symbol for war was water and fire, called the *atl-tlachinolli* in Nahuatl, the language of the Mexica. A meeting space for eagle and jaguar warriors next to the Templo Mayor advertised the important role that the military classes played in Mexica culture more generally and in maintaining Mexica power over conquered peoples.

Warrior ranks



Figure **3.14.15.4**: Warriors, Codex Mendoza, Viceroyalty of New Spain, c. 1541–1542, pigment on paper (© Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford)

While the Mexica had no standing army, they did have elite warriors with extensive military and martial arts training who fought in "flowery wars," a ritualistic form of warfare that consisted of capturing victims and sacrificing them to the gods.

Our understanding of the role of the eagle warriors is largely based on colonial sources (or written sources made after the Spanish conquest in 1521), including the ***Codex Mendoza***, (c. 1541–42). This book documents pre-invasion Mexica culture but was commissioned by Antonio de Mendoza, the first viceroy of New Spain. It should be kept in mind though that the *Codex Mendoza*, while a critical historical document, is not politically nor culturally neutral. According to this source the goal of the eagle warrior was to capture the greatest number of captives, who would then be sacrificed to the Mexica gods. Warriors rose in rank according to the number of captives they acquired. This ranking system is documented in the *Codex Mendoza*, which illustrates the different military ranks and their corresponding war suits, determined by the number of captives.

In the second to last register, for example, the warrior in the red suit is credited for capturing two victims, while the jaguar warrior at the far right captured four. In the last register, the warrior at right is of the highest rank, yet he is dressed in civilian clothes, a reference to his aristocratic ancestry. While all warriors were equipped with shields and obsidian weapons, their war suits identified their military rank and social status.

Symbolism of the war suit



Figure **3.14.15.5**: The *Eagle Warrior's* face emerges from his helmet (photo: Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)



Figure **3.14.15.6**: Eagle Warrior from the House of the Eagles, c. 1400–1521 C.E., Tenochtitlan (today, Mexico City) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, the war suit served a symbolic function, since it was believed that in dressing like an eagle or a jaguar, the warrior adopted the power and skill of their assigned animal, thus ensuring a more successful hunt. The symbolism of the war suit was further emphasized by its materiality, since most warriors, except for the nobility, wore suits made of animal skin. The eagle warrior not only acted like an eagle, but also literally resembled one.

Original appearance

In comparison to the warriors seen in codices, the *Eagle Warrior* may appear somewhat tame at first. Lacking the colors, patterns, and weapons of the warriors of the *Codex Mendoza*, the *Eagle Warrior* does not seem have the menacing appearance that these soldiers may have actually possessed. But we have to remember that the sculpture was originally painted and covered in feathers, and so it would have had a more life-like appearance when placed in the House of the Eagles.



Figure **3.14.15.7**: Bench from the House of the Eagles, c. 1400–1521 C.E., Tenochtitlan (today, Mexico City) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure **3.14.15.8**: Mictlantecuhtli from the House of the Eagles, c. 1400–1521 C.E., Tenochtitlan (today, Mexico City) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The *Eagle Warrior* stood near the doorway of the House of the Eagles, likely functioning as a guardian figure. He stood atop a bench that was decorated with relief sculpture showing warriors as they advanced towards a ball (called a *zacatapayolli*) into which they placed bloodletting implements. Warriors would have pierced parts of their body, such as their tongue or ears, to let blood onto paper, which would then be burned. The blood was offered to the gods as an act of penance because the Mexica believed that the gods demanded blood in return for their creation of the world.

Another life-size terracotta figure stood at a second doorway in the House of the Eagles, but instead of showing an eagle warrior it is the god of the Underworld, Mictlantecuhtli. At almost six feet tall, the skeletal god is as imposing as the Eagle Warrior, if not more so. He leans slightly forward, his clawed hands raised and his mouth slightly open. Originally, hair or paper decorations would have been placed in the holes on top of his head. Like the *Eagle Warrior*, Mictlantecuhtli displays the same skill in firing terracotta on a large scale.

Though much of the original splendor of the armed *Eagle Warrior* has been lost, one can only imagine the imposing appearance of this sculpture hovering at the entrance as actual warriors gathered together. Both the sculpture of the *Eagle Warrior* and Mictlantecuhtli testify to the ways in which sculptures of warriors and gods played an active role in Mexica life.

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3.14.16: Seated figure of Xochipilli

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure **3.14.16.1**: Stone seated figure of Xochipilli, Mexica, 1325–1521, from Mexico, 55 x 32 cm (© The Trustees of the British Museum)

Flower Prince

Xochipilli was the Mexica god of music and dance. His name in Nahuatl, the language spoken by the Mexica*, means ‘Flower Prince’. He was also called Macuilxochitl. Music and dance played an important role in Mexica religious and public ceremonies.



Figure **3.14.16.2**: Wooden slit-drum (teponaztli), Mexica, 1325–1521, from Mexico (© The Trustees of the British Museum)

Some of the dances described by the Spanish chroniclers have survived to the present. Images of musical instruments, musicians, and dancers are represented in ceramic, stone, murals, and especially in codices (screenfold books). A variety of instruments, such as flutes, drums, the *teponaztli*, and conch shells, were used to accompany dances or poetry performances.

Xochipilli, like all Mexica gods, had another aspect. **Bernardino de Sahagún**, a sixteenth-century Spanish friar, recounts that Xochipilli could strike down with terrible diseases those who did not observe the sacred fast days.

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*The people and culture we know as 'Aztec' referred to themselves as the Mexica (pronounced Me-shee-ka).

Additional resources:

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B. de Sahagun (trans. A.J.O. Anderson and C.E. Dibble), *The Florentine Codex: general*, 4 vols. (Santa Fe, N.M; The School of American Research, Salt Lake City, University of Utah, 1950-68)

C. McEwan, *Ancient Mexico in the British* (London, The British Museum Press, 1994)

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3.14.17: Seated figure of Xiuhtecuhtli

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure **3.14.17.1**: Stone seated figure of Xiuhtecuhtli, Mexica, 1325–1521, from Mexico, 23 cm high (© Trustees of the British Museum)

The god of fire



Figure **3.14.17.1**: Stone seated figure of Xiuhtecuhtli, Mexica, 1325–1521, from Mexico, 23 cm high (© Trustees of the British Museum)

This figure represents Xiuhtecuhtli, the Mexica god of fire. Xiuhtecuhtli is generally represented nude except for a loin cloth, with eyes semi-closed and only two teeth protruding from the corners of his mouth (characteristic of the old god Huehueteotl, with whom he is also identified). His headdress consist of a headband decorated with circles and a bow made of pleated bark paper (*amacuexpalli*), common among fertility deities. Xiuhtecuhtli is also represented in codices (screenfold books) with his face painted with black and red pigment, and with Xiuhcoatl ('Fire Serpent') as a back ornament. The cult of the fire god goes back many centuries before Mexica times and extended throughout Mesoamerica.

Xiuhtecuhtli is shown seated, with his hands resting on his knees. This position is common in Mexica sculpture representing gods such as Tlaloc, Macuilxochitl-Xochipilli, Quetzalcotal or Mictlantecuhtli. In the codices small figures representing deities are depicted in this pose, inside temples, when receiving offerings or gifts.

This piece was among a collection of antiquities taken to Spain after Mexico's independence in 1821. It was later acquired by John Wetherell and was illustrated in a catalogue he published in 1842. The British Museum purchased the entire Wetherell Collection in 1849.

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*The people and culture we know as 'Aztec' referred to themselves as the Mexica (pronounced Me-shee-ka).

Additional resources:

L. López Luján, *The offerings of the Templo Ma* (University Press of Colorado, 1994)

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C. McEwan, *Ancient Mexico in the British* (London, The British Museum Press, 1994)

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3.14.18: Xiuhcoatl (fire serpent)

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure **3.14.18.1**: Stone figure of Xiuhcoatl, Mexica, 1325–1521, from Mexico, 77 x 60 cm (© The Trustees of the British Museum)

Fire Serpent

The serpent played an important role in Mexica* religion. Many superb stone sculptures have survived, the majority of them representing rattlesnakes carved with striking realism and great skill. This magnificent sculpture has a blend of both realistic and mythical creatures. It exhibits all the elements characteristic of Xiuhcoatl, the Fire Serpent, with the head of a serpent, short legs finishing in claws and a curved snout. The end of the figure's tail is formed by the conventional Mexican year symbol (*xihuitl*): a triangle, like the solar ray sign, and two entwined trapezes.

The Fire Serpent is commonly represented in Mexica art in a variety of media, including codices (screenfold books). It is used for example, as a back ornament for Xiuhtecuhtli, the fire god, and Huitzilopochtli, the Mexica patron god.



Figure **3.14.18.2**: Stone figure of Xiuhcoatl, Mexica, 1325–1521, from Mexico, 77 x 60 cm (© The Trustees of the British Museum)

This piece was probably used to decorate a building. According to Guillermo Dupaix, a collector of Mexican antiquities, it came from Texcoco, a city on the east side of the lake on which the Mexica capital, Tenochtitlan, was founded. William Bullock, also a famous collector, acquired it in 1823 during his trip to Mexico and exhibited in London, at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly.

*The people and culture we know as 'Aztec' referred to themselves as the Mexica (pronounced Me-shee-ka).

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Additional resources:

M. E. Miller and K. Taube, *An illustrated dictionary of t* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1997)

E. Pasztory, *Aztec art* (New York, Abrams, 1983)

H.B. Nicholson and E. Quiñones Keber, *Art of Aztec Mexico, treasures* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1983)

C. McEwan, *Ancient Mexico in the British* (London, The British Museum Press, 1994)

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3.14.19: Brazier of Chicomecoatl

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER



Mexica brazier of Chicomecoatl, c. 1500, ceramic, found in Tláhuac (south of Mexico City), 104 cm high (Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City); a conversation between Dr. Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank and Dr. Steven Zucker

Terms and key ideas

- Mexica (or Aztec) ceramic art
- braziers and marking offerings to deities
- Chicomecoatl and Xilonen as deities
- the importance of maize in Mexica culture
- the concept of the deity impersonator

Additional resources:

Read about this brazier on the Google Arts and Culture project

Learn more about the Mexica (Aztecs) on Smarthistory

Aztec Empire from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Read about the Head of Xilonen at the Art Institute of Chicago, which also includes an educational resource about this sculpture

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3.14.20: Aztec feathered headdress

by DR. LAUREN KILROY-EWBANK and DR. BETH HARRIS



Video **3.14.20.1**: Feathered headdress, Aztec, reproduction (National Anthropology Museum, Mexico City). Original: early 16th century, quetzal, cotinga, roseate spoonbill, piaya feathers, wood, fibers, amate paper, cotton, gold, and gilded brass, Aztec, Mexico, (World Museum, Vienna)

Backstory

This headdress is also called the *Penacho of Moctezuma II*. Moctezuma II's headdress was first mentioned in a European inventory in 1596, when it was acquired by Austrian Archduke Ferdinand II von Tyrol. It was listed there as "a Moorish hat." It was likely an object sent from Mesoamerica to Europe by Hernan Cortes, but it is unknown whether it actually belonged to Moctezuma II himself.

In the late nineteenth century, Austria established its first Museum of Natural HIstory, with geologist Ferdinand von Hochstetter as its director. While searching for objects to display in the new museum, von Hochstetter found the headdress in Ambras Castle, Archduke Ferdinand's former residence in Innsbruck, Austria. Since then, the headdress has been displayed in the ethnology museum in Vienna (now called the Weltmuseum Wien). In 2010, the Weltmuseum embarked on a restoration and research project on the headdress in conjunction with INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History).

Over the last century and a half, the headdress has become an important touchstone for Mexican national and indigenous identity, and many Mexicans think it should be returned. Representatives and activists from Mexico have continuously made requests for its repatriation, but despite **a deal almost struck in 2011**, the Austrian authorities have as yet refused to officially allow the loan or return of the headdress to Mexico, claiming that the trip across the Atlantic would be too risky for the fragile object. **As art historian Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll writes**,

The replica of the headdress in Mexico City, which is featured in the video above, was created and installed in 1940.

Backstory by Dr. Naraelle Hohensee

Additional resources:

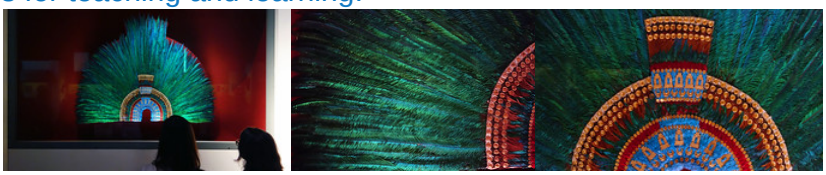
"The Penacho of Moctezuma's Repatriation Battle," *Pulsamérica*, November 3, 2017

"Return of Aztec artifact may be model deal," *IOL*, January 19, 2011

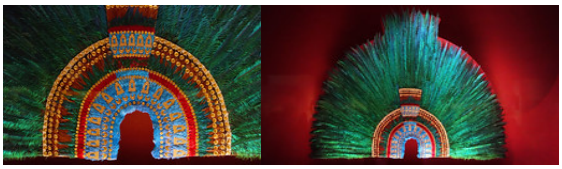
"The Fight to Bring Home the Headdress of an Aztec Emperor," *Atlas Obscura*, September 26, 2017

Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine: Three parerga of a feather headdress," in *The Inbetweenness of Things*, ed. Paul Basu (London: Bloomsbury, 2017

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3.14.21: Aztec art and feasts for the dead

by DR. JOSHUA FITZGERALD



Figure **3.14.21.1**: Mexica afflicted with smallpox (detail), Bernardino de Sahagún and Indigenous collaborators, *General History of the Things of New Spain*, also called the *Florentine Codex*, book 12, 1575–1577, watercolor, paper, contemporary vellum Spanish binding, open (approx.): 32 x 43 cm, closed (approx.): 32 x 22 x 5 cm (Medicea Laurenziana Library, Florence, Italy)

Art and the fall of Tenochtitlan



Figure **3.14.21.2**: Map of the Valley of Mexico in 1519 (image: Sémhur, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The Mexican-Catholic tradition of *Día de Muertos* ("Day of the Dead") occurs on November 1 and 2. Families begin days or weeks in advance to make tasty treats to welcome the holiday—and now in October 2020 they still do, even as a global pandemic turns life upside down. By some horrid irony, 2020 marks the 500th anniversary of the first transatlantic pandemic—the smallpox outbreak of 1520 in the Valley of Mexico—and unbeknownst to many, the ancient roots of *Día de Muertos* are inextricably tied to that grim anniversary. That fall, the Mexica people (who belonged to the larger Nahua ethnic group and who were the leaders of the "Aztec" Triple Alliance) of the island city of **Tenochtitlan** in the Valley of Mexico should have been preparing ample amounts of amaranth dough to honor ancient traditions instead of struggling to survive disease.



Figure **3.14.21.3**: Tepeilhuitl ceremony with feasting and *tepictoton*, Bernardino de Sahagún and collaborators, *General History of the Things of New Spain*, also called the *Florentine Codex*, vol. 1, book. 1, folio 22, 1575–1577, watercolor, paper, contemporary vellum Spanish binding, open (approx.): 32 x 43 cm, closed (approx.): 32 x 22 x 5 cm (Medicea Laurenziana Library, Florence, Italy)

Smallpox attacked Tenochtitlan at an important time in the **Mesoamerican calendar**. According to the Mexica's account of the **Spanish invasion**, recorded in Book 12 of the ***Florentine Codex*** (created c. 1575–77 by a Franciscan friar and Indigenous collaborators), smallpox erupted during the sacred month of Tepeilhuitl or "The Festival of the Mountains"—one of the oldest religious festivals associated with the Mexica and their capital at Tenochtitlan. Normally the Mexica observed that holiday, one of their twenty-day months, by remembering their dead relatives through communal feasting, song, and dance.

The sacred festivities date back to to the foundation of the city Tenochtitlan in the 14th century, when, according to colonial-era manuscripts, as the Mexica slogged through marshy lands of the Valley of Mexico in search of their new home, and arrived at a place called Iztacalco. There they performed the *amatepetl* or "paper-mountain" ceremony in the year 13 Rabbit (likely 1362 C.E.). One Nahuatl (the language of the Nahua) text describes the solemn ceremony as one where "people made many hills of dough and gave them eyes and mouths of seeds." [1]

During the month of Tepeilhuitl in 1520, however, smallpox raged among the Mexica for sixty days, the disease then spread throughout the countryside. Only months before, the people of Tenochtitlan had cast out the Spaniards (led by Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés) for committing a massacre during another festival known as **Toxcatl**. The Mexica had crafted a life-sized dough image of their patron deity Huitzilopochtli, and when they began to dance and sing before it, Spanish onlookers used that act as a rationale to attack the surprised and unprepared worshippers. As the fall set in, the Spaniards returned and were prepared to choke off the city with a months-long siege. By that time, its citizens had borne witness to the horrors of smallpox, many unable to move under the pain of erupting pustules that blanketed their skin. Basic functions in Tepeilhuiltl had been disrupted by the crippling disease as "starvation reigned, and no one took care of others any longer." [2] Instead of creating edible art and honoring the ancestors, the Mexica faced famine.

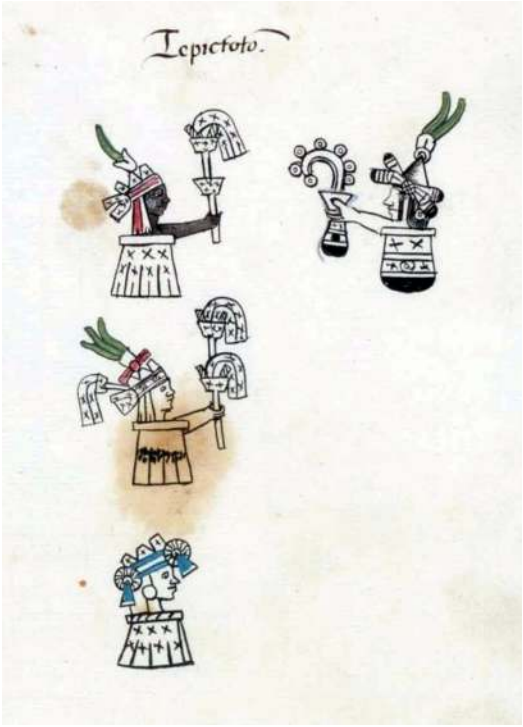


Figure **3.14.21.4**: Illustration of *tepictoton*, Bernardino de Sahagún and Indigenous collaborators, *Codices matritenses (Primeros Memoriales)*, 1558–85 (Royal Library, Madrid)

Crafting Edible Mountain-Gods



Figure **3.14.21.5**: Amaranth grain (photo: **Gaurav Dhwaj Khadka**, CC BY 4.0)

The month of Tepeilhuitl was dedicated to honoring the natural and supernatural environment while also commemorating the recently deceased members of a community. It knitted communities together with its public displays of religious artwork, musical and dance performances, and acts of gifting food and drink to supernatural forces. A central aspect was the act of crafting, displaying, and eating handmade sacred art made of dough.

These works of sacred art were known as *tepictoton*, or “small molded ones.” They were sacred objects consisting of three basic components: an inner portion containing a collection of amaranth-dough figures that were the likenesses of actual living or dead people; an exterior shell that looked mountain-like and encased the dough figures; and a final layer of paint, appliques, and ornamentation that associated the mountain with a particular deity. Nahuas used the *tepictoton* as a type of altar or shrine in the process of commemorating their dead.



Figure **3.14.21.6**: Popocatépetl in 2017 (photo: **SchneidIt**, CC BY-SA 4.0)

In Nahua cosmology, mountains were concretions around water, and life-sustaining rain clouds formed above them. Famed mountains in the Valley of Mexico included Mount Tlaloc, Popocatepetl, and Iztactepetl. Interviewing Nahuas in the 1550s, the priest Bernardino de Sahagún recorded that

> ***"Everyone fashioned them in their homes… at midnight, and after they had been fashioned, they made an offering of incense to them. They also sang to them… a song to each of the mountains… Payment [to the gods] was made. They decapitated birds in their honor then they made offerings of tamales to them." [3]***

With everyone honoring their local mountain-gods, the displays clearly reflected an important religious tradition.

Dough objects, as is their nature, tend to be perishable, and we lack extant examples of these ancient mountain-gods to learn from today; we must rely on colonial-era texts and images (those created after the defeat of the Mexica in 1521). Some of the best sources for studying *tepictoton* include both Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales* and the *Florentine Codex* that followed, as well as other descriptions made when Indigenous elders were interviewed by non-Indigenous men or Nahua assistants.

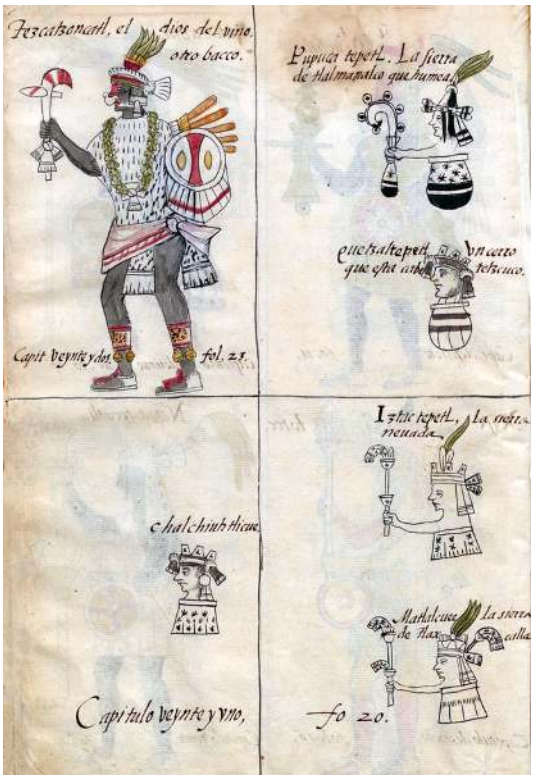


Figure **3.14.21.7**: Deity (upper left) and tepictoton, Bernardino de Sahagún and Indigenous collaborators, *General History of the Things of New Spain*, also called the *Florentine Codex*, vol. 1, book. 1, 1575–1577, watercolor, paper, contemporary vellum Spanish binding, open (approx.): 32 x 43 cm, closed (approx.): 32 x 22 x 5 cm (Medicea Laurenziana Library, Florence, Italy)

Images can help to identify patterns in the rituals of the month of Tepeilhuitl. An image in the *Primeros Memoriales* and reproduced in Book I of the *Florentine Codex* illustrates five mountain-gods (the *tepictoton*) whose bodies consist of an upper, human-like head and a lower base made to look like a bulbous vessel or a fanned skirt. Three of them have a single arm extending into the air before them that clutch small replicas of "their stout reed staves, their lightning sticks, their cloud-bundles." [4]



Figure **3.14.21.8**: Popocatepetl (detail), Bernardino de Sahagún and Indigenous collaborators, *General History of the Things of New Spain*, also called the *Florentine Codex*, vol. 1, book. 1, 1575–1577, watercolor, paper, contemporary vellum Spanish binding, open (approx.): 32 x 43 cm, closed (approx.): 32 x 22 x 5 cm (Medicea Laurenziana Library, Florence, Italy)

The artist renders fine details, including splatter marks of rubber paint that were applied to the skirts and sashes worn by the mountain-gods. Identifiable features distinguish each one. For instance, the likeness of the mountain Popocatepetl dons a black and white peaked cap and bears a vessel that fumes a curly stream of smoke. It represents the sacred forces of the active volcano located to the southeast of Tenochtitlan. According to the text, the *tepictoton* were then "placed on the ground, the one following the other in a row, and they were facing the fifth [figure]" [5].

The main ingredient

The mountain-god creations consisted primarily of nourishing amaranth seed dough, called *tzoalli* (*tzohualli* in Huastecan Nahuatl). The dough was a chief ingredient in worship, and the people of Mexico have enjoyed it in various forms, from dried cakes to soupy *atoles*, for millennia. Dough figures looked uncomfortably human as they were given "teeth of gourd seeds… eyes of fat black beans." [6]



Figure **3.14.21.9**: Tlaloque (detail), Bernardino de Sahagún and Indigenous collaborators, *Codices matritenses (Primeros Memoriales)*, 1558–85, (Royal Library, Madrid)

Another depiction from the *Primeros Memoriales* shows the exterior of a *tepictoton* (mountain-god) in the likeness of Tlaloc (it is a tlaloque, a little helper of Tlaloc). Its head and body are honey-yellow (amaranth seeds, ***huauhtli***, had an amber quality and looked like pale fish roe) and the tiny black strokes give the appearance of black seeds dimpling the mountainside. Tlaloc has three blue rain and water symbols painted on his side, and he wears a white cotton crown (its fluffy edges apparent on the codex page), a headband, and an earspool. His face consists of exposed teeth made from gourd seeds, and the classic blue-green "Tlaloc mouth"—a mustache-like symbol framing the upper lip, its ends curling back and upward.

Tepeilhuitl is directly related to the god **Tlaloc**, who was a water deity overseeing rain and lighting. Tlaloc was responsible for Nahuas drowning or struck down suddenly, and he manifested in human bodies by crippling them with palsy or stiffening their limbs. Those figures that made up the inside of each *tepictoton* were specifically the likenesses of those living or dead people affected by Tlaloc's powers.

The dead inside

Before the exterior of a mountain-god display could be fashioned, Nahua artisans first crafted little dough figures called "children," which represented the dead and afflicted. First, they would craft "skeletons" (in Nahuatl *imomoio*, "their bones") for individual figures. This was done with sticks of wood or compacted bars of amaranth dough to provide a frame. Around the figure's "skeleton," they applied more dough to make the body, and these along with other dough figures in the shape of "serpents" (known as *ehecatotontin* or "little winds" in Nahuatl) would be piled together in the participant's household courtyard. The children and little winds were then curated into piles by the artists, one pile for each mountain-god to adorn the courtyard that year.



Figure **3.14.21.10**: Tepictoton (detail), Bernardino de Sahagún and Indigenous collaborators, *General History of the Things of New Spain*, also called the *Florentine Codex*, vol. 1, book. 1, 1575–1577, watercolor, paper, contemporary vellum Spanish binding, open (approx.): 32 x 43 cm, closed (approx.): 32 x 22 x 5 cm (Medicea Laurenziana Library, Florence, Italy)

Over these they pasted more amaranth, which they pressed to form the geologic and human-like features of the *tepictoton*. As they finished the exterior with paint, feathers, and seeds, they also wrapped the mounds of dough with a paper skirt, a final layer of dress to cover both the mountain and its dough children inside.

At the end of the month of Tepeilhuitl, observants cracked open the mountain-god dioramas, pulled out “children” and “little winds” from the interior, carried the figures to a sacred shrine called the Mist House, and carefully washed and prepared them for consumption. Eating replicas of their dead—the little dough bodies now metaphorically charged with twenty days’ worth of adoration and memories—Nahuas believed they were nourished with the same powers as the dough bodies.

During the month of Tepeilhuitl in 1520, the Mexica starved through a pandemic when they would normally be feasting to remember their loved ones and looking forward to a prosperous future. We do not know how, if at all, the Mexica celebrated that year.



Figure **3.14.21.11**: Ofrenda for Dia de los Muertos, 2012, Castillo de Chapultepec, Mexico City, Mexico (photo: Juan, CC BY-ND 2.0)

Edible arts in times of sickness

Adopted and adapted up to the present, every fall we are reminded of Tepeilhuitl's cultural resilience in each *ofrenda* (family altars) that families make for *Día de Muertos*. Artisanal foods grace family altars and tombstones in the cemetery, and everyone enjoys eating sweet breads, called *pan de muertos*, decorated with crossbones designs, and glittering white c*alavera* sugar skulls. People do not make *tepictoton* nor *tzohualli* figures for eating these days, but *alegrías* (tasty biscuits made of toasted and honey-coated amaranth seeds) reflect some of the deeper roots of honoring the sacred landscape. Celebrating the tradition of *Día de Muertos* will need to be different this year (2020) due to disease, with many festivals across the globe cancelled to limit the spread of COVID-19. Furthermore, many of this year's *ofrendas* will memorialize the lives we have lost to the virus. Hopefully, families can still honor their roots in a safe and tasty way.

Notes:

[1] Codex Aubin, Am 2006 Drg.31219, Folio 23v © *The Trustees of the British Museum* and Fernando Alvarado Tezozómoc, *Crónica mexicáyotl*, Adrián León (trans.), third edition (México Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas 1998)

[2] James Lockhart (ed. and trans.), *We people here: Nahuatl accounts of the conquest of Mexico, Vol. 1* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993: pp. 180-183).

[3] Bernardino de Sahagún, *Primeros memoriales* (trans. by Thelma D. Sullivan and Henry B. Nicholson, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017: p. 64).

[4] Bernardino de Sahagún, *Primeros memoriales*, p. 114.

[5] Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain, Book 1: The Gods* (trans. by Arthur JO Anderson and Charles E. Dibble; Santa Fe: The School of American Research and the University of Utah, 1970: p. 49).

[6] *Florentine Codex*, book 1, p. 47.

[7] *Florentine Codex*, book 1, p. 75.

Additional resources

Look at the Florentine Codex

Carolina A. Miranda, "How a vital record of Mexican indigenous life was created under quarantine," LA Times 2019

For those interested in learning more about *Día de Muertos* and *ofrendas*, please do so in a respectful and genuine manner

Learn more about *Día de Muertos* from National Geographic

Celebrate *Día de Muertos* by honoring Mexico's ancient roots and shape your homemade sweets from indigenous ingredients

Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, 13 Vols. (edited and translated by Arthur J O Anderson and Charles E Dibble; Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research; Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah, 1950-1982).

Michel Graulich, *Myths of ancient Mexico* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

Frances E. Karttunen, *An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992).

Elizabeth Morán, *Sacred Consumption: Food and Ritual in Aztec Art and Culture* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2016).

John F. Schwaller, *The Fifteenth Month: Aztec History in the Rituals of Panquetzaliztli* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019).

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3.14.22: Remembering the Toxcatl Massacre- The Beginning of the End of Aztec Supremacy

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3.14.23: Painting Aztec History

by HAYLEY WOODWARD



Figure **3.14.23.1**: Detail of a Mexica painter-scribe (*tlacuilo*), Codex Mendoza, Viceroyalty of New Spain, c. 1541–1542, pigment on paper © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (fol. 70r)

Writing with images

Imagine writing a history. More than likely, you would begin by brainstorming the events you would want to include, the characters in your story, and when and where the events took place. Then, you would have to order these elements in some way to create a cohesive account, maybe telling your story in a clear chronological order or from multiple perspectives. You would want to organize it using a format that packs in as much information as possible and serves the agenda of your narrative.

Although history writers throughout time have had to grapple with such questions, many use alphabetic text to record the past. However, for the Aztecs, the people who lived in Central Mexico before the arrival of the Spaniards in 1519, language took a painted form. The **Aztecs** understood writing and painting to be deeply intertwined processes, so much so that the Nahuatl word for "painter," or *tlacuilo*, translates to "painter-scribe" or "painter-writer." An important subset of the corpus of Aztec painted manuscripts, which include divinatory books, censuses, land registers, and tax and tribute documents, were histories.

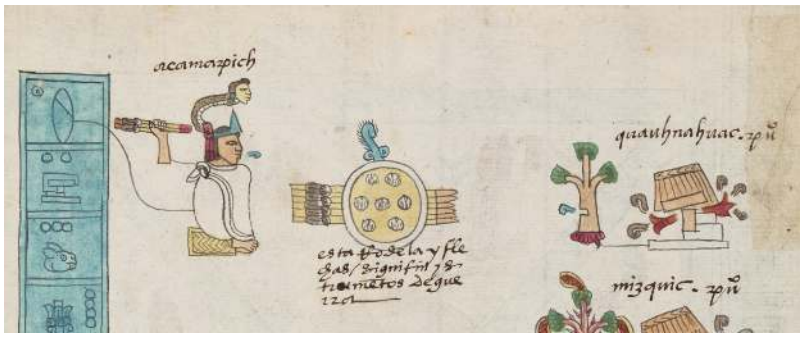


Figure **3.14.23.2**: Detail showing the ruler Acamapichtli (left), and Cuauhnahuac (right), Codex Mendoza, Viceroyalty of New Spain, c. 1541–1542, pigment on paper © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (fol. 2v)

The Aztec painted language operated at two levels. First, painter-scribes identified individuals and specific places through glyphs, which functioned like nametags. For instance, in the **Codex Mendoza**, the glyph attached to the ruler Acamapichtli provides the reader with his name, represented by a hand grasping a bundle of reeds (his name means "Handful of reeds" in Nahuatl). On the same page, a painted tree with a curled scroll represents a place called Cuauhnahuac. In Aztec painted writing, the representation of the ruler Acamapichtli itself carries meaning just like its associated name glyph. Acamapichtli's visual features are elements of Aztec pictography, in which visual representations of people, places, and events act like writing. For instance, a literate reader can examine the representation of Acamapichtli (ignoring the name glyph) and conclude that he is a ruler since he wears the turquoise diadem of Aztec rulers, sits on the woven throne of rulers, and speaks (signified by a curled scroll that comes out of his mouth), an act characteristic of rulers (who were called *huey tlatoani* or "chief speaker").

Then, painter-scribes made strategic choices about to how to arrange and present these individual elements in order to create story arcs. This is the second way that the Aztec painted language operated. Some stories packed many people and events together in a stream of narrative, some stories stressed change over time, and in some stories, place and setting played a pivotal role to the narrative. The Aztecs' painted language employed composition as a communication device as much as it used glyphs to identify people and places.

The Codex Boturini



Figure **3.14.23.3**: Codex Boturini, early 16th century, 19.8 x 549 cm (single pages are 19.8 x 25.4 cm), ink on amatl paper, Viceroyalty of New Spain (Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, Photo: **xiroro**, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

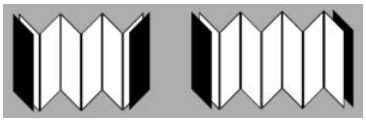


Figure **3.14.23.224**: Diagram showing a screenfold book

One painted history is the Codex Boturini. The codex is a screenfold, or an accordion-style book made of indigenous paper that allows the pages to be compressed or expanded at the reader's discretion. This is the conventional format of pre-Hispanic painted books in Central Mexico. The first page of the codex represents the initial scene of the **Aztec migration story**, the foundation story that visually outlines the Aztecs' journey from their ancestral homeland called Aztlan to their arrival at the eventual capital of their empire, Tenochtitlan (today, Mexico City). In the first page, a figure standing in a canoe departs from an island in the middle of a lake; the painter-scribe demonstrates that this place is an island through the wavy outline of the lakeshores.



Figure **3.14.23.225**: Codex Boturini, early 16th century, 19.8 x 25.4 cm, ink on amatl paper, Viceroyalty of New Spain, folio 1 (Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City)

This island is Aztlan, the ancient homeland of the Aztecs; a male and female couple and a few temples symbolize that this place was settled and populated. The direction of the figures' profile bodies and the footprints leading to the right cue the reading order. The footprint path leads to a large sign with a curled top, which represents a place called Colhuacan. Within this place, the Aztec patron deity, Huitzilopochtli, rests. He is identified by a head that seems to emerge from a bird headdress. Above the footprints is a framed flint sign with a single dot next to it. This is the glyphic year sign of 1 Flint and connects the action to a specific year. A series of curled scrolls emanate from the representation of Huitzilopochtli; these scrolls represent speech or utterance and show that the patron deity is speaking and giving direction to the migrants. Thus, in the eyes of a literate viewer, all of these pictorial elements come together to express that in the year 1 Flint, the Aztecs left their ancestral island home of Aztlan, and received directions from their patron deity to continue on their migration. The painter-scribes efficiently pack all of the required elements of narrative (people, places, events, and time) into this opening page using exclusively visual language.

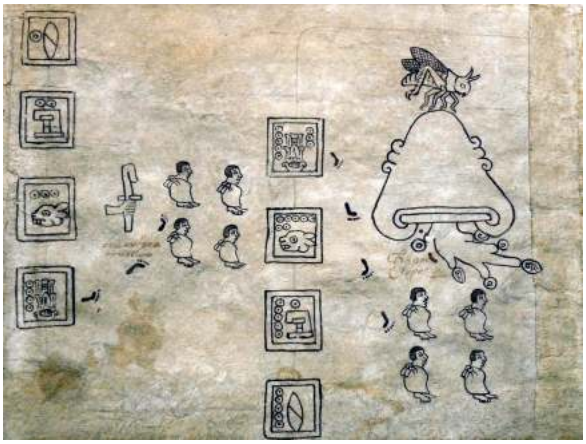


Figure **3.14.23.4**: Codex Boturini, early 16th century, 19.8 x 25.4 cm, ink on amatl paper, Viceroyalty of New Spain, folio 18 (Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City)

Throughout the rest of the codex, the Aztec migration story continues. Most of the pages include images of migrants, a place glyph that represents where they stopped on their migration story, and a cluster of year signs that show how many years they stayed in that particular place. Footprints link the migrants' journey and symbolically connect the separate pages to one another (which could be expanded when opened from the accordion-style book). In the Codex Boturini, the painter-scribe emphasized the sequence and duration of the migration, as the narrative is linked together in a chronological order.

The Mapa Sigüenza

The flexibility of the Aztecs' visual grammar meant that the migration story told in the Codex Boturini could also be told in a completely different format. In the Mapa Sigüenza, the Aztec migration story is told with the help of a conceptual map. While the Boturini is a screenfold book, meaning each episode of narrative corresponds to one page to be read sequentially, the story on the Mapa Sigüenza was painted on a single large sheet of indigenous amatl paper so the viewer sees all of the content at once. For the painter-scribe of the Sigüenza, it was more important to position the Aztecs' migration in geography rather than as a sequence of events, as in the Boturini.

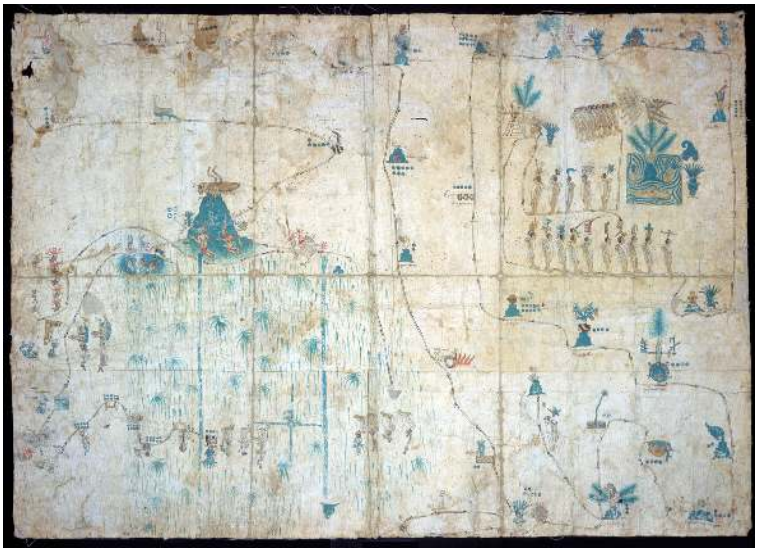


Figure **3.14.23.5**: Mapa Sigüenza, 16th century, amatl paper, 54.5 x 77.5 cm (Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City)

The story begins in the top right corner, at the island of Aztlan (represented as a square filled with blue wavy lines representing water) and the curved place sign seen in the Codex Boturini. Tall, slender figures line up in profile to begin the migration. Their itinerary takes place along a thin pathway dotted with footprints to mark movement. The pathway meanders throughout the page, passing through signs that represent different mythic places. Dots next to these place signs express how many years the migrants stayed in each place.



Figure **3.14.23.6**: Detail of grasshopper, Mapa Sigüenza, 16th century, amatl paper, 54.5 x 77.5 cm (Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City)

The disproportionately large place sign of a grasshopper on top of a green hill in the middle of the left side of the page demonstrates that this was the most important stop in the Sigüenza's version of the migration. The painter-scribe chose to increase its size relative to the other place signs (what we call hierarchy of scale). Below this place, the painter-scribe adds descriptive geographic features, such as blue straight lines that signify canals and marshy vegetation, to help the reader identify this landscape as the marshy lakeshores that surrounded the ultimate capital of Tenochtitlan. Unlike the Boturini, the Sigüenza's makers decided to use a map-like format to give its readers a better understanding of the spatial relationship between places on the journey.

Aztec books and the Spaniards

Although many Aztec painted histories survive today, none are undoubtedly pre-Hispanic in date. When the Franciscan friars arrived in 1524, they began to systematically destroy all types of books in Aztec libraries, as these forms of knowledge were considered to be continuations of pagan idolatry incompatible with Catholicism.

Despite this, indigenous painter-scribes continued to record histories in painted form in the decades after the Aztec-Spanish encounter, and even used the Aztec painted language to memorialize scenes of colonial history. In fact, the manuscripts described above (the Codices Boturini and Mendoza and the Mapa Sigüenza) were all created in the early **colonial era**. Indigenous communities made many manuscripts and maps in the pre-Hispanic style and used the painted language, often to express their ancient right to lands. Although viewership changed, the Aztecs' painted language was both stable and versatile in the face of colonialism; it did not cease with Spanish intervention, but rather it adapted and addressed new audiences.

Additional resources:

Elizabeth Hill Boone. *Stories in Red and Black: Pictorial Histories of the Aztecs and Mixtecs*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).

Dana Leibsohn. *Script and glyph: pre-Hispanic history, colonial bookmaking and the Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*. (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2009).

A list of Aztec Group codices at the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies

Facsimiles of colonial codices and commentaries (in Spanish) at Amoxcalli

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3.14.24: Stone kneeling figure of Chalchiuhtlicue

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM

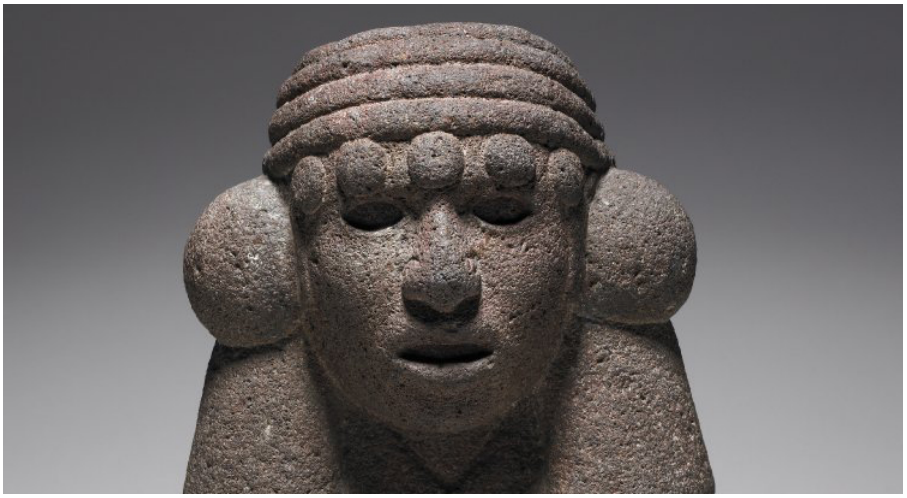


Figure 3.14.24.1: Figure of Chalchiuhtlicue, c. 1325-1521 C.E., Aztec, 30 x 18 cm, granite, Mexico © The Trustees of the British Museum

A water goddess

This stone sculpture represents Chalchiuhtlicue, the Mexica water goddess. Chalchiuhtlicue means “she of the jade skirt” in Nahuatl, the language spoken by the Mexica.* She was associated with the spring water, rivers and lakes, and also with birth. According to an Mexica creation myth there were four suns (or worlds) before the present one. Chalchiuhtlicue presided over the fourth one, which was destroyed by floods and its people turned into fishes.



Figure 3.14.24.2: Figure of Chalchiuhtlicue, c. 1325-1521 C.E., Aztec, granite, 30 x 18 cm, Mexico © Trustees of the British Museum

Female figurines, kneeling or standing, are a recurring theme in Mexica sculpture. Most of them have distinctive characteristics that identify them as fertility goddesses. They are always represented as young women and they wear a variety of headdresses. In some cases, like in this example, their hair is arranged in two large tassels on both sides of the head. Other fertility deities, such as the maize goddesses, wear a large rectangular headdress made of rigid bark paper and ornamented with rosettes. Here,

Chalchiuhtlicue wears the traditional shawl (*quechquemitl*), also trimmed with tassels, over a long skirt. Her eyes were probably made of shell, like in many other Mexica sculptures.

This piece was acquired by William Bullock, a famous collector of Mexican antiquities, in 1823 and exhibited at the Egyptian Hall, in Piccadilly.

The image of the goddess Chalchiuhtlicue figures prominently in the codices as a beautiful young woman representing the purity and preciousness of water. She is invariably painted blue, signaling her role in mythology as the wife, mother or sister of Tlaloc, the Rain God. She is associated with spring water used to irrigate the fields and, as the patron saint of fishermen, with lakes and rivers. She also plays an important role in birth ceremonies. Each figure wears a headband adorned with large ear tassels, as well as a tasseled*quechquemitl* (shoulder cape) over a long skirt.

*The people and culture we know as “Aztec” referred to themselves as the Mexica (pronounced Me-shee-ka).

Suggested Readings:

C. McEwan, Ancient Mexico in the British (London, The British Museum Press, 1994).

M. E. Miller and K. Taube, *An illustrated dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1997).

H.B. Nicholson and E. Quiñones Keber, *Art of Aztec Mexico* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1983).

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SECTION OVERVIEW

3.15: Isthmian cultures (Central America)

The North American Isthmus—today, Panama, Costa Rica and Nicaragua

3.15.1: Doe Shaman Effigy

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3.15.3: Central American art in context- an origin story of the Bribri people

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3.15.1: Doe Shaman Effigy

by DR. SARAHH SCHER

From the physical to spiritual world (the shaman)



Figure **3.15.1.1**: Doe Shaman Effigy, Costa Rica/Nicaragua, c. 500 B.C.E.-300 C.E., ceramic, 32 x 26 x 18 cm (Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University) (photo: Bruce M. White)

An important visual theme in many ancient American art styles is that of transformation: one thing changing into another. Often the physical change seen in the art is meant to convey a spiritual transmutation, as inhabitants of this physical world communicate with, and often temporarily become, the inhabitants of the spirit world. Communication with the spirit world is essential. The inhabitants of that world hold power over this one, and they can aid humans in making crops grow, healing the sick, or helping the dead pass into the afterlife. However, there is also a dark side to the spirit world and its inhabitants. Some spirit beings are malevolent, causing disease, crop failure, droughts, floods, and other disasters. In order to negotiate with the perilous spirit world, a person with special gifts and training must be able to travel there and represent their people.

The term “shaman” initially referred solely to the specific kinds of healers and holy people of Siberia (the word is Tungusk in origin), but today it is often used as a broad category designating ritual specialists who undergo spiritual transformations and trances that place them into communication with the spirit world, and allow them to journey into that world if the need arises.

Usually, if the local term for such a practitioner is known, that is what they are called in scholarly literature, but in the case of long-passed cultures with no written language, “shaman” is frequently the catch-all designation. Most shamans have spirit alter egos who help them in this world and in the spirit world, and these alter egos are usually animals. The qualities of particular animals, such as swiftness, strength, and heightened senses, all aid the shaman as they travel in the spirit world, where they may have to fight evil spirits or rival shamans as well as find and communicate with more benevolent forces.

Doe / Shaman

The Doe Shaman (above) is such a figure. She is from the Greater Nicoya area, comprised of parts of modern-day Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Unlike Mesoamerica and the Central Andes, there was no empire-building in the area we now call Central America. Instead, small egalitarian bands and larger chiefdoms were the primary political units. A characteristic of such small societies was their desire to clearly distinguish themselves from their neighbors, with whom they often fought, competed for resources, married, and traded. A product of this competition was remarkable innovation in material culture styles, meant to create distinct wares that announce and confirm social identity. The red and black slip painting burnished to a high sheen and fine incised lines all characterize the particular local style (called Rosales Zoned Engraved) that the Doe Shaman’s people used. However, it is what the artistic style depicts that was of central importance. What is slip?



Figure **3.15.1.2**: Head and shoulders (detail), *Doe Shaman Effigy*, Costa Rica/Nicaragua, c. 500 B.C.E.-300 C.E., ceramic, 32 x 26 x 18 cm (Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University) (photo: Bruce M. White)

A woman…

The Doe Shaman depicts a woman, identifiable by her protruding breasts and rounded, pregnant belly, seated with her legs crossed and her hands placed on her thighs. She wears a necklace, perhaps made of stone beads, around her neck, and her body is painted or tattooed with numerous swirling and straight lines. Her head is considerably larger in proportion to her body than a normal human's would be, and her shoulders are exceptionally broad. The swirling forms that cross her body at the armpits, navel, and buttocks may reference the shapes modern shamans report seeing as they fall into trance and prepare to enter the spirit world.

She is seated in a cross-legged pose that is commonly used to show shamans in a trance state. Her crossed legs (below) are rendered in a combination of three-and two-dimensional forms: the thighs down to the knees are rounded, three-dimensional forms, while the lower legs and feet are painted on the surface of the thighs they cross. The ankles cross between the legs, both marking and hiding her genital area. In general her body is depicted in an abstract manner, with rounded forms and a lack of interest in musculature.

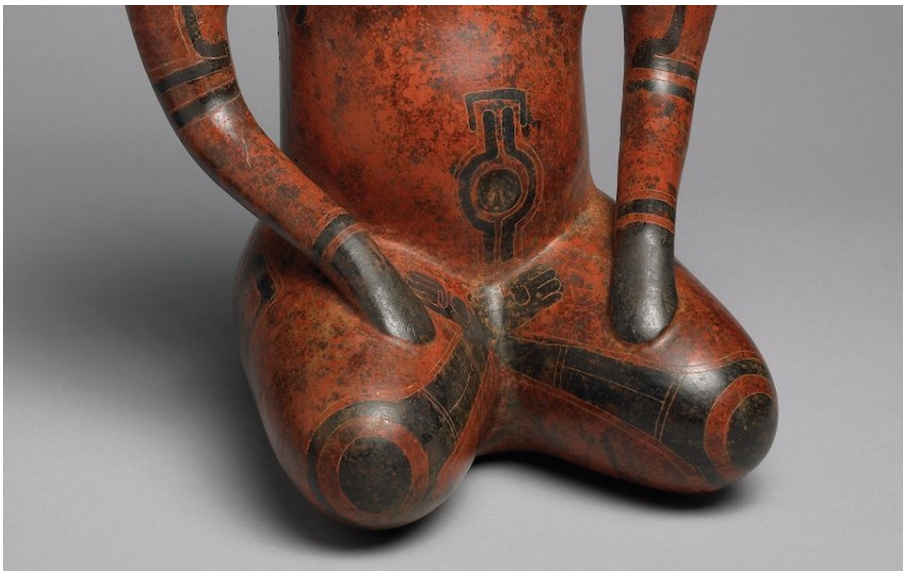


Figure **3.15.1.3**: Abdomen and crossed legs (detail), *Doe Shaman Effigy*, Costa Rica/Nicaragua, c. 500 B.C.E.-300 C.E., ceramic, 32 x 26 x 18 cm (Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University) (photo: Bruce M. White)

but also a white-tailed deer…

Upon closer inspection, it also becomes clear that this woman does not just have human features. Instead she is being portrayed as someone in between the human and animal worlds: a shaman transforming into her animal self in preparation for a journey to the spirit world. Her features are a mixture of those of a human and those of a white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*).

Several parts of her body reveal this subtle transformation, most especially the knobby protrusions on the sides of her head, the split in her lower lip, and the fact that her hands lack fingers and instead look like hooves. The protrusions on her head mimic the pedicels, or antler stumps, of deer, from which antlers grow and then are shed. The pedicels reference the regenerative nature of antlers, endowing the shaman with their property of death and rebirth.



Figure **3.15.1.4**: Back of head and torso (detail), *Doe Shaman Effigy*, Costa Rica/Nicaragua, c. 500 B.C.E.-300 C.E., ceramic, 32 x 26 x 18 cm (Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University) (photo: Bruce M. White)

Her split lower lip, viewed against her protruding chin, looks somewhat like a deer's sensitive muzzle. Her hoof-hands, viewed in contrast to her nearby human feet, emphasize her ability to transform into the deer in her travels to the spirit world, and to use the swiftness of the deer in her dangerous journey. This beautifully-made piece would have been placed in a grave, where the vessel would embody the shaman's power that would help the deceased make their safe passage from life to death, being reborn into the spirit world through the regenerative and maternal power of the shaman as well as her protection in the journey from life to afterlife.[1]

1. Rebecca Rollins Stone, *The Jaguar Within: Shamanic Visions in Ancient Central and South American Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), pp. 94-104.

Additional resources:

This work at the Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University—with zoomable image

Rebecca Rollins Stone, *The Jaguar Within: Shamanic Visions in Ancient Central and South American Art*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.

Rebecca Stone-Miller, *Seeing with New Eyes: Highlights of the Michael C. Carlos Museum collection of the art of the Ancient Americas*. Atlanta: Michael C. Carlos Museum, 2002.

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3.15.2: Mirror Pendant in the Form of a Bat-Human From Grave 5, Sitio Conte

DR. KAREN O'DAY



Figure **3.15.2.1**: Mirror Pendant in the Form of a Bat-Human, from Grave 5, Sitio Conte, Coclé Province, Panama, gold, c. 850, 3 11/16" x 3 3/16" x 1 1/8" (Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University)

Although the entertainment industry is constantly releasing a new Hollywood blockbuster, TV series, video game, graphic novel, or comic book about Batman's latest adventures, it is important to understand that the extraordinary image of a human being with bat features and qualities existed long ago in the Americas. This is one of the key messages from this unique pendant from ancient Panama.



Figure **3.15.2.2**: Map showing the location of Sitio Conte

Archaeologists found this pendant with the remains of a male elder in a grave at the cemetery called Sitio Conte, located west of Panama City in the province of Coclé and approximately twenty-five miles from the Pacific Ocean. The Sitio Conte cemetery was one of several major regional cemeteries in the first millennium C.E. Currently, archaeologists are excavating El Caño, another major cemetery very close to Sitio Conte with similar types of graves and art objects. At least 200 people, mostly adult men, were buried at the Sitio Conte cemetery between 750 and 950 C.E.

Besides this pendant, the male elder's grave was filled with pottery and tools as well as many types of jewelry and ornaments in various materials, including metals, animal bone, and stone. The Bat-Human pendant was found near two other pendants that look completely different—one displays two male warriors (below) and the other one mixes bat and crocodile imagery. Aside from this older man and his items, fourteen men of various ages were interred alongside him in the grave and most of them also had some pottery, tools, jewelry, or ornaments.



Figure **3.15.2.3**: Double figural pendant, from Grave 1-E, Trench I, Gr. 5, layer 2, skeleton XV #134c., gold 700-900 (Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, 20/C13358.1)

Materials and function

The bat-human pendant is in very good condition overall. One loss can be observed at the right bottom corner and another one can be seen at the left top corner. It is made with a gold-copper alloy (typical of ancient Central American metalwork), and showcases the artists' skills with a variety of materials and techniques. It was fabricated using the lost-wax method, which requires many steps before the pendant is cast by pouring liquid metal into a mold.

In addition to casting, the curved wings with pointed extensions were made from sheets hammered into shape and attached to the body at the shoulders. Along with casting and hammering, the artists also inlaid materials into the four round and now empty depressions. The inlays have not survived after being buried for centuries in water-logged soil (the cemetery was located along the Great Coclé River). However, archaeologists have observed traces of resin in the large central depression, indicating that some sort of stone was held in place through this method. The other three depressions were inlaid differently, which is indicated by pairs of holes in the metal back.

Such holes would have had a cord pass through the back, holding the stone in place. It is likely that the smaller depressions would have once held pyrite or emeralds. Emeralds were a highly valued material and were used across Mesoamerica and Central America. In fact, a pendant in another Sitio Conte grave has a large square emerald in its back and, as such, bears witness from ancient Panama to the value of greenstone across Mesoamerica and Central America.

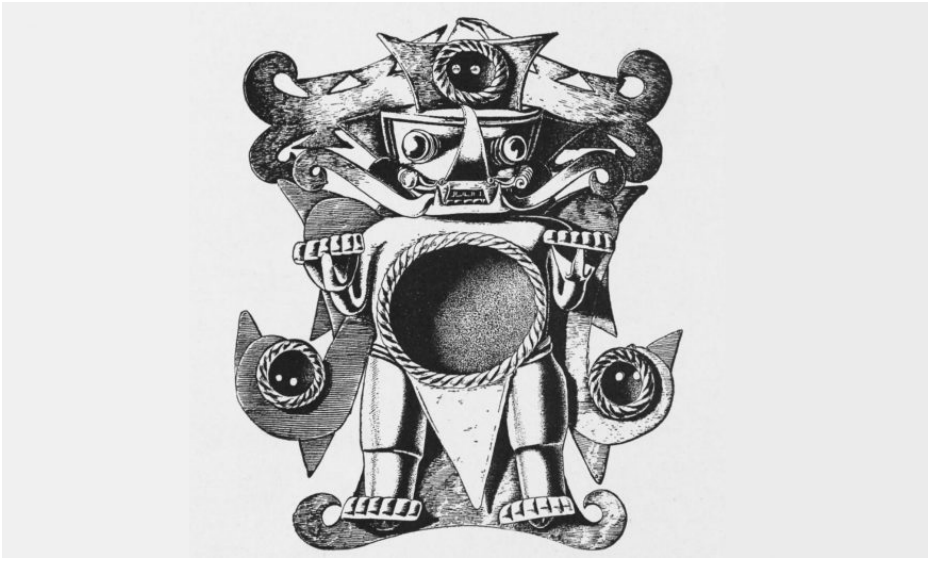


Figure **3.15.2.1**: **Drawing**, Grave 5, Sitio Conte, from Samuel Kirkland Lothrop, *Coclé: An Archaeological Study of Central Panama*, Part I. Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, volume VII (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 1937), page 104.

On the back of the pendant are two suspension rings, which confirm that this object was designed to be hung on a cord around the neck, either alone, or, more likely, with other pendants such as those found in the grave. There is evidence dating from the time of Spanish Conquest in the 16th century that people living on the Caribbean coast of Panama wore mirrors suspended from their necks.

Iconography

In addition to the mixture of techniques and materials, this pendant's imagery also is a blend: human being and bat. Today there are more than one hundred known bat species in Panama. Several features of the pendant resemble bats such as its large ears, interlocking canines, and partially folded wings with pointed contours. The triangular or leaf-like nose panel resembles that of the leaf-nosed bats (family *Phyllostomidae*). Bats—especially with the wings spread open—are a popular subject for Sitio Conte pottery and pendants. However, this figure stands straight on two legs with two arms and hands raised like that of a human. All of its fingers are separated from the wings—unlike actual bats whose free thumb and fingers are encased in its wings. The figure has a trapezoidal forehead contour and upper and lower sets of square teeth behind canines. These features resemble human-shaped pottery vessels found in Sitio Conte graves. The figure is dressed in a loincloth, which is articulated by contour lines that run across the knees and a triangular cloth tucked between the legs. The Bat-Human figure also wears an elaborate head ornament in the shape of a trapezoidal panel.

Symbolism

It is not hard to understand why humans create images of themselves possessing the bat's striking physical features and impressive abilities, such as adroit flight and locating prey at night.

Bat-human imagery in ancient Central American art is often linked to religious beliefs and practices. There is evidence of ritual specialists in ancient Central American societies: men and women who go through rigorous training about the natural and supernatural worlds to gain knowledge that helped them accomplish a goal for the community. The specialists may have animal assistants and they may also transform into these assistants during rituals to acquire the animal's features and abilities. Beliefs and practices of ritual specialists may also help us understand the pyrite originally in the central depression (and possibly the three smaller ones:) ritual specialists used mirrors like doorways opening into the supernatural realm. Mirrors let them see parts of the universe invisible to the ordinary eye.

Together, these observations may even lead to the hypothesis that the man buried with it served as a ritual specialist in his community in central Panama. Unfortunately, there is no way to confirm his identity or role in his society. That said, other tools in his immediate vicinity in the grave can be linked to ritual: he had two pyrite mirrors (only their stone backs survive today) and a pair of painted ceramic incense burners. Whatever the man's exact identity in his community, today we can see very clearly a man outfitted for his afterlife with many powerful ornaments, tools, and images.

Video 3.15.2.1: River of Gold: Precolumbian Treasures from Sitio Conte, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Penn Museum)

Additional resources:

Mirror Pendant in the form of a Bat-Human at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University (31-36-20/C13361)

Warwick Bray, "Sitio Conte Metalwork in Its Pan-American Context," in *River of Gold: Pre-Columbian Treasures from Sitio Conte*, edited by Pamela Hearne and Robert J. Sharer (The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1992), pp. 32-46.

Megan Gambino, The Call of the Panama Bats, *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2009

Pamela Hearne and Robert J. Sharer, *River of Gold: Treasures from Sitio Conte* (The University Museum University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1992).

John W. Hoopes, and Oscar M. Fonseca Z., "Goldwork and Chibchan Identity: Endogenous Change and Diffuse Unity in the Isthmo-Colombian Area," in *Gold and Power in Ancient Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia*, edited by Jeffrey Quilter & John W. Hoopes (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC., 2003), pp. 49-89.

John Kricher, *A Neotropical Companion, An Introduction to the Animals, Plants, & Ecosystems of the New World Tropics* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1997).

Olga Linares, "Ecology and the Arts in Ancient Panama: On the Development of Social Rank and Symbolism in the Central Provinces," *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*, number seventeen (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC., 1977).

Samuel K. Lothrop, *Coclé: An Archaeological Study of Central Panama, Part I. Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology*, Harvard University vol. VII. (Peabody Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts).

Julia Mayo and Carlos Mayo, "El descubrimiento de un cementerio de élite en El Caño: indicios de un patrón funerario en el Valle de Río Grande, Coclé, Panamá," *Arqueología Iberoamericana* vol 20, 2013, pp. 3-27.

Laura Navarro and Joaquín Arroyo-Cabrales, "Bats in Ancient Mesoamerica," in *The Archaeology of Mesoamerican Animals*, edited by Christopher M. Getz and Kitty F. Emery, (Lockwood Press, Atlanta, Georgia), pp. 583-605.

Karen O'Day, "The Sitio Conte Cemetery in Ancient Panama: Where Lord 15 Wore His Ornaments in 'Great Quantity,'" in *Wearing Culture: Dress and Regalia in Early Mesoamerica and Central America*, edited by Heather Orr and Matthew G. Looper (University Press of Colorado, Boulder

2014), pp. 1-28.

Nicholas J. Saunders, "'Catching the Light': Technologies of Power and Enchantment in Pre-Columbian Goldworking," in *Gold and Power in Ancient Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia*, edited by Jeffrey Quilter & John W. Hoopes (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC. 2003), pp. 15-47.

Rebecca Stone, *The Jaguar Within: Shamanic Trance in Ancient Central and South American Art* (University of Texas Press, Austin, 2011)

Rebecca Stone-Miller, *Seeing with New Eyes: Highlights of the Michael C. Carlos Museum Collection of Art of the Ancient Americas* (Michael C. Carlos Museum, Atlanta, Georgia).

A.R. Williams, "The Golden Chiefs of Panama," *National Geographic* 221 (1), pp. 66-81.

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3.15.3: Central American art in context- an origin story of the Bribri people

by **DENVER ART MUSEUM**



“In the Denver Art Museum’s Art of the Ancient Americas galleries, we worked with Mexico City-based animators Hola Combo to create animations to help tell the origin stories that explain the relationship between ancient American communities and the their environment. The animation for the Central America section was inspired by a song sung by the Bribri people of Costa Rica and northern Panama. It tells of the formation of the first humans and how they learned to build a relationship with the earth, and with each other that sustains them. The Bribri still sing this song today, and we are grateful to the work of anthropologist Cervantes Gamboa.”

Listen in **Spanish**

Listen in **Bribri**

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SECTION OVERVIEW

3.16: Carribean

3.16.1: Introduction to Taíno art

3.16.2: Taíno Zemis and Duhos

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3.16.1: Introduction to Taíno art

by **DR. MAYA JIMÉNEZ**



Figure **3.16.1.1**: Taíno artist, *Cohaba Inhaler in the Form of a Ritual Specialist*, 1000–1500 C.E., stone, from the Caribbean (The Walters Museum)

Taíno: natives of the Caribbean

Except for a few Spanish chronicles, such as Fray Ramón Pané's *Relación de las antigüedades de los indios* (*An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians*, 1497), there are few written records of Taíno culture. Luckily, science has given important clues about the Taínos' rise and decline, debunking the common misconception (known as the "myth of the Taino extinction") that Taínos were wiped out by Spanish colonialism. In fact, Taíno descendants, along with their culture and language, remain an important part of Caribbean life today. Many Taíno words, such as canoe, hammock, and tobacco, still exist in today's Spanish and English vocabulary. In places like the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, islanders proudly refer to themselves as "quisqueyanos" or "boricuas," a reference to the Taíno name of their respective islands. In addition, new research by political scientists like Tony Castanha and biologists like Juan C. Martínez Cruzado have confirmed the legacy of Taíno culture in modern-day Puerto Rican society. Martínez Cruzado for example employed genetic testing to determine that 61.1% of Puerto Ricans carry Taíno ancestry. The Taíno then, remain central to understanding the history and the cultural diversity of the Caribbean.

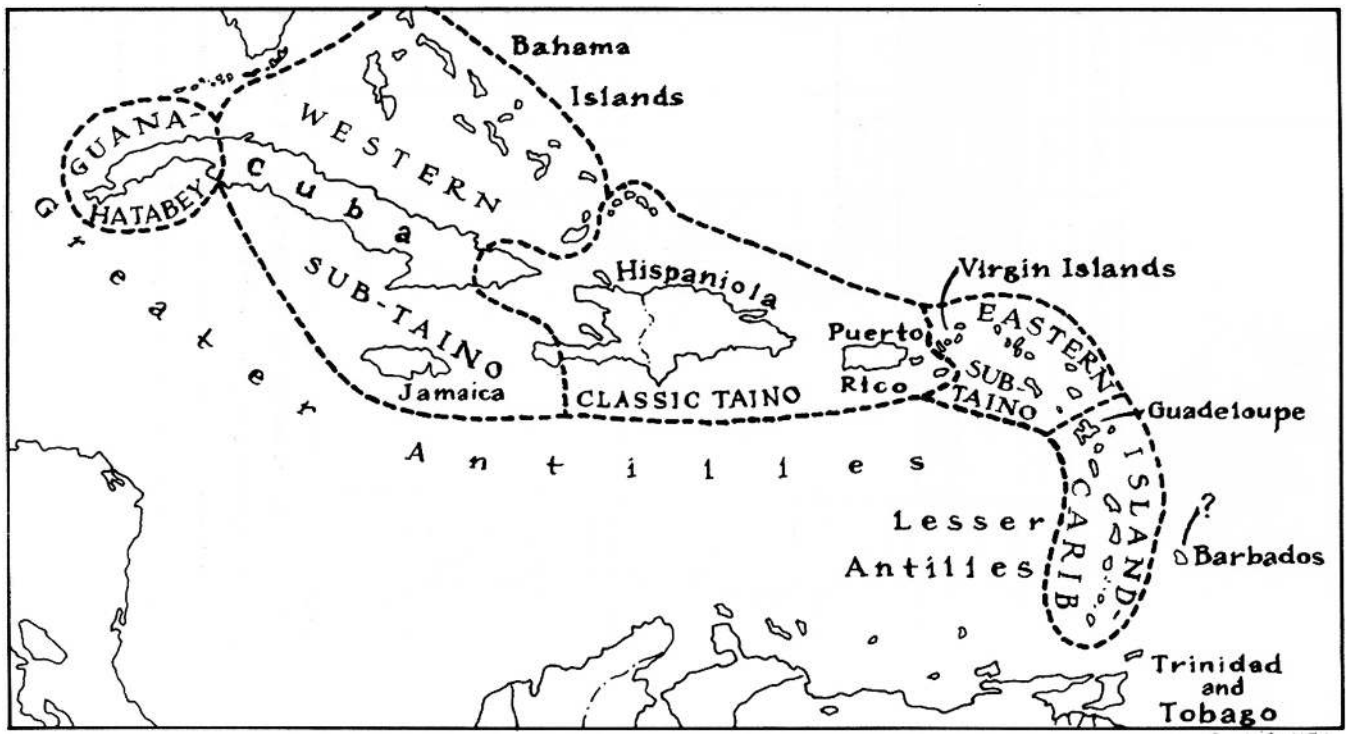


Figure **3.16.1.2**: Map of the Taíno and Caribe in the Greater and Lesser Antilles (public domain)

The Taínos emerged c. 1200 C.E. They are descendants of the Arawaks who migrated from the northern coastal region of South America to the Caribbean where they settled in the Greater Antilles. While the Island Caribs (a different Indigenous people) resided in the Lesser Antilles, the Taínos, whose name translates into "good people," occupied the islands of Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, the Bahamas, and Eastern Cuba. The Taínos were the first to come into contact with the Spanish when, in 1492, Christopher Columbus landed on the island of **Hispaniola** (today Haiti and the Dominican Republic), formerly known as Española, meaning "Spanish."

The Taínos developed sophisticated systems of navigation, traversing the islands of the Caribbean with ease and building impressive wooden canoes, which the Spanish noted could fit up to 100 passengers. They were also known for their sophisticated agricultural system, cultivating three main crops—cassava (*casaba*), corn (*mahiz*), and sweet potatoes (*batata*)—in *conucos* (earth mounds) that are still used to this day. Similar to corn in **Mesoamerica**, cassava was the main staple of the Taíno diet, and as a result, rituals were implemented to celebrate the planting, harvesting, and consumption of this crop.

Social division

Taíno society was divided into two social classes, the *naborias* and *nitaínos*. The *naborias* were the laboring class in charge of fishing, hunting, and working in the *conuco* fields, while the *nitaínos*, the nobles, supervised their labor. The *nitaínos* ruled over communities known as *yucayeques*; and in turn, reported to a status group, the *cacique*—who oversaw the larger chiefdom of which *yucayeques* formed part. By 1492, there were five chiefdoms (*caciques*) on the island of Hispaniola.

Most Taínos lived modestly in *bohios* (huts) that were constructed from palm trees. The interior of these homes were furnished with stools, hammocks, and pots. The home of the *cacique*, called *caney*, was larger than traditional *bohios* and also served as a ceremonial center, containing religious objects, like *zemís*, made of wood, clay, or stone. Only *caciques* and ritual specialists would partake in these rituals through which they would communicate with the spiritual world for the purposes of divination or curing.



Figure **3.16.1.3**: Taíno artist, *Zemi*, 800–1500 C.E., basalt stone, from the Dominican Republic (The Walters Museum)

Zemis and religion

The Taínos worshiped two main gods, Yúcahu, the lord of cassava and the sea, and Attabeira, his mother and the goddess of fresh water and human fertility. Yúcahu and Attabeira, as well as other lesser gods associated with natural forces, were worshiped in the form of ***zemís***, sculptural figures that depicted either gods or ancestors. These objects often emphasized the head, as it was believed that the head was the location of spiritual power. *Zemí* figures could be used as stands, reliquaries, or as part of personal adornment.



Figure **3.16.1.4**: Taíno artist, *Zemí* c. 1000 C.E., wood and shell, from the Dominican Republic (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Taíno artist, *Zemí* c. 1000 C.E., wood and shell, from the Dominican Republic (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

While the *zemís* were perhaps the most important of Taíno artworks, there also existed numerous artifacts relating to the sniffing of cohoba, a powder derived from the seeds of a local tree, the *Anadenanthera peregrina*. The *caciques* and ritual specialists inhaled the cohoba, similar to how the Quimbaya from Colombia chewed coca leaves, for ritualistic purposes, in order to communicate with the spiritual world. The *zemi* sculpture above was made to hold cohoba for snuffing in the bowl atop its head. It shows a figure with an emaciated body and teary eyes; these mark the effects of someone who has been fasting prior to the cohoba ritual, and is now seeing into the spirit world through their wide-open eyes.

While the Taíno were matrilineal, meaning that the mother determined name and rank, their society was not matriarchal. In fact most *caciques* and *nitaínos* were men, although the women in their family held high status and enjoyed special privileges. Concerned with religious rituals, agricultural productivity, and maritime life, the Taíno, unlike the Aztecs of Mexico, were not well armed, leaving them ill-prepared for the arrival of the Spaniards— and their weapons.

The effects of the Spanish conquest

While Columbus set foot on the island of Hispaniola in 1492, conquest of the island did not begin until 1494. Quickly thereafter, exploratory missions took place throughout the Caribbean, with the Spanish colonization of Puerto Rico beginning in 1508 and Cuba in 1510. By 1509, only 15 years after the establishment of colonial rule in Hispaniola, the Taíno population is estimated at 60,000, a drop of hundreds of thousands in just a few years.

The dramatic collapse of the Taíno population—like that of other pre-Columbian cultures—was due to numerous factors, including overwork (a result of the encomienda system, the forced labor of indigenous people on plantations), disease (such as smallpox and measles, to which the indigenous populations were not immune), starvation, massacres, and suicide.



Figure **3.16.1.5**: Taíno artist, *Three-Cornered Stone* (Trigonolito), 13th–15th century C.E., limestone, from the Dominican Republic (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Three-pointer stones and celts

Common objects produced by the Taíno include ***zemís***, ***duhos*** (wooden ritual seats), three-pointer stones, and celts. Three-cornered stones can be small enough to hold in your hand or almost too heavy to carry. They typically include animal or human imagery, similar to the *zemí* featured above. On one three-cornered stone from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, a face with large eyes, a pointed nose, and a wide, open mouth can be seen.



Figure **3.16.1.6**: Taíno artist, Ritual seat (*duho*), 1292–1399, wood inlaid with gold, 22 x 44 x 16.5 cm (The British Museum

Archeologists have discovered hundreds of three-pointer stones, suggesting they were common among the Taíno. Sometimes buried in *conucos* to promote agricultural fertility, these triangulated stones were also used to encourage human reproduction. Turn-of-the-twentieth-century American archaeologist Jesse Walter Fewkes categorized three-pointer stones into four categories, with the Three-Cornered Stone illustrated here being an example of the anthropomorphic type, characterized by a human face carved in the front. Certain facial features, such as the circular eyes and broad, open mouths, which also appear on *zemís* and *duhos*, and are typical of Taíno figurative sculpture.



Figure **3.16.1.7**: Ceremonial axe blade (celt), 7th-15th century C.E., greenstone (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

A very common non-figurative object made by the Taíno are celts, which are ceremonial axe blades made of polished stone. Celts are common across the Caribbean, in the Mesoamerican, and the Isthmian mainland, where they were frequently carved into bird- and human-like forms. Taíno celts are are carved into lobed shape that is often compared to a flower petal, and they are polished until smooth. These celts were never meant to be used as axe blades, and instead were used as offerings to deities, symbols of status, and were also part of systems of exchange.

Together, these Taíno artworks, discovered in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and throughout the Greater Antilles, prove the existence of a Caribbean network of exchange, and the many ways in which the indigenous people of the Americas were interconnected even before 1492.

Additional Resources:

Doyle, James. "Indigenous Arts of the Caribbean." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. (June 2021)

James A. Doyle, "Arte del Mar: Art of the Early Caribbean," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* vol. 77, no. 3 (Winter, 2020)

Lawrence Waldron, *Pre-Columbian Art of the Caribbean* (University of Florida Press, 2019)

Taino: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean, ed. Fatima Brecht, Brooklyn Museum, NY, 1997

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3.16.2: Taíno Zemis and Duhos

by **DR. MAYA JIMÉNEZ**



Figure **3.16.2.1**: Taíno artist, Zemí, c. 1000, wood and shell, from the Dominican Republic (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

An emaciated figure looks out at us, his teeth bared and his eyes wide open. A large bowl rests atop his head. This figure, known as a *zemí* (or *cemí*), shows someone who has likely fasted for days in preparation for a ritual, which involved snuffing *cohoba* (a type of hallucinogen). Ingesting such substances would allow the participants, typically spiritual healers or *caciques* (rulers), to travel to the world of the spirits and communicate with them, bringing power and healing knowledge back to their people. The bowl atop the *zemí* would have been used for this very ritual, while his alert facial expression would have echoed that of its practitioner.

The side view of the *zemí* shows his lean state, with his ribs emphasized in low relief. He wears a woven cap, ear ornaments, and around his biceps and ankles are bands referred to as ligatures—tightly-bound ornaments that often pinched the flesh and modified the shape of the arm or leg they adorned. While now appearing nude, the figure may once have worn a loincloth.[1] Although only the teeth remain of its shell inlay, the *zemí* would originally have had inlaid eyes as well. The grimacing mouth and open, staring eyes are characteristic of cohoba users, and so may be meant to show the *zemí* in a trance state.

While many *zemís*, were used as cohoba stands, the word "zemí" in the Taíno language refers to "a spiritual and vital force pertaining to deities and ancestors;"[2] meaning that *zemís* were also imbued with spiritual, ancestral, and supernatural forces. Art historian James Doyle explains this process further:

> ***Sculptures began with a call from the medium itself; for example, a tree would frighten a person walking through the forest by moving its roots. The person would ask the tree spirit (zemí) who it was, and the spirit would demand that a ritual specialist reveal its identity. When the ritual specialist arrived, the spirit's specific bodily form would be revealed during a hallucinatory trance. Once the identity became known, an artist would sculpt the tree (or stone) invested with divine power into a figure.James A. Doyle, "Arte del Mar," 23.***

As objects used for both ritual and veneration, *zemís* could impact many aspects of Taíno life, influencing the health, social standing, political power, or the fertility of an individual.



Figure **3.16.2.2**: Taíno artist, Spatula, c. 10th–15th century, manatee bone, from the Greater Antilles, Caribbean (Cleveland Museum of Art)

The ritual of sniffing *cohoba*

The ritual of sniffing cohoba began with a cleansing process, through which the *cacique* would induce vomiting. Afterwards, the *cacique* would use a spoon to place the cohoba on top of the *zemí*. With the aid of tubes, the *cacique* would sniff the cohoba, which was sometimes mixed with tobacco or crushed seashell to enhance the hallucinogenic effects. Taíno artists made objects specifically for this ceremony, such as spatulas to capture the snuff and sticks to induce vomiting.

The experience of sniffing cohoba was an all-body experience through which *caciques* interacted with the supernatural world and interpreted these induced apparitions as communications with either gods or ancestors. The knowledge acquired from interactions with the spirits was fateful for the sick since the cause of illness, and its cure, could be ascertained.



Figure **3.16.2.3**: Taíno, *Deity Figure (Zemí)*, 13th–15th century, sandstone, Dominican Republic (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Materials

The material from which the *zemís* were made significantly affected the style of the finished product. In the case of a zemí made of sandstone, one can see how the smooth edges and round features of the cohoba stand echo the circular eyes and oval mouth of the figure. Depicting a crouched figure, which is typical of cohoba stands, the body's features seem to blend in and at times disappear altogether with the cylindrical shape of the stand, perhaps a consequence of its material fragility.



Figure **3.16.2.4**: Deity Figure (Zemi), c. 1000, Dominican Republic, wood, shell, 68.5 x 21.9 x 23.2 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

By contrast, the wooden *zemí* is more detailed, as seen through his descriptive face and emaciated body. The detailed face, which depicts a crying figure, allows us to identify the *zemí* as a depiction of Boinayel, the Rain Giver. The white teeth, made of shell, add a strong decorative element to this already intricate figure. Together, the use of low relief carving and inlaid material give this *zemí* a heightened sense of realism, not seen in the stone zemí.



Figure **3.16.2.5**: Taíno artist, *Zemí* (mask side), c. 1510–1515 (Museo Nazionale Prehistorico ed Etnografico "Luigi Pigorini," Rome, Italy; photo: Lorenzo Demasi)

Who made this *Zemi*?

The Pigorini Museum in Rome, Italy, display a *zemí* that has baffled visitors and art historians alike. Lavishly decorated with seashells, glass beads, and mirrors, this *zemí* features the depiction of a *cacique* on the front and a zoomorphic mask on the back. The dualism of this *zemí* and the use of these particular materials and style are rarely found in Taíno art.



Figure **3.16.2.6**: Taíno artist, *Zemí* (cacique side), c. 1510–1515 (Museo Nazionale Prehistorico ed Etnografico "Luigi Pigorini," Rome, Italy; photo: **Lorenzo Demasi**)

Because the human face is carved from West African rhinoceros horn and the beaded designs seem to mimic the complex geometric arrangements found in Angolan art, viewers may wonder whether the artist of this unique *zemí* was West African or Caribbean. Making the matter more complex is the use of Venetian mirrors to create the eyes and ears of the zoomorphic mask and Venetian glass beads to decorate the exterior. How did Taíno artists have access to these materials, designs, and iconography? Or was the artist even Taíno?

The Beaded *Zemí* looks similar in many ways to other Taíno *zemís* including the typical gaping eyes, wide-open mouth, and squatting position. There are more differences though. The variety of materials, many of which are rare, and use of geometric design dramatically depart from the simplicity encountered in traditional *zemís*. Art historians have explained the dualism of this zemí as the transformation of a ritual specialist, with the human face being a reference to human life, and the mask, which many believe to be skeletal, a reference to death. Nevertheless, even if the zemí does not depict a ritual specialist, it may still relate to cohoba rituals through its associations with the spiritual world of the dead. And at least in that regard, it is a clear example of Taíno art.

The confluence of European and African influences have led scholars to think that the Beaded Zemí was made sometime between the initial Spanish colonization of the Caribbean and the Taíno demographic decline during the mid-sixteenth century. It is a unique artwork. The Beaded Zemí reveals the high-level cultural complexity that resulted from the **colonization of Latin America**.



Figure **3.16.2.7**: Lucayan duho (seat), high-back style, 1000–1500, wood, 84 x 15 x 21 cm, Turks and Caicos Islands, Bahamas (National Museum of the American Indian)

Duhos



Figure **3.16.2.8**: Taíno artist, *Duho*, 1292–1399, wood and gold, 44 x 22 x 16.5 cm (The British Museum)

Duhos are ceremonial seats fashioned out of stone or wood. They symbolized prestige and power since only *caciques* or ritual specialists used them. While *duhos* ranged in design, consisting of high-back or flat seats, they were most commonly low seats supported by four legs. Despite being seats of power, much like what we would today call a throne, *duhos* were low to the ground, featured no arm rest, and their reclining position resembled that of hammocks.

Duhos from the Dominican Republic were usually highly ornate, featuring decorative patterns and exotic materials, such as manatee bone and gold. The backrest was an essential part of the seat since it provided lumbar support to the cacique or ritual specialist during rituals. The head, featured prominently in the front, and stylistically in keeping with zemi sculptures, depicted either a god or ancestor. The smooth wooden surface would have made the experience all the more comfortable, allowing the cacique or ritual specialist to relax as he mentally entered the spiritual world.

Ranging in color and graining pattern, wooden duhos reveal the diversity of Caribbean timber and might for instance be made of the tropical hardwood Guayacan, which the Taíno valued for its dark color and glossy finish. Further contributing to its shimmering effects, the artist decorated this duho with gold sheets that have been inserted into the eyes, mouth, earspools, and joints of the figure. Despite the perishable nature of wooden duhos, they have survived in large part because the Taíno stored them in caves to protect them from humidity and fire, as well as from invading Spaniards. It is extraordinary that any of these fragile ceremonial seats have remained almost intact. Used not only in cohoba sniffing rituals, duhos were also placed inside tombs, where they rested alongside the interred cacique.

Notes:

1. James A. Doyle, “Arte del Mar: Art of the Early Caribbean,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* vol. 77, no. 3 (Winter, 2020), 23.
2. Ibid., 24.

Additional Resources:

Doyle, James. “**Indigenous Arts of the Caribbean**.” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. (June 2021)

James A. Doyle, “**Arte del Mar: Art of the Early Caribbean**,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* vol. 77, no. 3 (Winter, 2020)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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SECTION OVERVIEW

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4.1.1: Introduction to Andean Cultures

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4.1.3: Ancient Andean art in context- An origin story (“The Legend of Ñaymlap”)

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4.1.1: Introduction to Andean Cultures

by **DR. SARAHH SCHER**

Page ID
181617



Figure **4.1.1.1**: Inka ruins, Písac, Peru (photo: **Chensiyuan**, CC BY-SA 3.0)



Figure **4.1.1.2**: The Andes mountains (image: **NASA**)

A land of contrasts

"The Andes" can refer to the mountain range that stretches along the west coast of South America, but is also used to refer to a broader geographic area that includes the coastal deserts to the west and into the tropical jungles to the east of those mountains. This region is seen as home to a distinct cultural area—dating from around the fourth millennium B.C.E. to the time of the Spanish conquest—and many of these cultures still persist today in various forms.

From the desert coast, the mountains rise up quickly, sometimes within 10-20 kilometers of the Pacific Ocean. Therefore, the people who lived in the Andes had to adapt to varying types of climate and ecosystems. This diverse environment gave rise to a range of architectural and artistic practices.

Period and time scale	North Coast	Central Coast	South Coast	North Highlands	Central Highlands	South Highlands	Titicaca region
Formative 3500-900 BCE	Cerro Sechín Huaca Prieta			Kotosh Guitarrero			Chinchorros
Early Horizon 900-100 BCE	Cupisnique		Paracas	Chavín			Pukará
Early Intermediate Period 100 BCE-600 CE	Moche Gallinazo		Nasca	Recuay			Tiwanaku
Middle Horizon 600-1000 CE	Sicán Moche	Wari		Wari	Wari	Wari	Tiwanaku
Late Intermediate Period 1000-1438 CE	Chimú Sicán	Chancay	Ica				
Late Horizon 1438-1532 CE	Inka	Inka	Inka	Inka	Inka	Inka	Inka

Figure **4.1.1.3**: Table showing the time periods, cultures, and territories within Andean prehistory. While the table ends with the Spanish conquest of the Inka in 1532, native cultures continue in the Andes, with many changes from their pre-conquest forms.

Deserts, mountains, and farms

Though much of the Andean coast is near the Equator, its waters are cold, due to currents from the Antarctic. This cold water is rich in sea life; however, during El Niño years, warm water takes over, leading to large die-offs of fish and marine mammals, and often creating catastrophic flooding on the coast.



Figure **4.1.1.4**: Ocean and cliffs near the site of Pacatnamú, Peru, with the foothills of the Andes visible in the distance (photo: Dr. Sarahh Scher)

In normal years, the coast is very dry. The rivers that run to the coast, fed by melting snow from the Andes mountains (called the Cordillera Blanca, or White Mountains, in contrast to the Cordillera Negra, or Black Mountains to the west where snow does not fall), create areas of agricultural lands interspersed with desert. Cultures eventually learned to create canals, allowing them to irrigate more land, and irrigation remains important to farming on Peru's coast.

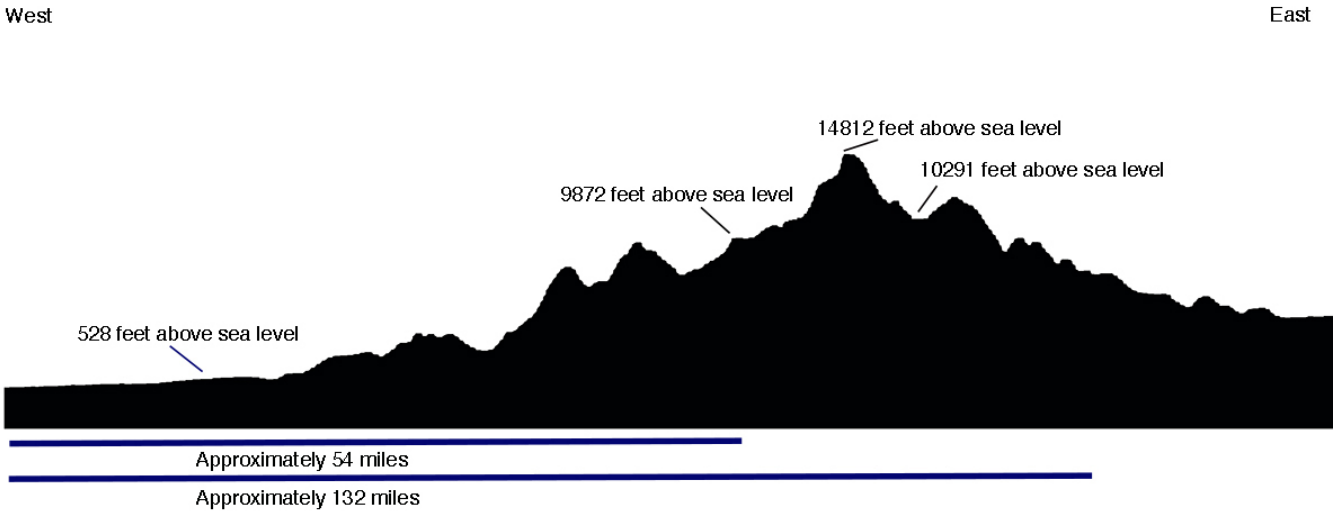


Figure **4.1.1.5**: Cross-section showing typical change in elevation in the Andes (diagram: Dr. Sarahh Scher)

As the elevation climbs, different ecological zones are created, and people of the Andes used these to grow different products: maize (corn), hot peppers, potatoes, and coca all grew at different elevations. Some cultures (such as the **Cupisnique** and **Paracas**) developed on the coast, and incorporated seafood into their diet. They would trade with the cultures that lived in the highlands (such as the Recuay and the inhabitants of **Chavín de Huantar**) for the things they could not grow for themselves. The people in the highlands would likewise trade with the coastal peoples for dried fish and products that would not grow at their elevation, as well as exotic animals like parrots from the tropical jungles to the east.

Plants and animals



Figure **4.1.1.6**: Leaves of an *Erythroxylum coca* plant, Colombia (photo: **Darina**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The plants and animals of the Andes provided ancient peoples with food, medicine, clothing, heat, and many other resources for daily life. As noted above, the rapid change in elevation of the Andes meant that many different foods could be grown in a compressed area. Potatoes were a staple food of the highlands, and maize and manioc were important in the lower elevations.

Coca grew in the highlands but was traded all over the Andes. The leaves of this plant, when chewed, provide a stimulant that allows people to walk for long periods at high altitude without getting tired, and it suppresses hunger. It was used by travelers in the highlands, but was also used in ritual practices to endure long nights of dancing. In modern times, people drink it as a tea to help with the symptoms of altitude sickness.



Figure 4.1.1.7: Terraced hillsides at the Inka ruins of Písac, Peru (photo: Paulo JC Nogueira, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Farming in the steep topography of the mountains could be difficult, and an important innovation developed by the Andeans was the use of terracing. By creating terraces (essentially giant steps along the contours of a mountain) people were able to make flat, easily worked plots. The terraces were formed by creating retaining walls that were then backfilled with a thick layer of loose stones to aid drainage, and topped with soil.

The most important animals in the highlands were camelids: the wild vicuña and guanaco, and their domesticated relatives, the llama and alpaca. Alpacas have soft wool and were sheared to make textiles, and llamas can carry burdens over the difficult terrain of the mountains (an adult male llama can carry up to 100 pounds, but could not carry an adult human).



Figure 4.1.1.8: Left: Alpacas, Ecuador (photo: Philippe Lavoie, public domain); Right: Llama near Cusco, Peru (photo: Dr. Sarahh Scher)

Both animals were also used for their meat, and their dried dung served as fuel in the high altitudes, where there was no wood to burn. Andean camelids, like their African and Asian cousins, can be very headstrong. If they are overloaded, they will sit on the ground and refuse to budge. Because of this, the ancient people of the Andes did not have domesticated animals that could carry them or pull heavy wagons, and so roads and methods of moving people and goods developed differently than in Europe, Asia, and Africa. The wheel was known, but not used for transport, because it simply would not have been useful.

Textile arts



Figure **4.1.1.9**: Weaving with traditionally dyed alpaca wool, Chinchero, Peru (photo: **Rosalee Yagihara**, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The ancient peoples of the Andes developed textile technology before ceramics or metallurgy. Textile fragments found at Guitarrero Cave date from c. 5780 B.C.E. Over the course of millennia, techniques developed from simple twining to complex woven fabrics. By the first millennium C.E., Andean weavers had developed and mastered every major technique, including double-faced cloth and lace-like open weaves.

Andean textiles were first made using fibers from reeds, but quickly moved to yarn made from cotton and camelid fibers. Cotton grows on the coast, and was cultivated by ancient Andeans in several colors, including white, several shades of brown, and a soft grayish blue. In the highlands, the alpaca provided soft, strong wool in natural colors of white, brown, and black. Both cotton and wool were also dyed to create more colors: **red** from cochineal, blue from indigo, and other colors from plants that grew at various elevations. Alpaca wool is much easier to dye than cotton, and so it was usually preferred for coloring. The extra time and effort needed to dye fibers made the bright colors a symbol of status and wealth throughout Andean history.

Ceramics



Figure **4.1.1.10**: Oxygenated sculptural ceramic ceremonial vessel that represents a dog, c. 100-800 C.E., Moche, Peru, 180 mm high (Museo Larco).

Though ceramics were not as valuable as textiles to Andean peoples, they were important for spreading religious ideas and showing status. People used plain everyday wares for cooking and storing foods. Elites often used finely made ceramic vessels for eating and drinking, and vessels decorated with images of gods or spiritually important creatures were kept as status symbols, or given as gifts to people of lesser status to cement their social obligations to those above them.

There are a wide variety of Andean ceramic styles, but there are some basic elements that can be found throughout the region's history. Wares were mostly fired in an oxygenating atmosphere, resulting in ceramics that often had a red cast from the clay's iron content. Some cultures, such as the Sicán and Chimú, instead used kilns that deprived the clay of oxygen as it fired, resulting in a surface ranging from brown to black.



Figure 4.1.1.11: Non-oxygenated ceramic feline bottle, 12th–15th century, Chimú (Peru), 28.26 cm high (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Decoration of ceramics could be done by incising lines into the surface, creating textures by rocking seashells over the damp clay, or by painting the surface.

Some early elite ceramics were decorated after firing with a paint made from plant resin and mineral pigments. This produced a wide variety of bright colors, but the resin could not withstand being heated and so these resin-painted wares were only for display and ritual use. Most ceramics in the Andes instead were slip-painted. Slip is a liquid that is made of clay, and the color of the slip is determined by the color of the clay and its mineral content. Most slip painting was applied before firing, after the semi-dry clay had been burnished with a smooth stone to prepare the surface. The range of slip colors could vary from two (seen in **Moche ceramics**) to seven or more (seen in Nasca ceramics). Once fired, the burnished surface would be shiny. Ceramics, because of their durability, are one of the greatest resources for understanding ancient Andean cultures.



Figure 4.1.1.12: Female figurine, 1400–1533, Inka, Silver-gold alloy, 14.9 x 3.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Figure **4.1.1.13**: Knife (*tumi*) with Removable Figural Handle, Moche, 50-800 C.E., green copper with patina, 11.43 x 2.5 x 1.43 cm (**Walters Art Museum**)

Metalwork

Metalworking developed later in Andean history, with the oldest known gold artifact dating to 2100 B.C.E., and evidence of copper smelting from around 900–700 B.C.E. Gold was used for jewelry and other forms of ornamentation, as well as for making sculptural pieces. Inka figurines of silver and gold depicting humans and llamas have been recovered from high-altitude archaeological sites in Peru and Chile. Copper and bronze were also used to create jewelry and items like ceremonial knives (called *tumis*).

Architecture

The architecture of the Andes can be divided roughly between highland and coastal traditions. Coastal cultures tended to build using adobe, while highland cultures depended more on stone. However, the lowland site of Caral, which is currently the oldest complex site known in the Andes, was built mainly using stone.



Figure **4.1.1.14**: Caral, Peru, founded c. 2800 B.C.E. (photo: **Pativilcano**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Beginning with Caral in 2800 B.C.E, various cultures constructed monumental structures such as platforms, temples, and walled compounds. These structures were the focus of political and/or religious power, like the site of **Chavín de Huantár** in the highlands or the Huacas de Moche on the coast. Many of these structures have been heavily damaged by time, but some reliefs and murals used to decorate them survive.



Figure 4.1.1.15: Painted adobe relief, Huaca de La Luna,100 CE to 800 C.E., Moche (Peru) (photo: Marco Silva Navarrete, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The best-known architecture in the Andes is that of the Inka. The Inka used stone for all of their important structures, and developed a technique that helped protect the structures from earthquakes. Because of its stone construction, Inka architecture has survived more easily than the adobe architecture of the coast. Ongoing efforts by archaeologists and the Peruvian Ministry of Culture are also focused on restoring and preserving the great works of coastal architecture.



Figure 4.1.1.16: Inka stone doorways, Qoricancha, Cusco (photo: Jean Robert Thibault, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Ancient past, continuing traditions

From textiles to ceramics, metalwork, and architecture, Andean cultures produced art and architecture that responded to their natural environment and reflected their beliefs and social structures. We can learn much about these ancient traditions through the artifacts and sites that survive, as well as the many ways that these practices—such as weaving—persist today.

Additional resources:

Dualism in Andean Art from The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Timeline of Art History

The Lost Inca Empire from PBS

Chavin (UNESCO World Heritage Site)

Project page for the Huaca de la Luna restoration by the World Monuments Fund

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4.1.2: Introduction to Ancient Andean Art

by **DR. ANANDA COHEN-APONTE**

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Figure **4.1.2.1**: Map of South America showing the Andes (map: **Mapswire**, CC BY 4.0)

Mountain highlands to arid coastlines

The Andes region encompasses the expansive mountain chain that runs nearly 4,500 miles north to south, covering parts of modern-day Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. The pre-Columbian inhabitants of the Andes developed a stunning visual tradition that lasted over 10,000 years before the Spanish invasion of South America in 1532.

One of the most ecologically diverse places in the world, the Andes mountains give way to arid coastlines, fertile mountain valleys, frozen highland peaks that reach as high as 22,000 feet above sea level, and tropical rainforests. These disparate geographical and ecological regions were unified by complex trade networks grounded in reciprocity.

The Andes was home to thousands of cultural groups that spoke different languages and dialects, and who ranged from nomadic hunter-gatherers to sedentary farmers. As such, the artistic traditions of the Andes are highly varied.

Pre-Columbian architects of the dry coastal regions built cities out of adobe, while highland peoples excelled in stone carving to produce architectural complexes that emulated the surrounding mountainous landscape.

Artists crafted objects of both aesthetic and utilitarian purposes from ceramic, stone, wood, bone, gourds, feathers, and cloth. Pre-Columbian Andean peoples developed a broad stylistic vocabulary that rivaled that of other ancient civilizations in both diversity and scope. From the breathtaking naturalism of **Moche** anthropomorphic ceramics to the geometric abstraction found in **Inka textiles**, Andean art was anything but static or homogeneous.

Characteristics

While Andean art is perhaps most notable for its diversity, it also possesses many unifying characteristics. Andean artists across the South American continent often endowed their works with a life force or sense of divinity. This translated into a process-oriented artistic practice that privileged an object's inner substance over its appearance.



Figure **4.1.2.2**: Border fragment, Paracas, 4th-3rd century B.C.E., cotton and camelid fiber, 1.43 x 12.7 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Andean art is also characterized by its environmental specificity; pre-Columbian art and architecture was intimately tied to the natural environment. Textiles produced by the Paracas culture, for instance, contained vivid depictions of local birds that could be found throughout the desert peninsula.



Figure **4.1.2.3**: Hummigbird, Nasca geoglyph, over 300 feet in length, created approximately 2000 years ago (photo: **Diego Delso,** CC BY-SA 4.0)

The nearby Nazca culture is best known for its **monumental earthworks** in the shape of various aquatic and terrestrial animals that may have served as pilgrimage routes. The **Inkas**, on the other hand, produced windowed monuments whose vistas highlighted elements of the adjacent sacred landscape. Andean artists referenced, invoked, imitated, and highlighted the natural environment,

using materials acquired both locally and through long-distance trade. Andean objects, images, and monuments also commanded human interaction.



Figure **4.1.2.4**: A window frames a view of the surrounding mountains, Machu Picchu (photo: Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

Worn, touched, held, maneuvered, or ritually burned

Pre-Columbian Andean art was meant to be touched, worn, held, maneuvered, or ritually burned. Elaborately decorated ceramic pots would have been used for storing food and drink for the living or as grave goods to accompany the deceased into the afterlife. Textiles painstakingly embroidered or woven with intricate designs would have been worn by the living, wrapped around mummies, or burned as sacrifices to the gods. Decorative objects made from copper, silver, or gold **adorned the bodies** of rulers and elites. In other words, Andean art often possessed both an aesthetic and a functional component — the concept of "art for art's sake" had little applicability in the pre-Columbian Andes. This is not to imply that art was not appreciated for its beauty, but rather that the process of experiencing art went beyond merely viewing it.



Figure **4.1.2.5**: Mantle, created to wrap a mummified body ("**The Paracas Textile**"), Nasca, 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 148 x 62.2 cm (Brooklyn Museum)



Figure **4.1.2.6**: Detail, Mantle, created to wrap a mummified body ("The Paracas Textile"), Nasca, 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 148 x 62.2 cm (Brooklyn Museum)

The supernatural



Figure **4.1.2.7**: A bead from a necklace buried with the Old Lord of Sipán, 300-390 C.E., gold, 3 × 5.2 × 4.5 × 8.3 cm (photo: Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

At the same time that Andean art commanded human interaction, it also resonated with the supernatural realm. Some works were never seen or used by the living. Mortuary art, for instance, was essentially created only to be buried in the ground.

The magnificent ceramics and metalwork found at the grave of the **Lord of Sipán** on Peru's north coast required a tremendous output of labor, yet were never intended for living beings. The notion of "hidden" art was a convention found throughout the pre-Columbian world. In Mesoamerica, for instance, burying objects in ritual caches to venerate the earth gods was practiced from the **Olmec** to the **Aztec** civilizations.

Works of art associated with particular rituals, on the other hand, were often burned or broken in order to "release" the object's spiritual essence. Earthworks and architectural complexes best viewed from high above would have only been "seen" from the privileged vantage point of supernatural beings. Indeed, it is only with the advent of modern technology such as aerial photography and Google Earth that we are able to view earthworks such as the Nazca lines from a "supernatural" perspective.

Art was often conceived within a dualistic context, produced for both human and divine audiences. The pre-Columbian Andean artistic traditions covered here comprise only a sampling of South America's rich visual heritage. Nevertheless, it will provide readers with a broad understanding of the major cultures, monuments, and artworks of the Andes as well as the principal themes and critical issues associated with them.

Additional resources:

Dualism in Andean Art on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Music in the Ancient Andes on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Birds of the Andes on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Elizabeth Hill Boone, ed., *Andean Art at Dumbarton Oaks* (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996)

Sarahh Scher and Billie J. A. Follensbee, eds., *Dressing the Part: Power, Dress, Gender, and Representation in the Pre-Columbian Americas* (University Press of Florida, 2017)

Rebecca Stone. *Art of the Andes: from Chavín to Inca* (Thames & Hudson 2012)

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4.1.3: Ancient Andean art in context- An origin story (“The Legend of Ñaymlap”)

by **DENVER ART MUSEUM**

Page ID
181619



“In the Denver Art Museum’s Art of the Ancient Americas galleries, we worked with Mexico City-based animators Hola Combo to create animations to help tell the origin stories that explain the relationship between ancient American communities and the their environment. For the Andes, we chose a story that loosely relates to the works on display. “The Legend of Ñaymlap” is an ancient story from Peru’s northern coastal communities and supposedly records the origins of the Sicán or Lambayeque dynasty (about 750–1375 CE). Within this origin story, there is a moral about the relationship between the deities and the land. As the ruler turns away from the deities, rain and floods devastate the land, starving the community.”

Listen in **Spanish**

Listen in **Mochica**

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4.2.1: Caral

- by **UNESCO**

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The 5000-year-old 626-hectare archaeological site of The Sacred City of Caral-Supe is situated on a dry desert terrace overlooking the green valley of the Supe river. It dates back to the Late Archaic Period of the Central Andes and is the oldest centre of civilization in the Americas. Exceptionally well-preserved, the site is impressive in terms of its design and the complexity of its architectural, especially its monumental stone and earthen platform mounts and sunken circular courts. One of 18 urban settlements situated in the same area, Caral features complex and monumental architecture, including six large pyramidal structures. A quipu (the knot system used in Andean civilizations to record information) found on the site testifies to the development and complexity of Caral society. The city's plan and some of its components, including pyramidal structures and residence of the elite, show clear evidence of ceremonial functions, signifying a powerful religious ideology.

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4.2.2: Cupisnique Feline-Head Bottle

by DR. SARAHH SCHER *and* **DR. STEVEN ZUCKER**

Page ID
181622



Video **4.2.2.1**: Feline-Head Bottle, 15th-5th century B.C.E., Cupisnique, Jequetepeque Valley (possibly Tembladera), Peru, ceramic and post-fired paint, 32.4 x 20.5 x 13.3 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Speakers: Dr. Sarahh Scher and Dr. Steven Zucker

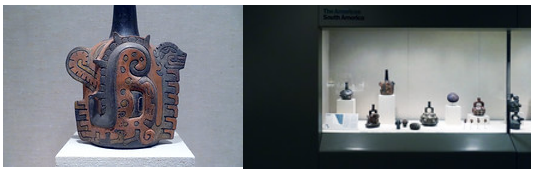
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This page titled 4.2.2: Cupisnique Feline-Head Bottle is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Dr. Sarahh Scher and Dr. Steven Zucker, "Feline-Head Bottle," in Smarthistory, September 25, 2016, accessed November 17, 2020, https://smarthistory.org/feline-bottle/..

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4.2.3: Chavín culture

4.2.3.1: Chavín de Huántar

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4.2.3.1: Chavín de Huántar

by **DR. SARAHH SCHER**

Page ID
181624



Figure **4.2.3.1.1**: Archaeological site of Chavín de Huántar (photo: **Sharon odb**, CC BY-SA 3.0)



Figure **4.2.3.1.2**: Map showing location of Chavín de Huántar (Imagery ©2015 Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO, Landsat, Map Data ©2015 Google)

Chavín de Huántar is an archaeological and cultural site in the Andean highlands of Peru. Once thought to be the birthplace of an ancient “mother culture,” the modern understanding is more nuanced. The cultural expressions found at Chavín most likely did not originate in that place, but can be seen as coming into their full force there. The visual legacy of Chavín would persist long after the site’s decline in approximately 200 B.C.E., with motifs and stylistic elements traveling to the southern highlands and to the coast. The location of Chavín seems to have helped make it a special place—the temple built there became an important pilgrimage site that drew people and their offerings from far and wide.

At 10,330 feet (3150 meters) in elevation, it sits between the eastern (Cordillera Negra—snowless) and western (Cordillera Blanca—snowy) ranges of the Andes, near two of the few mountain passes that allow passage between the desert coast to the west and the Amazon jungle to the east. It is also located near the confluence of the Huachesca and Mosna Rivers, a natural phenomenon of two joining into one that may have been seen as a spiritually powerful phenomenon.

Over the course of 700 years, the site drew many worshipers to its temple who helped in spreading the artistic style of Chavín throughout highland and coastal Peru by transporting ceramics, textiles, and other portable objects back to their homes.

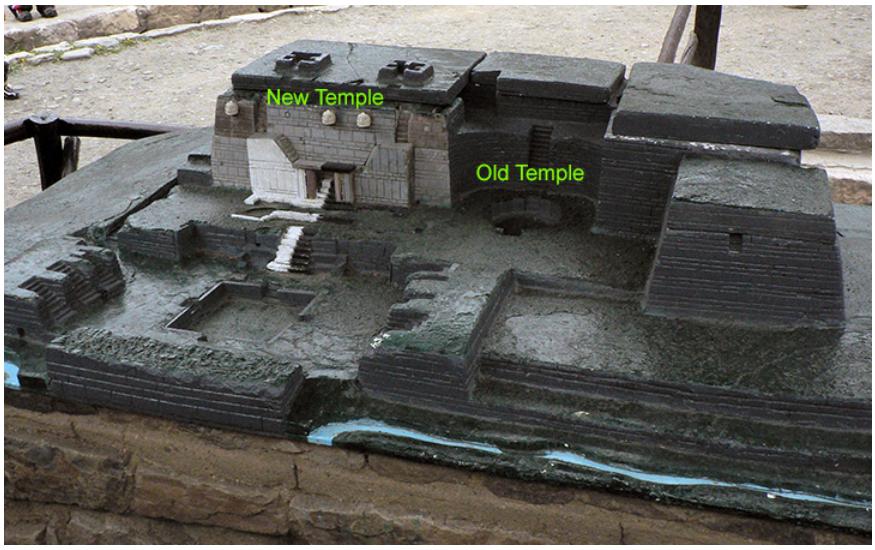


Figure **4.2.3.1.3**: Model of the temple at Chavín de Huántar archaeological site. Peru, 900–200 B.C.E. (photo: Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The temple complex that stands today is comprised of two building phases: the U-shaped Old Temple, built around 900 B.C.E., and the New Temple (built approximately 500 B.C.E.), which expanded the Old Temple and added a rectangular sunken court. The majority of the structures used roughly-shaped stones in many sizes to compose walls and floors. Finer smoothed stone was used for carved elements. From its first construction, the interior of the temple was riddled with a multitude of tunnels, called galleries. While some of the maze-like galleries are connected with each other, some are separate. The galleries all existed in darkness—there are no windows in them, although there are many smaller tunnels that allow for air to pass throughout the structure. Archaeologists are still studying the meaning and use of these galleries and vents, but exciting new explorations are examining the acoustics of these structures, and how they may have projected sounds from inside the temple to pilgrims in the plazas outside. It is possible that the whole building spoke with the voice of its god.



Figure **4.2.3.1.4**: Lanzón Stela, Building B, Chavín de Huántar (photo: Cyark, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The god for whom the temple was constructed was represented in the Lanzón (left), a notched wedge-shaped stone over 15 feet tall, carved with the image of a supernatural being, and located deep within the Old Temple, intersecting several galleries.

Lanzón means “great spear” in Spanish, in reference to the stone’s shape, but a better comparison would be the shape of the digging stick used in traditional highland agriculture. That shape would seem to indicate that the deity’s power was ensuring successful

planting and harvest.

The Lanzón depicts a standing figure with large round eyes looking upward. Its mouth is also large, with bared teeth and protruding fangs. The figure's left hand rests pointing down, while the right is raised upward, encompassing the heavens and the earth. Both hands have long, talon-like fingernails. A carved channel runs from the top of the Lanzón to the figure's forehead, perhaps to receive liquid offerings poured from one of the intersecting galleries.

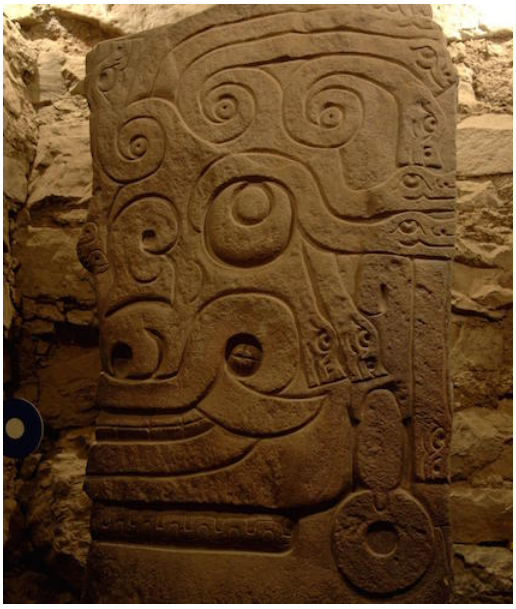


Figure **4.2.3.1.5**: Detail of carving, Lanzón Stela, Building B, Chavín de Huántar (photo: Cyark, CC BY-SA 3.0)



Figure **4.2.3.1.6**: Drawing of the Lanzon at Chavín de Huántar (Richard Burger and Luis Caballero)

Two key elements characterize the Lanzón deity: it is a mixture of human and animal features, and the representation favors a complex and visually confusing style. The fangs and talons most likely indicate associations with the jaguar and the caiman—apex predators from the jungle lowlands that are seen elsewhere in Chavín art and in Andean iconography. The eyebrows and hair of the figure have been rendered as snakes, making them read as both bodily features and animals.

Further visual complexities emerge in the animal heads that decorate the bottom of the figure's tunic, where two heads share a single fanged mouth. This technique, where two images share parts or outlines, is called contour rivalry, and in Chavín art it creates a visually complex style that is deliberately confusing, creating a barrier between believers who can see its true form and those outside the cult who cannot. While the Lanzón itself was hidden deep in the temple and probably only seen by priests, the same

iconography and contour rivalry was used in Chavín art on the outside of the temple and in portable wares that have been found throughout Peru



Figure **4.2.3.1.7**: Nose Ornament, c. 500-200 B.C.E., Peru, North Highlands, Chavín de Huántar, hammered and cut gold, 2.3 cm high (Cleveland Museum of Art)

The serpent motif seen in the Lanzón is also visible in a nose ornament in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art (above). This kind of nose ornament, which pinches or passes through the septum, is a common form in the Andes. The two serpent heads flank right and left, with the same upward-looking eyes as the Lanzón. The swirling forms beneath them also evoke the sculpture's eye shape. An ornament like this would have been worn by an elite person to show not only their wealth and power but their allegiance to the Chavín religion. Metallurgy in the Americas first developed in South America before traveling north, and objects such as this that combine wealth and religion are among the earliest known examples. This particular piece was formed by hammering and cutting the gold, but Andean artists would develop other forming techniques over time.



Video **4.2.3.1.2**

Additional resources:

Huántar Chavín from Cyark

Chavín de Huántar Archaeological Acoustics Project

Chavin (UNESCO World Heritage Site)

Nose Ornament at the Cleveland Museum of Art

Richard L. Burger, *Chavín and the Origins of Andean Civilization*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1992.

RL Burger, "The Sacred Center of Chavín de Huántar" in *The Ancient Americas: Art from Sacred Landscapes* , ed. by RF Townsend (The Art Institute of Chicago, 1992), pp. 265-77.

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4.2.3.2: Complexity and vision- the Staff God at Chavín de Huántar and beyond

by **DR. SARAHH SCHER**

Page ID
181625



Figure **4.2.3.2.1**: Archaeological site of Chavín de Huántar (photo: **Julio Martinich**, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Art for the initiated

The artistic style seen in stone sculpture and architectural decoration at the temple site of **Chavín de Huántar**, in the Andean highlands of Peru, is deliberately complex, confusing, and esoteric. It is a way of depicting not only the spiritual beliefs of the religious cult at Chavín, but of keeping outsiders "out" while letting believers "in." Only those with a spiritual understanding would be able to decipher the artwork.

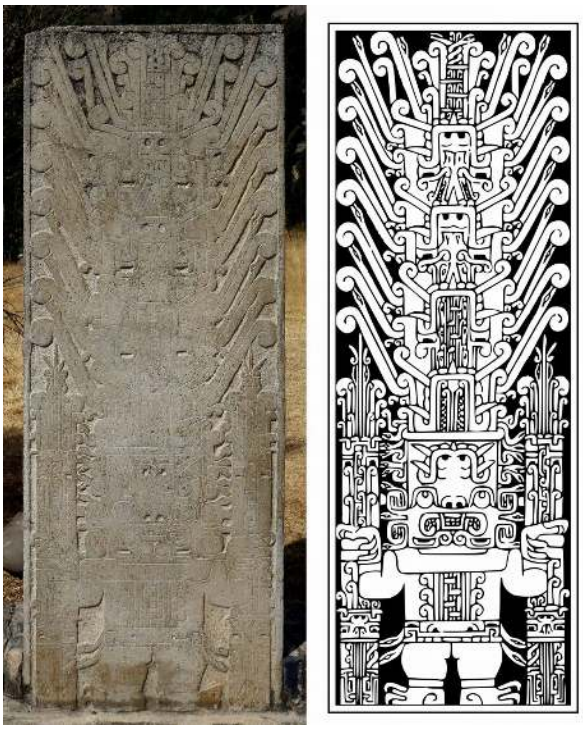


Figure **4.2.3.2.2**: Left: the Raimondi Stele, c. 900-200 B.C.E., Chavín culture, Peru (Museo Nacional de Arqueología Antropología e Historia del Peru, photo: **Taco Witte**, CC BY 2.0). Right: Line drawing of the Raimondi Stele (source: **Tomato356**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The Raimondi Stele from Chavín de Huántar is an important object because it is so highly detailed and shows Chavín style at its most complex. It is easiest to see in a drawing, because the original sculpture is executed by cutting shallow but steep lines into the highly-polished stone surface, making it very difficult to make out the incised image. This style is deliberately challenging to understand, thereby communicating the mystery of the Staff God, and creating a difference between those initiated in the religion who can understand the imagery, and outsiders who cannot.

Powerful animals

The stele (see video directly below) shows the god holding staffs composed of numerous curling forms. Beneath the god's hands we see upside-down and sideways faces, and the staffs terminate at the top in two snake heads with protruding tongues. The god's belt is a compressed, abstracted face with two snakes extending from where the ears should be, perhaps substituting the snakes for hair, and turning the face with its snake-hair into a belt. The god's hands and feet have talons rather than human fingernails, evoking felines and birds of prey.



Video **4.2.3.2.1**

These are references to animals that would have been exotic rumors to the people of highland Chavín: the jaguar, the harpy eagle, and the anaconda are all animals that dwell in the lush tropical jungle over the Andes mountains to the east. They are all apex predators, possessing physical qualities like strength, flight, and stealth that become metaphors for the power of the Staff God. Other supernatural imagery from Chavín includes images of caimans, crocodile-like animals that also inhabit the eastern jungles. Most people would never have seen these creatures, rendering them mythical in their own right, and suitable for depicting the mysterious nature of the god.

Multiple faces

The god's face is actually composed of multiple faces (see video directly below). The eyes in the center looking upward are above a downturned mouth sporting feline fangs, but beneath that we can see another upside-down pair of eyes and a nose that use the same mouth. This is an artistic technique known as contour rivalry, where parts of an image can be visually interpreted in multiple ways. A similar thing is taking place on the god's "forehead," where we see another upside-down mouth with four large fangs protruding from it, which when associated with the eyes in the middle completes a full face. Above this multi-faced head is what appears to be an enormous headdress, which is composed of more faces that also multiply using contour rivalry, and have extensions emanating from them that terminate in curls and snake heads.



Video **4.2.3.2.2**

An intricate style

This intricate and confusing style was not just used for large monuments at Chavín. Smaller carved, decorative elements of the site's architecture also display these kinds of supernatural figures. The two stone slabs seen below are examples of the kinds of sculptures found in cornices and other architectural elements at Chavín.



Figure **4.2.3.2.3**: Stone sculpture (Museo Nacional de Chavín, photo and drawing: Dr. Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC 4.0)

One of these depicts a standing figure with snakes for hair. It sports the same protruding fangs we see in the upside-down heads above the Staff God's face. Large pendant earrings rest on its shoulders, and in its hands it holds two shells: a *Strombus* in its right hand and a *Spondylus* in its left. Spondylus shells are not native to Peru; they thrive in the warm coastal waters of what is now Ecuador, hundreds of kilometers from Chavín. Early on in the history of the Andes, there was a brisk trade in these shells as luxury items.



Figure **4.2.3.2.4**: Carved *Strombus* shell trumpet (*pututu*) (Museo Nacional de Chavín, photo: Dr. Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC 4.0)

Strombus can be found in Peruvian waters, but that is the southernmost reach of their range—they are more common in the north. A great number of carved Strombus shells turned into trumpets (called *pututu*) have been found at Chavín. Far from the ocean, these shells symbolized water and fertility. Furthermore, the Strombus is frequently associated with masculinity, while the Spondylus has feminine associations. The two together therefore signaled generative fertility and the power of the cult to foster agricultural prosperity.



Figure **4.2.3.2.5**: Cornice sculpture (Museo Nacional de Chavín, photo and drawing: Dr. Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC 4.0)

A second carved figure is more enigmatic, and is full of contour rivalry. The main figure appears to be composed of the head to the right, attached to a body with round spots, probably alluding to a jaguar. However, behind the head is another eye, nose, and fanged mouth, and the jaguar spots are joined by an eye with a profile mouth with fangs. Thus, what appears to be one creature at first

glance may be as many as three. At the bottom left, we can see another fanged mouth, this one upside-down, but because the stone is broken, we've lost its context.

The spread of the Staff God

The image of the Staff God would spread throughout Peru. The imagery's geographic reach gives us some insight into the contact between distant areas and the diffusion of imagery. Once thought to show the expansion of the cult of Chavín, today scholars are more hesitant to draw direct relationships between Chavín influence and these far-flung images. The Staff God may have had its roots in earlier cultural styles, including the one known as **Cupisnique**, making Chavín just one of many expressions of this deity. The Staff God's imagery traveled extensively, far beyond the areas already mentioned.



Figure **4.2.3.2.6**: Cupisnique-style crown, 800-500 B.C.E., gold, 24 × 15.5 cm (National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, photo: Dr. Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC 4.0)

A Cupisnique gold crown from Chongoyape, Peru, also demonstrates the Staff God's reach. The crown depicts a version of the god that is simpler than that seen in the Raimondi Stele, but it still uses contour rivalry and the trademark fanged mouths.



Figure **4.2.3.2.7**: Textile fragment, 4th–3rd century B.C.E., Chavín culture, Peru, cotton, refined iron earth pigments, 14.6 x 31.1 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**, drawing by Dr. Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC 4.0)

A painted textile fragment with the Staff God is thought to be from the southern Peruvian coast, hundreds of kilometers from Chavín (which is in the highlands). It is woven from cotton, which is a coastal agricultural product, and distinct from the camelid wool that came from the highlands. The Staff God here is shown with the head in profile, and with snakes emerging from the top of the head, with a feline-fanged mouth, snake belt, and taloned hands and feet. The figure is enclosed in a knot-like shape, composed of supernatural figures that blend snake and feline attributes. Other southern coastal textiles with Staff God imagery have been found, including some that render the Staff God as explicitly female, showing how this religious imagery transformed as it traveled.

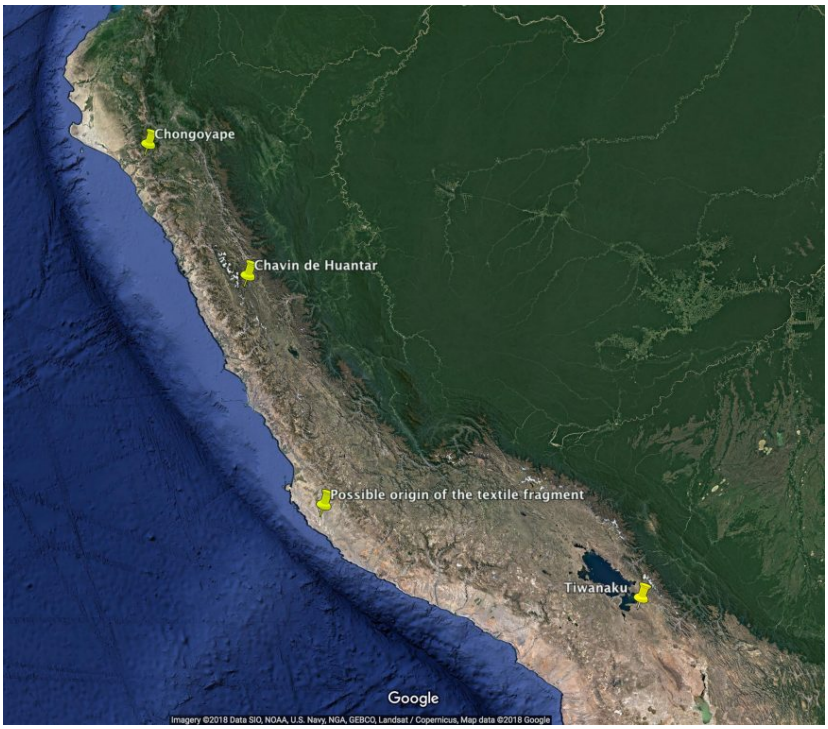


Figure **4.2.3.2.8**: Map of Peru showing the locations of objects with Staff God imagery (© 2018 Google)

Traveling in time

The image of a divine figure holding staffs or similar objects in its hands would persist in Andean art long past the time of Chavín. The so-called “Sun Gate” at the site of Tiwanaku, near lake Titicaca in modern-day Bolivia, is 748 miles (about 1200 km) from Chavín. It dates from around 800–1000 C.E., and so is separated by at least a thousand years from the Raimondi Stele. However, like the Stele, it features an abstracted and intricate style that separates believers from outsiders.



Figure **4.2.3.2.9**: Sun Gate, Tiwanaku, Bolivia (photo: **Brent Barrett**, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)



Figure **4.2.3.2.10**: Sun Gate, Tiwanaku, Bolivia (photo: **Ian Carvell**, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Tiwanaku style is more angular than Chavín, and the Sun Gate has a strong gridded organization that adds to the geometric feel. The central figure of the Sun Gate, while sharing the frontality of the Staff God and the familiar pose (arms at the sides, elbows bent, and vertical objects in its grasp), is also different from earlier iterations. The head is disproportionately large, rendered in a higher relief than the rest of the figure, and features projecting shapes that may represent the rays of the sun. Some terminate in feline heads in profile, a change from the earlier serpents seen at Chavín, Chongoyape, and in the textile fragment. In its hands it holds projectiles and a spear-thrower—weapons rather than elaborate staffs.

The Sun Gate figure stands atop a stepped pyramid shape with serpentine figures emerging from it, a representation of the Akapana pyramid, which mirrored the nearby sacred mountain Illimani not only in shape but by having a series of internal and external channels that allowed rain water to cascade down the side of the structure like the above-and below-ground rivers of the mountain. Not only does it stand in the same pose as the Staff God; it, too, is associated with natural forces, like the mountain, the sun, and the waters of Illimani. The feline heads terminating the rays from the figure's head are joined by the bird-human hybrid "attendant" figures in the rows to either side.

The meaning of the Staff God image was likely different in each of the places it has been found, an image of the sacred that came from afar and was adopted and adapted to the needs of the local people. In each case, however, we find that the intricate and often inscrutable imagery was a way of keeping believers separate from outsiders.

Additional resources:

Richard L. Burger, *Chavin and the origins of Andean civilization* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995).

Julia T. Burtenshaw-Zumstein, *Cupisnique, Tembladera, Chongoyape, Chavín? A Typology of Ceramic Styles from Formative Period Northern Peru, 1800-200 BC*, doctoral dissertation, University of East Anglia, 2014.

Joanne Pillsbury, Timothy Potts, and Kim N. Richter, Golden Kingdoms: Luxury arts in the ancient Americas (Los Angeles: Getty Trust Publications, 2017).

Recordings of pututus

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4.2.4: Salinar culture Nose ornament with spiders

- by **THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART**

Page ID

181626

“It’s a form of mask, a form of changed personality.”



Salinar (?) culture, *Nose Ornament with Spiders*, 1st century B.C.E.–2nd century C.E., gold, Peru, North Coast, 5.1 x 11.1 x 0.3 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) **A video from The Met**

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SECTION OVERVIEW

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4.2.5.1: Nasca Art- Sacred Linearity and Bold Designs

by **DR. ANANDA COHEN-APONTE**

Page ID
181628



Figure **4.2.5.1.1**: Map showing the locations mentioned in this essay (map: Google)

The Nasca (also spelled Nazca) civilization flourished from 100–800 C.E. in the Nasca Desert of Peru's south coast, located about 200 miles south of Paracas. The Nasca lived in dispersed settlements along the Nasca River, and the site of Cahuachi served as their main ritual and pilgrimage center. The flat desert terrain proved to be a favorable canvas for Nasca artists, which they utilized to create artworks of unprecedented grandeur, size, and sophistication.



Figure **4.2.5.1.2**: Geometric Nasca lines (photo: **Diego Delso**, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The Nasca Lines

The Nasca Lines are **geoglyphs** consisting of lines and representational images etched onto the desert floor. The lines cannot be viewed in their entirety from the ground, and are best seen either from the surrounding foothills or by plane. The Nasca Lines have garnered the attention of archaeologists, art historians, explorers, journalists, and artists, inspiring a slew of interpretations over the course of nearly a century.



Figure **4.2.5.1.3**: Nasca line monkey (photo: **Diego Delso**, CC BY-SA 4.0)

While scholars remain divided on the precise meaning of the lines, all can agree that they were not made by aliens, as the popular show Ancient Aliens would like people to believe. One of the most convincing interpretations put forth by archaeologist Anthony Aveni and his colleagues argues that the Nasca lines traced important underground water sources. The vast majority of the Nasca lines are just that—straight lines, which run parallel, converge, and intersect with one another. In an excessively dry desert climate that receives less than one inch of rainfall per year, access to fresh water would have been a central concern for ancient Nasca peoples.



Figure **4.2.5.1.4**: Hummingbird Nasca line (photo: **Diego Delso**, CC BY-SA 4.0)

The Nasca landscape also contains a series of representational images of a monkey, whale, condor, spider, dog, heron, and others. One of the most iconic images is that of the Nasca Line Hummingbird, which features a stylized rendition of this miniscule bird, measuring over 300 feet long. The hummingbird is rendered in bird's-eye view with outstretched wings, tail, and long characteristic beak that extends to another set of lines.

While the lines seem impossible to create without the use of modern technology, archaeologists discovered that the lines are indeed reproducible with a large labor force and a system of measurement that employs a set of strings or ropes of different lengths. One striking feature of all the figural Nasca lines is they are contour drawings—the lines never cross each other. If one traversed the lines of the hummingbird, for instance, he or she would return full circle to the starting point. This suggests that the animal figures could have each served as special pilgrimage routes. Indeed, the existence of pottery fragments and food remains along the lines indicate frequent human visitation.



Figure **4.2.5.1.5**: Figure with Human Heads, 450-650 C.E., ceramic (**Dallas Museum of Art**)

Nasca ceramics



Figure **4.2.5.1.6**: Nasca vessel in the form of an *achira* root, 180 B.C.E. – 500 C.E. (**The Art Institute of Chicago**)

Nasca ceramic art also exhibits a strong interest in bold design. The *Figure with Human Heads* consists of a person gendered as male, either standing or seated, with his arms at his sides. His nose is modeled in three dimensions, but the rest of his facial features are painted, and his body is rendered as the general form of the vessel. He wears a headcloth over his hair, held in place with a criss-crossed band, and a tunic that features a design consisting of black and white stepped motifs arranged into repeating squares. Beneath this pattern is a border decorated in a repeating rhythm of highly abstracted heads seen in profile. The closed eyes and loose hair indicate that they are ritual heads, associated with fertility in Nasca art. (While sometimes referred to as “trophy heads,” archaeologists have found increasing evidence that heads were curated by the Nasca as part of ancestor veneration, and that they were usually not associated with warfare). The use of the monochromatic scheme in the man’s tunic intensifies the design’s visual impact, and is similar to the pattern seen in a vessel depicting an *achira* (a root vegetable).



Figure **4.2.5.1.7**: Nasca textile bag with abstract design, perhaps serpents, 7th century (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art)**

The Nasca were interested in issues of design and abstraction centuries before the rise of abstract art in the twentieth century. Nasca earthworks carved into the ground left an indelible mark on the coastal landscape, revealing a great deal about Nasca beliefs and aesthetic traditions. The Nasca introduced a stunning linearity to the arts of the pre-Columbian Andes, which carried through to other aspects of their artistic repertoire.

Additional resources

Rebecca R. Stone, *Art of the Andes: From Chavín to Inca* (London: Thames & Hudson 2012)

Super/Natural: Textiles of the Andes at the Art Institute of Chicago

Anthony Aveni, "Solving the Mystery of the Nasca Lines," 53 no. 3 (May/June 2000)

Helaine Silverman, *Cahuachi in the Ancient Nasca World* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993)

"Archaeologists Identify 143 New Nazca Lines," Smithsonian Magazine

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4.2.5.2: Nasca ceramics, an introduction

by **THE BRITISH MUSEUM**

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Figure **4.2.5.2.1**: Double spout and bridge vessel with hummingbirds, 100 B.C.E.–600 C.E., Nasca, painted pottery, 10 cm in diameter (© Trustees of the British Museum)

The double spout and bridge vessel is one of the oldest ceramic forms known in Nasca art. This example is decorated with several hummingbirds flying around two flowers at the base of the spouts, a motif which is characteristic of the early phases of the Nasca cultural sequence. In some areas of Peru today, hummingbirds are considered to be the intermediaries or even manifestations of the mountain gods.

The innovative techniques and aesthetic qualities of Nasca polychrome ceramics make them unique in the Andean region. They were most commonly made by coiling. Slip was then applied, the vessel fired and burnished to a characteristic glossy finish. The slip was made from different mineral pigments such as manganese (black) and iron oxide (red). This represents an innovation on previous resin painting, and helped ensure the preservation of the vivid painted motifs.

The most common shapes of Nasca polychrome ceramics are bowls, dishes, vases and vessels with one or two spouts and bridge. They are reserved for the élite and are used as grave offerings.



Figure **4.2.5.2.2**: Spout and bridge vessel in the shape of a woman, 100 B.C.E.–600 C.E., Nasca, painted pottery, 16.5 x 13 cm (© Trustees of the British Museum)

Human figures

The vessel represents a standing woman holding an instrument, possibly a spindle wrapped in a cloth. She is wearing facial and body paint with intricate motifs. A repeating motif circles the bottom of the vessel.



Figure **4.2.5.2.3**: Spout and bridge vessel in the shape of a woman, 100 B.C.E.–600 C.E., Nasca, painted pottery, 16.5 x 13 cm (© Trustees of the British Museum)

Human figures, both male and female, are either painted around Nasca vessels or modeled into a head or full figure. The figures depicted are associated with: subsistence activities, where they hold agricultural products and tools used in farming, fishing or

hunting; with war scenes, where they hold weapons such as darts, maces, spears and trophy heads, and with music, where they play instruments such as pan pipes, drums, and rattles.

Effigy vessels representing human figures appeared in the first century C.E.. There are also vessels modeled into animals (such as birds, dogs or snakes) or edible plants (maize or fruits).



Figure **4.2.5.2.4**: Double spout and bridge pottery vessel with a bird deity, 100 B.C.E.–600 C.E., Nasca, painted pottery, 23.5 cm in diameter (© Trustees of the British Museum)

A bird deity

This globular jar depicts a fantastic bird in flight with a human face, adorned with a mouth mask and a diadem. The bird holds a human trophy head. Ritual beheading was a common practice in the Andes and scenes of decapitation can be seen painted on Nasca vessels. Not all birds depicted in Nasca art can be identified to a particular species. Some representations are quite naturalistic, while others combine fantastic and anthropomorphic elements.

Certain birds are still revered in the Andean region today. The people of the modern town of Nasca believe that the condor and other birds, such as the pelican and the heron, are manifestations of the mountain gods. To catch sight of one of these birds means that rain will fall in the mountains.



Figure 4.2.5.2.5: Double spout and bridge pottery vessel with a bird deity, 100 B.C.E.–600 C.E., Nasca, painted pottery, 23.5 cm in diameter (© Trustees of the British Museum)

The technique and range of colors used on this large vessel mark the peak of Nasca achievements. The number of colors used by Nasca artists is larger than that used by any other culture in the Americas before European contact.



Figure 4.2.5.2.6: Double spout and bridge vessel with pelican and fish, 100 B.C.E.–600 C.E., Nasca, painted pottery, 14 cm in diameter (© Trustees of the British Museum)

Manifestations of the mountain gods

The body of the vessel is painted with a pelican holding a fish in its beak. Several species of birds, both marine and terrestrial, are represented on Nasca ceramics; although the depictions are quite naturalistic, it is not always easy to determine their species.

Birds played an important role for Nasca people and bird feathers were used as ornaments for high ranking people and textiles. A sixteenth-century chronicle written by a Spanish friar describes islands off the south coast where large quantities of bird droppings were collected and used as fertilizer.

Certain birds are still revered in the Andean region today. The people of the modern town of Nasca believe that the pelican and other birds, such as the condor and the heron, are manifestations of the mountain gods. To catch sight of one of these birds means

that rain will fall in the mountains. Hummingbirds are considered to be the intermediaries of the mountain gods, or even a manifestation of them.

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4.2.5.3: Nasca Geoglyphs

by **JAYNE YANTZ**

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Figure **4.2.5.3.1**: Hummingbird, Nasca Geoglyph, over 300 feet in length, formed approximately 2000 years ago (photo: **Diego Delso** , CC BY-SA 4.0)

Located in the desert on the South Coast of Peru, the Nasca Geoglyphs are among the world's largest drawings. Also referred to as the Nasca Lines, they are more accurately called geoglyphs, which are designs formed on the earth. Geoglyphs are usually constructed from strong natural material, such as stone, and are notably large in scale.

Imagine encountering such a drawing. The hummingbird measures over 300 feet in length, and is one of the most famous Nasca Geoglyphs. Among the other celebrated geoglyphs of mammals, birds and insects are a monkey, killer whale, spider, and condor. Various plants, geometric shapes (spirals, zigzag lines and trapezoids), abstract patterns, and intersecting lines fill the desert plain, known as the Pampa, an area covering approximately 200 square miles near the foothills of the Andes. The zoomorphic geoglyphs are the oldest and most esteemed. Each appears to have been made with a single continuous line.

Today it is believed that the geoglyphs were created by the Nasca people, whose culture flourished in Peru sometime between 1-700 C.E. They inhabited the river valleys of the Rio Grande de Nasca and the Ica Valley in the southern region of Peru, where they were able to farm, despite the desert environment—one of the driest regions in the world. The high Andes Mountains to the east prevent moisture from the Amazon from reaching the coast, so there is very little rainfall; water that does arrive, comes from mountain runoff.



Figure **4.2.5.3.2**: Map showing the location of the Nasca geoglyphs, map © Google

The Nasca people are also famous for their polychrome pottery, which shares some of the same subjects that appear in the Nasca Geoglyphs. Remains of Nasca pottery left as offerings have been found in and near the geoglyphs, cementing the connection between the geoglyphs and the Nasca people. Because the quality of the ceramics produced in Nasca is very high, archaeologists deduce that specialists shaped and painted the pottery vessels. This suggests a society that, at its height, had a degree of wealth and a division of labor. However, the Nasca people had no writing. In cultures without writing, images often assume an increased level of importance. This may help explain why the Nasca came together to create vast images on the desert floor.



Figure **4.2.5.3.3**: Double-Spout and Bridge Vessel, c. 100-700 C.E., Nasca, Peru, polychrome ceramic, 12.07 x 10.16 cm (Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

How were they made?

Since the Nasca geoglyphs are so large, it seems clear they were constructed by organized groups of people and that no single artist made them. The construction of the geoglyphs are thought to represent organized labor where a small group of individuals directed the design and creation of the lines, a process that may have strengthened the social unity of the community. Despite the impressive

scale of the geoglyphs, these remarkable works did not require complex technology. Most geoglyphs were formed by removing weathered stones from the desert floor, stones that had developed a dark patina known as “desert varnish” on their surface. Once removed, the lighter stones below became visible, forming the famous Nasca Lines. The extracted darker stones were placed at the edges of the lines, forming a border that accented the lighter lines within. Straight lines could be created by extending cords, one on each side of the line, between two wooden stakes (some of which have been recovered) that guided workers and allowed for the creation of sight lines.

For larger geometric shapes, such as trapezoids, borders were marked and then all the stones on the interior were removed and placed along edges or heaped in piles at the edges of the geoglyph. Broken pottery has been found mixed with the piles of stones. Spirals and animal shapes were made in a similar manner. Spirals, for example, would be formed by releasing slack in a cord as workers moved around in a circular path, moving further and further from the center where the spiraling line begins. For animal forms, such as monkeys, whales, or hummingbirds, portions of the figures might be made in the same manner as the spiral in the monkey’s tail, or the image might be based on a gridded drawing or textile model that was enlarged on the desert floor where lines were staked out to create the figure.

When were they made?

The oldest of the Nasca Geoglyphs is more than 2000 years of old, but, as a group, the Nasca geoglyphs were created over several centuries, with some later lines or shapes intersecting or overlapping with previously created lines. This is just one of the unusual features of these geoglyphs. Even more curious, the drawings are best observed from the air, which is why they did not become widely known until the 1920s after the development of flight. Although it is possible to observe some of the lines from the adjacent Andean foothills or the modern mirador (viewing platform), the best way to see the lines today remains a flight in a small plane over the Pampa (lowlands). These amazing images are so large that they cannot be truly appreciated from the ground. This, of course, raises the question: for whom were the lines made? And, what was their purpose?



Figure **4.2.5.3.4**: Monkey with Spiral Tail, Nasca Geoglyph, approximately 2000 years old (photo: **Diego Delso** , CC BY-SA 4.0)

What was their purpose and meaning?

Archaeologists are not certain of the purpose of the lines, or even of the audience for whom the lines were intended since they can only be seen clearly from the air (This is now particularly true of the older animal designs). Were they made to be seen by deities

looking down from the heavens or from distant mountain tops? Perhaps the numerous theories that have been proposed will eventually be clarified as our understanding of the cultures of ancient Peru increases.

Celestial alignments?

Shortly after the geoglyphs were first investigated, researchers sought an astronomical interpretation, suggesting that the geoglyphs might be aligned with the heavens, and perhaps represented constellations or marked the solstices or planetary trajectories. While some geoglyphs seem connected to celestial events, such as marking the summer solstice (in December) when mountain waters flow to the coast, it is difficult to find celestial alignments for most of the geoglyphs. As far as we know, Andean peoples did not form pictures by connecting the stars in the night sky as we do; rather they looked at the black spaces between stars and saw shapes that they converted into their own reverse "constellations." It is important to note that these constellations do not seem to match the Nasca geoglyphs.

Deities or ceremonial walkways?

Many other reasonable theories have been proposed. Some scholars have suggested that the geoglyphs represent Nasca deities, or formed a calendar for farming, or represented ceremonial walkways. Because some of the lines do seem to direct people to Cahuachi, a Nasca religious center and pilgrimage destination, it seems possible that ancient Nasca people walked the lines. It is also possible that Nasca people ritually danced on the lines, perhaps in connection with shamanism and the use of hallucinogens. The geoglyphs, particularly the early animals which are clearly spaced apart from each other, may also have strengthened group identity and reinforced social interaction patterns as individual groups of people may each have tended or "owned" one of the geoglyphs,



Figure **4.2.5.3.5**: Spider, Nasca Geoglyph, over 300 feet in length, formed approximately 2000 years ago (photo: **Diego Delso** , CC BY-SA 4.0)

A discredited theory proposed that the geoglyphs are the result of alien contact. While this is sensationalist and helped to secure the popular fame of the Nasca geoglyphs, there is no evidence to support this assertion. Archaeologists and scientists have rejected this proposal and it is important to recognize the implication of this theory is that the Nasca people needed the influence of aliens peoples to create their geoglyphs. We know that the technology to manufacture the geoglyphs was available to the Nasca people and that they had a social system that was fully capable of organizing and producing large geoglyphs. We also know that the designs are consistent with other art forms native to Nasca culture.

Farming, fertility, and water?

Among the most promising recent theories, archaeologists have begun to secure a link between the geoglyphs and farming, which sustained the Nasca people. Some geoglyphs may deal with fertility for crops; others may be associated with the water needed to raise the crops. In a desert, water is the most important commodity. In Andean mythology the mountains are revered as the home of the gods. It has been suggested that the lines were intended to be visible to the gods in the mountains. Some lines also seem to point in the direction of the mountains — the origin of fresh water for the desert South Coast of Peru. Snow pack melts high in the mountains and becomes runoff and a vital source of water for the coast. In fact, ancient underground water channels are sometimes marked on the surface by Nasca geoglyphs, particularly at the points of intersection. These have been dubbed “ray centers,” spots where lines converge. Offerings have been found at these points, including conch shells. The spirals on the desert floor, in the monkey’s tail, and as independent abstract designs, may refer to the spirals found in conch shells and thus may reference water. This same shape appears in Nasca *puquios* —*gradually* descending tunnels that tap ancient subterranean aquifers and water channels. Puquios have been described as wells, and formed part of this ancient irrigation system. Puquios, found in Nasca (and elsewhere in Peru), allowed people to reach water in times of drought. Geoglyphs other than spirals may also be directly associated with water.



Figure **4.2.5.3.6**: Puquio, South Coast of Peru

Preservation

Because the Nasca Geoglyphs were made directly on the earth by rearranging stones on the desert floor, these giant images are actually quite vulnerable to damage. In time the lighter-colored stones exposed by the Nasca people may attain their own patina, making them less visible, but the designs face greater threats from vehicle and pedestrian traffic. Crossing the lines can damage their borders and make the images less distinct. Because of this, the Peruvian government has created a *mirador* (viewing platform) along the Pan American Highway where visitors can climb to view a few drawings without damaging the lines.

In the end, it is likely that the Nasca Geoglyphs served more than one purpose, and these purposes may have changed over the centuries, especially given that new lines often “erased” older ones by “drawing” over them. It does appear that many geoglyphs made reference to water and agricultural fertility, and were used to promote the welfare of the Nasca people. The geoglyphs were also a place where people gathered, perhaps for pilgrimage, perhaps to walk or dance on the lines in a ritual pattern. As a gathering place, the Nasca geoglyphs may additionally have turned the Pampa into a map of social divisions, where different families or clans

tended different geoglyphs. Although we do not know exact details, we can surmise that the geoglyphs represent a community investment meant to serve this ancient people.

Backstory

In January, 2018, a semi truck traveling through Peru on the Pan-American highway veered off the road and plowed through the desert. The deep ruts that it made damaged several of the Nasca lines. Though the area is clearly marked as a protected zone, **according to the archeologist Johnny Isla** , co-director of the Nasca-Palpa Project, cases like this "occur daily." The driver, who authorities suspect may have been trying to avoid a toll, was charged with an "attack against cultural heritage."

Human interventions like this constitute the main threat to the Nasca-Palpa area, whose geoglyphs extend across almost 300 square miles. In 2014, **Greenpeace activists damaged the desert floor** around the famous hummingbird geoglyph as they lay out a large protest sign meant to be seen from the air. Their action was a protest against climate change during the United Nations summit in Lima, and was not intended to damage the site; the organization has since apologized. However, the marks made by the activists' footprints have been deemed possibly "irreparable" by Luis Jaime Castillo Butters, a professor of archeology and Peru's Vice Minister for Cultural Heritage. "A bad step, a heavy step … marks the ground forever," **he said** . "There is no known technique to restore it the way it was."

The construction of the Pan-American highway has also increased the risks to the area, not only because of vehicles that can potentially veer off the road, but also because rains and mud can **wash off of the surface and damage the lines** .

Nasca-Palpa was designated as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** in 1994. In contrast to many other at-risk heritage sites around the world, UNESCO states that

> ***Even though there have been some impacts caused by natural and human factors, these have been minimal and the geoglyphs maintain their authenticity and express their high symbolic and historic value even today.***

The most pressing need, **now being discussed by Isla and others** , is for better, 24-hour monitoring of the area — possibly using drone technology — so that human incursions on the site can be quickly addressed and avoided.

Backstory by Dr. Naraelle Hohensee

Additional resources:

Birds of the Andes on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

UNESCO World Heritage webpage for Nasca-Palpa

Anthony Aveni, *Between the Lines* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).

Jeffrey Quilter, *The Ancient Central Andes* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

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"'Deep Scars' as Trucker Drives Across Peru's 2,000-Year-Old Nazca Lines," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2018

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"Rains damage Peru's Nazca lines," *The Telegraph*, January 20, 2009

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4.2.5.4: The Paracas Textile

by **LOIS MARTIN**

Page ID
181631



Figure **4.2.5.4.1**: Nasca, *Mantle* (“*The Paracas Textile*“), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2 inches / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)

Mummy bundles

One of the most extraordinary masterpieces of the pre-Columbian Americas is a nearly 2,000-year-old cloth from the South Coast of Peru, which has been in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum of Art since 1938.

Despite the textile’s small size (it measures about two by five feet), it contains a vast amount of information about the people who lived in ancient Peru; and despite its great age and delicacy, its colors are brilliant, and tiny details amazingly intact. This is due to the arid environment of southern Peru along the Pacific shore, where it is so dry that organic material buried in the sand remains well preserved for hundreds or even thousands of years.



Figure **4.2.5.4.2**: Paracas National Reserve, Peru (photo: **ilker ender**, CC BY 2.0)



Figure **4.2.5.4.3**: The Paracas peninsula, Peru

In the ancient cemeteries on the Paracas Peninsula, the dead were wrapped in layers of cloth and clothing into “mummy bundles.” The largest and richest mummy bundles contained hundreds of brightly embroidered textiles, feathered costumes, and fine jewelry, interspersed with food offerings, such as beans. Early reports claimed that this cloth came from the Paracas peninsula, so it was called “THE Paracas textile,” to mark its excellence and uniqueness. Currently, scholars have revised this provenance, and now attribute the cloth to the related, but slightly later Nasca culture.

Thread by thread

Recently, the Brooklyn Museum has posted high quality, close-up views of this masterpiece online, allowing viewers to scrutinize the textile, thread by thread. Such a detailed inspection has not been possible since the piece was first made. With simple tools, the early cultures of the Andean region of South America produced textiles of astonishing virtuosity. Some extremely fine pieces, like this one, are too delicate to have served any utilitarian purpose, and so are considered ceremonial.



Figure **4.2.5.4.4**: Detail of border figure 61, Nasca, *Mantle* (“*The Paracas Textile*“), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2” / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)

Like some other very fine cloths, the Brooklyn textile is finished so carefully on both sides that it is almost impossible to distinguish which is the correct side. Although the central cloth and its framing dimensional border are created by different techniques, both display perfect reversibility—except for three border figures. These three—instead of being duplicated on the back (as if flipped in mirror image), like all the others—appear in back view on one side of the cloth, thereby designating a “front” and “back” to the textile.



Figure **4.2.5.4.5**: Center detail, Nasca, *Mantle* (“*The Paracas Textile*“), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2 inches / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)

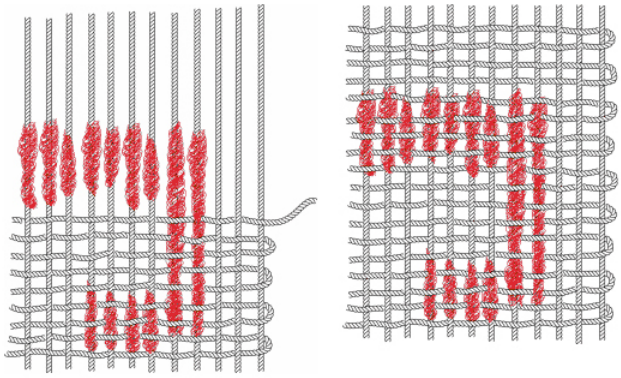


Figure **4.2.5.4.6**: Warp wrapping (diagram by Lois Martin)

The central cloth’s design of 32 geometric faces is created by “warp-wrapping,” a technique in which colored fleece is wound around sections of cotton warp threads before weaving.

Because the central cloth and the border have different color palettes, they may have been created at different times. The triple-layer border has colorful outer veneers of wool “crossed-looping” that envelop inner cotton cores of looping or weaving.

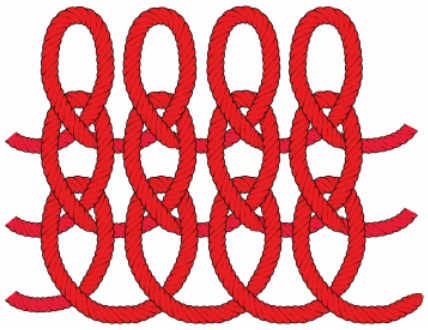


Figure **4.2.5.4.7**: Crossed looping (diagram by Lois Martin)

“Crossed-looping” resembles knitting (but is accomplished with a single needle); in areas where the threads are broken, it is possible to glimpse the underlying cotton substrates. While the cotton is off-white, the wool is dyed in jewel-bright tones.



Figure **4.2.5.4.8**: Alpaca herd, Ausangate, Peru (photo: **Marturius**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The combination of materials suggests extensive trading relationships: for while cotton was grown in coastal valleys, wool came from camelids (such as the llama, alpaca, and vicuña) that live at high altitudes in the Andes mountains.



Figure **4.2.5.4.9**: The llama is laden with a bounty of vegetables. Since pre-Columbian people had no wheeled vehicles for transport, llama caravans carried goods between regions. Border figure 26, Nazca, *Mantle* ("*The Paracas Textile*"), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2 inches / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)

Monstrous hybrids

On the border, a parade of 90 figures is linked together on their lower bodies, which are worked two-dimensionally against a red background.



Figure 4.2.5.4.10: Detail of border figures (composite photo), Nasca, *Mantle* ("*The Paracas Textile*"), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2 inches / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)

Each figure's upper body and head is constructed as a separate unit, and attached to the woven strip. The upper bodies are worked in bas-relief, with some parts projecting outwards from the plane of the fabric. Tiny components (like leaves and feathers) were worked as separate pieces and then attached, giving a wonderful three-dimensionality and liveliness to the figures, especially because they mingle and overlap.



Figure 4.2.5.4.11: Nasca, *Mantle* ("*The Paracas Textile*"), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2 inches / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)



Figure 4.2.5.4.12: Nazca ornament, gold (Brooklyn Museum)

The parade is arranged in four, single-file, L-shaped lines that proceed around each corner of the cloth. A wide variety of types appear, including human, animal, and monstrous hybrids. Some figures are unique, others are twins, triplets, or even sextuplets; a few are in related groups.

Most of the animals and plants that appear can be tied to species still found on the South Coast, and many human figures wear or carry items that directly relate to the archaeological record.

Their jewelry, for example, corresponds to specimens formed from thin sheets of gleaming gold. These include: “forehead ornaments” (shaped like a bird with outstretched wings); “hair spangles” (disk or star shapes that dangle from the wingtips of the forehead ornament); slender, feather-shaped headdress “plumes;” and “mouthmasks.” Mouthmasks hung from the nose septum, and had flaring extensions, like cat whiskers.



Figure 4.2.5.4.13: Detail with face ornament, border figure 63, Nasca, Mantle (“The Paracas Textile”), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2″ / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)

Garments

The border figures' clothing also matches examples found archaeologically, and some bear minuscule designs that faithfully represent embroidered decorations found on life-sized garments. Some wear wrap-around dresses of a style worn by women in ancient times; others wear two-part outfits, associated with men (below). The largest and most beautifully decorated garments were mantles that draped over the shoulders, and fell to the knee. By examining stitches on actual mantles, archaeologists have determined that teams of artists worked on them, sitting side-by-side.



Figure **4.2.5.4.14**: One of three figures with a front and back, painted or tattooed skin, wears a bristling mouthmask, and a headdress with flower-like plumes. He carries a striped staff topped with a winged creature, and wears a tunic and loincloth. Over his shoulder hangs a boldly-patterned mantle ending in a feline. Detail of border figure 16, Nasca, *Mantle* ("*The Paracas Textile*"), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2" / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)

Other border details, rather than realistic, seem to be fantastic or mythological. The severed heads (sometimes called "trophy heads") brandished by some figures, for example, sometimes sprout flourishing plants—as if to suggest themes of sacrifice and fertility. And snake-like streamers that flow from some figures do not correspond to any known object, and may indicate supernatural qualities.

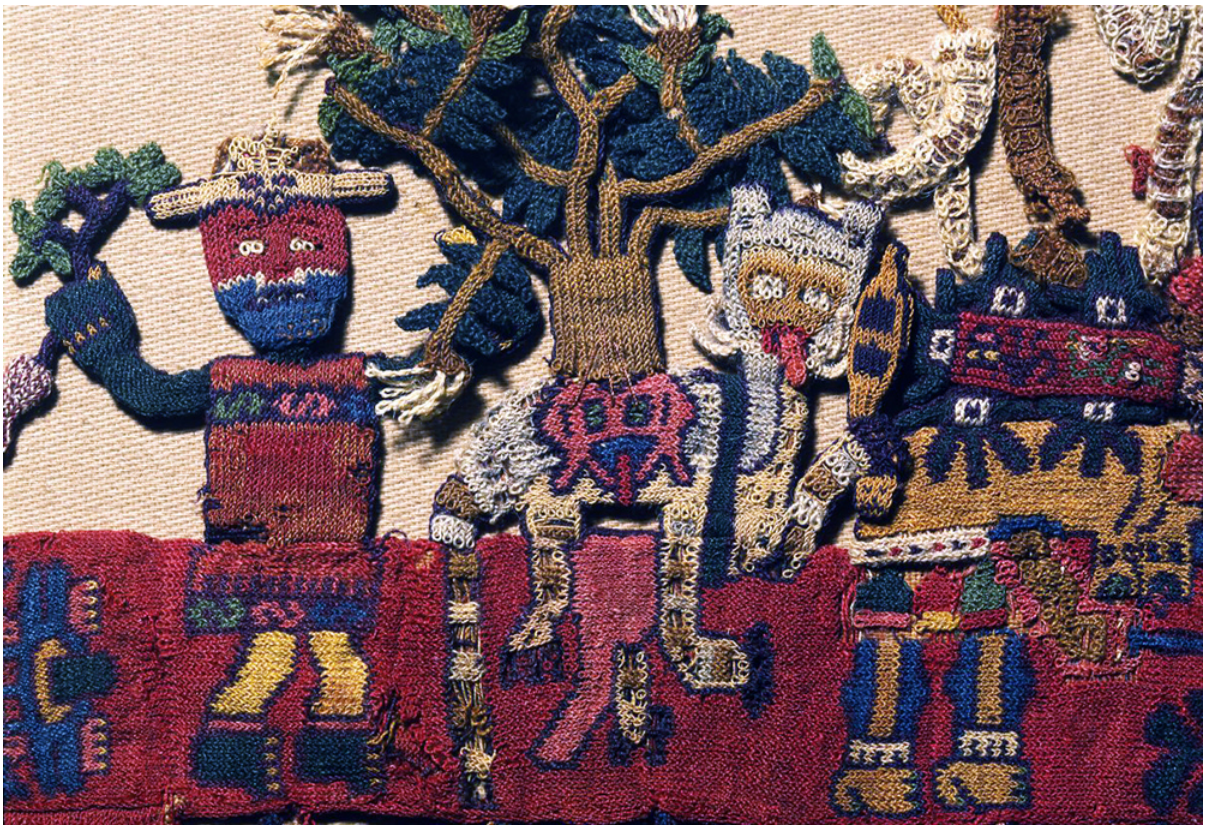


Figure **4.2.5.4.15**: Pampas cat and tree, border figure 3, Nasca, *Mantle* ("*The Paracas Textile*"), 100-300 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 58-1/4 x 24-1/2" / 148 x 62.2 cm, found south coast, Paracas, Peru (Brooklyn Museum)

When they depicted clothing, Paracas and Nazca artists often added a face, or an animal body to the loose ends of fabric hanging behind a wearer. This artistic convention seems to suggest the lively movements of cloth fluttering behind a wearer, and hints that these ancient people considered cloth a precious carrier of vitality: an interpretation that seems warranted because this vibrant textile gives us such an evocative and animated glimpse into their world.

Backstory

The Paracas Textile is only one of hundreds of similar textiles that originate from multiple burial sites on the Paracas peninsula. These burials were first identified and excavated by the renowned Peruvian archaeologist Julio Tello in the 1920s. For political reasons, Tello was forced to abandon the site in 1930, and, without a team of archaeologists to oversee the area, a period of intense looting followed. It is now believed that a great number of the Paracas textiles in international museum collections were acquired as a result of this looting, which occurred most heavily between 1931 and 1933.

A large group of these illegally acquired textiles is held by the **Gothenburg Collection** in the **Museum of World Culture** in Gothenburg, Sweden. The objects were smuggled out of Peru by the Swedish consul in the early 1930s, and donated to the city of Gothenburg. The museum and city fully acknowledge the objects' illicit provenance, and have been working with the Peruvian government on a plan for their systematic return. As stated on the museum website,

> ***Large quantities of Paracas textiles were illegally exported to museums and private collections all over the world between 1931 and 1933. About a hundred of these were taken to Sweden and donated to the Ethnographic Department of Gothenburg Museum. Today, problems associated with looted artifacts and illicit trade in antiques are better acknowledged and being addressed.***

Though Peru began lobbying for repatriation in 2009, Gothenburg has been somewhat slow to respond to the requests, partly due to the fragile condition of the textiles. According to the museum website, even the transport of these objects between the museum's

archives and their exhibition space in Sweden—a distance of only a few kilometers—has resulted in their **deterioration**. Despite these concerns, a plan has been put in place to systematically return some of the textiles to Peru. The first four were delivered **in 2014**, and another 79 **in 2017**. Further works are set to be returned by 2021. The repatriated textiles are now in the possession of Peru's General Directorate of Museums of the Ministry of Culture.

The case of the Gothenburg Paracas textiles highlights the need not only for governmental and institutional agreements regarding the restitution of illegally acquired objects, but also for oversight concerning the continued stewardship and preservation of these fragile artworks.

Backstory by Dr. Naraelle Hohensee

Additional resources:

This textile at the Brooklyn Museum

The Gothenburg Collection of Paracas textiles

Article on the looting of Paracas textiles on Trafficking Culture

"Peru recovers 79 pre-Hispanic textiles illegally kept in Sweden," *The Local*, December 15, 2017

"Peru recovers Paracas textiles," *Diario UNO*, December 15, 2017

"Sweden Returns Ancient Andean Textiles to Peru," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2014

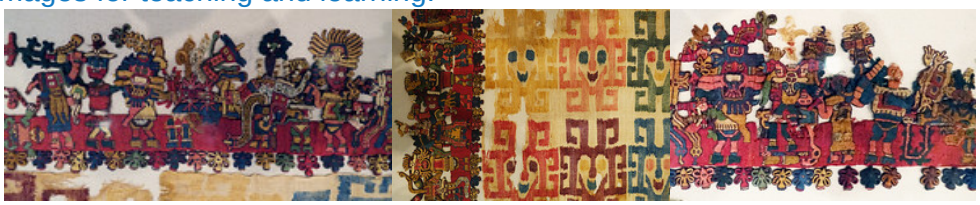
Frame, Mary. 2003–4. "What the Women Were Wearing: A Deposit of Early Nasca Dresses and Shawls from Cahuachi, Peru." *Textile Museum Journal*, 42/43:13–53.

Paul, Anne. 1990. "Paracas ritual attire: symbols of authority in ancient Peru," *Civilization of the American Indian series*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Paul, Anne. 1991. *Paracas art & architecture : object and context in South Coastal Peru*, 1st ed. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Silverman, Helaine. 2002. "Differentiating Paracas Necropolis and Early Nasca Textiles," *Andean archaeology II: Art, Landscape, and Society*, edited by W. H. Isbell and H. Silverman. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 71–105.

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4.2.5.5: Nazca Feather Tunic

by **BANK OF AMERICA**

Page ID

181632



“Feather Tunic” is a garment likely worn by a high-ranking member of the Nasca people, a pre-Hispanic Andean society, considered to be made between the fifth and seventh centuries C.E., or between the years 400 and 600. It would have been part of an impressive ensemble, complete with gold jewelry and an elaborate headdress. Perhaps it was created for use at a special ceremonial event and one of only intended to be a burial garment. The tunic may reference the sun, worshipped by many pre-Hispanic Andean societies, one of only a few intact examples of ancient Peruvian featherwork garments in existence today. Explore this masterpiece further with Thomas Campbell, Director and CEO of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco—the de Young and Legion of Honor museums.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

4.2.6: Paracas

4.2.6.1: Paracas, an introduction

4.2.6.2: Paracas Textiles, an introduction

4.2.6.3: Paracas Supernatural Bird Mantle

4.2.6.4: Paracas Feline Face Bottle

4.2.6.5: Paracas Flying Figure Bowl

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4.2.6.1: Paracas, an introduction

by **DR. MARY BROWN**

Page ID
181634



Figure **4.2.6.1.1**: Red Beach, Paracas Reserve, Peru (photo: Dr. Mary Brown, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Sand and sea



Figure **4.2.6.1.2**: Peruvian cotton (_Gossypium barbadense_), (photo: **Joe Lazarus** CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Imagine living in the driest desert on earth located next to the richest ocean on earth. How would these extremes shape social and religious life? What kind of mythology would the drama of this landscape generate? Some ideas can be found in an ancient south-coastal Peruvian people now known as Paracas, from the later **Inka** Quechua word *para-kos*, meaning “sand falling like rain.” Paracas refers to both an arid south coastal peninsula and the culture that thrived in the region c. 700 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. The area is a starkly beautiful desert of ochre red, yellow, and gold sediments juxtaposed with the vivid Pacific Ocean. The ocean, enriched by the icy Peruvian current, is a haven for marine life. Ancient inhabitants, likely drawn to the ocean’s resources, had to make do with small coastal rivers trickling down from the Andes for fresh water and agricultural opportunities. In this environment, with visual contrasts so extreme the landscape approaches **Color Field abstraction**, small villages that depended on fishing and farming created one of the most extraordinary cultures and art traditions in the ancient Americas.



Figure **4.2.6.1.3**

The Pacific bounty and the cotton grown in coastal river valleys gave Paracans the means to support a rich culture and forge reciprocal trade relationships with other Early Horizon highland cultures, principally **Chavín**. As a result, they assimilated and transformed art and ideas from the highlands, while inventing new beliefs and accompanying art forms that were largely inspired by their unique coastal ecology. Unlike other coastal and highland Andean communities, Paracans did not pursue monumental architecture, rather, they directed their considerable creative energies to textiles, ceramics, and personal regalia.

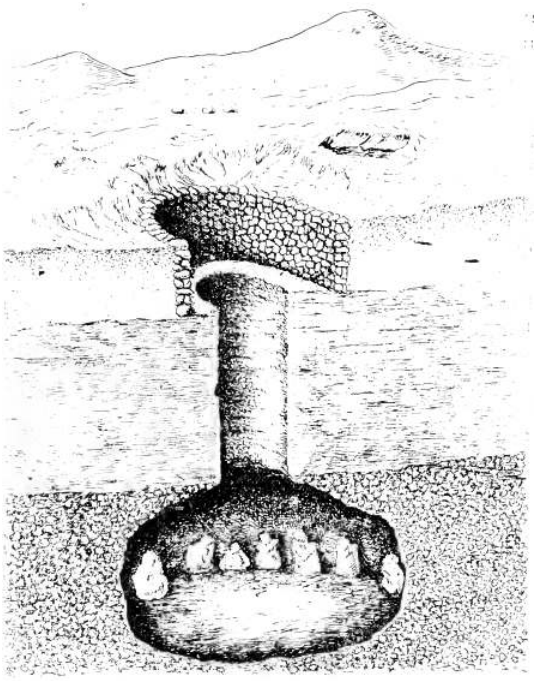


Figure **4.2.6.1.4**: Illustration of mummy bundles at the bottom of a shaft-type tomb, from Julio C. Tello, *Antiguo Perú: primera época*, 1929, fig. 78

Belief in an afterlife led to the creation of subterranean burial chambers filled with elaborate mummy bundles and artifacts. Remarkably preserved in the arid coastal desert, the burials were forgotten and undisturbed for nearly 2,000 years. They were discovered in the early 20th century by Peruvian archeologist Julio C. Tello. The contents of these burials constitute the only known records of Paracas culture.



Figure **4.2.6.1.5**: Paracas, detail of Linear Style embroidered mantle, 100 B.C.E.–100 C.E., camelid fiber, 267 x 131.9 cm (**Brooklyn Museum**)

Mummy bundles and personal adornment

Most individuals were modestly wrapped in rough, plain cotton fabric to form a mummy bundle. Some adult males, presumably elites, were wrapped in multiple layers of vividly colored, elaborately woven and embroidered textiles made with cotton from the coast and camelid wool imported from the highlands. Ceramics, gold items, spondylus shells, feather fans, and individual feathers also accompanied these individuals.

Before his death and burial, an elite Paracas man would have been a dazzling sight in the desert, showing off concentrated finery that exuded status, power, and authority. These individuals are generally understood to be the religious and political leaders of Paracas chiefdom society, whose leadership and ritual duties likely continued in the afterlife. Such elites needed all their ritual attire and accessories to perform their duties and roles effectively on both sides of life and death, much like the pharaohs of ancient Egypt. Mummies may also have helped to maintain the tenuous desert agricultural cycle (often disturbed by El Niño climate events). As metaphorical seeds germinating the land, some bundles contained cotton sacks of beans rather than human bodies.[1]



Figure 4.2.6.1.6: Double-spout strap-handle vessel depicting a falcon (Paracas), 500-400 B.C.E., ceramic and resin-suspended paint, 11.43 × 12.38 × 12.38 cm (Dallas Museum of Art)

Burial artifacts

The Paracas achievements in ceramic and textile arts are among the most outstanding in the ancient Americas. The majority of Paracas ceramics were decorated after firing, with plant and mineral resin dyes applied between incised surface lines to build an image in abstract bands. In a final, transitional stage, pre-fire monochrome clay slips were applied to vessels in the shape of gourds, resulting in smooth, elegant wares.



Figure 4.2.6.1.7: Left: Pyro-engraved gourd bowl, Paracas culture, 5th–4th century B.C.E., 6.4 x 15.2 x 14.6 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art); right: Pair of ceramic trumpets with post-fire paint, Paracas culture, 100 B.C.E.–1 C.E., 29.1 x 7.9 x 7.9 cm and 30.2 x 8.3 x 8.3 cm (Brooklyn Museum)

Other notable items found in the burials included pyro-engraved gourd bowls, as well as gourd rattles and ceramic bugles, revealing the culture's interest in musical performance. Textiles were, without question, the most outstanding of the burial finds in both quantity and quality, with every known weaving and embroidery technique mastered. Their embroidered imagery is also a form of text and the source of nearly all interpretations of Paracas beliefs and conceptions of their ritual life.

Mythical imagery in textile art

Linear Style

Complex textile imagery was likely accompanied by equally complex oral narratives. At the start of the Paracas textile tradition, c. 700 B.C.E., the imagery is dominated by the traditional Andean animal triad of serpent, bird, and feline, rendered in an abstract style known as the Linear Style and accompanied by their own creation, the Oculate Beings.



Figure 4.2.6.1.8: Paracas, detail of Linear Style embroidered mantle with serpentine Oculate Being, 1–500 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 11.5 x 19.5 cm excluding fringe (The British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Oculate Beings were named for their enormous eyes, possibly inspired by the coastal burrowing owl or the enlarged eyes of a person in trance, and are believed to be key Paracan supernatural figures due to their frequent and enduring presence in Paracas art. Oculate Beings appeared in both humanoid and zoomorphic forms. Art historian Anne Paul identified eight distinct Oculate Beings based on different animals and poses: serpent, bird, and feline, symmetrical, seated, inverted head, flying, and with streaming hair. [2] Paracas embroiderers developed the visual potential of the Linear style to the highest degree, embedding images of animals and Oculate Beings into complex visual effects.

Block Color Style



Figure 4.2.6.1.9: Paracas, detail of Block Color style embroidered mantle with falcons, c. 100 C.E., cotton, camelid fiber, 298.9 x 137 cm (Brooklyn Museum)

Beginning around 200 B.C.E., textile embroiderers added the curvilinear Block Color style to their production, resulting in an explosion of new forms and figures. Block Color embroidery broke away from the Linear Style iconographic template to include human figures in ritual costume, human/animal composite figures, and elaborate composites of multiple animals. Sprouting seeds, insects, flowers, serpents, sharks, the pampas cat, and in particular a wide variety of coastal and highland birds dominate this later phase of Paracas embroidery, and there are as many distinct figures as there are individual garments. This final, figural phase also often featured human figures in a state of flight or trance, akin to those found on both earlier and contemporaneous ceramics. While precise meanings remain elusive, the imagery suggests an intense interest in agricultural fertility, as well as an increasingly complex mythology and accompanying ritual activities.



Figure **4.2.6.1.10**: Supay Beach, Paracas Reserve, Peru (photo: Dr. Mary Brown, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

An enduring enigma

Much about Paracas culture will always remain a mystery. Their artistic record reveals a set of beliefs and rituals reflecting their culture's dependence on the natural world and concern with perpetuating agricultural cycles, the important role of animals in political and religious activities, and a deep investment in the afterlife. The major works of Paracas artists, particularly those expressed in the embroidered figures that embellish woven textiles, are a pinnacle of Andean textile art and acknowledged as among the most accomplished fiber arts ever created. In the trajectory of Andean art, Paracas stands as an independent, inventive coastal counterpart to Chavín. Paracas culture was also a vehicle for transferring both textile and ceramic technology and iconography to the slightly later, south coastal Nasca culture, before disappearing forever into the golden desert sand.

Notes:

1. Lisa DeLeonardis and George F. Lau, "Life, Death, and Ancestors," in *Andean Archeology*, ed. Helaine Silverman (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 103
2. Anne Paul, "Continuity in Paracas Textile Iconography and its Implications for the Meaning of Linear Style Images," in *The Junius B. Bird Conference on Andean Textiles*, ed. Anne Pollard Rowe (Washington, D.C.: Textile Museum, 1986), p. 88

Additional resources:

Anne Paul, *Paracas Ritual Attire: Symbols of Authority in Ancient Peru* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990)

Anne Paul, ed. *Paracas Art and Architecture: Object and Context in South Coastal Peru* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990)

D.A. Proulx, "Paracas and Nasca: Regional Cultures on the South Coast of Peru," in *The Handbook of South American Archaeology*, eds. Helaine Silverman and William H. Isbell, 563–585 (New York: Springer, 2008)

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4.2.6.2: Paracas Textiles, an introduction

by DR. ANANDA COHEN-APONTE

Page ID
181635



Figure **4.2.6.2.1**: Color Block Mantle, Peruvian (Paracas), first century C.E., wool, plain weave, embroidered with wool, 142 x 241 cm (**Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**)

A Desert Necropolis in Peru

At around the same time that **Chavín** culture flourished in the highlands, the Paracas peninsula on the southern coast of Peru witnessed the rise of a new society of farmers and fishermen. The Paracas culture (c. 700 B.C.E.–200 C.E.) is best known not for its monumental architecture, but for what lay buried below the ground: a necropolis of hundreds of miraculously preserved mummy bundles. The Paracas mummies were buried in two different types of burial chambers. The Paracas Cavernas (cavern) pits were small bottle-shaped shaft tombs, while the Paracas Necropolis crypts were large mausoleums fitted with masonry walls.

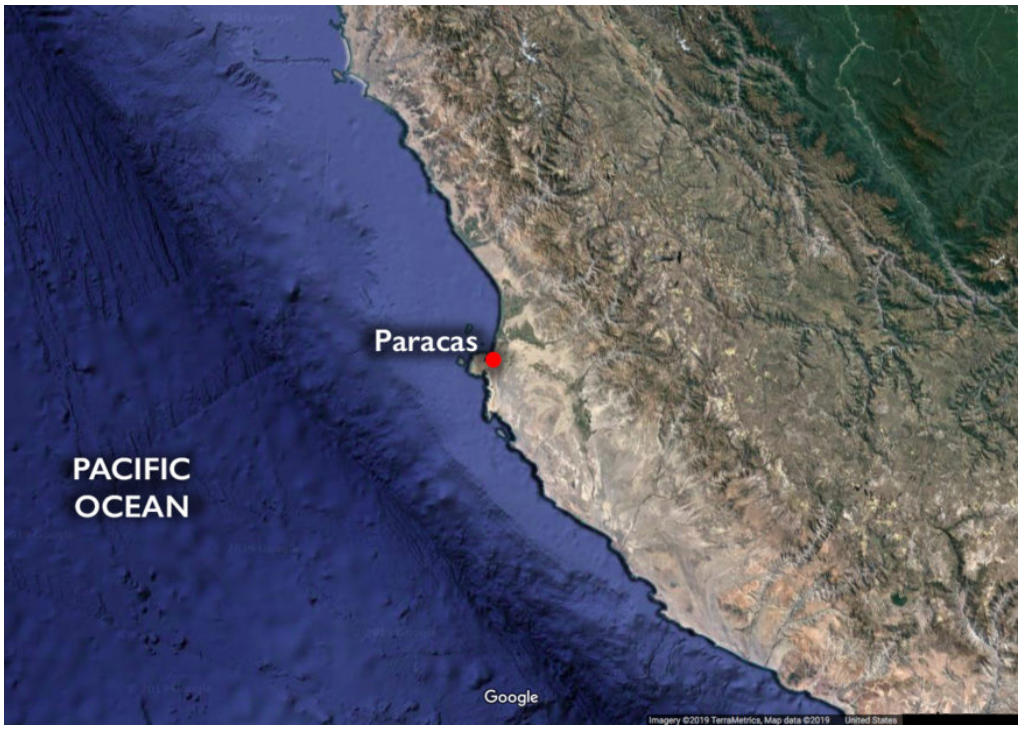


Figure **4.2.6.2.2**: The Paracas peninsula (map: Google)

Located within these tombs were mummy bundles wrapped in sumptuous embroidered textiles, some reaching up to four feet in circumference. The textiles ranged in quality from rough swaths of undecorated cloth to finely embroidered mantles. Mummies were also buried with offerings of food and jewelry to accompany the deceased into the afterlife. The types of textiles and offerings associated with a mummy bundle shed light on the individual's social status; the larger and more elaborate the bundle, the higher social standing the person held during his or her life.

Paracas textiles provide some of the most stunning examples of pre-Columbian Andean fiber art. Close examination of Paracas textiles reveals a great deal of information on the sophisticated embroidery techniques developed by Paracas artists, their system of textile production, and their belief systems.

Material



Figure **4.2.6.2.3**: Alpaca wool (photo: **Cgoodwin**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Paracas embroidered cloths were made out of cotton and camelid fibers. Cotton is a local coastal crop that would have been readily accessible to Paracas artists. Camelid (related to the camel family) fiber, on the other hand, derives from llamas, alpacas, and vicuñas indigenous to the highlands.

Paracas weavers would have procured camelid fiber through long-distance trade. Cotton would have been used for weaving the ground cloth while the silkier, high-quality camelid threads were typically used for the embroidery.

Linear style

Linear Style textiles are embroidered cloths that feature repeating geometric designs. Many Linear Style textiles appear to be woven because the embroidery covers nearly the entire surface area of the ground cloth. Paracas textile specialists would embroider designs on a grid pattern instead of stitching along the contours of the design. In other words, the embroiderers would stitch each color separately in a linear fashion until the entire composition became filled in with lines. This required a great deal of planning and visualization to achieve the final product. Paracas textile specialists employed an apprentice system in which less experienced embroiderers produced designs alongside those of experts in order to mimic their designs and techniques. One single cloth could bear the work of many different hands with varying levels of expertise.



Figure **4.2.6.2.4**: Linear Style Paracas textile, 5th–3rd century B.C.E., camelid hair and cotton (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

The Block Color style, on the other hand, was made by stitching outlines of shapes and then filling them in with broad areas of color. Block Color style tends to be less geometric than Linear Style, and has more open spaces between motifs. Both Linear and Block Color styles were being used during the same time period.



Figure 4.2.6.2.5: Detail of a Paracas Block Color mantle, 50–100 C.E., embroidered wool (**Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**)

Symbols

Felines, serpents, birds, and fish dominate the Linear Style symbolic repertoire, while human figures are added to the subject matter of Block Color textiles. Unlike what we see at Chavín, Paracas symbolism mainly consists of local wildlife, including fish, pampas cats, falcons, and hummingbirds.



Figure 4.2.6.2.6: Double Fish Mantle, Block Color style, Paracas, 0-100 C.E. (**The Brooklyn Museum**)

In the *Double Fish Mantle* we see a series of paired fish transposed to one another, with each head facing the tail of the other. Art historian Mary Frame suggests that they represent sharks due to the appearance of gills behind the eyes. In the orange border, smaller sharks are enclosed within the protected space of their connected bodies, and may be a reference to fertility and reproduction. The Paracas embroiderers depicted a range of aquatic and terrestrial life in their textiles, providing a comprehensive picture of the peninsula's thriving ecosystem.

Paracas textiles contain standardized geometric, linear representations of animal motifs. The repeating images have a rhythmic character and usually remain faithful to the pattern. The designs are dense and compact, and bear little distinction between foreground and background. In the *Double Fish Mantle*, the fish motifs are arranged symmetrically within the mantle, with four pairs of fish embroidered along the long edges, followed by a row of five pairs, with six pairs along the center of the mantle.



Figure 4.2.6.2.7: Double Fish Mantle, detail, Block Color style, Paracas, 0-100 C.E. (**Brooklyn Museum**)

While the number and distribution of the fish pairs conform to a set pattern, a great deal of diversity can be found in the details of the embroidery. Some are green, blue, and pink; others are black, pink, and brown, while others are yellow, blue, and brown. The specific color combinations vary across the composition and do not fit into any discernible pattern. The subtle interventions made by the embroiderers, which break the pattern through the unsystematic distribution of colors, lend the mantle a powerful visual dynamism. The orange borders of the mantle offer a pop of color and also feature a slight variation of the fish motif.



Figure 4.2.6.2.8: Double Fish Mantle, detail, Block Color style, Paracas, 0-100 C.E. (Brooklyn Museum)

Use



Figure 4.2.6.2.9: A mannequin displaying a Linear Style "turban," 300 B.C.E–100 C.E., camelid fiber and feathers (Brooklyn Museum)

Paracas embroidery adorned a number of different types of textiles and garments. Everyday clothing such as hats, and ponchos often contained embroidered sections executed in the linear style.

The most elaborate embroideries can be found in mummy bundles. Long swaths of cloth embroidered in the linear style were wrapped around the deceased to create a bundle, some measuring up to 85 feet in length.



Figure 4.2.6.2.10: The turban seen at left (Brooklyn Museum)

Additional resources

Read more about Andean textiles at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Rebecca R. Stone, *Art of the Andes: From Chavín to Inca* (London: Thames & Hudson 2012)

Anne Paul, “Paracas ritual attire: symbols of authority in ancient Peru,” *Civilization of the American Indian series* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990)

Anne Paul, *Paracas art & architecture: object and context in South Coastal Peru*, 1st ed (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991)

Helaine Silverman, “Differentiating Paracas Necropolis and Early Nasca Textiles,” *Andean archaeology II: Art, Landscape, and Society*, edited by W. H. Isbell and H. Silverman (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2002), pp. 71–105

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4.2.6.3: Paracas Supernatural Bird Mantle

by DR. MARY BROWN

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181636



Figure **4.2.6.3.1**: Man's mantle and two border fragments, Paracas, 50–100 C.E., wool plain weave, embroidered with wool, 101 x 244.3 cm (**Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**)

The Transcendent Bird

Birds and winged creatures have often been tasked with duties of great symbolic importance in human culture. From harpies to storks, interfacing with the spirit realm and ferrying precious items and messages are just a few of birds' mythic and folkloric roles throughout time and place. In the Peruvian south coast, a village culture now known as **Paracas** (c. 700 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.) created a version of the supernatural bird that demonstrates enduring elements of Andean art—a bird with outstretched wings, composite imagery, and symbolic heads—in a distinctively Paracas visual style.



Figure 4.2.6.3.2: Detail, Man's mantle and two border fragments, Paracas, 50–100 C.E., wool plain weave, embroidered with wool, 101 x 244.3 cm (**Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**)

This being was recorded in embroidered camelid fiber upon a large funeral mantle, one layer of many **textiles** making up an elite mummy bundle preserved for some 2,000 years in the Paracas Necropolis cemetery on the arid coastal peninsula which gives the culture its name. When discovered and unwrapped, this textile (from the 1st century C.E.) revealed colorful, flying human/bird figures dressed in elaborate costume and possessing of an intriguing array of accessories.

Anatomy and Costume

The avian figures are rendered in the final stylistic phase of Paracas Necropolis embroidery that art historians refer to as the Block Color style. The placement of the figures in a checkerboard pattern across the mantle's ground cloth and in alternating up/down poses on its border is typical of Block Color compositions. The inherent freedom of embroidery, a technique in which thread is stitched upon the surface of a woven cloth, made it possible for Paracas artists to create complex, multi-colored figures. Four different combinations of red, pink, blue, dark green, yellow, and soft green stitches articulate a headdress with frontal bands and dangling ornaments, colorful faces (possibly wearing masks), and fringed tunics. They carry banded staffs curving into serpents in one hand, curving staffs with fringe ending in floral or fishtail ornaments in another. Fantastical elements, such as avian toe-and-talon feet and snake emanations, place the figure firmly in the realm of the supernatural.

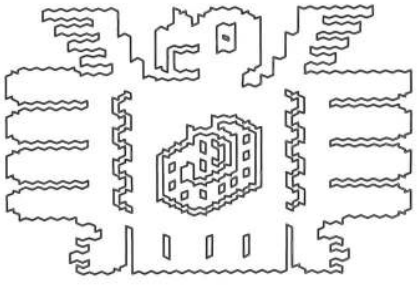




Figure 4.2.6.3.3: Left: design from a Huaca Prieta textile showing a condor with a serpent or fish in its stomach (redrawn from Bird, 1963); right: detail, Man's mantle and two border fragments, Paracas, 50–100 C.E., wool plain weave, embroidered with wool, 101 x 244.3 cm (**Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**)

While the color and curvilinear style are unprecedented in Andean art, serpent/bird combinations and composite imagery are found in Andean art as early as the Cotton Pre-Ceramic period (c. 3000 B.C.E.–1800 B.C.E.) in the Huaca Prieta twined textile and in stone at the Old Temple of **Chavín de Huantar** (c. 900 B.C.E.–500 B.C.E.). The Paracas human/bird's wing feathers also double as heads, another example of characteristically Andean composite imagery.

The Symbolic Power of Heads

Figures clutch a head by its hair, two heads are placed on the front of the body, and one is placed within each wing. Heads are a frequent motif appearing in all phases of Paracas art, and caches of severed human heads have been found within some of their burials. Numerous archeologists, beginning with Julio C. Tello in the early 20th century, believed severed heads were trophies taken in conflict. This interpretation has been supported by the fact that many heads, some of young men, were buried with ropes (presumably for transport and display) still attached to their skulls.





Figure **4.2.6.3.4**: Detail showing feather/heads, Man's mantle and two border fragments, Paracas, 50–100 C.E., wool plain weave, embroidered with wool, 101 x 244.3 cm (**Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**)

Other heads were buried intact and wrapped in cotton cloth before burial, suggesting they were not trophies, but the heads of ancestral elders. Art historian Anne Paul observed that there are far more heads depicted in Paracas art than are actually found in burials, and there is little evidence to suggest that Paracas was a particularly aggressive culture. She believes the presence of so many heads in their art may be a stronger reflection of their symbolic power than a frequent practice of head collection.[1]



Figure **4.2.6.3.5**: Ladder-tailed nightjar, Rio São Manuel, South Amazon, Brazil (photo: **Charles J Sharp**, CC BY-SA 4.0)

These heads intersected with conceptions of birds in a number of ways. Birds may have been seen as aids in the act of headhunting (for those that were likely trophy heads), as vehicles for transporting them to the spirit world, and as mirrors of their ritual consumption. An association between the nightjar bird and decapitation is documented in narratives from village cultures of eastern Brazil.[2]



Figure **4.2.6.3.6**: Left: Detail of a textile fragment with a head-tasting figure (circled in red), probably Paracas, 200–600 C.E., cotton and camelid fiber, 10 1/4 x 6 11/16 inches (**Brooklyn Museum**); right: Double spout-and-bridge vessel depicting a head-tasting bird deity, Nasca, 100 B.C.E.–600 C.E., ceramic (**British Museum, London**, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Some Paracas Block Color figures are shown with tongue-like appendages probing clutched heads, or small birds and other animals possibly substituting for heads.[3] Further, Paracans would have observed carrion-feeding birds such as Andean condors, who visited the coast, and the local turkey vultures consuming carcasses. These activities would have strongly resonated with their attunement to the cycle of life from death. As the Nasca culture (c. 100 C.E.–800 C.E.) arose to the south of the Paracas region, this imagery persisted in their art. One Nasca ceramic vessel very clearly depicts a winged supernatural with a headdress, masked face, avian feet, and faces within its wings; it is clutching and connected to a head by a shared mouth band.



Figure **4.2.6.3.7**: Left: Turkey vultures, Paracas Reserve, Peru (photo: Dr. Mary Brown, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0); right: Andean condor, Arequipa, Peru (photo: **Pedro Szekely**, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Avian Ritual Performance

The fringed tunics, headdress ornaments, and staffs depicted on the figures illustrate actual found objects within certain mummy bundles, revealing that they are more than symbols, they reflect a number of items used in Paracas ritual life.



Figure **4.2.6.3.8**: Detail, Man's mantle and two border fragments, Paracas, 50–100 C.E., wool plain weave, embroidered with wool, 101 x 244.3 cm (**Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**)

Prior to the appearance of Paracas culture, there is very little evidence for the use of avian costume in the Andes. This imagery suggests that Paracas society may have been the first in the Andes to engage in avian-inspired ritual performance. These performances might have involved a state of trance during which an individual takes a psychological journey to another realm, generally to acquire knowledge and skills needed in the human world, often aided by an animal companion or symbolically becoming an animal in the process. As flyers and divers, birds are able to access realms unavailable to humans, and have thus been associated with ritual journeys and spiritual transformation worldwide. In the Andes, however, prior to Paracas culture the jaguar was the animal more closely associated with shamanic transformation, as demonstrated by the monumental stone art of highland Chavín culture.



Figure **4.2.6.3.9**: Man's mantle and two border fragments, Paracas, 50–100 C.E., wool plain weave, embroidered with wool, 101 x 244.3 cm (**Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**)

Reading the Mantle

These fantastical avian beings reveal noteworthy elements of Paracas cultural life: the symbolic role of birds, heads, and the possibility of avian-inspired rituals. The flying figures may be illustrations of humans who engaged in ritual performance during life and were believed to transform into supernatural birds in the afterlife. The mantle may have been created as an aid to this transformative process, helping to incubate an individual within a bundle so that he would emerge in the afterlife as a bird/human hybrid. The imagery demonstrates an ongoing Andean interest in birds, bodiless heads, composite visual systems, and the importance of the afterlife, expressed in a unique Paracas art style.

Notes:

1. Anne Paul, "Bodiless human heads in Paracas Necropolis textile iconography," *Andean Past* 6, 2000: p. 76.
2. Vanessa Drake Moraga, *Animal Myth and Magic: Images from Pre-Columbian Textiles* (Larkspur, CA: Ololo, 2005), p.127.
3. Lisa DeLeonardis and George F. Lau, "Life, Death, and Ancestors" in *Andean Archeology*, ed. Helaine Silverman (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 98.

Additional resources:

Anne Paul, *Paracas Ritual Attire* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991)

Denise Y. Arnold and Christine A. Hastorf, *Heads of State: Icons, Power, and Politics in the Ancient and Modern Andes* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016)

Elizabeth Benson, *Birds and Beasts of Ancient Latin America*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997

Read more about birds of the Andes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Vanessa Drake Moraga, *Animal Myth and Magic: Images from Pre-Columbian Textiles* (Larkspur, CA: Ololo, 2005)

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4.2.6.4: Paracas Feline Face Bottle

by **DR. MARY BROWN**

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Figure **4.2.6.4.1**: Feline Face Bottle, Paracas, 4th–3rd century B.C.E., ceramic and post-fired paint, 17.8 x 14.3 x 13.7 cm, from the Ica Valley, Peru (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

An animal face in clay

A feline with enormous fangs snarls on the front of an **ancient Andean** ceramic jar. Two spouts rise from the top, and a small bird's head is lightly carved into one of them. The stories once told about the feline and bird are long lost to time, but the jar and its animals still communicate insights about the people who created them. In the absence of written texts, material culture such as this ceramic jar is the only surviving record of this ancient culture.



Figure **4.2.6.4.2**: Map of Paracas Culture

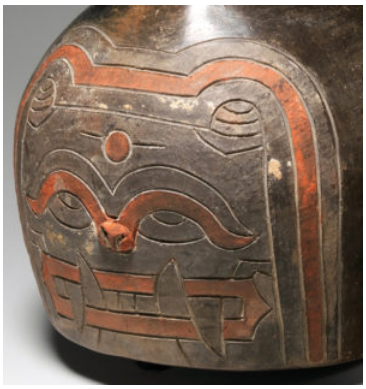


Figure 4.2.6.4.3: Feline face bottle (detail), Paracas, 4th–3rd century B.C.E., ceramic and post-fired paint, 17.8 x 14.3 x 13.7 cm, from the Ica Valley, Peru (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The jar is from the **Paracas culture**, a village society that thrived on the south coastal Peruvian desert during and just after the first millennium B.C.E. This vessel was found in the Ica Valley to the south of the Paracas peninsula.

The feline face was created by lines lightly carved into the soft, pre-fired clay surface, a technique called incising. After firing, the jar was colored with a resin paint, a distinctive Paracas technique. Colors, typically four or five but sometimes up to fifteen, were made of pigments and binders from the plants, minerals, and other materials available in the desert coast environment, including reptile urine. [1]



Figure 4.2.6.4.4: Embroidered textile found with a mummy bundle. Mantle, Peruvian (Paracas), 0-100 C.E., wool, plain weave, embroidered with wool, 142 x 241 cm (**Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**)

The jar's survival can be credited to the culture's reverence for their ancestors and concern with furnishing the realm of the afterlife. This resulted in the creation of mummy bundles (wrapping the dead in layers of textiles) and burying them with grave offerings in the arid Paracas peninsula and neighboring river valleys. The desert climate, the driest in the world, fortunately also preserved a large quantity of ancient textiles, fragile materials that are usually lost forever when buried.

Background: Chavín and its influence on Paracas

Examining the vessel's technique, imagery, and style have revealed clues about cultural interactions between Paracas and another culture from the highland (mountainous) region, known as Chavín (pronounced Cha-VEEN). Comparing ceramics from the two cultures reveals how the Paracas ceramic tradition, once heavily influenced by Chavín, began to develop its own characteristics. One of the notable ways this occurred was by changing the style of a Chavín feline, among the most important highland animal images, and putting a bird on it.

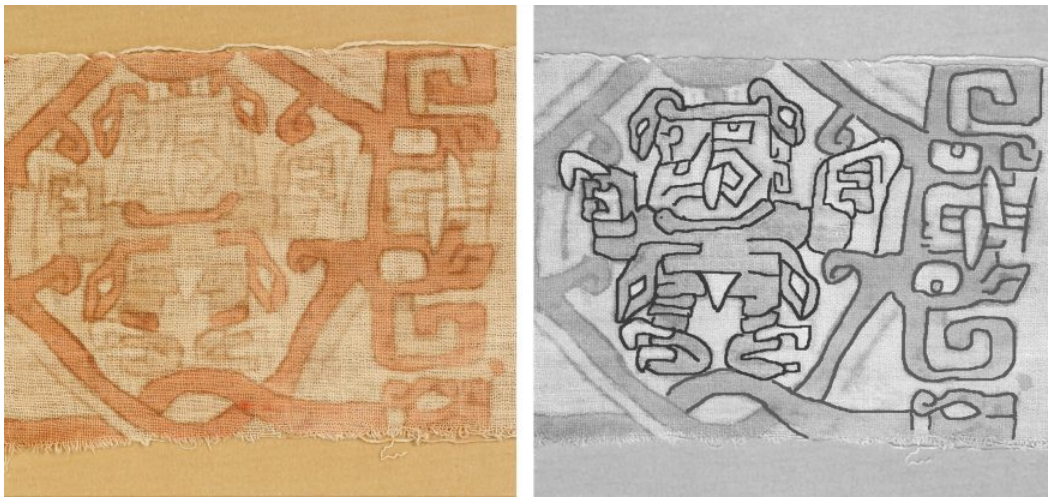


Figure 4.2.6.4.5: Textile fragment with the Staff God, 4th–3rd century B.C.E., Chavín culture, Peru, cotton, refined iron earth pigments, 14.6 x 31.1 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The highland culture of **Chavín** was one of the key cultures in the Early Horizon Andean interaction sphere (c. 900 B.C.E.–100 C.E.). Its influence is apparent in the highlands and the coast by the widespread use of a strikingly distinct visual art style. Chavín images are abstract and composite, with multiple animals appearing in one body, such as we see in a textile fragment showing the **Staff God**. Here, the Staff God is shown with its head in profile, with snakes emerging from the top of the head, a feline-fanged mouth, snake belt, and taloned hands and feet.

Animals in Chavín images often appear aggressive, with over-sized, interlocking fangs and long claws. The eyes feature pendant irises (where the iris hangs from the top of the eye), and an upturned, "push-face" nose resembling the features of certain canine breeds.



Figure 4.2.6.4.6: Spotted jaguar, cornice sculpture, Chavín de Huantar (photo and drawing: Dr. Sarahh Scher)

Due to contact with the Amazon rainforest on the eastern slopes of the Andes, their imagery also featured tropical animals such as the spotted jaguar, harpy eagle, and possibly a caiman (a small crocodilian). Jaguar images are particularly emblematic of Chavín art style, as they are typically shown with exaggerated, exposed incisor teeth that give the animals a permanently aggressive demeanor. The spotted jaguar is recognized in their art by large, concentric circles included on its body and on the bodies of hybrid feline/human/avian beings. The Chavín art style is best demonstrated by their stone carving tradition at the highland site of **Chavín de Huantar**, and was carried throughout the highlands and to the coast by way of portable arts such as textiles and ceramics.



Figure **4.2.6.4.7**: Chavín ceramics (left) influenced early Paracan ceramic vessels (right). Left: Stirrup-Spout Vessel with Feline and Cactus, 900/200 B.C.E., Chavin, North Coast, ceramic, 26.7 × 17.8 cm (**Art Institute of Chicago**); right: Feline face bottle, Paracas, 800–100 B.C.E., ceramic and post-fired paint, from the Ica Valley, Peru, 19.2 cm high (Fowler Museum)

Chavín ceramics were mostly dark brown, red, or black in color. Flat-based, spherical vessels typically featured raised, sculptural imagery and handles in a horseshoe shape connected to a vertical spout, called a stirrup-spout. The earliest Paracas ceramic vessels show a marked Chavín influence, and they are believed to be some of the first appearances of Chavín art style in the region. In the image above, we see a Chavín vessel on the left and a Paracas vessel on the right. Both have flat bases, dark colors, stirrup-spouts, and felines with oversized, interlocking fangs in faces protruding from the surface of the vessel.



Figure **4.2.6.4.8**: Feline face bottle, Paracas, 4th–3rd century B.C.E., ceramic and post-fired paint, 17.8 x 14.3 x 13.7 cm, from the Ica Valley, Peru (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Paracas innovations: new forms, colors, and a bird

The Paracas vessel at The Metropolitan Museum of Art demonstrates how new ideas were changing the way Chavín imagery was used in Paracas art. While the vessel body retains the dark tones characteristic of Chavín, it also shows a number of changes. Its base is slightly more rounded than earlier vessels.

The face is confined to the surface, except for the small protruding nose. Instead of a stirrup-spout, the vessel has two spouts connected by a handle, known as the double-spout-and-bridge. This handle will become characteristic of ceramics of this region in the centuries after Paracas.



Figure **4.2.6.4.9**: Bird spout and feline face highlighted. Feline face bottle, Paracas, 4th–3rd century B.C.E.



Figure **4.2.6.4.10**: Pampas cat (photo: **ZooPro**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

One spout on the Paracas vessel has been rendered as a rounded bird's head, with large, round eyes and a dot for a pupil. Under the bird spout, the feline face retains the interlocking fangs of Chavín imagery that are seen in their ceramics and stone imagery; however, the irises hanging from the top of the eye have been softened to resemble an upward gaze. The eyes are crowned by curving brows that have lost the angry ferocity of Chavín prototypes.

The rounded ears have incised lines that might reference the stripes of a small, coastal pampas cat rather than the spotted jaguars depicted in the highlands. The design was originally colored by post-fire paint in bright white and red.

These changes will later give way to some vessels that are entirely in the **shape of birds**, with colorful, interlocking abstract bands and circles illustrating abstract, dappled wing feathers.

The Bird Whistle Spout



Figure **4.2.6.4.11**: Carved Strombus shell trumpet (*pututu*), Chavín (photo: Dr. Sarahh Scher)

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art's vessel, the Paracans connected sound to the bird's head. The spout became a sound-maker when liquid was poured, as the fluid's movement pushed the air inside through a whistle chamber. This effect animated the vessel and added to the sensory experience when it was put to use in a living ceremony, or conceptually in the afterlife. There is abundant material evidence of the importance of music in all areas of the Andes, from the earliest times through the conquest. Flutes made of bird bones were found in the ancient coastal site of Caral.

Shell trumpets appeared in highland Chavín. **Ceramic trumpets**, gourd rattles, and drums were in use throughout the south coast. Panpipes and whistles appeared on the north coast and throughout the pan-Andean Inka empire (among other instruments). The range of instruments and their extensive use indicate how music, with its ability to alter states of mind, helped create a bridge to the numinous (supernatural or divine forces) in Andean life.



Figure **4.2.6.4.12**: Feline face bottle, Paracas, 4th–3rd century B.C.E., ceramic and post-fired paint, 17.8 x 14.3 x 13.7 cm, from the Ica Valley, Peru (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Lessons of the Feline Face Vessel

Ceramics were one of the principal ways Andean cultures recorded their ideas. Further, their techniques, imagery, and form—made possible by easily molded and incised surfaces—are all clues for better understanding cultural exchange and changes within a culture. In the early stages of their ceramic production, Paracans incorporated a foreign ceramic style and feline into their own ideology, yet ultimately modified the image to match both their unique art style and the new ideas emerging in Paracas culture. The bird spout and whistle are particularly notable Paracas innovations. This vessel helps underscore that in the latter part of the first millennium B.C.E., Paracas broke further away from a formerly dominant influence and would continue to develop along a more independent path.

Notes:

[1] Dawn Kriss, et al. “A Material and Technical Study of Paracas Painted Ceramics.” *Antiquity*, vol. 92, no. 366, 2018, pp. 1492–1510.

Additional resources

Read more about this vessel at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Alan R. Sawyer, *Ancient Peruvian Ceramics: The Nathan Cummings Collection* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1966).

Music in the Andes on the Metropolitan Museum’s Heilbrunn Timeline

Erin Blakemore, “Ancient pots reveal reptile pee pigments and cultural connections,” National Geographic (2018)

Dorothy Menzel, John H. Rowe, and Lawrence Dawson, *Paracas Pottery of Ica: A Study in Style and Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964).

Beach firing pit by UCLA archeology class

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4.2.6.5: Paracas Flying Figure Bowl

by **DR. MARY BROWN**

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Figure **4.2.6.5.1**: Flying Figure bowl, 3rd–1st century B.C.E., Paracas, ceramic, post-fired paint, 5.1 x 17.5 x 17.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

A flyer and a feline



Figure **4.2.6.5.2**: Paracas Culture

A smiling figure hangs suspended, staring from a void. On the outside wall of the bowl, cats look out at us. The beings almost have the charm of contemporary children's book illustrations with their simplified, animated lines and bright colors. These deceptively familiar, even playful figures appear on the interior and side of a ceramic bowl made by the Paracas culture of the first millennium B.C.E. This exceptionally well-preserved ceramic vessel was found in a burial from the Ica Valley, and it illustrates a key Paracan supernatural figure and coastal feline—the pampas cat.

Along the southern coast of Peru, the Paracans fished the rich Pacific Ocean and farmed in small river valleys along the otherwise arid and inhospitable desert coast for about 1,000 years. In this harsh environment, they generated a colorful material culture, a great deal of which was devoted to the afterlife and so survived in underground burial chambers. Burials on the Paracas peninsula and in the nearby river valleys contained mummies bundled in layers of **textiles**, some of which were brightly colored, embroidered, and accompanied by ceramics and other artifacts. With no written text, the contents of the burials are now the only record of their beliefs and cultural practices.



Figure **4.2.6.5.3**: Flying Figure bowl, 3rd–1st century B.C.E., Paracas, ceramic, post-fired paint, 5.1 × 17.5 × 17.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

A painted item for the elite

The images on the ceramic vessel were first incised into the soft clay with shallow cuts. Then, the vessel was fired and painted with vegetal and mineral pigments bound together by heated plant resin, which hardens when cooled (a method called post-fire resin painting). It was not intended for use in daily life because of the way it was painted—it would not have held up to normal wear-and-tear because the plant resin in the paint melts in heat. Paracan ceramic artists also knew and utilized more widespread decorative techniques such as pre-fire slip painting, but the more technically demanding post-fire resin technique added value to the vessel.

This bowl, which has no recorded findspot, was likely among a medley of prestige items (including textiles, gold ornaments, feathers and feather work, spondylus shells, and animal pelts) that would have embellished the mummy bundle and afterlife environment of a high-ranking Paracan individual.



Figure 4.2.6.5.4: Flying Figure bowl, 3rd–1st century B.C.E., Paracas, ceramic, post-fired paint, 5.1 × 17.5 × 17.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The strange anatomy and accessories of the flying figure

Inside the bowl, the figure (generally identified as a flying figure) appears in red, green, and white paint. Its frontal head has over-sized eyes made of two concentric circles and an upturned mouth resembling a mysterious grin. From the mouth streams a red emanation ending in a stylized head, possibly a serpent head with exaggerated fangs, or a disembodied human head tasted by an elongated tongue. Its green body is shown in profile and has a band along its back ending in a black triangular tail. Three white fingers hold a head by its hair, and the feet are abstracted into sharp triangles. The hand-held head has a closed mouth of one straight line, likely indicating a state of death. The head at the end of the mouth emanation has slightly upturned corners, registering as the hint of a smile. Symbolic heads are a frequent appearance in Paracas art. Some art historians believe the heads represent **power and fertility**. The black angular tail (and possibly feet) of the flying figure could refer to ceremonial obsidian knives (used in ritual or symbolic decapitation—a practice well-documented in Paracas culture) that have been found in some of their burials.

A curving red band within a yellow border bisects the center of the vessel, possibly indicating the otherworldly realm of the flying figure. A green step motif might represent the Andes mountain range rising abruptly just to the east of the coastal environment. Mountains, widely considered to be a supernatural realm, might be the flyer's ultimate destination.

Who is the flyer?



Figure 4.2.6.5.5: Burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*), Peru

The flying figure is likely an entity that archaeologists and art historians have called the Oculate Being, one version of a multi-faceted Paracas supernatural that first appears in early textile art and emerges as a frequent motif in later ceramics. Named by scholars for its overly large eyes, the Oculate Being might be based on the coastal Peruvian burrowing owl. This unusual bird lives in underground desert burrows and, unlike other owl species, emerges during the day as well as night to hunt and forage. The owl's frontal eyes and atypically long legs give it a slightly anthropomorphic (human-like) appearance. Paracans, too, made their homes

in walled, subterranean spaces that offered protection from the harsh desert, and might have been intrigued by this owl whose daily activities paralleled some of their own.



Figure 4.2.6.5.6: Flying Figure bowl, 3rd–1st century B.C.E., Paracas, ceramic, post-fired paint, 5.1 × 17.5 × 17.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The pampas cat



Figure 4.2.6.5.7: Pampas cat (photo: ZooPro, CC BY-SA 3.0)

On the bowl's side, set against the red background, the stylized white feline figure has an upturned mouth and round green eyes. It likely represents a pampas cat. A small wild cat native to South America that frequented coastal river valleys, pampas cats are a common motif in Paracan embroidered textiles, painted ceramics, and they even appear as a late geoglyph (large-scale land art).

In textiles, the feline often appears alongside birds or serpents, as animal companions to humans, part of human-animal hybrids, or is suggested indirectly by feline costumes. Art historian Anne Paul has argued that the border cloth of textile mantles (large, sleeveless wraps found in mummy bundles) and their imagery symbolically protected both the deceased human wrapped within the textile and the images in the center of the cloth. [1] This idea might also apply to Paracas ceramics, with the feline protecting the flying figure within.

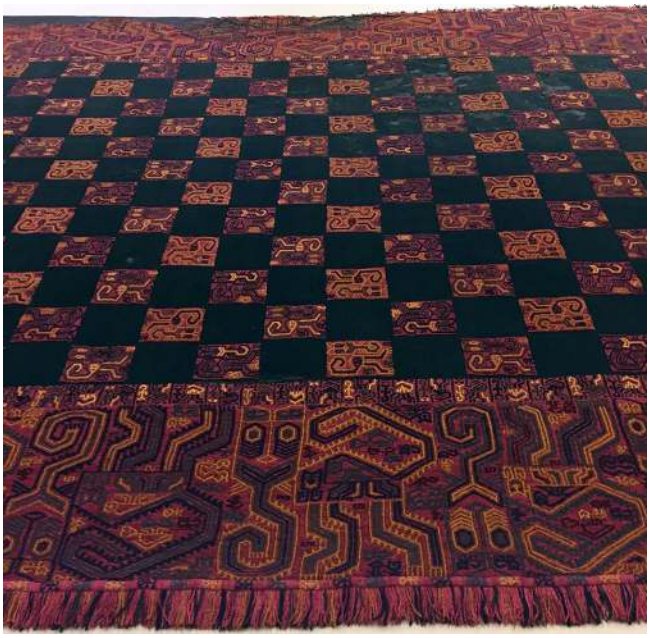


Figure 4.2.6.5.8: Paracas embroidered mantle, 100 B.C.E.-100 C.E., camelid fiber, 105 1/8 x 51 15/16 inches (267 x 131.9 cm) Brooklyn Museum

The mysterious Paracas flyers



Figure 4.2.6.5.9: 3rd–1st century B.C.E., Paracas, Ceramic, post-fired paint, 5.1 × 17.5 × 17.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Figure 4.2.6.5.10: Detail, Man's mantle and two border fragments, Paracas, 50–100 C.E., wool plain weave, embroidered with wool, 101 x 244.3 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

This vessel was made during the later phase of Paracas art (c. 400 B.C.E. into the first centuries of the common era) when flying figures became common in both ceramic and embroidered textile iconography, with many holding knives and heads in the same manner as this painted ceramic image.

Art historians have interpreted the figures in various ways—as spirits taking flight in the afterlife (linking them to the burial context of the art), or as representations of living humans in a state of trance during a ceremony. Many flyers, including the bowl's flying Oculate Being, carry heads and accessories resembling knives, perhaps a reference to ferrying powerfully symbolic heads to another realm. Whatever their original meaning, these energized, animated beings certainly demonstrate the creativity and technical virtuosity of Paracas artists in all media.



Figure **4.2.6.5.11**: Paracas ceramic trumpet showing a figure grasping a head and a falcon, c. 300–200 B.C.E., polychromed ceramic, Ocucaje-South Coast, Paracas, Peru, diameter of mouthpiece: 3.5 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Notes:

[1] Anne Paul, “Protective Perimeters: The Symbolism of Borders on Paracas Textiles,” *RES* 38 Autumn 2000, pp. 144–167

Additional resources

Read more about the feline **geoglyph**

Alan R. Sawyer, *Ancient Peruvian Ceramics: The Nathan Cummings Collection* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1966)

Dawn Kriss, et al. “A Material and Technical Study of Paracas Painted Ceramics,” *Antiquity* 92, no. 366 (2018), pp. 1492–1510

Dorothy Menzel, John H. Rowe, and Laurence Dawson, *Paracas Pottery of Ica: A Study in Style and Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964)

Lisa DeLeonardis, “The Substance and Context of Paracas Ceramic Ritual Offerings,” *Boletin de Pontificía Universidad la Católica del Perú* 17 (2013), pp. 205-229

Lisa DeLeonardis, “Encoded Process, Embodied Meaning in Paracas Post-Fired Ceramics,” in *Making Value, Making Meaning: Techné in the Pre-Columbian World*, edited by Cathy Lynne Costin (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2016), pp. 129-166

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SECTION OVERVIEW

4.2.7: Moche

4.2.7.1: Moche culture, an introduction

4.2.7.2: The Moche Royal Tombs of Sipán

4.2.7.3: Pair of Earflares, Winged Messengers

4.2.7.4: Moche Portrait Head Bottle

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4.2.7.1: Moche culture, an introduction

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4.2.7.2: The Moche Royal Tombs of Sipán

by DR. SARAHH SCHER

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Figure **4.2.7.2.1**: Sculptural ceramic ceremonial vessel that represents a dog, c. 100-800 C.E., Moche, Peru, 180 mm high (Museo Larco). This spotted dog is represented in several scenes of Moche art accompanying Ai Apaec, the Moche mythological hero.

A Complex Culture

Moche architects and artists raised spectacular adobe platforms and pyramids, and created exquisite ceramics and jewelry. Their art, unlike that of most Andean cultures, is naturalistic and rich in imagery, inviting us to explore their world.

The Moche culture thrived on Peru's northern coast between approximately 200 and 900 C.E. Rising and falling long before the Inka, the culture left no written records, and the early Spanish colonists who chronicled the cultures of Peru found the Chimú people in what had earlier been Moche territory. The Moche are a prime example of how archaeologists and art historians use scientific methods of data collection and evaluation in understanding ancient, non-literate cultures.

In the early 20th century, there was very little scientific excavation in Peru. Many art objects that came into museums and private collections were taken from graves and had no record of their original context. Based on this limited knowledge, scholars thought that the Moche had been a unified state that held sway over a large swath of the north coast, from near the border with modern-day Ecuador in the north to the Huarmey river valley to the south (Huarmey is approximately 180 miles north of the modern capital city of Lima). This conclusion was based on the similarity of ceramic and metal artworks being found throughout the range.

Not a single unified political entity

As modern scientific archaeology began in the area, it became clear that the Moche were not a single, unified political entity. Archaeologists and art historians began to see that differences in style and iconography could be determined between areas. Architectural structures were different at different sites. In addition, carbon dating allowed scholars to understand that some styles of pottery could be from one time frame in one river valley, while being associated with a completely different time frame in another. As more data was accumulated, hypotheses were tested and the conception of the Moche was revised and reassessed. What emerged was a vision of the Moche as politically independent groups who shared a common ideology, mythical and religious beliefs and practices, as well as a common iconography for their artwork.



Figure 4.2.7.2.2: Moche sites (in what is today Peru) courtesy of the San José de Moro Archaeological Project

Independent areas (sometimes as large as a pair of river valleys, sometimes as small as one section of a single valley) would signal that they belonged to Moche culture by using Moche themes in their artwork, while at the same time asserting differences—in architecture, in iconographic style, and in which figures from the mythology were deemed important. In this way, separate Moche polities could express both their political independence as well as their sense of belonging to a larger cultural system. The biggest separation of Moche style and iconography splits them into northern and southern areas (see map above), which can then be subdivided into smaller, politically independent areas.



Figure 4.2.7.2.3: Ceramic artist Walter Acosta showing a replica Moche mold.



Figure 4.2.7.2.4: Mold-made replicas in ceramic artist Walter Acosta's workshop, painted with slip and ready to be fired.

North-South Differences

The Southern Moche tended to be expert ceramicists—producing a large amount of fine, thin-walled vessels painted in slip. Moche artists used only three colors—cream, red-brown or red-orange, and black to decorate their ceramics. Many Moche ceramics were made using molds, and so we have many duplicate pieces. The ability to control imagery through the use of molds seems to have been important to the political elites of the Moche.

Early Moche vessels are very sculptural, depicting humans, supernatural figures, animals, and plants in a great variety. Later Moche ceramics feature complex line drawings of similar subject matter (called fineline style). The Moche often used a distinctive spout on their vessels, called a stirrup spout. It is composed of a hollow tube of clay bent into an upside-down U shape, with another tube piercing it at the apex of the curve (see images below). This spout form has ancient origins in the Andes, and it seems possible that the Moche deliberately chose this form to echo its use in during the earlier Cupisnique (1500-500 B.C.E.) and Chavín (900-200 B.C.E.) cultures. Fine ceramics would have been used as gifts from the highest elites to the lower elites and middle classes, helping to cement the social bonds that supported the power that the elites held. Fine ceramics have been found in households, and the pieces in graves show evidence that they had been used.



Figure 4.2.7.2.5: Left: *Fox Warrior Bottle*, c. 4th – 6th century C.E., Moche, Peru, ceramic, 26.7 cm; and right: *Fox Warrior Bottle*, 7th-8th century C.E., Moche. Peru, ceramic, 29.46 cm (both, The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The Northern Moche are celebrated for their metalwork, especially the exquisite pieces found in the tombs of Sipán in the Lambayeque valley. Working in gold and silver, Moche artists were adept at hammering, soldering, and setting stones, as well as developing a process to make a copper-gold alloy appear to be solid gold—a technique known as depletion gilding. Gold, silver,

semiprecious stones and Spondylus shell were used to make the elaborate regalia of the highest elites. Massive necklaces and bracelets, ear spools, headdresses, nose ornaments, and more were made by Moche artists for the great lords. While there certainly were skilled ceramicists in the north and able metalsmiths in the south, the general division of materials between these two areas helps define some of their differences. Both areas also would have had weavers producing fine textiles, but few examples have survived.



Figure 4.2.7.2.6: Nose Ornament with Intertwined Serpents, Moche, Peru, c. 390-450, gold, silver, shell, 12.5 x 21.1 x 1.1 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Iconography, Ideology, and Human Sacrifice

Early scholars assumed that armed conquest was the mechanism of power for the Moche state and Moche art certainly has a great deal of imagery relating to armed combat. However, it now appears that only some Moche expansion was due to military action. Other areas seem to have simply been colonized in uninhabited areas, or Moche culture was adopted by local elites who were impressed by the ideology. The imagery of combat is, in large part, related to that ideology, but not as a call to conquest. Instead, it seems that a lot of Moche combat imagery has ritual meaning. It focuses on hand-to-hand combat between two individuals, using cone-headed clubs as weapons and small shields for defense. Interestingly, this ignores what we know archaeologically about Moche warfare—which included the use of spears and darts propelled by throwing sticks, as well as slings used to propel stones with astonishing force. The Moche artwork, in other words, tells us one thing about their culture but omits other things. We can think of this as a form of propaganda—emphasizing the ritual aspects of Moche elite power rather than the more practical aspects of war. Moche art and archaeology also tell us what the point of this hand-to-hand combat was.



Figure 4.2.7.2.7: Warrior Bottle, 4th-7th century, Moche, Peru, ceramic, 28.6 x 17.2 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

In the art, we see victorious warriors knocking the helmet off of their foe, sometimes bloodying their nose in the process. The defeated warrior is then stripped of his armor and clothing. With a rope tied around his neck, he is led by the victor, who carries the armor and clothing in a bundle to signify his victory. The defeated warriors are eventually sacrificed in an elaborate ritual, their necks sliced and blood collected, to be drunk by figures that are dressed in the costumes of gods.



Figure 4.2.7.2.8: Adobe mural depicting victorious warrior with captured weapons and clothing, Huaca de la Luna, Peru

Archaeologists have uncovered three sets of sacrificed prisoners at the site of Huaca de la Luna in the Moche river valley. These large-scale sacrifices took place at different times over the course of hundreds of years. The skeletons show signs of having undergone combat, as well as having had their throats slit. These remains seem to show that what is depicted in the art was also carried out in life (at least these three times). Whether smaller-scale sacrifices related to this imagery took place is still being investigated, at Huaca de la Luna and other large Moche sites. The continued archaeological exploration and analysis of Moche artworks will help researchers to further understand this complex culture.



Figure 4.2.7.2.9: Adobe mural depicting stripped prisoners led by ropes around their necks, Huaca El Brujo, Peru (photo: **d.j. a.**, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

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4.2.7.3: Pair of Earflares, Winged Messengers

by DR. SARAHH SCHER *and* **STEVEN ZUCKER**

Page ID
181642



Video **4.2.7.3.1**: Pair of Earflares, Winged Messengers, 3rd-7th century, Moche, Peru, gold, turquoise, sodalite, shell, 8 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

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4.2.7.4: Moche Portrait Head Bottle

by STEVEN ZUCKER *and* **DR. SARAHH SCHER**

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181643



Video 4.2.7.4.6: Portrait Head Bottle, 5th–6th century (Moche culture), Peru, ceramic, 32.39 cm high (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

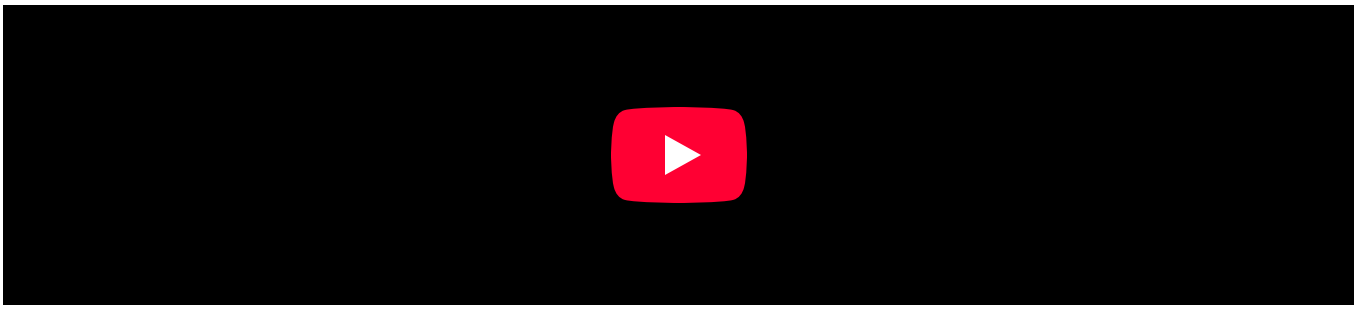
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4.2.7.5: Funerary bundle of the Señora de Cao

by **DR. SARAHH SCHER** and **DR. STEVEN ZUCKER**

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The funerary bundle of the Señora de Cao, headdress ornament and six nose ornaments, found in what is now the El Brujo Archaeological Complex, c. 400 C.E., Moche (Museo Cao, Magdalena de Cao, Peru)

Additional resources:

An introduction to Moche culture

The Royal tombs of Sipán

Check out the El Brujo Archaeological Complex

Exhibition objects from *Golden Kingdoms*, including Moche works

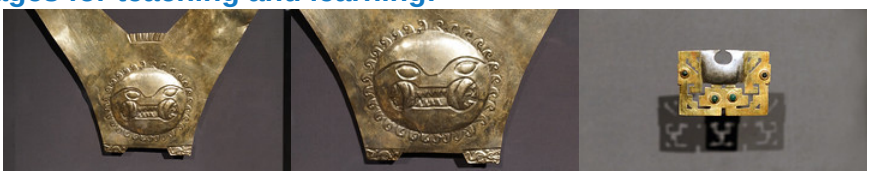
Read more about **Moche iconography from Dumbarton Oaks**

Read more about Moche ceramics at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

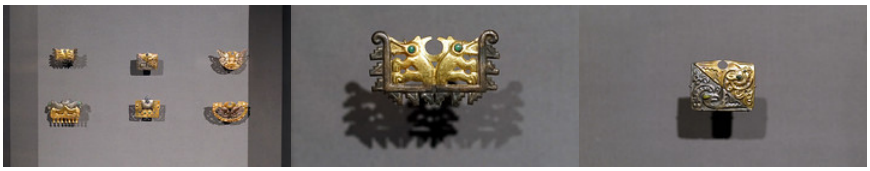
Golden Kingdoms: Luxury Arts in the Ancient Americas, ed. Joanne Pillsbury, Kim Richter, and Timothy Potts (J. Paul Getty Museum, 2017).

Walter Alva and Christopher B. Donnan, *Royal Tombs of Sipán* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum, 1993)

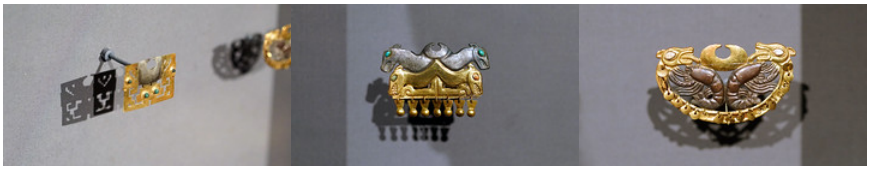
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SECTION OVERVIEW

4.2.8: Wari

4.2.8.1: Four-cornered hat

4.2.8.2: Feather panels

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4.2.8.1: Four-cornered hat

by DR. SARAHH SCHER and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER

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A Four-Cornered Hat, Wari (Huari) culture, c. 500–900 C.E., camelid fiber, 17.8 x 18.4 cm, 57.8 cm circumference, Bolivia or Peru (The Metropolitan Museum of Art); A conversation between Dr. Sarahh Scher and Dr. Steven Zucker

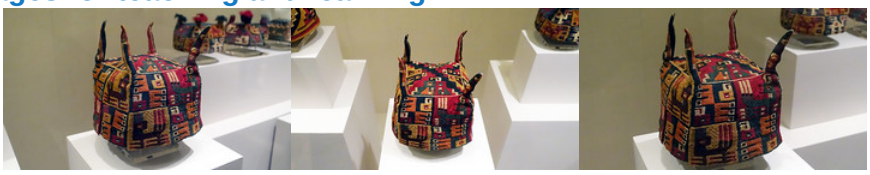
Additional resources:

Read more on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's website

Learn more about Andean cultures

Learn more about Tiwanaku

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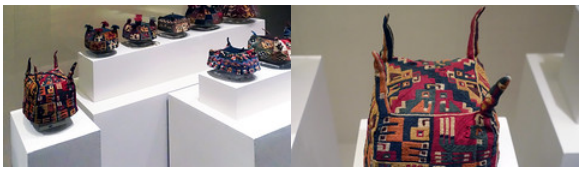
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4.2.8.2: Feather panels

by **DR. MARY BROWN**

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Figure **4.2.8.2.1**: 36 of 96 feather panels, Wari, c. 600–900 C.E., feathers on cotton, camelid hair, South Coast, Peru, 207 x 614 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Figure **4.2.8.2.2**: Map of Wari and Tiwanaku civilizations, South America. Wari civilization about the same time as Tiwanaku (image: Zenyu, in the public domain)

Blue and yellow horizontal rectangles, shimmering the way only natural feathers can, alternate in a stunning iridescent abstraction. The 96 panels (today split apart into different sections) are composed of two yellow and two blue rectangles made up of tens of thousands of macaw feathers.

The panels were made by the Wari culture, an empire that stretched from the mountain highlands to the southern coastal region of what is now Peru during the Andean Middle Horizon period, c. 600 to 900 C.E.



Figure 4.2.8.2.3: Blue and yellow macaw (Ara ararauna) (photo: Chris Morgan, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The panels were found in the Churunga Valley on the far south coast, and they are composed of feathers from the blue and yellow macaw, a bird found in the Amazon rainforest along the eastern slopes of the Andes mountains, some 500 miles (approximately 806 kilometers) away from the valley. The panels continue an earlier Andean tradition of extraordinary featherwork, demonstrating Wari artists' excellence in conceptualizing abstract designs and their advanced skills in **featherwork**, a type of art so delicate and fine it is often called feather painting.



Figure 4.2.8.2.4: Feather panels, Wari, c. 600–900 C.E., feathers on cotton, camelid hair, South Coast, Peru, 207 x 614 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

The discovery

In 1943, farmers from the village of La Victoria discovered a cache of buried items, including the series of 96 feather panels. The feather panels had been rolled and placed into eight large (one by two meter) ceramic jars painted with faces and abstract designs, then buried in a mound of earth and stone and surrounded by concentric walls. The fragile feathers and their ceramic jars were, fortunately, well-preserved within the dry earth. Silver, gold, ceramics, and other luxury objects were also found.

Without a well-documented excavation by trained archeologists and art historians, key information about the nature of the site and its contents was lost, and there was no written text to accompany the materials. By some accounts, buried bodies were also unearthed, but they were immediately burned and destroyed by the locals who believed they possessed the power to cause harm if disturbed. [1] In some Andean cultures, mummies were included in complex burials. In other areas, buried bodies were naturally preserved by the conditions of the climate, a process that may have been understood and anticipated. Whether or not bodies were buried with the jars remains uncertain. When they were discovered, the panels were much admired for their beauty and craftsmanship, and soon caught the attention of Peruvian archeologists who collected and distributed them to museum collections.

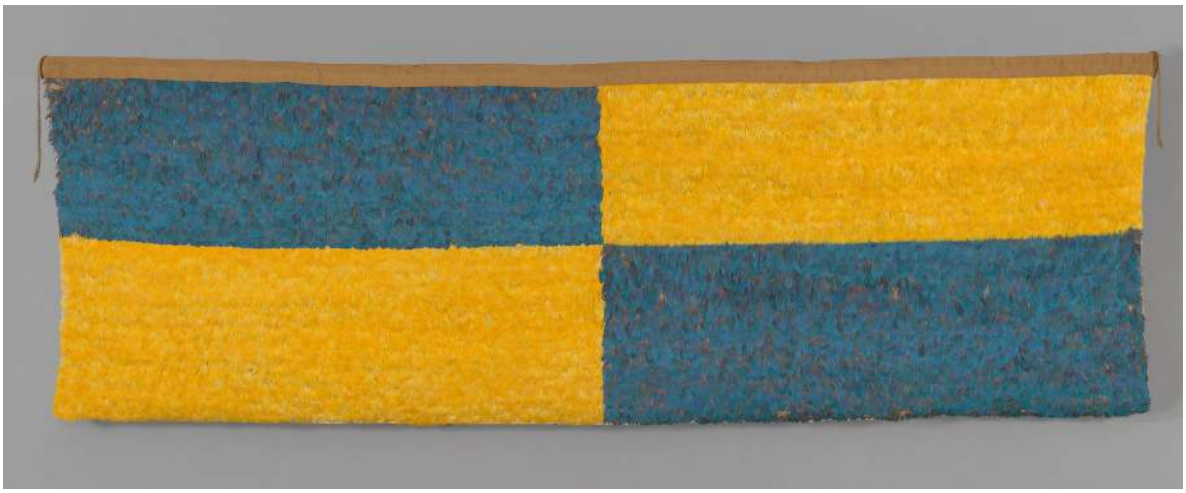


Figure 4.2.8.2.5: Feather panels, Wari, c. 600–900 C.E., feathers on cotton, camelid hair, South Coast, Peru, 207 x 614 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Why were the panels made?

Various interpretations about the panels' functions in Wari culture have been proposed by scholars based on what we know about the Andean worldview. One key concept is the belief in a supernatural realm that should be honored with elaborate art and luxury goods, some of which were made only to be buried as offerings. A widespread belief in the afterlife also led to the inclusion of luxury goods as part of (presumably) elite burials. The panels' burial context suggests that they may have been offerings meant for the spirit world, accessories of an elite tomb meant to accompany one or more individuals, or perhaps both.

Another possibility is that the panels were part of a ceremony that involved the living. Andean cultures often engaged in rituals as part of their spiritual practices. These events would have required enhancement with art, such as featherwork, in order to elevate them beyond everyday experiences. The panels might also have decorated and defined a sacred site, known in the Andes as a *huaca*. *Huacas* could be places (springs or other water sources, rock formations), human-made or natural objects in the landscape, or even people. A site identified as a *huaca* was often adorned with art or other identifying markers. The panels' large size and the presence of braided cords on the corners meant for securing them to a surface suggest that they might have served as artistic enhancement on the walls of a *huaca*. It has been noted that the later Inka also honored this site as a *huaca* by placing their own art and artifacts within the burial mound. [2]

The magic of feathers

Humans throughout time and place have valued birds' feathers for their attractiveness and have gone to extraordinary lengths to acquire them. In the Americas, birds and feathers had a sacred role in addition to their value as objects of beauty. The unparalleled splendor of natural feathers, never duplicated by artificial means (even in the era of synthetic manufacturing) was assigned a spiritual value. Prior to the rise of the Wari empire, two earlier cultures of the south coastal region, Paracas and Nasca, established long-range trade networks with the Andean highlands and eastern Amazonian jungle to access feathers for their garments and accessories. While both cultures had largely disintegrated by the time the Wari empire was established on the south coast, remnants of featherworking knowledge remained in the region. Also, the means to acquire them by trade was quickly assimilated by the Wari, whose artists transformed earlier motifs into powerful abstract statements of their own.

Wari abstraction and statecraft

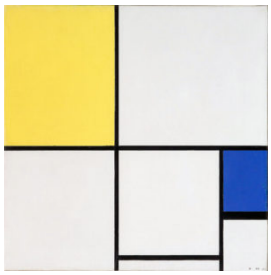


Figure 4.2.8.2.6: Piet Mondrian, Composition with Yellow and Blue, 1932, oil on canvas, 55,5 x 55,5 cm (Fondation Beyeler, Basel; photo: Lluís Ribes Mateu, CC BY-NC 2.0)

The Wari are known for their complex, abstract designs in woven and featherwork textiles—many Wari motifs appear strikingly similar to modernist expressions of the early 20th century (such as we see in Piet Mondrian's paintings). The German modernist, Max Ernst, may have owned a section of the panels. Wari textiles surpassed experiments in shape and color, containing layers of cultural meaning that would have been immediately understood by members of their society. In a stratified, imperial system such as the Wari, an elite tunic might convey a statement of power, broadcasting in vividly dyed camelid fibers a wearer's high social position.

The feather panels would have served a similar function, although as wall hangings rather than personal adornment. The powerful blue and yellow design has been created through the natural colors of the macaw feathers, trimmed, shaped, attached to strings, and sewn in rows onto a cotton and camelid fiber textile in a manner that highlights their intrinsic beauty.



Figure 4.2.8.2.7: South Coast, Peru (photo; Mary Brown)

The possible meanings assigned to the colors remain unknown, but due to the Andean attunement to their natural world, it is possible that the panels represent an abstracted south coast landscape of golden sand paired with a blue sea and sky, communicating an elite's connection with each realm.

The feather panel in context



Figure 4.2.8.2.8: Feather panels, Wari, c. 600–900 C.E., feathers on cotton, camelid hair, South Coast, Peru, 207 x 614 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

This extraordinary series of panels demonstrates the assimilation of earlier featherwork traditions from the southern coastal region and the continuity of the value placed on feathers in this area, as well as exemplifies the Wari abstract art style. One can imagine the drama of the blue and yellow surfaces, shimmering in the intense south coast sun during the day or illuminated at night by flame, transforming a monochromatic desert area into a colorful realm for ritual ceremonies. It is also possible that the feather panels were never meant for human eyes or experience, but only for the afterlife and the realm of the spirits. While speculation about their meaning is ongoing, contemporary audiences can certainly admire the abstract design and technical accomplishment of the Wari feather panels. They are considered to be among the most significant examples of Andean featherwork yet discovered.

Notes:

[1] Heidi King, “The Wari Feathered Panels from Corral Redondo, Churunga Valley: A Re-examination of Context,” *Ñawpa Pacha, Journal of Andean Archaeology* 33, no. (2013), pp. 25–26.

[2] King, p. 36.

Additional resources

Thor Hanson, *Feathers: The Evolution of a Natural Miracle* (New York: Basic Books, 2011)

Heidi King, ***Peruvian Featherworks: Art of the Pre-Columbian Era*** (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012)

Rebecca Stone, *Art of the Andes: From Chavín to Inca* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012)

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SECTION OVERVIEW

4.2.9: Tiwanaku

4.2.9.1: Tiiwanaku, an introduction

4.2.9.2: Semi-subterranean Court at the site of Tiwanaku

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4.2.9.1: Tiiwanaku, an introduction

by DR. ANANDA COHEN-APONTE

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181649



Figure 4.2.9.1.1: Tiwanaku, c. 800–1000 C.E., near Lake Titicaca, Bolivia (photo: **Mhwater**, in the public domain)

The Sacred Center of Tiwanaku



Figure 4.2.9.1.2: Map of Tiwanaku and Wari civilizations, South America. Wari civilization dates to the 6th–11th century, flourishing about the same time as Tiwanaku (image: **Zenyu,** in the public domain)

The north coast of Peru was not inactive after the fall of the **Moche** around 800 C.E. The Lambayeque and **Chimú** cultures that succeeded them built impressive monuments and cities. In fact, the Chimú civilization dominated nearly the entirety of the north coast of Peru for over 400 years until they were conquered by the **Inka** empire in 1470. Exciting cultural and artistic developments were also occurring in the highlands at around the same time that the Moche, Lambayeque, and Chimú cultures dominated the north coast.

The Tiwanaku civilization (200–1100 C.E.) was centered in the Lake Titicaca region of present-day southern Peru and western Bolivia, although its cultural influence spread into Bolivia and parts of Chile and Argentina. Tiwanaku's main city center boasted a population of 25,000–40,000 at its peak, consisting of elites, farmers, llama herders, fishermen, and artisans. Its ceremonial center featured a tiered pyramid called the Akapana, and a temple complex (the Kalasasaya).

Gateway of the Sun



Figure **4.2.9.1.3**: Sun Gate, Tiwanaku, Bolivia (photo: **Brent Barrett**, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0). **View in Google Street View.**

The people of Tiwanaku were skilled engineers and masons, producing impressive stone buildings and monuments. Perhaps one of the most iconic works of Tiwanaku public architecture is the Gateway of the Sun, a monolithic portal carved out of a single block of andesite. The monument was discovered in the city's main courtyard and may have originally served as the portal to the Puma Punku, one of the city's most important public shrines. The Gateway contains low relief carvings across the lintel set into a square grid. At the center of the lintel is Tiwanaku's principal deity.



Figure 4.2.9.1.4: Sun Gate, Tiwanaku, Bolivia (photo: Ian Carvell, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

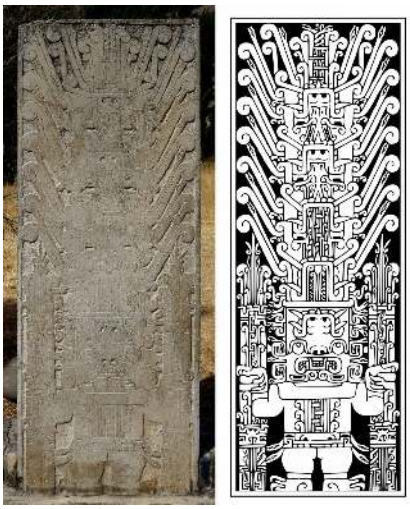


Figure 4.2.9.1.5: Left: the Raimondi Stele, c. 900-200 B.C.E., Chavín culture, Peru (Museo Nacional de Arqueología Antropología e Historia del Peru, photo: Taco Witte, CC BY 2.0). Right: Line drawing of the Raimondi Stele (source: Tomato356, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The figure is faced frontally, holding two implements terminating in bird heads, perhaps representing a spearthrower and spears. He wears an elaborate tunic decorated with human and animal faces. The eyes of the figure bear the characteristic Tiwanaku stylized teardrop—a winged feline that hangs down from the eye to the bottom of the face. Tendrils of hair emanate in rays from the head, terminating in feline heads and circles. Composite human-bird deities flank the central figure on both sides.

As many scholars have pointed out, the deity represented on the Gateway exhibits a number of similarities to the deity in the Raimondi Stele at **Chavín de Huantar**. Both stand frontally and carry a staff in each hand, grasping them in precisely the same manner. Their rayed headdresses/hairstyles extend outward in zoomorphic (animal-like) tendrils. The square, mask-like quality of their faces endows the deities with an ominous quality.

Archaeologists speculate that the doorway was originally brightly painted and inlaid with gold; thus, it is important to remember that the “pristine” and unadorned state of the ancient monuments we see today often bear little relationship to their original appearance.

Relationship with Chavín

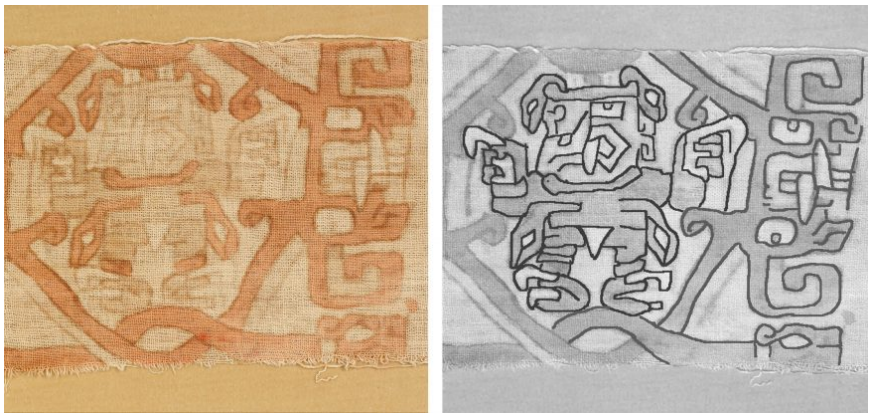


Figure 4.2.9.1.6: Textile fragment, 4th–3rd century B.C.E., Chavín culture, Peru, cotton, refined iron earth pigments, 14.6 x 31.1 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Adopting elements of Chavín iconography may have been a strategy for the Tiwanaku people to assert ancestral ties to the great early highland civilization. In the absence of a written language, images played a vital role in the transmission of ideas and values across space and time. Although the Chavín civilization had long succumbed by the time Tiwanaku reached its fluorescence, Chavín iconography traveled across the Andes through textiles and other portable objects, becoming continually reinterpreted and reinvented by each culture that came into contact with it.

Textiles and ceramics



Figure 4.2.9.1.7: Tiwanaku four-corner hat, 700–900 C.E., camelid fiber (Dallas Museum of Art)

While monumental stone structures and sculpture are the hallmarks of Tiwanaku art, smaller works in textile and ceramic of refined quality were also produced. Like the Wari, Tiwanaku men of high rank wore intricately designed four-cornered hats, brightly colored and decorated with geometric designs. In the example above, the overall diamond shape of the design has been divided into four sections, which is often a reference to the four cardinal directions. The rich red and blues come from difficult and expensive dyes, further emphasizing the wealth and power of the man who wore it.



Figure 4.2.9.1.8: Feline incense vessel, 6th–9th century C.E., ceramic (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Tiwanaku ceramics, like the incense burner above, feature clean, somewhat blocky forms and surface decoration that echoes the aesthetic seen in stone sculpture, like the Gateway of the Sun above. A bold, black outline and flat areas of color characterize the painting. Here, an abstracted winged feline can be seen, with an eye divided down the middle between black and white, another typical element to Tiwanaku ceramic decoration. The painted feline head is rounder and more simplified than the sculpted one, which features more naturalistic, expressive eyes and an open mouth with prominent fangs.

Additional resources

Read more about the Staff God at Chavín de Huántar

Margaret Young-Sánchez et al., *Tiwanaku: Ancestors of the Inca* (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2004)

Jean-Pierre Protzen and Stella Nair, "On Reconstructing Tiwanaku Architecture," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 59, no. 3 (Sep., 2000), pp. 358–371

"Central and Southern Andes, 500–1000 A.D." on the Met's Museum Timeline

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4.2.9.2: Semi-subterranean Court at the site of Tiwanaku

by DR. SHELLEY BURIAN

Page ID
181650



Figure 4.2.9.2.1: View from the Semi-subterranean Court, Tiwanaku, Bolivia, 300–400 CE (photo: Danielle Pereira, CC BY 2.0)



Figure 4.2.9.2.2: Map showing the location of Tiwanaku

From approximately 200 to 1100 C.E., Tiwanaku, near Lake Titicaca in present-day western Bolivia, was the center of a civilization whose influence spread as far as southern coastal Peru and northern Chile.

At its height, the site was home to up to 40,000 people and was centered around a ceremonial center featuring several monumental stone structures, including the Semi-subterranean Court, which is the oldest of these structures, and used for over 1,000 years before the decline of the Tiwanaku civilization.

The experience of entering this court is a bit like entering an architectural time capsule. All its various features are visual representations of the ways the site's inhabitants drew on older local cultures, adopted those from afar, and created their own

variations to establish a unique culture. It is a fascinating window into the worldview and religion of the inhabitants through the centuries.



Figure 4.2.9.2.3: View of Tiwanaku with the Semi-subterranean Court to the right, Tiwanaku, Bolivia, 300–400 CE (photo: Fellipe Cicconi, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Location

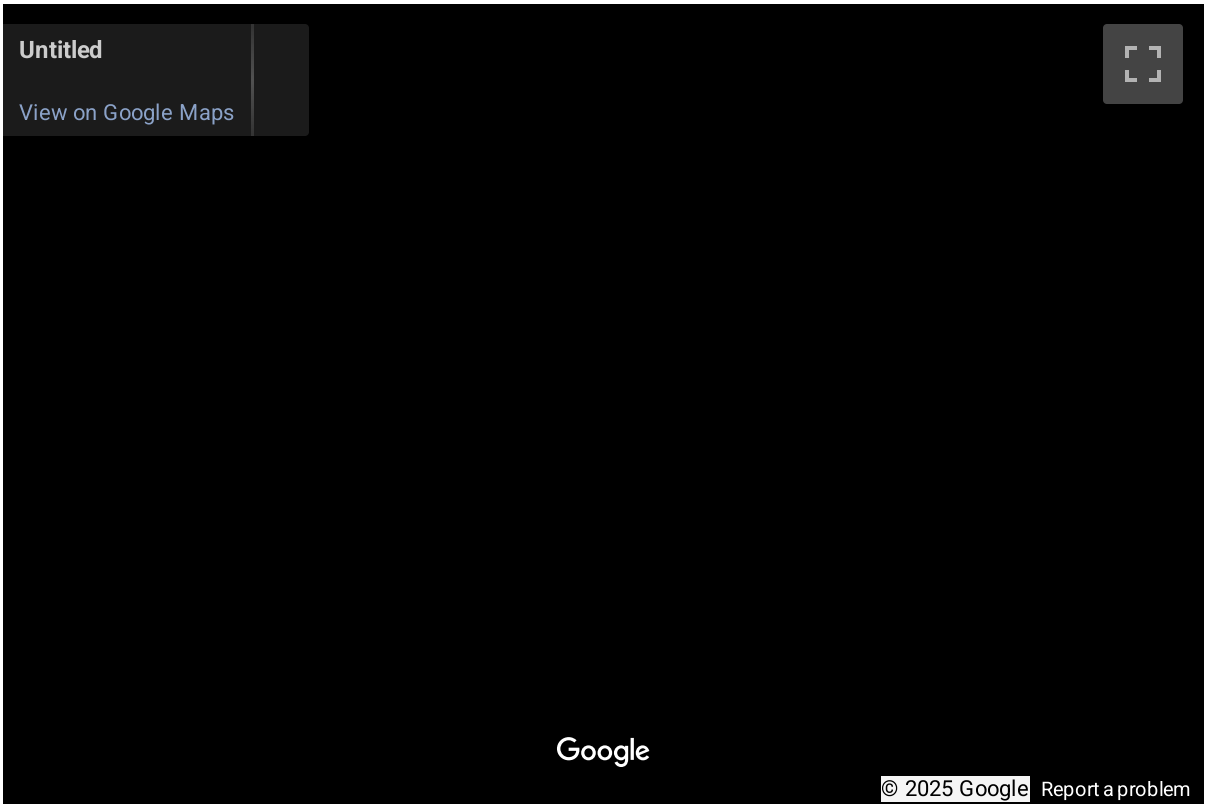
Like most large cities, Tiwanaku had a central “downtown” area where the largest and most important buildings and structures are located. It is most often referred to as the ceremonial core due to its placement at the center of the site and the identification of most of the buildings as sites for important religious and political ceremonies. These buildings were constructed over the course of the site’s history, and some which were not in current use were even partially taken apart so the stones could be used in newer ones.

By the time Tiwanaku began to decline as a state, the ceremonial core had numerous buildings, platforms, and courtyards, the largest and most important being the Semi-subterranean Court, the Kalasasaya and Putuni Complex (a combination of raised platforms and courtyards), the Akapana (a complicated mound structure believed to be a recreation of the Quimsachata mountains), and a later temple complex, the Pumapunku.



Figure 4.2.9.2.4: Map of the ceremonial center of Tiwanaku with important structures labeled

Structure and design



The Semi-subterranean Court is a square courtyard approximately ninety-one feet long and eighty-five feet wide, completely open to the sky. Its four stone walls were built approximately six feet down into the earth rather than upwards. Entered via a flight of steps worn down by centuries of use, the space gives the sense of standing at the boundary between the earth and the sky. This

feeling is enhanced by fifty-seven large vertical stones extending out of the sunken space and serving as a bridge between the earth and the sky.

Mapping the sky



Figure **4.2.9.2.5**: Foreground: vertical stones and walls of the Semi-subterranean Court, Tiwanaku, Bolivia, 300–400 CE (photo: **twiga269 ॐ FEMEN**, CC BY-NC 2.0)

The central stones on three of the walls (north, east, and west) provide more than a physical connection to the sky above. They mark viewing points for various astronomical events such as solstice and equinox sunrises and sunsets, the rising and setting of important stars, and even point the way to the Celestial South Pole, the pivot of the southern hemisphere. The movements of the sun, moon, and stars across the sky regulated the rhythm of life in all Andean societies—used to determine when to plant and harvest crops and conduct religious rituals. As this court has been identified by archaeologists as a gathering place for these rituals, these stones would have helped participants properly orient themselves for the appropriate celestial event.

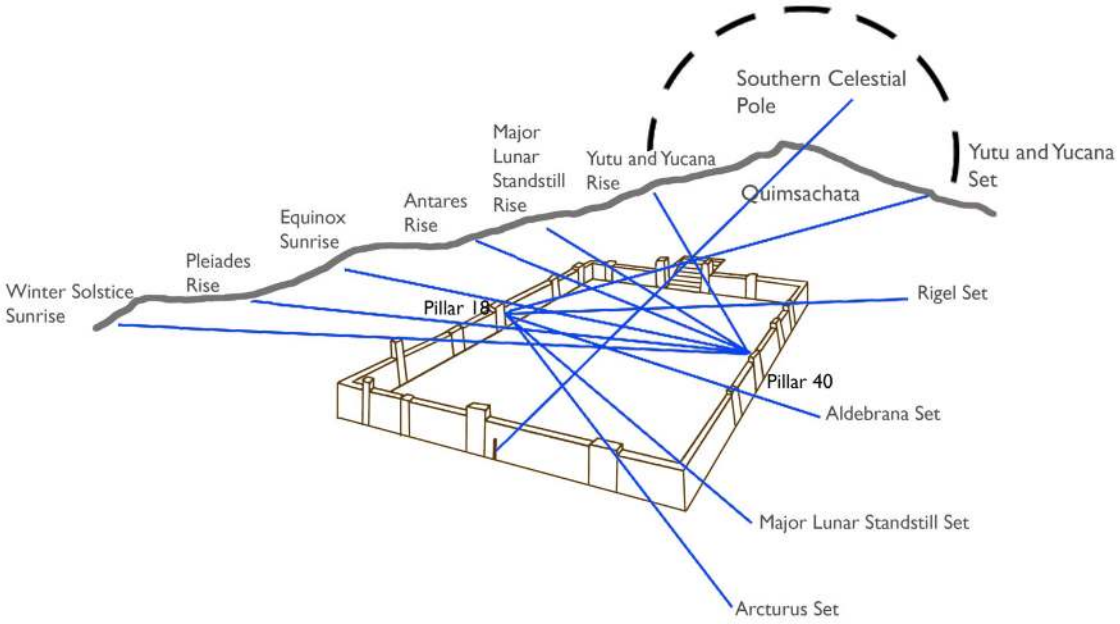


Figure **4.2.9.2.6**: Astronomical alignments of the Semi-subterranean Court (redrawn after Vranich and Smith 2017, figure 6.4)

Connecting past and present

The Semi-subterranean Court served as a way in which the people of Tiwanaku could express their connections to past cultures while creating their own unique architectural and sculptural styles. Completed between 300–400 C.E., it is estimated to be the earliest monumental stone building constructed in the central ceremonial area.

The innovation of the Semi-subterranean Court begins with its size. The sunken court style of building is found in many of the archaeological sites which pre-date the founding of Tiwanaku in the regions surrounding Lake Titicaca such as Pucara and Chiripa, but the Semi-subterranean Court is the largest found to date. Its increased size was likely a statement of growing political power by the emerging Tiwanaku polity.



Figure 4.2.9.2.7: Tenon heads in a wall of the Semi-subterranean Court, Tiwanaku, Bolivia, 300–400 C.E. (photo: Phil, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The second, more striking change to the older sunken court style is the addition of the tenon heads (sculptures of heads which are set into a wall, anchored by a post called a tenon, but extend out from the surface) to all four walls in a pattern of repeating triangles between the large vertical stones.



Figure 4.2.9.2.8: Left: Common style of tenon head, Semi-subterranean Court, Tiwanaku, Bolivia (photo: THEOW, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0); right: Less common style of tenon head, Semi-subterranean Court, Tiwanaku, Bolivia (photo: Kevin Jones, CC BY 2.0)

The heads in the best condition display a wide range of variations on two basic compositions. The first and most common is a face with a wide band around the forehead, large deep-set eyes, a T-shaped rectangular nose, and an oval mouth with thick lips. The

second, of which few uneroded examples remain, is a face without the forehead band, a more oval-shaped nose, and much smaller eyes. No two heads carved in either style are exactly alike: noses range from broad to narrow, the eyes can be circular or square, some mouths are wide open with clearly defined lips while others are tightly closed.

These are believed to represent the range of ethnicities or communities who were governed by the Tiwanaku polity and attended the ceremonies held in the court. It is still unknown if they were contributed by the groups they represent willingly or by force.

Sculpture and religion through time



Figure 4.2.9.2.9: Stele 15, Semi-subterranean Court, Tiwanaku, Bolivia (photo: Alexei Vranich, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Archaeological excavations from the mid-twentieth century uncovered several freestanding sculptures, two of which have compositions that provide a striking visual representation of the cultural changes which occurred in Tiwanaku society through the centuries.

Stela 15 is a four-sided rectangular stone shaft with simple low relief carving on all four sides. The narrower sides contain vertical patterns of snake-like figures running up towards several small mammals with long tails. Although both wider sides were each carved with the image of a large humanoid figure, erosion has virtually erased the carving on one. The other shows a standing figure with a large face containing the T-shaped nose, deep-set circular eyes, and oval mouth seen in some of the tenon heads. A beard-like band encircles the lower face, indicating that it is a male figure. The arm on the viewer's left is placed diagonally above the one on the right, both raised above a band showing two opposing feline figures.

This imagery is associated with the Yayamama religious tradition that was practiced across the Lake Titicaca region beginning in 800 B.C.E. and declining around 300 C.E. The placement of Stela 15 in the Semi-subterranean Court indicates that, like the other sunken courtyards in considerably older Lake Titicaca sites, this structure was initially used for Yayamama ceremonies. The imagery of better-preserved stelae at other Yayamama sites suggest that some of these ceremonies centered around celebrating the fertility forces of the female-male duality (represented by deified ancestors) as well as those found throughout nature, represented by various animals and a navel-like image thought to represent the center of the cosmos.

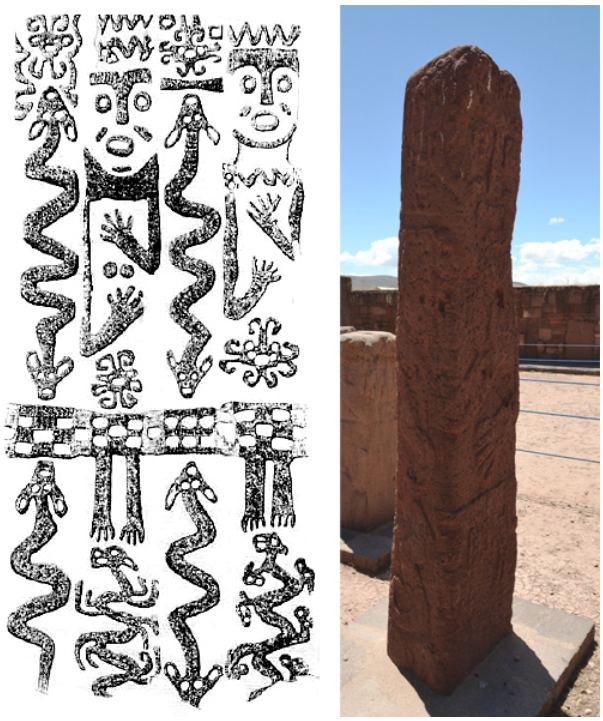


Figure 4.2.9.2.10: Left: A drawing showing all four sides of a Yayamama stela from Taraco, Peru (redrawn after Chávez and Mohr Chávez 1988); right: Stele 15, Semi-subterranean Court, Tiwanaku, Bolivia (photo: Antoine 49, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The wealth of realistic detail and iconography of the Bennett Monolith, built several centuries later, are the result of a dramatic change both in artistic styles and religious traditions. Here, the male figure (a towering twenty-four feet tall) is carved in the round and shown wearing elaborate clothing carved with extreme attention to detail. The figure's torso and arms are covered with images of running bird-headed figures holding staffs and llamas sprouting sacred cacti. On the back there is also a rendition of the frontal-facing deity shown on the Sun Gate, identified by its large square face surrounded by rays ending in animal heads and circular shapes. Instead of holding two staffs, this version of the deity holds a flowering cactus plant in each hand.



Figure 4.2.9.2.11: The Bennett Monolith (photo: JoAnn Miller, CC BY 2.0)

In contrast to Stela 15, the figure depicted in the Bennett Monolith holds both arms against its sides with the hands facing forward rather than placed on top of each other. Like the deity of the Sun Gate, each hand holds an object, the left a cup similar in shape to a **kero** and the right a snuff tray used to ingest trance-inducing substances during ceremonies.

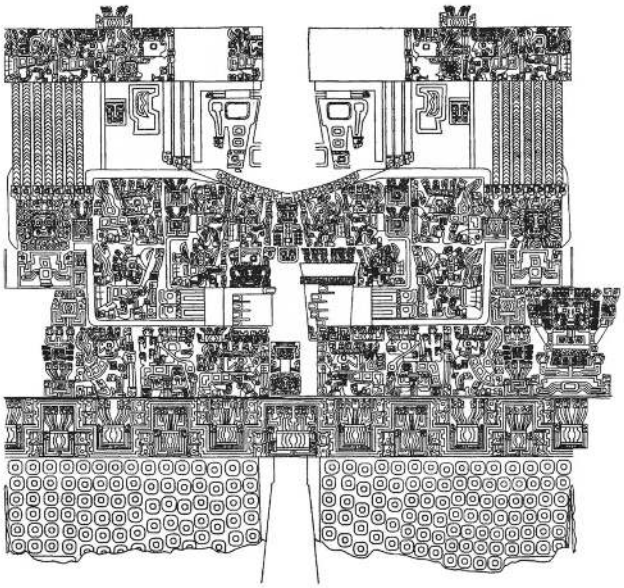


Figure **4.2.9.2.12**: Drawing showing the carved decoration of the Bennett Monolith (redrawn after Posnansky 1945, Vol. II, Figs. 113 and 117)

The Bennett Monolith, with its references to **Chavín de Huantar** iconography, suggests that Tiwanaku gradually moved away from the Yayamama religious practices to those imported afar. Its presence in the Semi-subterranean Court, where it was originally placed near older sculptures like Stela 15, perfectly demonstrates how the inhabitants maintained ties with the past traditions of the Lake Titicaca region while continuing to innovate and adopt new ideas.

Overall, the Semi-Subterranean Court marks the rise of Tiwanaku's importance as a regional center. Its large size, innovative architectural sculpture, and changing free-standing monuments demonstrate the inhabitants' desire to create a unique version of the older regional culture and those from abroad to express their power and influence.

Additional resources:

Tiwanaku: Spiritual and Political Centre of the Tiwanaku Culture (UNESCO)

Central and Southern Andes, 500–1000 A.D. on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Margaret Young-Sánchez, *Tiwanaku: Ancestors of the Inca* (Denver Art Museum, 2004)

Alexei Vranich, "Monumental Perceptions of the Tiwanaku Landscape," in *Political Landscapes of Capital Cities*, edited by Jelena Bogdanović, Eulogio Guzmán, and Jessica Joyce Christie (Boulder, CO: University of Colorado Press, 2016) pp. 181-211

Alexei Vranich and Scott C. Smith, "Nighttime Sky and Early Urbanism in the High Andes: Architecture and Ritual in the Southern Lake Titicaca Basin during the Formative and Tiwanaku Periods," in *Archaeology of the Night: Life After Dark in the Ancient World*, edited by Nancy Gonlin and April Nowell (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2017), pp. 121-138

John Wayne Janusek, Ancient Tiwanaku (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Michael A. Malpass, *Ancient People of the Andes* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2016)

Sergio Chávez and Karen L. Mohr Chávez, "Newly Discovered Monoliths from the Highlands of Pouno, Peru" *Expedition* vol 12, no. 4, pp. 25-39

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20, 2020, https://smarthistory.org/semi-subterranean-court-tiwanaku/.

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4.2.10: Chancay culture Chancay Standing Female Figure

by DR. SARAHH SCHER

Page ID
181651



Figure **4.2.10.1**: 1200–1450, ceramic, 18 1/4 x 11 3/4 x 5 inches (**Michael C. Carlos Museum**)

What can small-scale ceramic figurines tell us about the past? It turns out, they can tell us a great deal about cultures that no longer exist. A wonderful example is a Chancay female figure from 1200–1450.

The Chancay people lived on the central coast of Peru, centered on the Chancay river valley (approximately 80 kilometers north of Lima) from c. 1000 C.E. until their conquest by the **Chimú** and then the **Inka** in the fifteenth century. They were expert weavers, creating fine cloth as well as fiber sculptures, but they also created ceramic sculptures in a distinctive style. Among them are standing figures of both men and women, painted in a brown-black over a creamy white slip.

The *Standing Female Figure* is relatively large (over eighteen inches tall), hollow, and likely made by joining slabs of clay together, although molds could have been part of that process. The surface of the figure is painted with a white slip that was then overpainted with brown-black slip designs. The abstracted body is characterized by a large head, wide torso, and long, large legs with big feet that help to hold the sculpture upright. The small arms are relatively flat, with a bend at the elbow and paddle-like hands.

Her facial features are small compared to the overall head, with oval eyes, a sharply triangular nose, and a small mouth that is partially obscured by the decorative pattern on her chin that is made up of two serrated lines (this is actually an animal mouth painted over her actual mouth, as discussed below). Her face and head are in fact painted with a number of patterns made up of lines with a consistent thickness.

A woman…

At the top of her head, vertical lines delineate sections that are filled with a shape reminiscent of a step or mountain range. A design similar to this is found in most ancient Andean visual vocabularies, especially in textiles. Beneath that, a band with a more complex pattern features white circles outlined in black, with a black dot at the center. These circles fit into triangular shapes, alternating point up and point down, with a space in between decorated with curved and straight lines. This may be meant to indicate a textile headband, but the design does not wrap around the back of the head the way the design on the torso does. The corners of her eyes are linked to the bottom of the band by two thin lines set at a diagonal, with more dotted circles in between the lines and curves fringing the outer edges.



Figure **4.2.10.2**: 1200–1450, ceramic, 18 1/4 x 11 3/4 x 5 inches (**Michael C. Carlos Museum**)

While the figure at first appears to be wearing a patterned tunic and nude from the waist down, the decoration on her torso is probably intended to represent body paint or tattooing. It consists of a black background, a frame-like border made up of two white lines, and white spots, some of which have a pattern in the center made up of two crossed lines and four dots. Two of the spots that do not have the central pattern actually surround small bumps that indicate breasts.

While not visible in the photographs, there is a faint impression of a textile on the sculpture that indicates that this figure was originally meant to be dressed, further indicating that the torso patterning is body decoration. The holes across the top of the head indicate that along with her dress, she would have been adorned with perhaps a feather headdress or other head ornament.

…and something else

The decoration of the body paint on the standing figure's torso may just look like irregular splotches of white on a dark background, but Dr. Rebecca Stone has noted that the spots, along with the wide, toothy mouth painted over her actual mouth, likely reference the whale shark. Stone has also pointed out that the white strip down the back of the figure's torso echoes the white line of dots that can highlight the edge of the shark's dorsal fin. The whale shark is the largest living species of fish, with an average length of 32 feet and weight of 20,000 pounds. Their mouths can be up to 4.9 feet wide, and are filled with tiny teeth and filters for feeding on plankton and very small fish. As they are not predators, their attitude towards humans has historically been one of docile indifference.



Figure **4.2.10.3**: Whale shark in frontal view (photo: **Derek Keats**, CC BY 2.0)

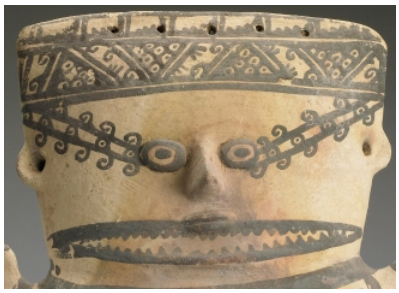


Figure **4.2.10.4**: detail, 1200–1450, ceramic, 18 1/4 x 11 3/4 x 5 inches (**Michael C. Carlos Museum**)

These whale shark attributes, layered over her human body, could be indications that this figure is being depicted as a ritual specialist transforming into a spiritual alter ego to travel into the spirit world, and whose animal self is the whale shark. While the whale shark is not a fierce predator like a jaguar, harpy eagle, or caiman — apex predators that are commonly associated with ritual transformation in Andean art — they are formidable in size, and are able to move from the surface of the water to depths of several thousand feet, which may have been thought of as an ability to travel between this world and the underworld, just as ritual specialists could travel between this world and the next. It is also possible that the woman's body paint marks her as a member of a clan or other lineage group associated with the whale shark, perhaps claiming it as an ancestor.

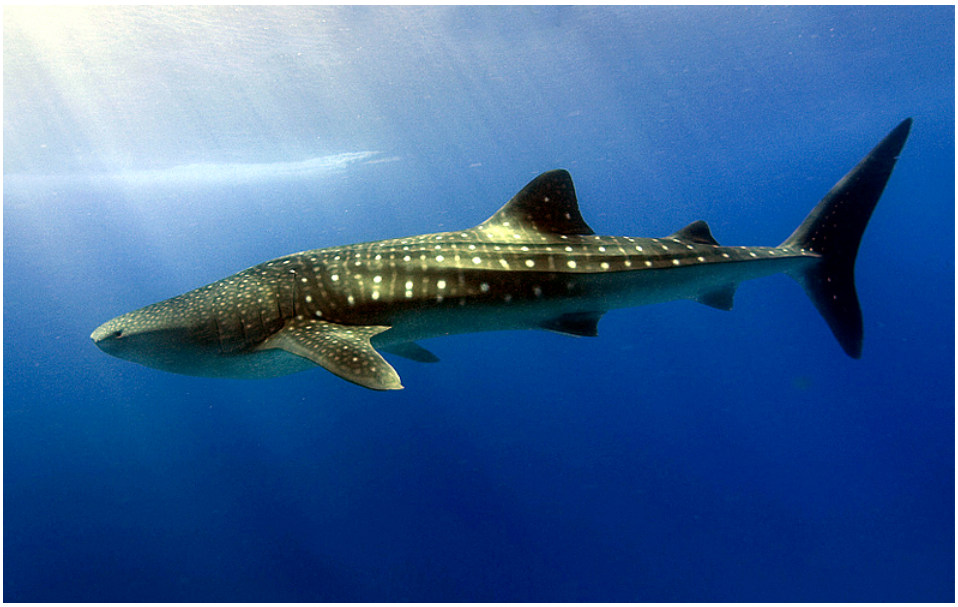


Figure **4.2.10.5**: Profile view of a whale shark (photo: **Shiyam ElkCloner**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Female whale sharks can produce large litters of pups, perhaps also linking them with fertility in the minds of the Chancay people, and making this the spiritual power that the whale shark (as spiritual alter ego or as lineage ancestor) was thought to wield. Her wide, staring eyes may allude to trance or spiritual sight (the ability to see into the spirit world), but they also dovetail with the whale shark's ability to roll its eyes back and pull them into its head, which must have made a strong impression on the Chancay people who witnessed it. The blending of human and animal traits in this figure shows us that the Chancay people were keen observers of nature, and that their beliefs were combined with what they knew about the natural world.

Additional resources:

Rebecca R. Stone, *Art of the Andes: From Chavín to Inca* (London: Thames & Hudson 2012)

Rebecca R. Stone, *The Jaguar Within: Shamanic Trance in Ancient Central and South American Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011)

Rebecca R. Stone and William B. Size, *Seeing with New Eyes: Highlights of the Michael C. Carlos Museum Collection of Art of the Ancient Americas* (Atlanta: Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, 2002)

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SECTION OVERVIEW

4.2.11: Chimú culture

4.2.11.1: Introduction to the Chimú culture

4.2.11.2: Chan Chan

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4.2.11.1: Introduction to the Chimú culture

by DR. SARAHH SCHER

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Figure **4.2.11.1.1**: Wall of the main plaza of the *ciudadela* Nik An in Chan Chan, capitol of Chimor, Peru, c. 950-1470 (photo: **Kevstan**, CC BY-SA 3.0)



Figure **4.2.11.1.2**: Map of the Chimor kingdom at its largest extent (**Huhsunqu,** CC BY-SA 2.5)

Following the decline of the **Moche** on the north coast of Peru, there arose two cultures in their place. One was the Sicán (or Lambayeque), beginning around 750 in the northern part of the old Moche territory in the Lambayeque and La Leche river valleys. The other was the Chimú, who began to flourish around 950 in the Moche valley (around the Moche River) and spread both north and south, eventually conquering the Sicán around 1375 and expanding almost as far as Lima. The Chimú kingdom, called Chimor, came to a close with their conquest by the Inka.

The capital of the Kingdom of Chimor was the city of Chan Chan, located in the Moche river valley, closer to the coast than the **Moche culture's** center at the Huacas del Sol and de la Luna. Chan Chan was composed of royal compounds, today referred to as *ciudadelas* or citadels. These citadels were elaborate, labyrinthine compounds surrounded by high walls made of adobe bricks covered in mud plaster and reliefs.



Figure **4.2.11.1.3**: View of the ruins of adobe walls in *ciudadela* Nik An, Chan Chan, capital of Chimor, Peru (photo: **Veronique Debord**, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Ciudadelas were composed of long, narrow corridors leading to spaces with different uses, such as large, open plazas with central platforms for ceremonies, storage facilities, and even large wells. It would be difficult for someone unfamiliar with the citadel to navigate their way through, and so the architectural design provided a kind of security in addition to the presence of guards and court officials.

The citadel was a royal household, audience chamber, and storage facility during the life of the king, and his tomb upon his death. Each new king would build a new citadel, as the old king was buried in his. A new king would begin from square one, needing to build his wealth and his citadel, along with his reputation. This may have been one reason for the steady expansion of the kingdom of Chimor: the need for new sources of wealth for new kings.



Figure **4.2.11.1.4**: Spondylus princeps shell (photo: **Kevin Walsh**, CC BY 2.0)

Chimú kings had access to high-quality textiles made with dyed camelid wool, gold- and silversmiths who made fantastical jewelry as well as delightful miniatures of everyday objects, and exotic feathers and shells. The feathers came from the cloud forests of the Andes as well as the Amazonian jungles that lay beyond, and *Spondylus* shells were brought from the warm waters of modern-day coastal Ecuador. The king of Chimor had in his retinue a servant called the *Fonga Sigde*, whose job it was to strew crushed *Spondylus* powder before the king as he walked, creating a “red carpet” for him to walk on and showing his extreme wealth and power.

Because of the legendary wealth of the kings of Chimor, the *cuidadelas* of Chan Chan were mercilessly looted beginning with the fall of the Chimú empire to the Inka around 1470, and very few objects have been recovered scientifically from the site. There is, however, a great deal of conservation and restoration work going on at the site, and other sites have yielded a wealth of Chimú objects, including the Moche pyramids of Huaca del Sol and Huaca de la Luna, which are less than three miles away. The Chimú may have seen these structures as belonging to revered ancestors, and therefore spiritually powerful and an appropriate place for their own dead.



Figure 4.2.11.1.5: Chimú tunic with fringed hem and bird design, 1300–1470, Peru, camelid fiber, cotton, 49.5 x 113 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Clothed in glory



Figure 4.2.11.1.6: Chimú feathered tunic, 15th–early 17th century, Peru, cotton, feathers, 69.9 × 68.6 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Chimú tunics varied in quality from plain, undyed cotton in natural colors to brilliantly-colored dyed camelid wool, (above) and eye-catching, exotic feathered tunics (left). Both of the tunics shown here feature bird designs, but the one above is heavily abstracted. The bird can be seen inside the large pink diamond shapes, reduced mainly to a large beak, round head with its eye, and two triangles for the body and tail. Heavily geometric designs like this one were common in Chimú textiles, although some are more naturalistic. The feathered tunic's birds are easier to see. They were created by carefully tying rows of trimmed feathers to a plain textile backing. Despite their relative clarity, they are still similar in shape to those in the textile tunic. The plainest textiles would have been worn by the common people, with more elaborate creations like the ones seen here worn by the elites. The king was entitled to wear the most luxurious articles of clothing, distinguishing him from everyone else.



Figure **4.2.11.1.7**: Top: Chimú feathered crown, 14th–15th century, Peru, paradise tanager and macaw feathers, cotton, skin, cane, copper, 26 cm high (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**) Bottom: Paradise tanager (photo: **DickDaniels**, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Feathers were also used to decorate crowns. The conical shape would be constructed of a basketry base, then decorated with feathers and other ornaments (in this case with copper bands at the top and bottom of the base). Art historians have identified the feathers as coming from the paradise tanager and the macaw, both birds that live in the dense tropical jungles to the east of the Andes mountains. The brilliant colors and exotic origins of the feathers signaled the ruler's ability to procure luxury items from far away.

Pots that whistle

Chimú ceramics are very different from those of the Moche that preceded them. They are less sophisticated in execution, and usually are not painted, relying solely on modeled form and surface textures for their decoration.

The vessel below is a double chamber type that is common to Chimú, where two hollow forms are joined by a tube at the bottom and a strap handle at the top, with a more or less cylindrical spout sticking straight up from one chamber. In some cases, the vessel has been engineered so that pouring liquid out of it or sloshing the liquid around inside it will force air through a whistle inside one chamber, causing the pot to make a sound when it is used (audio of this vessel whistling can be found **here**)**.** These vessels were fired in a kiln deprived of oxygen (referred to as a "reducing atmosphere"), causing the iron compounds in the clay to turn black. The general term for Andean ceramics made this way is "blackware."



Figure **4.2.11.1.8**: Chimú whistling jar, 1000–1476, Peru, mold-form clay, 16 x 9.5 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Glittering regalia

Chimú metalsmiths made many different kinds of objects. The earspools seen below would have been worn by a ruler or very high-ranking noble. They depict a man, probably a king, holding a beaker and a feather fan, carried on a litter by other figures. He wears a large headdress topped with a broad crescent of feathers, with a stepped ornament at the center. He wears earspools and a tunic with a fringed hem. Trapezoidal sequins dangle from wire loops on the surface of the earring, and would have shimmered as the wearer moved, adding further splendor to the object.



Figure **4.2.11.1.9**: Pair of Chimú earspools, 12th–15th century, Peru, gold, 13.5 cm in diameter (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)



Figure **4.2.11.1.10**: Left: Chimú beaker, 14th–15th century, Peru, silver, 19.7 x 13.3 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) Right: Miniature panpipes, 13th–15th century, Peru, silver, 2.7 x 5.6cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Metalsmiths also made silver and gold beakers, similar to those made by the Sicán. The figure in the beaker seen here holds a tunic with a bird design. The Chimú also made miniature metal versions of objects—household goods, musical instruments, even fruits. The tiny (2.7 x 5.6 cm!) panpipes to the right would have been included in a tomb as a precious, more durable version of an instrument normally made of reed.

In the ultimate statement of luxury, rulers also had silver versions of ceramic vessels made for them. The one below depicts a ruler seated on a throne that is decorated with birds, waves, and a supernatural figure, similar to thrones and adobe reliefs found at Chan Chan. Two attendant figures are seated below him. The design is repeated on the other side. The ruler figure is larger than those below him, emphasizing his power just as much as the elaborate repoussé that defines the throne. One subject figure on each side is carrying a bag, perhaps filled with tribute for the king of Chimor. The stirrup spout for the vessel shows that the Chimú continued some elements of Moche style.



Figure **4.2.11.1.11**: Chimú bottle depicting a throne with figures, 1300–1500, Peru, silver, 23.5 x 11.1 x 16.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Treasures from the ocean

Chimú jewelry included not only metals and beads of precious stone but also shell. The red-orange *Spondylus* shell that was crushed for the king to walk on was also used to make beads, as were other shells, which produced purple, yellow, and white beads. The wrist ornament below is one of a pair, to be worn like cuffs. The rich colors echo those of high-status dyed textiles and exotic feathers. A ruler wearing these cuffs, a brilliantly colored tunic, a tall, colorful crown, and shiny gold earspools must certainly have been an intimidating sight, inspiring awe of the power of Chimor in all who witnessed him.



Figure **4.2.11.1.12**: Chimú beaded wrist ornament, 14th–15th century, Peru, shell, cotton, 15.3 cm long (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

The conquest of the Kingdom of Chimor by the Inka around 1470 brought the age of luxury on the coast to an end. The artists and craftsmen of Chimor were taken to **Cusco** to make elite goods for the Inka nobles, and the *ciudadelas* were sacked and plundered. Further looting would take place over the centuries, leaving only the massive adobe architecture as a reminder of the might of the Chimú kings.

Additional resources:

Music in the Ancient Andes from The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Birds of the Andes from The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Architectural Models from the Ancient Andes from The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Alana Cordy-Collins, “Fonga Sigde, shell purveyor to the Chimu kings,” in M.E. Moseley and A. Cordy-Collins, eds., *Kingship and Statecraft in Chimor* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990), pp. 393-418.

Joanne Pillsbury, “The Thorny Oyster and the Origins of Empire: Implications of Recently Uncovered Spondylus Imagery from Chan Chan, Peru,” *Latin American Antiquity*, vol. 7, no. 4 (1996), pp. 313-340.

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4.2.11.2: Chan Chan

- by **UNESCO**

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The Chimu Kingdom, with Chan Chan as its capital, reached its apogee in the 15th century, not long before falling to the Incas. The planning of this huge city, the largest in pre-Columbian America, reflects a strict political and social strategy, marked by the city's division into nine 'citadels' or 'palaces' forming autonomous units.

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4.2.12: Sicán culture Inverse-Face Beaker

by DR. SARAHH SCHER *and* **DR. BETH HARRIS**

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Video **4.2.12.1**: Inverse-Face Beaker, 10th-11th century, Sicán (Lambayeque), Peru, gold, 20 x 18.1 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Key points:

- The Sicán culture was located on the north coast of Peru, and is sometimes referred to as Lambayeque.
- We have lost a significant amount of knowledge of Sicán culture due to systematic looting and grave-robbing. These looted objects were smuggled out of Peru and many find their way to private collections and museums in North America and Europe.
- This inverse-face beaker, made of hammered gold, shows a face in a position that would have been upside-down when it was used. This inversion may suggest the underworld, or contact with spirit forces.

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Donna Yates, Batán Grande on Trafficking Culture

Izumi Shimada, “Sicán Elite Tombs and Their Broader. Implications” (Institute of Archaeology, University College London, 1992)

Izumi Shimada, “Precious Metal Objects of the Middle Sicán,” *Scientific American* (2005)

This page titled 4.2.12: Sicán culture Inverse-Face Beaker is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Dr. Sarahh Scher and Dr. Beth Harris, "Inverse-Face Beaker," in Smarthistory, November 21, 2017, accessed November 19, 2020, https://smarthistory.org/what-the-bulldozers-left-behind-reclaiming-sicans-past-2/.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

4.2.13: Inka

In less than two centuries, the Inka developed a powerful empire and a complex set of artistic traditions.

1438 - 1532 C.E.

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4.2.13.1: Introduction to the Inka

by **DR. SARAHH SCHER**

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The Inka, like the **Aztecs (or Mexica)** of **Mesoamerica**, were relative newcomers to power at the time of European contact. When Francisco Pizarro took the Inka ruler (or Sapa Inka) Atahualpa hostage in 1532, the Inka empire had existed fewer than two centuries. Also like the Aztecs, the Inka had developed a complex culture deeply rooted in the traditions that came before them. Their textiles, ceramics, metal- and woodwork, and architecture all reflect the materials, environment, and cultural traditions of the Andes, as well as the power and ambitions of the Inka empire.



Figure **4.2.13.1.1**: Along the Inka road system or Qhapaq Ñan today, Pucará del Aconquija, Argentina (photo: **Ministerio de Cultura de la Nación Argentina**, CC BY-SA 2.0)

An Empire of Roads—and Cords



Figure **4.2.13.1.2**: Map of the Qhapaq Ñan (Inka road system) (map: **Manco Capac**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The Inka empire at its greatest extent sprawled from the modern-day city of Quito in Ecuador to Santiago in Chile. The Inka called their empire *Tawantinsuyu*, usually translated as “Land of the Four Quarters” in their language, Quechua. At the center of the empire was the capital city of Cusco. The empire was connected by a road system—the Qhapaq Ñan—that was used for official Inka business only. Soldiers, officials, and llama caravans carrying food, ceramics, textiles, and other items used the roads, and so did message runners. These runners were stationed at regular intervals along the roads, so that messages could travel swiftly throughout the empire.

However, the messages that these runners carried were not written in the way we would expect. They were not made of marks on paper, stone, or clay. They were, instead, encoded into a knotted string implement called a *quipu*. Our knowledge of quipu remains limited. We have been able to determine only some of the ways that the quipu were used. Researchers continue to investigate this unique system of communication. The knots along the various cords recorded numbers, so that a knot with 5 loops could represent the number 5. The position on the cord could then determine what the number meant in a decimal system, so that a 5-loop knot could represent the number 5, or 50, or 500, and so forth.

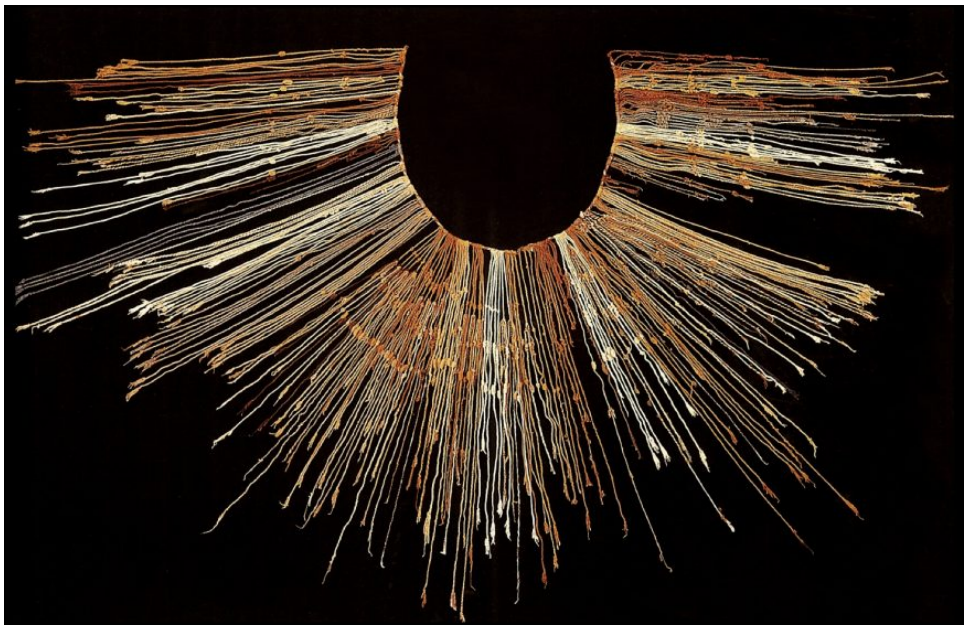


Figure 4.2.13.1.3: Inka *quipu* (Museo Larco, Lima, Peru)

The cords of *quipus* are frequently composed of different natural and dyed colors, but the reason or meaning behind those colors so far eludes scholars. The numbers encoded in the *quipus* helped the Inka keep track of the tax-paying obligations of their subjects, record population numbers, harvest yields, herds of livestock, and other important information. Also recorded on the *quipu* were stories—histories of the Inka and other social information. However, scholars today still don't know how that information was encoded into the *quipu*.

More valuable than gold

Quipus and other Inka fiber objects were made from yarn spun from alpaca fibers. Llamas and alpacas are the domesticated relatives of the wild camelids of the Andes, the guanaco and vicuña, and all of them are related to the camel. Alpacas and llamas were important to the functioning of the Inka empire, but they had been essential to the lives of Andeans for millennia. Llamas provided meat as well as acting as beasts of burden—an adult male llama can carry up to 100 pounds. Alpacas provided soft, strong wool for textiles and rope-making.



Figure **4.2.13.1.4**: All-T'oqapu Tunic, Inka, 1450–1540, camelid fiber and cotton, 90.2 x 77.15 cm (Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C.)

When the Spaniards encountered the Inka, they were confused by the fact that they considered textiles more valuable than gold. Textiles were integral to the structure of the Inka empire. *Acllas*, or "chosen women," were kept in seclusion by the Inka to weave fine textiles (called *qompi*). These textiles mostly took the form of tunics and mantles. Some were distributed as high-status gifts by the Sapa Inka to cement the loyalty of local lords throughout the empire. Others were burned as sacrifices to Inti, the sun god and divine ancestor of the Inka ruling class. This shows us just how highly the Inka regarded textiles: they were fit for a god.

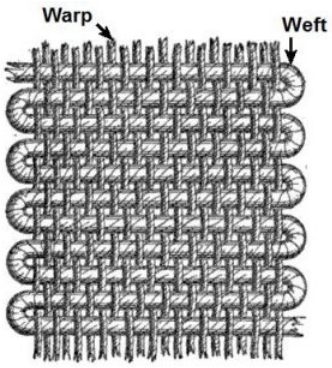


Figure **4.2.13.1.5**: Diagram of warp and weft, (image: **Ryj**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The *acllas* were not the only ones who wove. People of all ages spun, dyed, and wove textiles. The quality of wool, the fineness of its spinning, the relative rarity of the dye, and the skill of its weaving all determined the value of a textile. Some kinds of textiles were reserved for nobility or for warriors. The super-fine wool of wild guanacos and vicuñas was reserved only for the Sapa Inka's garments.

A textile is created using a grid of warp (usually vertical) threads, which act as the support or skeleton of the fabric, and weft (usually horizontal) threads, which are passed under and over the warp threads. Where the weft threads cover the warp creates the surface design of the textile, somewhat like pixels in a computer image. The "pixel size" is determined by thread fineness. Decoration on Inka textiles was based in this grid structure, resulting in geometric designs.

Inka metalwork

Despite the value they placed on textiles, the Inka did also create works out of gold and silver, but unfortunately, most were melted down by the Spaniards for ease of transport, or destroyed because they were thought to be idols. Depictions of people, animals, and plants have survived. The plants tend to be quite naturalistic, while the people and animals are more abstracted. Human figures

would likely originally have been dressed in miniature clothing. Figurines uncovered at the sites of human sacrifices on remote mountain peaks have been found dressed in finely-woven textiles with elaborate feather headdresses.



Figure **4.2.13.1.6**: Left: Female figurine, 1400–1533, Inka, silver-gold alloy, 14.9 x 3.5 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**); right: Camelid figurine, 1400-1533, Inka, alloys of silver, gold and copper, 5.1 cm high (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Vessels for feasting

Ceramics were also important to the Inka empire. Large vessels were used to store foods such as corn and dried alpaca meat in warehouses along the Qhapaq Ñan, which could feed soldiers and imperial officials, or be distributed to the people in times of hardship. Big vessels could also be used to cook food and brew corn beer (*asua* or *chicha*) for feasting.



Figure 4.2.13.1.7: Storage jar or *urpu*, 15th–early 16th century, Inka, ceramic, 21.9 x 18.8 x 14.6 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Figure 4.2.13.1.8: *Keru* vessel, 15th–early 16th century, Inka, wood, 14.6 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Feasting (the ceremonial consumption of food and drink) was a method of cementing social and political ties, and the nobility were expected to provide feasts for large crowds on important occasions. Vessels called *urpus* were used for transport, storage, and *asua*-brewing. Some are over four feet tall. They have large handles on their sides and a thick protrusion from the base of the neck. A rope could be looped between the handles and over this protrusion, making it possible to carry on the back of a person or llama. The pointed base could be pushed into the ground to hold the vessel steady.

Asua would be drunk out of ***kerus***, flared beakers made of wood, ceramic, or metal, depending on the status of the drinker. *Kerus* were often made in pairs, reflecting the social implications of drinking *asua* as a part of feasting. One *keru* from each pair would be larger than the other. The person of higher rank would drink from the larger *keru* and offer *asua* to the person of lower rank in the smaller vessel. By drinking together, they cemented the reciprocal obligations that required nobles to provide *asua* and food to the people, and those below them to provide taxes and loyalty to the rulers of the empire. The *keru* shown here is made from wood, and like the *urpu* vessel, has geometric designs.



Figure **4.2.13.1.9**: Twelve-sided stone, Cusco, c. 1440-1540 (photo: Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Perhaps the most well-known Inka art is their architecture. The Inka built everywhere they conquered, and their architectural style helped mark areas as belonging to the empire. Inka architecture is based on stone walls, fitted together in a very distinctive way. Instead of cutting stones into blocks and then laying those blocks together in rows, in some cases, the Inka would fit individual stones of varying sizes and shapes against each other, fitting them together like a puzzle. The stones would fit so closely that the Spanish remarked that a person could not even insert a knife blade between them.

Each stone was shaped so that it had a slight bulge or a slight indentation on the side where it would lay against another block. These bulges and indentations would slot together, holding the stones in place. It also allowed the stones to shift if they needed to —and they did need to, because Peru is seismically active and has frequent earthquakes.



Figure **4.2.13.1.10**: Stone doorways, Qoricancha, Cusco (photo: **Jean Robert Thibault**, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The doorways, windows, and niches placed in Inka walls have a signature vertical trapezoid shape, a recognizable and distinctive aspect of their architecture. Sometimes referred to as a keyhole shape, it is thought that this form is also something that helps stabilize the architecture during earthquakes. The roofs of these buildings were made of wood and thatch.



Figure 4.2.13.1.12: The terraces of Ollantaytambo, Peru (photo: **Ivan Mlinaric**, CC BY 2.0)

The Inka also built large architectural ensembles like the site of Ollantaytambo, which was a waystation along the Qhapaq Ñan. It consisted of storehouses, living quarters, and a series of terraces built into the side of a mountain. In most cases, the Inka used terraces as a way to stabilize mountainside soil for farming, but at Ollantaytambo they were planted solely with flowers—a show of the empire's power through its ability to use stone, manpower, and water to do nothing but create a lavish and pleasant leisure space.

Inka traditions survive

With their defeat at the hands of the Spaniards, the Inka lost their place as divinely-descended leaders of their people. However, Inka nobles petitioned for and often won the right to be treated as elites in colonial Spanish society, and celebrated their heritage at Christian festivals, such as **Corpus Christi**. The privileges the nobles received did not translate to the rest of the population, though, and many people were deprived of their lands and personal freedom, required to pay taxes through often arduous labor.

Rebellions vying for a return to Inka rule occurred throughout the colonial period, the last of which took place in the 1780s. Peru finally achieved independence from Spanish rule in the 1820s, establishing a republican government. Modern residents of Cusco and its surrounding areas are still proud of their Inka heritage, and modern religious celebrations often incorporate parts of native culture into Christian practices.

Additional resources:

Qhapaq Ñan UNESCO World Heritage Site page

Dualism in Andean Art from The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Timeline of Art History

The Great Inka Road: Engineering an Empire from the Smithsonian

The Lost Inca Empire from PBS

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4.2.13.2: Inka stone vessels

by **THE BRITISH MUSEUM**

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A huge empire

From their capital, Cuzco, in the central Peruvian Andes, the Inka created a huge empire reaching over 2,400 miles along the length of the Andes. The supreme head of state was the king, considered a living god ruling by divine right and the royal family controlled important areas of government such as the army.



Figure 4.2.13.2.1: Miniature gold llama figurine, c. 1500 C.E., Inka, gold, 6.3 x 1 cm, Peru © Trustees of the British Museum

The empire's economy was based on taxed labour. People contributed part of their labour to the state and the state-controlled religion. People farmed and herded animals, worked in mines and produced specialized goods such as clothing and pottery. The surplus was stored in numerous warehouses (*tambos*) for use by the army and state laborers.

Inka colonists were settled in newly conquered territories as a way of managing subject peoples and spreading Inka language and customs. Local lords were enlisted into the system of government to maintain order in their provinces, rebellious communities were resettled in the Inka heartland.

Inka engineers and laborers built a network of thousands of miles of roads and bridges to connect the empire. They constructed administrative centers, storehouses and military bases. A system of runners carrying information recorded on knotted strings called *quipus* also linked the capital to the regions.

Cuzco: the center of the Inka world

The **capital of Cuzco** was the center of the Inka world. Radiating from the central plaza the four main Inka roads led to the four corners of the empire. A sacred city of temples, royal palaces and residences for housing carefully-preserved bodies of dead rulers, early histories say the Inka likened Cuzco to the body of a puma (wild mountain cat), a symbol of Inka royalty.

The most sacred building in Cuzco was the Coricancha, a temple devoted to the sun, the main Inka deity. Its stone walls were covered in sheets of gold to reflect the sun's light.

From this temple a system of sight-lines (*ceques*) radiated outwards dividing the surrounding landscape like slices of a pie. Over 300 shrines were situated at sacred places along these lines and there formed part of a sophisticated agricultural calendar.

Two carved stone vessels

This massive circular ritual vessel or *cocha* is sculpted from a single block of black volcanic basalt from the imperial capital Cusco. This is one of a small number of surviving vessels of this size that were probably housed in the Coricancha—the Temple of the Sun—or adjacent sacred buildings. It was probably used as a receptacle for liquid offerings, perhaps simple to hold water and create a still, reflective surface regarded as an eye seeing into the underworld.



Figure **4.2.13.2.2**: Stone ritual vessel with snake motifs, late 15th century, Inka Colonial, basalt, 15 x 40 cm, Peru © Trustees of the British Museum

The tightly nestled concentric coils of the snake's body mimics moving water. Ten serpent heads are symmetrically arranged around the vessel rim in a pattern resembling the ceque system which was used by the Inkas to organize space in Cusco and the land beyond.



Figure **4.2.13.2.3**: Inka carved stone vessel, late 15th century, basalt, 18 x 50 x 67 cm, Inka Colonial, Cuzco © Trustees of the British Museum

Inka ritual vessels of a similar size are usually carved with spiraling serpents and the example above is no different. But this piece is unique as it is the only known example which is inscribed with figurative scenes. It is thought that these were applied in the early colonial period.



Figure 4.2.13.2.4: Solar disk flanked by two figures (detail), *Inka carved stone vessel*, late 15th century, basalt, 18 x 50 x 67 cm, Inka Colonial, Cuzco © Trustees of the British Museum

On one side a large central solar disc with a face is flanked by two standing figures with their hands to their chest. Directly beneath the solar disc are two figures kneeling opposite each other with their hands clasped in front of them. Between them is a small diamond-shaped object with a face. The small cult figure appears to be the earthly manifestation or representative of the solar deity.



Figure 4.2.13.2.5: Male and female figures (detail), *Inka carved stone vessel*, late 15th century, basalt, 18 x 50 x 67 cm, Inka Colonial, Cuzco © Trustees of the British Museum

On the other side, a complementary scene has a male and female figure at the center—possibly the Inka and his queen—who are the focus for a procession comprising a woman with a spindle, a hunchback and llamas being led in from either side.

The scenes are likely to represent key times in the Inka agricultural calendar, perhaps planting or harvest festivals.

The British Museum's collection includes both Inka (1400-1531 C.E.) and Inka-colonial (sixteenth – eighteenth century) objects. These range from large stone offering vessels (*cocha*) to miniature gold and silver figurines that were once used as offerings to the mountain deities in Inka state rituals. There are also examples of rare ceremonial pottery vessels fashioned in the form of an Andean foot-plough (*chaquitaclla*) and used for liquid offerings. After the Spanish conquest native artisans continued to create tapestries and wooden drinking vessels with new kinds of materials and motifs.

Suggested readings:

T.N. D'Altroy, *The Inkas* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2003).

T.N. D'Altroy, "Transitions in Power: Centralisation of Wanka Political Organisation Under Inka Rule," *Ethnohistory*, 34 (1987), 78–102.

T.N. D'Altroy and C.A. Hastorf, "The Distribution and Contents of Inka State Storehouses in the Xauxa Region of Peru," *American Antiquity*, 49 (1984), pp. 334–349.

T. Earle, "Wealth Finance in the Inka Empire: Evidence from the Calchaqui Valley, Argentina," *American Antiquity*, 59 (1994), pp. 443–460.

D. Guillet, "Terracing and Irrigation in the Peruvian Highlands," *Current Archaeology*, 28 (1987), pp. 409–430.

H. Lechtman, “Andean Value Systems and the Development of Prehistoric Metallurgy,” *Technology and Culture* 25 (1984), pp. 1–36.

S.K. Lothrop, “Gold and Silver from Southern Peru and Bolivia,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 67 (1937), pp. 305–325.

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C. McEwan, S. La Neice and N. Meeks, “The Gilded Image: Precolombian Gold from South and Central America,” *Minerva*, 7.3 (1996), pp. 10–16.

M.E. Moseley, *The Inkas and their Ancestors* (London, 1992).

J. Reinhard, “Sacred Mountains: an Ethno-archaeological Study of High Andean Ruins,” *Mountain Research and Development*, 5 (1985), pp. 299–317.

P.W. Stahl, “Pre-Columbian Andean Animal Domesticates at the Edge of Empire,” *World Archaeology*, 34 (2003), pp. 470–483.

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4.2.13.3: The Inka khipu

by **DR. KYLIE E. QUAVE**

Page ID
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Figure **4.2.13.3.1**: Khipu (quipu) fragment with subsidiary cords, Inka, 1400–1570, cotton and indigo dye, 66.04 × 101.28 × 1.91 cm (**Dallas Museum of Art**)

The **Inka** of the **Andean region** of South America developed the largest native empire in the Americas, a region that included mountains, jungles, and desert coasts. They built impressive monuments and ruled diverse peoples, yet they did this without a way of writing. What the Inka did use was the *khipu* (or *quipu* in Spanish), a knotted string record-keeping device, leading some people to ask: *what really is writing anyway?*

Writing without words

Inka khipus are bundles of woolen cords tied together with knots added to them to encode information. Some are all a natural beige cotton color, while others feature elaborate color combinations. Khipus are read from the looped, left side of a thick cord to the loose right side, with thinner knotted cords hanging down like long fringe. They were made, kept, and read by *khipukamayoq*, administrators who helped to rule the Inka empire by recording and keeping the information contained in the khipu.



Figure **4.2.13.3.2**: Khipu, Inka, 1400–1532, cotton, 39 x 77 cm (The Brooklyn Museum)

Similar recording systems made of fiber cords appear to have been used prior to the emergence of the Inka (pre-1300s C.E.) until well after the dissolution of the Inka empire (after the 1530s C.E.). In the native language of Quechua, “khipu” means “knot.” But figuring out whether these knots should be considered a form of writing cannot be answered until people today learn how to read the khipus of the past. Writing is graphic representation of a spoken language—symbols that can be translated into meaning originally expressed in speech. Some scholars have called the khipu “writing without words.” What is clear, however, based on centuries of research by mathematicians, textile artists, anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, and others, is that khipus recorded and conveyed complex information of many types. Today, we are able to read the numbers knotted into most khipus, even if we don’t always know what they are counting.

Khipus recorded information about taxes and inventories, but also about time and calendric cycles. They reportedly recorded laws, judicial proceedings, and perhaps historical narratives. Even though the khipukamayoq read them in Inka times, these ancient objects cannot be fully read today. Some khipus have been described by khipu makers living in the 20th century who preserved local methods of recording, but those methods do not seem to apply to all Inka khipus.



Figure **4.2.13.3.3**: Khipu, Inka, 1400–1532, cotton, 39 x 77 cm (The Brooklyn Museum)

One problem is that khipu literacy was not accurately documented from the 1500s forward, which was the time in which Europeans attempted to record Inka histories after the Spanish invasion and conquest began in the 1530s. The Indigenous chronicler Guaman Poma de Ayala wrote in a 1615 letter to the King of Spain that "with the strings they governed their entire dominion," and he exalted the khipukamayoqs for their ingenuity and skill.

Yet the Spanish Colonial chroniclers who described the khipu and its functions contradicted each other. Some claimed they were composed of letters, while others claimed they were mnemonic (memory) devices without a consistent method of encoding information. The chronicler Garcilaso de la Vega (a descendant of both Inkas and Spaniards) wrote in the early 1600s that the khipu recorded numbers—not words—from which the record-keepers memorized historical events. He also wrote that some read the khipu to recount poetry and allegories. Amid these inconsistent characterizations by early chroniclers, the Spanish campaigns to extirpate idolatry resulted in them publicly burning some of the Inka khipus in 1583.

More recently, many researchers have agreed that khipus seem to not have a single, standardized language system. However, they have identified some groups of khipus that have matching segments in which groups of cords have the same or similar knotted numbers from one khipu to another. These khipu may have counted local people or goods repeatedly, and may have been encoded in the same way from one khipu to another in that place. If there was not an empire-wide recording system, then maybe khipukamayoqs from single villages or regions did use the same coding system.

The nature of these khipu groups demonstrates that administration and accounting must have been at least one purpose of khipu. Such records may have included censuses, labor taxation, troop movement, storehouse counts, and more. The Inka structure for governing peoples in their provinces organized them into bureaucratic units based on fives and tens (such as 50, 100, 500, etc.), often called decimal administration. Khipu structure and organization shows how they could have been tools for counting and administering populations: a khipu's knots are organized vertically by 1s, 10s, 100s, and more. Also, pendant cords (hanging from the main cord) are often grouped in fives and tens. With different ethnic groups speaking diverse languages across the vast Andes, a system to track and account for millions of people and their labor and goods would have been useful.

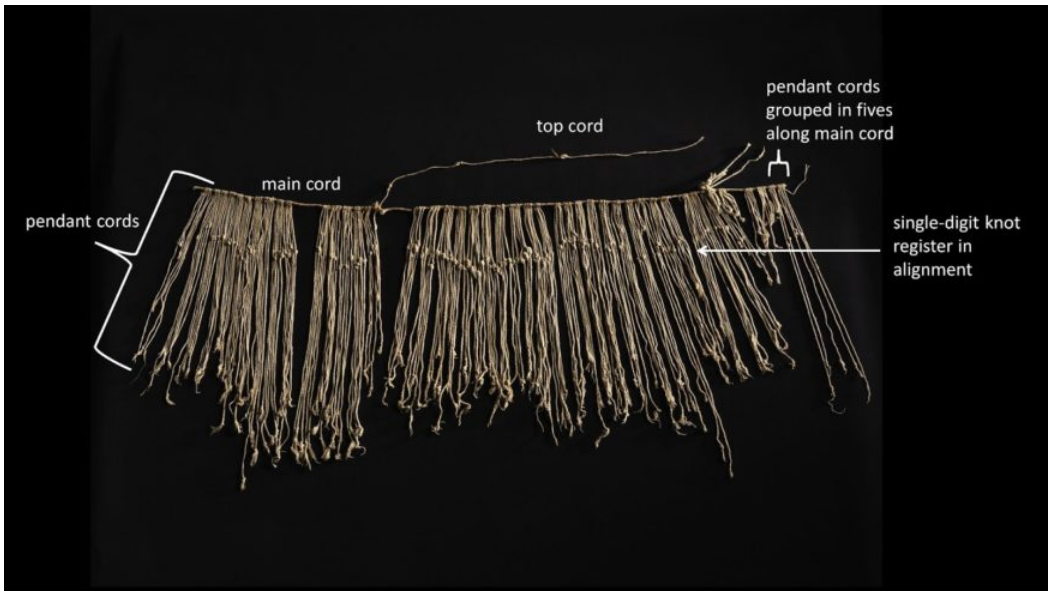


Figure **4.2.13.3.4**: Main elements of a khipu. 2002.1.118 (© Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University; photo: Bruce M. White, 2011)

Building an empire in string

The basic structure of a khipu most commonly consists of a main cord, pendants hanging from the main cord, as well as additional elements attached to pendants and main cord. The main cord is oriented horizontally, and one reads from the looped left side toward the loose right side of the main cord. Along its length, pendant strings are securely looped on to hang vertically downward. There may be one or more top cords, which would not hang downward but are rather tied on to sit upward if pulled away from the main cord. Many top cords summarize the information in the pendants, as their knots often represent the arithmetical sum of all the pendant cords hanging below.



Figure **4.2.13.3.5**: Example of multiple subsidiary pendants hanging from pendants (Dallas Museum of Art; photo: Dr. Kylie Quave)

Some pendant strings include subsidiary pendants also tied on to the original primary pendants that hang below the main cord—making up secondary, tertiary, and quaternary pendants, and so on. These subsidiary cords may be corrections, exceptions, or

subsets of information. Those who wrote and maintained khipus must have revised them at times, as some have bends in the pendant strings that suggest they were un-knotted or re-knotted.

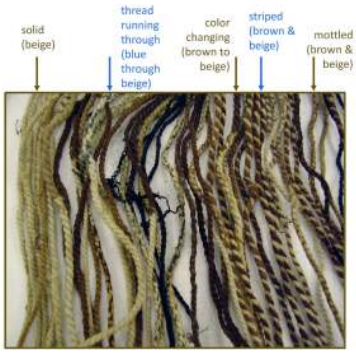


Figure **4.2.13.3.6**: Examples of color combinations from a khipu. Note that these pendants are all S-plied (Dallas Museum of Art; photo: Dr. Kylie Quave)

Khipus are most often made of camelid fiber, cotton, and other vegetal fibers that have been spun and plied. Both natural colors and colors achieved through dyes are found on khipus and other Andean textiles. Colored fibers are spun and plied together to make mottled or striped effects. Some khipu cords contain a single strand of a contrasting color, or the cord changes color mid-string. Spanish chroniclers writing in the 1500s and 1600s claimed that khipu colors held particular meanings, and researchers find it plausible that specific types of khipus each had their own suite of color symbols.

Once cords are prepared, the main cord and pendant cords are attached to each other. Pendants can be looped in one direction or another to attach, a decision that likely carries meaning within some khipus, just as the spin and ply directions of the cords likely carry meaning.

The knots tied onto khipu pendants can signify numerical and non-numerical information. There may be just one horizontal row (or register) of knots on pendant strings, but some khipus have several rows of aligned knots. Some of those rows of knots are organized in a decimal (or base-10 hierarchy), with the lowest row (farthest from the main cord) representing the 1s place, the next up as the 10s, then the 100s, the 1000s, and so on. Within each register, there are specific types of knots signifying numerical values. Today we count in a decimal system as well, but we use Arabic numerals. In our system, the ones place is to the right, and each digit goes up by a multiple of ten to the left (in the number 345, the 5 is in the ones place, the 4 in the tens place, and the 3 in the hundreds place). For the khipu, this decimal hierarchy goes from lowest row to highest row instead of right to left.

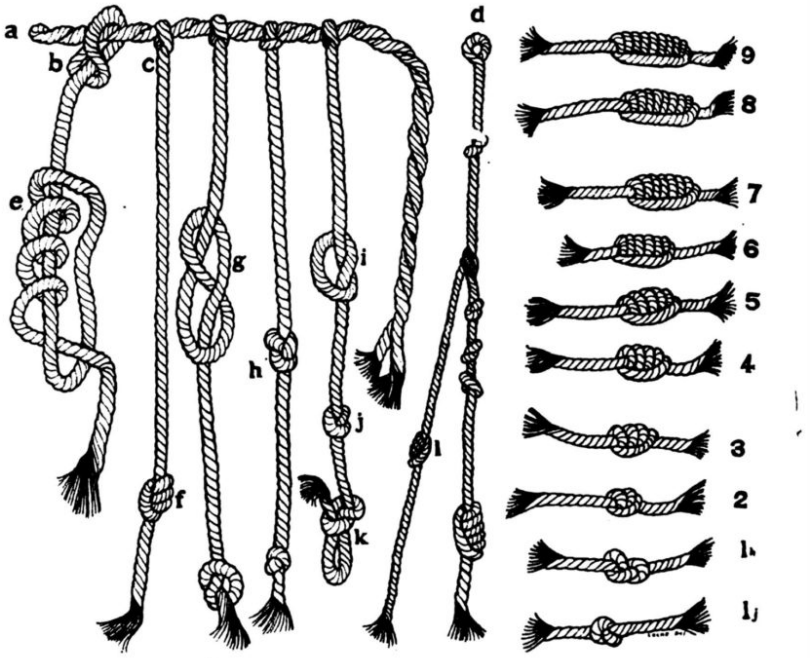


Fig. 1. Method of Tying Knots.

Figure **4.2.13.3.7**: Knots e-f are long knots (values 2-9), knots g-h are figure-eight knots (value 1), and knots i-j are single overhand knots (10s, 100s, etc.) Drawing of knot-tying methods from L. Leland Locke's landmark work *The Ancient Quipu or Peruvian Knot Record* (1923: fig. 1, American Museum of Natural History, New York).

Numerical khipus

Numerical value-signifying knots are formed in three ways. For single digits, they include: a "figure-8" knot for a value of "1"; or a "long knot", which includes two to nine twists around its cord for the values 2-9 (see the diagram above). To signify tens, hundreds, and more in a decimal system, khipus include single overhand knots. Just one overhand knot in the tens row would be a 10 value, while two or more overhand knots in a cluster would indicate 20 to 90. In the hundreds row, they would indicate 100, 200, and so on. Each row on a numerical khipu has a value of up to 9, 90, 900, and so forth. The total value of that pendant is found by adding each row. For example, in the diagram above, string d has a value of 135: there is a single overhand knot in the 100s row at the top (100), three single overhand knots in the second row (30), and a long knot with five turns in the lowest row (5).

Narrative khipus

Khipus that diverge from the decimal and numerical organization of knots are referred to as "narrative" khipu. These lead to complicated questions about how to read (and write) them. While it is possible these khipus functioned as mnemonic devices, there are alternative possibilities. One system could entail elements of the khipu translating to portions of words in Quechua, the language of Inka state business. Another system could mean that elements of a khipu encode something other than words, like a pictographic form of writing in string.

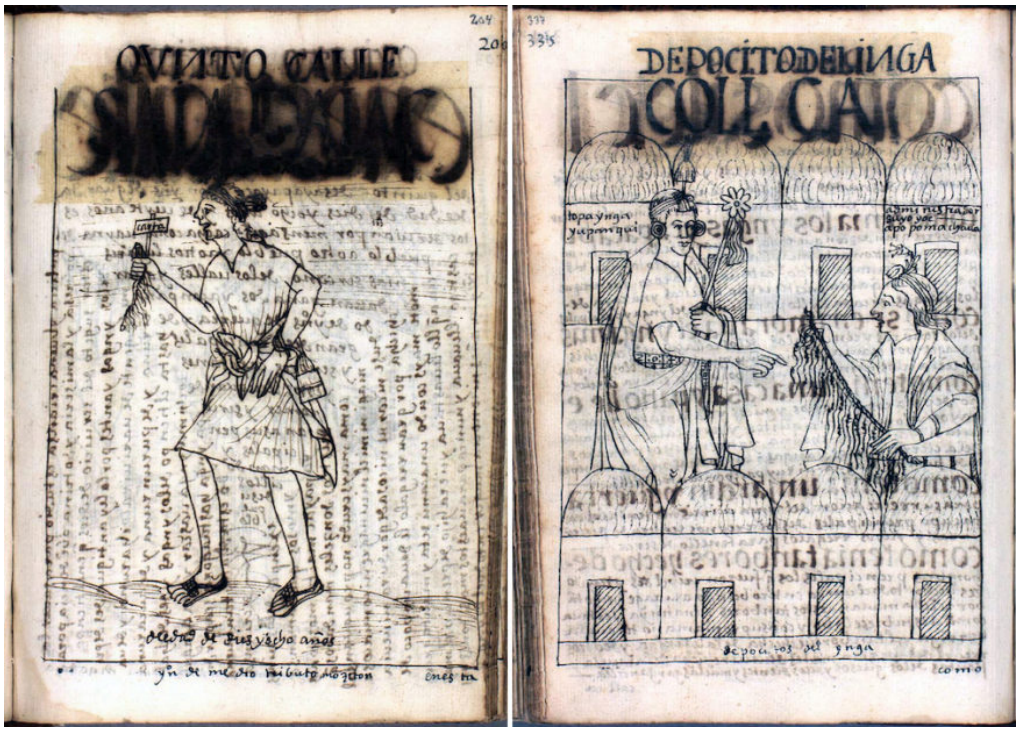


Figure 4.2.13.3.8: An Inka messenger carries a khipu in his hand (left), and a khipukamayoq and Inka ruler in front of storehouses (right), from Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, *The First New Chronicle and Good Government* (or *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno*), c. 1615, p. 202 [204] and p. 335 [337] (The Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen)

Khipukamayoq purportedly held the khipu code as a secret. Spanish chroniclers often described khipukamayoq as a special title passed from father to son. The chroniclers also described a system of governance in which official khipu records were produced in duplicate, with an archived copy sent to the capital of Cuzco. Drawings by the Indigenous writer Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala from the early 1600s show messengers carrying rolled up khipu across the Andes, and bureaucrats reading khipu accounts before imperial storehouses.



Figure 4.2.13.3.9: A woven Inka bag, inside which was found a fragmented khipu and loose pendant strings. This bag and its contents were recovered near modern Lima, Peru, as part of a group of mortuary goods likely belonging to an Inka bureaucrat (Logan Museum of Anthropology, Beloit College)

The future of the khipu

More than 600 khipus have been catalogued in detail for visual and statistical comparisons. The majority are found in museum and private collections, which means many have been separated from their original archaeological contexts. Archaeological khipus are not likely to survive in high-altitude regions, like the Inka capital of Cuzco in the high Andes, where organic fibers rarely survive within the earth. This presents another challenge to deciphering khipus.

However, khipus are not only found within the earth of archaeological sites or in art collections; they are still used in Andean communities today. The Indigenous descendants of the Inkas and the peoples they governed continue to live in the Andes. In the last 500 years since the Spanish invasion, khipus have been used to count flocks of animals and to track offerings and payments related to Catholic Masses and festivals. In some places, khipus have been created to accompany deceased loved ones into the afterlife. This tradition had been in decline, but resurged with the COVID-19 pandemic. Practitioners believe that the khipu animates the dead, and the rebirth of this tradition has brought comfort amid the grief of so much sudden loss.

Khipu makers may explain their ways of writing today, but those ways do not translate well for reading the Inkas' khipus. As khipus seem to have been key for managing a geographically large and extraordinarily diverse population of millions of people speaking multiple languages, determining how they functioned is essential if we want to understand the Inka empire.

Additional resources:

A Spanish and English bilingual book of essays and catalogue of khipus: Setlak, Magdalena, Viviana Moscovich, Sabine Hyland, and Lucrezia Milillo ***Quipus y Quipucamayoc. Codificación y Administración En El Antiguo Perú / Quipus and Quipucamayoc, Encoding and Administration in Ancient Peru*** (EY PERU/APUS GE, 2020)

Manny Medrano **explains what researchers know about khipus** (en español)

Video on khipu structure from MALI (Museo de Arte, Lima, Peru)

Ashok Khosla's ***Khipu Field Guide*** renders khipus into digital diagrams for comparison

More on the resurgence of khipus since 2020 from Sabine Hyland, Christine Lee, and Roberto Aldave Palacios

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4.2.13.4: City of Cusco

by **DR. SARAHH SCHER**

Page ID
181660



Figure **4.2.13.4.1**: The modern city of Cusco, overlooking the Plaza de Armas, Peru (photo: Michael and Kristine Senchyshyn, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

At the breath-taking elevation of 11,200 feet (roughly 3,400 m), the city of Cusco was not just the capital of Tawantinsuyu ("Land of the Four Quarters," the Inka name for their empire in their native language, Quechua). It was an *axis mundi*—the center of existence—and a reflection of Inka power. The city was divided into two sections, *hanan* (upper or high) and *hurin* (lower), which paralleled the social organization of Inka society into upper and lower moieties (social divisions). Cusco was further divided into quarters that reflected the four divisions of the empire, and people from those sections inhabited their respective quarters of the city. In this way, the city was a map in miniature of the entire Inka empire, and a way for the Inka rulers to explicitly display their power to shape and order that empire. Some scholars think that the city was deliberately laid out so that it was shaped like a puma, symbol of Inka might, but this is still under debate.



Figure **4.2.13.4.2**: Twelve-sided stone, Cusco, c. 1440-1540 (photo: Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The masonry of Cusco displays an understanding of stones as being like people, in that many different ones may fit together if they are properly organized. Each individual stone was pecked with tools and fitted to the one next to it, with the result that blocks will have a varied number of sides, such as the famous Twelve-Sided stone in the walls of Hatun Rumiyoq Street. Some sides of each stone were made to curve outward slightly, others to be slightly concave, so that the stones slotted together, while still allowing a small amount of movement. The ability to move a little was important in an area that is seismically active, protecting the walls from earthquakes.

The city hummed with activity, both secular and religious. Not only the Inka rulers and their nobles resided in Cusco. Local leaders from all sections of the empire also lived in Cusco—often compelled to do so as a means of controlling their home populations.

Girls and young women were drawn from across the empire to the capital to serve as cloistered *acllas* (“chosen women”): to weave fine cloth for gods and nobles and to make corn beer (*chicha*) for religious rituals, to serve gods in shrines, and in some cases to be given to Inka favorites in marriage. Young men were also brought to Cusco to be educated and raised in the Inka culture. When they returned to their homes, they would be valuable advocates for Inka traditions and power. In addition to the Inka gods and ancestor mummies kept in the capital, there were also the captured gods of subject peoples, brought there as another means of controlling their followers.

Qorikancha



Figure **4.2.13.4.3**: Remains of the Qorikancha, Inka masonry below Spanish colonial construction of the church and monastery of Santo Domingo, Cusco, Peru, c. 1440 (photo: Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

At the heart of *hurin* Cusco was the Qorikancha (“Golden House”), the most sacred shrine of the Inka, dedicated to the worship of the sun. While the Inka had many gods, they claimed descent from the sun, whom they called Inti, and held the sun’s worship above all others. The Qorikancha was the center point of the empire, and from it radiated imaginary lines, called *ceques*, which connected it to shrines throughout the Cusco valley. Rebecca Stone refers to the *ceques* as a “landscape calendar and cosmogram,” as the shrines were also a marker of time, with different noble families tending to and holding rituals at the shrines around the *ceque* system throughout the year.

After the conquest, the Qorikancha was one of many Inka shrines turned into a Christian holy space. The monastery and church of Santo Domingo were built around and on top of the original shrine, incorporating the old structure into the new one in a way that makes for a strange appearance today. Parts of the old temple are still visible, inside and out, alternating with Spanish Baroque architectural features (see image above).

The Qorikancha itself was renovated by the first emperor, Pachacuti Inka Yupanqui, after he had a mystical revelation that declared him a divine king. All of the doorways, windows, and wall niches of the Qorikancha were the distinctive Inka trapezoid shape, with doorways double-jambed (see image below) to signify the importance of the building.



Figure 4.2.13.4.4: Double-jambed door, Qorikancha, Cusco, c. 1440-1540 (photo: Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The exceptionally fine masonry of the Qorikancha was reserved for the most important buildings, since it was even more time-consuming than regular Inka stonework.

Rather than fitting each stone together as an individual shape, creating an irregular-looking surface, here they were shaped into even courses of rectangular blocks, and polished to a smooth finish. The walls were then covered in sheets of gold to signify the shrine's dedication to Inti, and would have reflected the sun's rays with a blinding brilliance. But the spectacular, radiant exterior was not the apex of the building's wonders. Inside, a reproduction of the world in miniature took the shape of a garden made from gold, silver and jewels, with people, animals, and plants. The riches of the Qorikancha would be taken in the looting of the city following the Spanish conquest in 1532, and melted down for their precious materials.

Saqsa Wayman



Figure 4.2.13.4.5: Saqsa Wayman, Cusco, Peru, c. 1440-1540 (photo: Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure 4.2.13.4.6: Saqsa Wayman, Cusco, Peru, c. 1440-1540 (photo: Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Saqsa Wayman looks down on the city of Cusco from the northwest. The structure, with its zig-zagging walls, is described as a fortress, although there are still many questions as to how it functioned in that capacity, and the purpose of some of its features is debated. It is possible that it was never finished, or that parts of it were left incomplete at the time of conquest, as Jean-Pierre Protzen has proposed. The stones used to construct it were much larger than those used in the streets and houses of Cusco, as can be seen in the photo at left. The stones were quarried and hauled into place using considerable manpower, obtained through the *mit'a*, or labor tax, that all able-bodied people of the empire owed the Inka.

Additional resources:

Video from Unesco on the City of Cusco

City of Cusco from Unesco

Carolyn Dean, *A Culture of Stone: Inka Perspectives on Rock*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

Rebecca Stone, *Art of the Andes: From Chavín to Inca* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2012).

Jean-Pierre Protzen, "The Fortress of Saqsa Waman: Was It Ever Finished?," *Ñawpa Pacha: Journal of Andean Archaeology*, no. 25/27 (1987), pp. 155-75.

Rebecca Stone-Miller, *Art of the Andes: From Chavín to Inca* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2012).

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4.2.13.5: An Inka paccha

by **DR. SARAHH SCHER**

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Figure **4.2.13.5.1**: Paccha (ritual watering device),1440–1540, ceramic, 14 9/16 x 5 7/8 x 4 3/4 inches (**Michael C. Carlos Museum**)



Figure **4.2.13.5.2**: "September: Cycle of sowing maize; Quya Raymi Killa, month of the feast of the queen, or *quya*" Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, *The First New Chronicle and Good Government* (or *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno)*, c. 1615 (**The Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen**)

Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, in his massive colonial treatise ***The First New Chronicle and Good Government*** (or *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno*), dedicated an entire chapter to the months of the year and the traditional **Inka** agricultural activities associated with them. Planting, tending, and harvesting plants are all depicted, but one aspect of Inka farming prior to the arrival of the Spaniards is missing — the ceremonial use of a ritual watering device, known in Quechua as a *paccha* (POCK-cha).

Because Guaman Poma was interested in showing the Spanish king that the natives of the Andes, and especially the Inka, had become good Christians, he may have left out the *paccha* and its ritual use as an unnecessary reminder of pre-Christian traditions

that the Spaniards considered idolatry.

Iconography of maize

While *pacchas* come in several styles and different imagery (in part due to the extensive reach of the Inka empire and local variations), the one seen above incorporates a sophisticated symbolism in its component parts that signals its purpose as a ritual device intended to promote agricultural fertility. Its three parts are composed of a *taclla*, or foot plow, an *urpu* or storage vessel, and an ear of corn, more properly called maize (*Zea mays*). When used in a ritual at the beginning of the planting season, the *paccha* symbolically encompassed the entire cycle of maize farming and use in the Inka world.



Figure **4.2.13.5.3**: Left: "September: Cycle of sowing maize; Quya Raymi Killa, month of the feast of the queen, or *quya*" Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, *The First New Chronicle and Good Government* (or *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno)*, c. 1615 (**The Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen**); Right: *Paccha* (ritual watering device), 1440–1540, ceramic, 14 9/16 x 5 7/8 x 4 3/4 inches (**Michael C. Carlos Museum**)

The *taclla* that forms the long portion of the *paccha* is a truncated version of the real farming implement. As we can see in a detail from Guaman Poma's illustration, the portion in the *paccha* is the lower part, the part that is pushed into the soil to create a hole for seeds to be planted, combined with the curved handle from the upper portion. It represents the beginning of the agricultural year, when the soil is prepared and then planted. The form of the *taclla* is smooth and simple, an idealized form of the two pieces of wood bound tightly with string.



Figure 4.2.13.5.4: Paccha (ritual watering device), detail of *urpu* and maize, 1440–1540, ceramic, 14 9/16 x 5 7/8 x 4 3/4 inches (Michael C. Carlos Museum)

At the top of the *taclla* is a small ear of maize, painted with a black slip. It is highly naturalistic, and that is because it was made by taking an actual ear of maize and pressing two soft pieces of clay around it to form a mold. Once dry, the mold was used to create the ceramic replica.

The **maize cob** represents the growing and harvest portion of the agricultural year, the production of this symbolically and functionally important crop. Inka art runs the gamut from highly naturalistic to completely nonrepresentational, and it is perhaps a testament to maize's importance that the cob on the *paccha* was produced with such exactitude. However, not all *pacchas* treated maize so naturalistically. A pair of similar *pacchas* (seen below) show a less careful construction, especially in the depiction of the maize cob. Rather than being molded from a real cob, the form was sculpted, giving it a more textured appearance.

The *urpu* perched next to the maize cob is a form of storage vessel that was produced in large quantities throughout the Inka empire. They are characterized by two handles on the lower sides of the vessel and a nub or small projection near the neck, which allowed a rope to be passed through the handles and looped over the nub so that it could be carried on a person's back or as part of a llama's pack. The pointed bottom of the vessel allowed it to be pushed into the earth for stability when being stored. *Urpus* had several uses, but principal among them was storage of maize and brewing of *chicha*, a type of beer made from maize that was an integral part of Inka social rituals. The *urpu* represents the use of the products of the agricultural cycle, especially the production of *chicha* and its use in feasting and religious rituals.



Figure **4.2.13.5.5**: A pair of *pacchas* with *taclla*, *urpu*, and maize imagery (The Metropolitan Museum of Art; photo: Dr. Lisa Trever, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Feeding the earth, enacting obligation

The ceremony that the *paccha* was used in "fed" *chicha* back to the earth. The point of the *taclla* was pushed into the prepared field (you can see some damage at the base of the *paccha*, probably indicating it was used for many rituals over time). *Chicha* was mixed with some soil, and poured through the *paccha* into the ground. This action imbued the soil for the coming agricultural year with some of the success of the last one, "fed" the earth, and made it ritually fertile and ready to continue the agricultural cycle. By making the *paccha* a microcosm of that cycle, it added further spiritual power to the ritual of watering the earth with *chicha*.

Extensive scientific analysis by Dr. Rebecca Stone and other specialists at Emory University has been able to pinpoint considerable specific information about this *paccha*. Residue from the ritual use of the device left behind not just traces of *chicha*, but also sand particles that can be identified as from the Chancay river valley of coastal Peru, an area that was conquered by the Inka. In addition, the level of detail in the maize cob made it, too, identifiable. It is a strain that was grown in the Chancay valley, having been developed in the Cusco region and brought to the coast with the Inka conquest.



Figure 4.2.13.5.6: Left: Cusco-style *urpu*, ceramic, 15th–early 16th century, 8 5/8 x 7 3/8 x inches (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**); Right: Chancay colonial Inka *urpu*, 1440–1540, ceramic, 9 ¾ x 6 ½ inches (**Michael C. Carlos Museum**)

The *urpu* on the *paccha* is also something that has Inka-Chancay connections: it is a Chancay-style version of the traditional Inka form. The *urpus* seen above are similar in form, but have different painting styles. The one on the left is from the Cusco region, and is painted with multiple colors on an orangey background. The one on the right was made in the Chancay valley during the Inka occupation, and uses a Chancay color palette of brown-black colors over a light cream. They both feature the same abstract motif featuring a long upright line, with smaller forms consisting of three parallel lines ending in a circle projecting from it. This is a common motif, and has been interpreted as an abstraction of a maize plant by some scholars, although others speculate that it is meant to represent a *khipu* (an information-encoding device made from knotted string).

The ritual this *paccha* was made for would have been enacted in fields the Inka owned in the Chancay lands they had conquered. It would have been the first “drink” of the agricultural year that the dry soil had on the arid coast, a gift from the Inka that the earth would be obligated to pay back in maize. Soon after the soil had been planted, the more commonplace watering via irrigation would commence, but that first watering with *chicha* was considered just as important to a successful harvest. It was part of an Inka worldview that emphasized reciprocal obligations that knit the various levels of the empire together. This meant drinking *chicha* with the earth, with the ancestors, with supernatural forces, and at feasts, drawing all of existence into a web that the Inka ruled.

Additional resources:

Rebecca Stone-Miller, *Seeing With New Eyes: Highlights of the Michael C. Carlos Museum Collection of Art of the Ancient Americas* (Atlanta: Michael C. Carlos Museum, 2002).

This page titled 4.2.13.5: An Inka paccha is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Dr. Sarahh Scher, "An Inka paccha," in SmartHistory, May 24, 2020, accessed November 20, 2020, https://SmartHistory.org/inka-paccha/..

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4.2.13.6: Maize cobs

by **DR. EMILY ENGEL**

Page ID
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Figure **4.2.13.6.1**: Maize cobs, Inka, c. 1440–1533, Sheet metal/repoussé, metal alloys, 25.7 x 6 x 9 cm (Ethnological Museum, Berlin) (photo: **Ethnological Museum**, Berlin, CC BY-NC-SA)

A garden of gold and silver

Imagine a garden of miniature llamas, corn, flowers, and people all made of gold and silver. Such a garden existed in the courtyard in one of the most important Inka temples, the Qorikancha, in the capital city of Cusco. One of these beautiful metal objects is a gold-silver alloy corncob sculpture. It mimics the appearance of a ripe ear of corn breaking through its husk, still on the stalk but ready to be harvested. In this sculptural representation of maize (*Zea mays*), individual kernels of corn protrude from the cob that is nestled in jagged metallic leaves. Inka metalsmiths expertly combined silver and copper to mimic the internal and external components of actual corn. Hollow and delicate, the ears of corn on the stalk are life-sized.

While many ancient Andean art traditions favored abstract and geometric forms (such as the *All-T'oqapu Tunic*), Inka visual expression often incorporated more naturalistic forms in small-scale metal objects. This silver alloy corncob sculpture is one example of this type of object.

After the Spaniards arrived in the Andes, the European invaders soon desired the gold and silver belonging to the Inka. Some of the earliest Spanish chroniclers record the placement of a garden composed of gold and silver objects among many of the offering and ritual spaces in the Qorikancha. Pedro de Cieza de León describes a golden garden in his 1554 account:

> ***In the month of October of the year of the Lord 1534 the Spaniards entered the city of Cuzco, head of the great empire of the Inkas, where their court was, as well as the solemn Temple of the Sun and their greatest marvels. The high priest abandoned the temple, where [the Spaniards] plundered the garden of gold and the sheep [llamas] and shepherds of this metal along with so much silver that it is unbelievable and precious stones, which, if they were collected, would be worth a city.[1]***



Figure 4.2.13.6.2: Foreground, Ruins of the Qorikancha (the Convent of Santo Domingo above), Cusco, Peru (photo: Terry Feuerborn, CC BY-NC 2.0)



Figure 4.2.13.6.3: Miniature gold llama figurine, Inka, 6.3 cm high, © Trustees of the British Museum

After the defeat of Inka leadership in the 1530s, Spanish royal agents set up colonies across the continent. They looted Inka objects in large quantities and sent many back to Spain. The silver corncob and stalk were likely part of the spoils captured in this raid. By 1534, the collections of the Spanish king Charles V included a gold maize stalk with three leaves and two ears of corn, similar to the one above. Royal inventories also describe gold and silver llamas, female figures, a lamb, and a male figure that purportedly originated in in one of the most important Inka temples in the capital city of Cusco, the Qorikancha.

A compact version of the Inka cosmos

The life-size garden was a significant offering within the Qorikancha where it became part of a compact version of the cosmos controlled by the Inka state. It also represented the vast range of ecosystems encompassed by the empire and the most important agricultural products cultivated in them. The empire reached from the desert coasts to over 6000 feet above sea level. Plants and animals represented in the golden garden cannot grow and survive at every point in the empire, but only at specified altitudes. For example maize grows up to a mid-range altitude, and llamas graze at the highest points of the empire. The metallic maize cobs

would have represented one of the most important imperial foodstuffs, used for making the *chicha* (maize beer) consumed at political feasts, which cemented the obligations of local political leaders to the Inka state .

For centuries, an organized “vertical archipelago” system and terracing technologies allowed Andean people to obtain the foods and materials that they needed to survive from different elevations. The Inka adopted these systems, enhanced them, and exploited them on an imperial scale. The Qorikancha’s garden asserted the natural world as a possession of the Inka at the same time it reinforced their divine right to rule across the Andes.



Figure **4.2.13.6.4**: Gold capacocha figurine, Inka, 6 cm high, © Trustees of the British Museum

The Inka commonly deployed small-scale naturalistic metallic offerings, like the silver alloy corncobs, in ritual practices that supported state religion and government. Offerings have been found across Inka territories. Besides corn, these offerings included small gold and silver human figurines ornamented with textiles that accompanied *qhapaq hucha* sacrifices at the furthest reaches of the empire. All these offerings acted as symbols of the supernatural origin of the Inkas in the Sun, and their control over the natural world as descendants from the most powerful deity.

1. Pedro Cieza de León, *The Discovery and Conquest of Peru: Chronicles of the New World Encounter*, ed. and trans. Alexandra Parma Cook and Noble David Cook (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 316–19.

Additional resources:

Gold of the Indies on The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

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4.2.13.7: Machu Picchu

by **DR. SARAHH SCHER**

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Figure **4.2.13.7.1**: Machu Picchu, Peru, c. 1450–1540 (photo: Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

A royal estate

Machu Picchu is often described as “mysterious,” but in fact a great deal is known about its construction and purpose. It was built as a royal estate for the first Inka emperor, Pachacuti Inka Yupanqui, in the middle of the 15th century, on a mountain saddle overlooking the Urubamba River (in modern day Peru). The location was approximately three days’ walk from the Inka capital of Cusco, and nearly 3,000 feet lower in elevation (7,972 feet / 2,430 meters), with a pleasant climate. It was intended as a place where the Inka emperor and his family could host feasts, perform religious ceremonies, and administer the affairs of empire, while also establishing a claim to land that would be owned by his lineage after his death. The site was chosen and situated for its relationship to the Andean landscape, including sight lines to other mountain peaks, called *apus*, which have long been considered ancestral deities throughout the Andes. The site contains housing for elites, retainers, and maintenance staff, religious shrines, fountains, and terraces, as well as carved rock outcrops, a signature element of Inka art.

Architecture



Figure **4.2.13.7.2**: Machu Picchu, Peru, c. 1450–1540, terraces can be seen to the left (photo: **Max Reiser**, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The site features architecture, from houses to terraces, built by carefully fitting individual stones against each other. Terraces were a common element of highland agriculture long before the Inka. They increased the arable land surface and reduced erosion by creating walled steps down the sides of steep mountains. Each step could then be planted with crops. Terracing took advantage of the landscape and provided some sustenance for the emperor and his entourage during his visits, as well as producing ritually-important maize crops. Further provisions came from the rich lands at the foot of the mountain peak, which were also beholden to Pachacuti and his family.

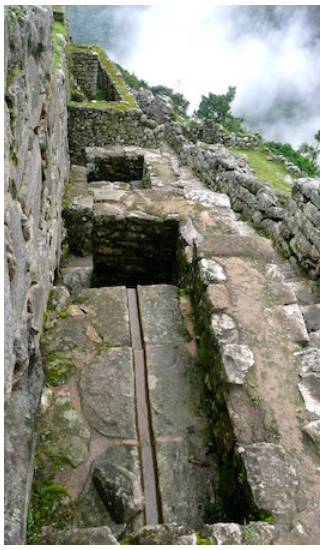


Figure 4.2.13.7.3: Stone channel drain, Machu Picchu, Peru, c. 1450–1540 (photo: Eduardo Zárate, CC BY-ND 2.0)

Water management at the site was crucial, and throughout Machu Picchu a system of stone channels drains water from rainfall and from a spring near the site. Some of the water was chanelled to stone fountains. There are sixteen in all, descending in elevation through the site. The first in the series is placed outside the door of the emperor's compound. That fountain is constructed with walls that may have created a ritual bath for the emperor, connected to his duties as a sacred king who performed religious rituals.

The construction of the main buildings is typical of Inka elite architecture. The walls were built of stones that had been individually shaped to fit closely with one another, rather than being shaped into similar units. This was accomplished by a laborious process of pecking at the stones with tools, gradually shaping them so that each stone was uniquely nested against those around it. Each stone had some sides that protruded slightly, and some with slight concave faces, socketing the stones so that they held together, but allowed for earthquake-damping movement in this seismically active region. Outward faces were then worked smooth, so that the walls resemble an intricate mosaic. Most structures were roofed with wood and thatch. Entryways were in the unique Inka shape of a trapezoid, rather than a rectangle. The trapezoid shape was also used for niches and windows in the walls of buildings. Buildings for people or activities of lower status were made using a rough construction technique that did not take the time to shape the stones.



Figure 4.2.13.7.4: Stone walls and trapezoid-shaped windows, Machu Picchu, Peru, c. 1450–1540 (photo: Jill /Blue Moonbeam Studio, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Population and social dynamics

The emperor and his retinue would only reside at Machu Picchu for part of the year. Most of the people who lived there permanently were *yanaconas* (retainers) and *mitimaes* (colonists obligated to move to their location). Graves at Machu Picchu have yielded evidence that many of the *yanaconas* there were craftspeople, including metalsmiths, who came from all over the empire. The ability to command people across the empire and to oblige them to work for the Inka nobility was an expression of imperial power. The buildings of Machu Picchu clearly show the social divisions of the site, with most of the high-status residential buildings in a cluster to the northeast. The emperor himself lived in a separate compound at the southwest of the site, indicating his unique status as the ruler. The Observatory (below) was adjacent to the royal residence, emphasizing the relationship between the elites, religious ritual, and astronomical observation, including Pachacuti's claim as both a descendant of the sun (whom the Inka called *Inti*) and the sun himself.



Figure 4.2.13.7.5: The Observatory, seen from above, Machu Picchu, Peru, c. 1440-1540 (photo: Stephen Trever, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

One of the obligations of the royal family was performing rituals that sustained relationships with the supernatural forces that drove existence. The number of religious structures at Machu Picchu is high, indicating that Pachacuti and his lineage were heavily involved in the religious functioning of the empire, a task that underscored his right to rule.

Observatory

Also called the Temple of the Sun, this building's purpose is echoed in its unique shape. It is composed of two main parts: an upper curved stone enclosure with windows and niches placed in it, and a cave beneath this structure with masonry additions that hold more niches. Modifications of the windows in the Observatory's upper walls indicate that they were used to calculate the June solstice, as well as the first morning rise of the constellation Pleiades and other important constellations. The cave beneath the enclosure may refer to the place of the underworld in Inka myth, making the Observatory a building that embodied cosmological thought as much as it facilitated astronomical observation.

Intihuatana



Figure **4.2.13.7.6**: Intihuatana, Machu Picchu, Peru, c. 1450–1540 (photo: Sarahh Scher, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The Intihuatana ("hitching post of the sun") is a carved boulder located in the ritual area of the site, to the west of the main plaza. Carved boulders were a part of the Inka relationship with the earth, and expressions of belief in a landscape inhabited by supernatural forces. Carved boulders of this type are found throughout the heart of the Inka empire. The stone's name refers to the idea that it was used to track the passage of the sun throughout the year, part of the reckoning of time used to determine when religious events would take place and similar to the Observatory.

Backstory

Due to its status as an important piece of both global and Peruvian heritage, Machu Picchu has recently become the focus of international attention with regard to both the repatriation of artifacts from the site, and preservation of the existing structures against environmental and human impact.

Covered by jungle and known only to locals since the sixteenth century, Machu Picchu was uncovered by Hiram Bingham III, a professor of South American history at Yale University, in 1911. In addition to the structures at the site, he and his team excavated thousands of artifacts, including ceramics, tools, jewelry and human bones, which he brought back to Yale under an agreement with the Peruvian government at the time. The agreement stipulated that the artifacts could be studied at Yale, with the provision that they could be requested and returned to Peru at any time. Since then, most of the objects have been housed at Yale's Peabody Museum.

Despite Peru's repeated demands for the objects' return over the last century, **it took a U.S. federal court case and the intervention of Peru's president** to finally secure their repatriation in 2010. According to the **Peabody museum website**,

> ***In a gesture of friendship and in recognition of the unique place that Machu Picchu has come to hold for the people of Cuzco and the Peruvian nation, Yale agreed to return to Peru materials excavated by Bingham at Machu Picchu in 1912. This was the basis of a diplomatic resolution of the dispute between Yale University and the Peruvian***

> ***government. The agreement was formalized in a Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of Peru on November 23 2010, a second Memorandum of Understanding with the University of Cuzco (UNSAAC) on February 11, 2011, and the return from the Peabody Museum of materials from Machu Picchu in 2011 and 2012.***

The agreement has resulted in ongoing research cooperation between Yale and UNSAAC, and is an example of how repatriation efforts can lead to new and fruitful opportunities for cooperation.

The site of Machu Picchu itself is also now the focus of governmental efforts, as authorities attempt to cope with the great numbers of visitors and their impact on the site, in addition to environmental and agricultural factors that threaten the integrity of the landscape. According to the **UNESCO website**,

> ***the Historic Sanctuary of Machu Picchu is among the greatest artistic, architectural and land use achievements anywhere and the most significant tangible legacy of the Inca civilization.…The strongly increasing number of visitors to the Historic Sanctuary of Machu Picchu must be matched by an adequate management regulating access.… The planning and organization of transportation and infrastructure construction, as well as the sanitary and safety conditions for both tourists and new residents attracted by tourism requires the creation of high quality and new long-term solutions, and is a significant ongoing concern.***

The government of Peru **recently instituted a ticketing system** that caps the number of visitors and requires them reserve and pay for daily time slots at the site. Still, UNESCO warns that

> ***Since the time of inscription consistent concerns have been expressed about ecosystem degradation through logging, firewood and commercial plant collection, poor waste management, poaching, agricultural encroachment…, introduced species and water pollution …, in addition from pressures derived from broader development in the region…. Continuous efforts are needed to comply with protected areas and other legislation and plans and prevent further degradation.***

Given the number of agencies involved in planning and protecting Machu Picchu, UNESCO states, achieving an adequate master plan for the site is an ongoing challenge. Machu Picchu is only one of many such world heritage sites around the world that are dealing with the threats brought by increased visitation, and it points to the tensions between the need for everyone to enjoy and benefit from the experience of seeing these magnificent sites, and the need to preserve them for future generations.

Backstory by Dr. Naraelle Hohensee

Additional resources:

Video from UNESCO on Machu Picchu

Historic sanctuary of Machu Picchu from UNESCO

Richard L. Burger and Lucy C. Salazar, *Machu Picchu: Unveiling the Mystery of the Incas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

Carolyn Dean, *A Culture of Stone: Inka Perspectives on Rock* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

Lucy C. Salazar, “Machu Picchu: Mysterious Royal Estate in the Cloud Forest,” in *Machu Picchu : Unveiling the Mystery of the Incas*, edited by Richard L. Burger and Lucy C. Salazar (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

Lucy C. Salazar, “Machu Picchu’s Silent Majority,” in *Variations in the Expression of Inka Power : A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks*, 18 and 19 October 1997, edited by Richard L. Burger, Craig Morris, Ramiro Matos Mendieta, Joanne Pillsbury and Jeffrey

Quilter (Washington, D.C.; [Cambridge, Mass.]: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection ; Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2007).

Peru-Yale Partnership for the Future of Machu Picchu Artifacts from Yale News

Machu Picchu: The Agreement between Yale and Peru on the Peabody Museum website

“Finders Not Keepers: Yale Returns Artifacts To Peru” and “Yale Returns Machu Picchu Artifacts To Peru”, NPR News, 2010 and 2011

“Will new limits on visiting Machu Picchu save Peru’s most famous Inca citadel?” *The Telegraph*, June 21, 2017

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4.2.13.8: All-T’oqapu Tunic

by **DR. SARAHH SCHER**

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181664



Figure **4.2.13.8.1**: All-T’oqapu Tunic, Inka, 1450–1540, camelid fiber and cotton, 90.2 x 77.15 cm (Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C.)



Figure **4.2.13.8.2**: Map, Inka Empire (**adapted**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

The Inka were masters of statecraft, forging an empire that at its height extended from modern Quito, Ecuador to Santiago, Chile. One of the engines that drove the empire was the exchange of high-status goods, which helped to secure the reciprocal but unequal economic and power relationships between the Inka and their subjects. Precious materials such as Spondylus shell from the warm waters of coastal Ecuador or gold from remote mountain mines were shaped into high-status objects. These were given to local leaders as part of a system of imposed obligations that gave the Inka the right to claim portions of local produce and labor as their due. Along with jewels, political feasts and gifts of finely-made textiles would also cement these unequal relationships.

Textiles and their creation had been highly important in the Andes long before the Inka came to power in the mid-15th century—in fact, textile technologies were developed well before ceramics. Finely-made textiles from the best materials were objects of high status among nearly all Andean cultures, much more valuable than gold or gems. The *All-T’oqapu Tunic* is an example of the height of Andean textile fabrication and its centrality to Inka expressions of power.



Figure **4.2.13.8.3**: Weaving on a backstrap loom, Diego Rivera, *The Weaver*, 1936, tempera and oil on canvas, 66 x 106.7 cm (Art Institute of Chicago)

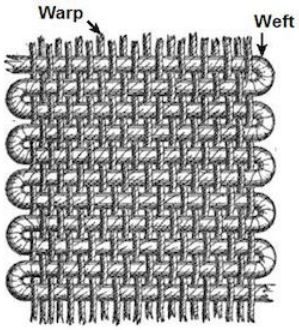


Figure **4.2.13.8.4**: Diagram of warp and weft, (**image**, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Weaving in Andean cultures was usually done on backstrap looms made from a series of sturdy sticks supporting the warp, or skeletal threads, of the textile. A backstrap loom is tied to a post or tree at one end, while the other end is attached to a strap that passes around the back of the weaver. By leaning forward or tilting back, the weaver can adjust the tension on the warp threads as he or she passes the weft threads back and forth, creating the pattern that we see on the surface of the textile. By the time of the Inka, an incredible number of variations on this basic technique had created all kinds of textile patterns and weaves.



Figure **4.2.13.8.5**: Detail, All-T'oqapu Tunic, Inka, 1450–1540, camelid fiber and cotton, 90.2 x 77.15 cm (Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C.)

The two main fibers spun into the threads of the tunic came from cotton and camelids. Cotton plants grew well on the Andean coast, in a variety of natural colors. Camelids thrived in the highlands (this includes the wild guanacos and vicuña and their domesticated brethren, the llama and the alpaca). Most Andean camelid-fiber textiles were made with the silky wool of the alpaca. Animal fibers are more easily dyed than plant fibers, so when weavers wanted bright colors they most commonly used alpaca wool. The *All-T'oqapu Tunic* is made of dyed camelid wool warp over a cotton weft, a common combination for high-status textiles.

Collecting, spinning, and dyeing the fibers for a textile represented a huge amount of work from numerous people before a weaver even began their task. Some dyes, like **cochineal red** or indigo blue, were especially prized and reserved for high-status textiles. Cochineal dye comes from the bodies of small insects that live on cacti, and it takes thousands of them to make a small amount of dye. Indigo dyeing requires a high level of technical skill and a large investment in time. Red- and blue-dyed textiles were not only beautiful, they also represented the apex of the resources needed to produce them and the social and political power that commanded those resources.

In the Inka empire, textiles were produced by a number of groups, but the finest cloth, called *qompi* in Quechua (the language of the Inkas), was produced by *acllas* ("chosen women"), women who were collected from across the empire and cloistered in buildings to weave fine cloth. The *acllas* also performed religious rituals, and made and served *chicha* (corn beer) at state feasts. These women spun, dyed, and wove fibers that were collected as part of the Inka taxation system. The textiles they produced were then given as royal gifts, worn by the royal household, or burned as a precious sacrifice to the sun god, Inti. The threads in the *All-T'oqapu Tunic* were spun so finely that there are approximately 100 threads per centimeter, making for a light, strong weave. It was traditional to weave garments in a single piece if possible, as cutting the cloth once it was off the loom would destroy its spirit existence (*camac*), which formed as it grew on the loom. The *All-T'oqapu Tunic* is a single piece of cloth, woven with a slit in the center for the head to pass through, and folded over and sewn together along the sides with spaces left open as arm holes.

Iconography



Figure **4.2.13.8.6**: Detail, All-T'oqapu Tunic, Inka, 1450–1540, camelid fiber and cotton, 90.2 x 77.15 cm (Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C.)

The decoration of the tunic is where its name derives from. T'oqapu are the square geometric motifs that make up the entirety of this tunic. These designs were only allowed to be worn by those of high rank in Inka society. Normally, an Inka tunic with t'oqapu on it would have a band or bands of the motif near the neck or at the waist. Individual t'oqapu designs appear to have been related to various peoples, places, and social roles within the Inka empire. Covering a single tunic with a large variety of t'oqapu, as seen in this example, likely makes it a royal tunic, and symbolizes the power of the Inka ruler (the Sapa Inka). The Sapa Inka's power is manifest in the tunic in several ways. Firstly, its fine thread, expert weave, and bright colors signify his ability to command the taxation of the empire, access to luxury goods like rare and difficult dyes, and the weaving expertise of the acllas. Secondly, among the t'oqapu in the tunic is one pattern than contains a black and white checkerboard. This was the tunic pattern worn by the Inka army, and shows the Sapa Inka's military might. Lastly, the collection of many patterns shows that the Sapa Inka (which means "unique Inka" in Quechua) was a special individual who held claim to all t'oqapu and therefore all the peoples and places of his empire. It is a statement of absolute dominion over the land, its people, and its resources, manifested in an item that is typically Andean in its material and manufacture.

Additional resources:

The Tunic at Dumbarton Oaks

Andean Textiles on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Raoul d'Harcourt, *Textiles of Ancient Peru and Their Techniques*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974.

John Murra, "Cloth and Its Functions in the Inca State," *American Anthropologist* 64 (1962), pp. 710-728.

Rebecca Rollins Stone, ""And all theirs different from his": The Dumbarton Oaks royal Inka tunic in context," in *Variations in the Expression of Inka Power*, edited by Joanne Pillsbury, Jeffrey Quilter, Richard Burger, Craig Morris and Ramiro Matos (Washington, D.C.: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 385-422.

Rebecca Stone-Miller, *To Weave For The Sun: Ancient Andean Textiles* (Boston: Thames and Hudson, 1992).

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4.2.13.9: Inka checkerboard tunics

by DR. SARAHH SCHER and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER

Page ID
181665

Checkerboard tunics, Inka, camelid fiber, first tunic: c. 1400–1540, 88.3 x 80 cm (Dallas Museum of Art), second tunic: 16th century, 87 x 76.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), both in the Golden Kingdoms exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Additional resources

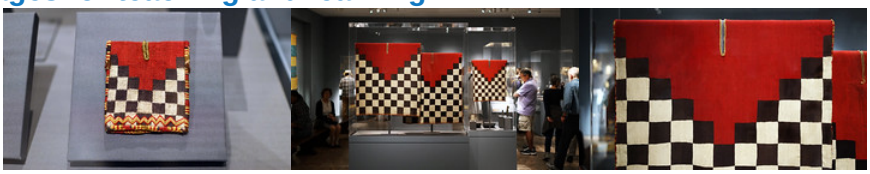
Checkerboard tunic at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Checkerboard tunic at the Dallas Museum of Art.

Learn more about Andean textiles from the Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, from The Met.

Read about another Inka tunic, the All-T'oqapu Tunic.

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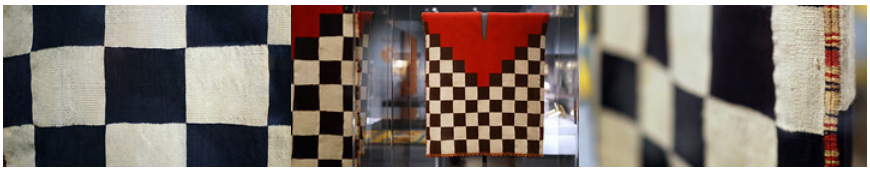


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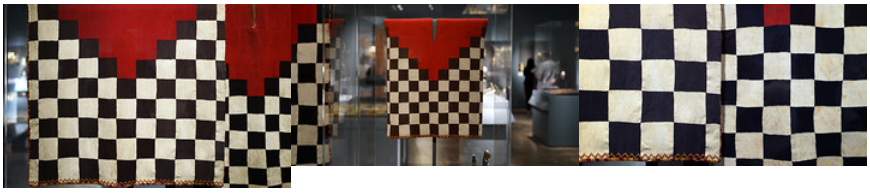


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4.2.13.10: Keru Vessel

by **PEGGY GOEDE MONTALVÁN**

Page ID
181666



Figure **4.2.13.10.1**: Three views of a *Keru* cup, Inka, Peru, lacquered wood, 7-3/8 x 6-15/16 inches / 18.7 x 17.6cm (Brooklyn Museum)



Figure **4.2.13.10.2**: Lands governed by the Viceroyalty of Peru, c. 1650

On a vibrantly colored *keru* cup from colonial Peru, exotically dressed figures, apparently a royal Inka couple, stand surrounded by flowers, vivid designs, and even a rainbow. A *keru* is a ceremonial Andean beaker that was an important part of Inka culture prior to the arrival of the Spaniards. This vessel was produced in the **Viceroyalty of Peru**, a Spanish colonial administrative district created in 1542 that included large parts of South America. It might surprise us to find Inka on a colonial vessel—a time after the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors (conquerors). But, although we speak of a Spanish "conquest" of the Andes, which started in the 1530s, Inka society did not disappear after the European invasion. Aspects of social and political bonds, religion, cults, and art—although often reduced or mixed with European characteristics—persisted. Even with the clash of cultures, the Inka (among other peoples) adapted to the new circumstances, as did the European intruders. The Spaniards were challenged to understand an indigenous society where nature was sacred, the sun, moon, stars, mountains, and rivers were venerated as gods and even the ruler, the Sapa Inka, was deified.

The Inka continued to use these types of cups in the early viceregal era, but soon the Spaniards grew suspicious. Why did the Andeans insist on continuing to use them? Were they somehow powerful? Was it possible to hide secret messages in their

mysterious iconography that could evoke rebellions against Spanish rule? The Spaniards ultimately decided to destroy *kerus* in massive campaigns in the later sixteenth century.

A cup not made merely for drinking

Keru (also spelled *kero* or *quero*) vessels are typically associated with Inka culture (15th-16th century), but they originated with the Tiwanaku culture (6th – 9th century) in present-day Bolivia. They can also be found in other Andean societies like the Wari (8th – 10th century), Sicán (10th – 11th century—see the image below), Chancay (12th-14th century) or Chimú (14th – 16th century) in the territory of what is today Peru.



Figure **4.2.13.10.3**: Aquillas, Sicán (Lambayeque), 10th – 11th century, gold (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), photo: Steven Zucker (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

The Andean Quechua term *keru* primarily specified a “wooden cup.” While wood is the most common material of these vessels, there are also examples made of gold or silver (correctly, although not commonly, called *aquillas*), stone, or ceramic. Although precious metals like gold and silver did not have the same meaning for Andeans as for Europeans, the material did matter. Associated with the luminous sun, golden *kerus* were reserved for the Inka ruler. Venerating nature, especially the sun and the moon, the Inka saw their ruler as the descendant of the sun god and his wife as the daughter of the moon. In the same way, the silver cups, reflecting divine moonlight, had a high value in Andean society. Wooden or stone cups could also elevate a person’s status, depending on the degree of craftsmanship and decoration. In contrast, simple or undecorated vessels were used by the common population in their daily lives or in small ceremonies during which they prayed for fertility or the benevolence of the gods.

Kerukamayoq (*querocamayoc*) were responsible for the production of the kerus. These specialists had an exceptional position in Andean society that came with privileges, such as exemption from farming. Even after the Spanish conquest, the production of *kerus* was restricted to these indigenous artisans.



Figure **4.2.13.10.4**: Kero, Inka, 15th – early 16th century, wood, 14.6 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

In pre-Hispanic times, the decoration of Inka *kerus*, if there was any, consisted solely of monochromatic carved geometric patterns, for example rectangles, rhombs, triangles, and lines. A few later exceptions showed abstract figures like llamas or even faces. It is possible that there is a deeper meaning behind these designs—they may refer to religious beliefs or traditions or may have revealed details about their owner.

In pre-Hispanic as in colonial times, the *keru* was not a mere drinking vessel but rather a ceremonial beaker, used during rituals and political ceremonies to establish and fortify important religious, social, and political relations. It had enormous symbolic power, even after the arrival of the Spaniards. To demonstrate the divine nature of rulers, rituals were performed in public during which the Sapa Inka exchanged identical *keru* pairs filled with *chicha* (maize beer) with his “father,” the sun, in a divine toast. The symbolic power of the *kerus* was transferred to secular issues, so that the exchange of *kerus* also took place between two Andean rulers, commonly the Sapa Inka and a soon-to-be ally, to formalize an agreement.



Figure **4.2.13.10.5**: The Inka is toasting to his father, the sun. From Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, ***The First New Chronicle and Good Government***, c. 1615 (**The Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen**)

With the arrival of the Spaniards in the Inka region around 1530, new pictorial conventions were introduced to the Andes. Adapting to the European traditions, traditionally abstract *keru* decoration began to incorporate figurative scenes. The meaning of the images may have been easier to comprehend by the new colonial society as they contained recognizable figures, symbols, and narratives. Representations of daily Andean life now appeared on the *kerus*, as well as newly introduced colonial rituals, such as the branding of the cattle. These images also contained symbolism only decipherable by Andean insiders, like the *kerukamayoq*.

A world of powerful symbolism



Figure **4.2.13.10.6**: Keru cup, Inka, lacquered wood, colonial, Peru, 18.7 x 17.6 cm (Brooklyn Museum)

Let's have a closer look at this particular Inka cup from the Brooklyn Museum. The iconography is quite common for colonial *kerus*. Its imagery is divided into three registers (bands)—like a comic strip. At the bottom, we see Andean flowers, likely Kantuta, which were symbolically connected to the Inka elite. Above, we find a strip with geometric patterns, similar to *tocapu* designs, which are also associated with Inka nobility. These designs were found **on textiles** as well, especially on the elaborate tunics, called *unkus* (also spelled *uncus*), of the Inka elite. As mentioned above, these motifs might have contained hidden meanings, as the Inka did not use a writing system, at least not in the strict sense of the term.

A figurative scene (image below) dominates the top register of the cup. We clearly recognize a man and a woman whose traditional apparel indicates that we are looking at representations of an Inka ruler, the Sapa Inka, and his wife, the coya. The ruler, addressing the observer in full frontal view, is wearing an *unku* and is crowned with the imperial headdress, the *mascaypacha* (also spelled *mascapaycha* or *mascapaicha*). The shield and spear in his hands characterize him as a leading warrior and are a reminder of his military power. At his side, the coya is likewise dressed in indigenous clothes, including a wrap dress (*anacu*) and a cloak (*lliclla*). The two individuals form a pair, symbolizing the complementary duality of opposites, in this case male and female, that formed Andean cosmology. As mentioned above, *kerus* were always produced in almost identical pairs that were then exchanged between two parties.



Figure **4.2.13.10.7**: Detail, *Keru* Cup, Inka, lacquered wood, colonial, Peru, 18.7 x 17.6 cm (Brooklyn Museum)

The figures on this *keru* stand under a rainbow, with light spots around and in between them, possibly depicting raindrops. Water was scarce and therefore a vital good in the often arid regions of the Andes. The rainbow thus connected the Inka with fertility and consequently with the power over life and death. Furthermore, the rainbow offered the Inka ruler a bridge to the heavenly realms as it connected the earth with Inti, the divine sun, the Sapa Inka's father. On similar *keru* examples, the rainbow rises from the mouth of a feline, a frightful, strong and elegant animal that, owing to its attributes, is also associated with the Sapa Inka.

The royal pair is surrounded by potent symbols of military power, fertility, strength, and divine descent—all justifying Inka rulership. The iconography of this *keru* reflects its use in important religious and political rituals. While the rainbow indicates the ties between the Sapa Inka and Inti during the ceremonial toast to the sun god, the *keru* representation of the ruler as the leading Inka warrior with the power over life and death reminded political authorities during the official keru exchange with the Inka of the advantages, but also the possible menaces, resulting from forming or refusing alliances with the Inka.

Eliminating the threat

Over the years, the Spaniards realized that the *kerus* were not simple cups, but meaningful objects that continued to be used in Andean rituals. The Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church both suspected a possible threat emerging from these enigmatic vessels. For them, *kerus* formed part of a dangerous side of Andean culture that had to be transformed and controlled, so as not to undermine colonial rule or conflict with evangelization.



Figure **4.2.13.10.8**: Portrait of Francisco Álvarez de Toledo, Viceroy of Peru, 16th century, oil (National Museum of the Archaeology, Anthropology, and History of Peru)

Francisco de Toledo, a viceroy of colonial Peru, gained notoriety in this context. In a time of financial struggles and continuous indigenous rebellions, Toledo carried out extensive reforms in the 1570s and 1580s to reestablish and secure Spanish royal power in the colonies. Everything Andean was viewed as a potential threat under his leadership. In the course of an extended campaign to erase any traditional indigenous beliefs and traditions, many *kerus* were destroyed along with other Inka objects like *unkus*, and the many religious figurines made of precious metals that where melted into easily transportable ingots. The *kerus* made of gold or silver were melted down, but wooden vessels survived, mainly because the cups were very popular in colonial society. Like modern souvenir hunting, Europeans loved these “indian” vessels and ordered their production for personal use, gifts, or trade.

Unfortunately, this love for the exotic endures today, so that *kerus* form a large part of the objects sold on the black market. The relatively few cups remaining for the use in a scientific context are spread all over the world in the different museums and collections. Unfortunately, many of the wooden examples have deteriorated over time. The exceptionally well-conserved *keru* at the Brooklyn Museum therefore represents a precious example and provides us with insights into a complex and fascinating society.

Additional resources:

This work at the Brooklyn Museum

Colonial *Kero* Cups on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Kero in the collection of The National Museum of the American Indian

Kero on the Google Art Project

Thomas Cummins, *Toasts with the Inca. Andean Abstraction and Colonial Images on Quero Vessels* (Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2002)

Diane Fane, ed., *Converging Cultures. Art and Identity in Spanish America* (New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1996)

Jorge A Flores Ochoa, Elizabeth Kuon Arce, et al., *Queros. Arte Inka en vasos ceremoniales* (Lima, Banco de Crédito del Perú, 1998)

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4.2.13.11: What is an Inka ushnu?

by **THE BRITISH MUSEUM**

Page ID
181667

Ushnus

The Inka capital Cusco and principal outlying towns of the Inka Empire were organized around a public plaza with a specially-constructed platform placed facing a designated sacred central space called the *ushnu*. This sacred space was marked by a vertical opening into the body of the earth into which liquid and other offerings were made.



Figure **4.2.13.11.1**: This ushnu (Incapirca Waminan) is situated on the summit of the mountain and comprises three superimposed platforms. © Trustees of the British Museum

The ushnu platform was therefore a kind of stage from which the Inka king and his lords could observe and rule over an annual round of seasonal festivals and ceremonial events.



Figure **4.2.13.11.2**: View from Incapirca Waminan © Trustees of the British Museum

In the late 1990s archaeologists in Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina began mapping the full system of Inka roads, including many of the less accessible, secondary trails at high altitude. In Peru this survey soon revealed a previously unrecognized category of stone platform with typically distinctive Inka stonework. These structures are carefully positioned on isolated mountain-tops 4000–4800 meters above sea level and represent some of the highest dressed-stone architecture found anywhere in the Americas, and possibly in the world. These structures were clearly important in Inka political and sacred geography and had profound symbolic significance.



Figure 4.2.13.11.3: A well-known *ushnu* site, Vilcashuaman was a major Inka administrative centre on the main Inka road running along the Andes mountain chain and down to the coast.

The sites were selected to command unsurpassed views of the snow-capped mountain peaks, worshipped as *wamanis*, or mountain deities, by the local communities. In this way local deities were incorporated into the overarching Inka state religion. The Inkas used the platforms as potent symbols of religious and political authority. They served as an innovative and powerful new instrument of statecraft in order both to define and proclaim their growing imperial hegemony.



Figure 4.2.13.11.4: British Museum map showing Inka *ushnu* sites © Trustees of the British Museum

Research

Atahualpa, the Inka ruler taken and killed by Spanish invaders in the 1500s, asked for the meeting with his murderers to take place in the great plaza of the town of Cajamarca at the site of a "*castillejo*," a type of platform we now call an *ushnu*. This shows not only that*ushnus* were appropriate sites to meet strangers, but that they were considered to hold great significance.

Research at 30 platforms across the modern area of Ayacucho has demonstrated that *ushnus* are located in both town squares and alongside Inka roads. In towns, the platforms are located in or by the side of the main square, while those located on Inka roads are often found on mountain tops. There, they offer views of the horizon and of*Wamanis* (mountain deities) in the landscape.



Figure **4.2.13.11.5**: A well-known *ushnu* site, Vilcashuaman was a major Inka administrative centre on the main Inka road running along the Andes mountain chain and down to the coast. © Trustees of the British Museum



Figure **4.2.13.11.6**: Ushnus in the landscape, Codex Murua 79v. Courtesy Sean Galvin.© Trustees of the British Museum The Codex Murua was produced after the Spanish conquest of the Inka Empire but its scenes of life, landscape and ritual were very likely to have been drawn by an Inka working to give the colonists an understanding of how his people lived.

The major *ushnu* platform at Vilcashuaman, which has been extensively restored comprises four superimposed platforms with a staircase of 36 steps on its eastern side, which, through a gateway, allows access to the top. The staircase is built up against the structure, abutting it. The top platform on its west side has a ramp allowing access to the platform below. On top the platform has a large monolithic seat carved to accommodate two people.

On its eastern side two squarish structures are built up close to the bottom platform; beyond this are the remains of a large*kallanka* or great hall and it is likely there was a second one of these across an open space. Slightly further to the west is the town's cemetery.

To the east and north-east is the main colonial plaza and to the north-east are extensive elaborate Inka remains including what have been identified as the footings of the local temples of the sun and moon. The fields surrounding the town are extensively dedicated to growing maize, barley and oats.

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4.2.13.12: Inka ushnus- landscape, site and symbol in the Andes

- *by* **THE BRITISH MUSEUM**

Page ID
181668



Video **4.2.13.12.8**: Video from The British Museum (**Inca Ushnus project**).

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SECTION OVERVIEW

4.3: Equador

4.3.1: Chorrera culture Chorrera ceramics

4.3.2: Jama-Coaque culture Jama-Coaque ceramics

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4.3.1: Chorrera culture Chorrera ceramics

by **DR. SARAHH SCHER**

Page ID
181670



Figure **4.3.1.1**: Standing Female Figure, Chorrera culture, Ecuador, 10th–2nd century B.C.E., ceramic and slip, 14 inches high (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

“Brought to an end by a volcano” is not a sentence we often see. Yet the Chorrera, who once held influence over a wide portion of what is now Ecuador, met exactly that fate. Now, looters looking for antiquities to sell on the black market are another hazard that they must endure.



Figure **4.3.1.2**: Map of the Chorrera cultural region (in red) (underlying map © Google)

The modern country of Ecuador is a land of geological contrasts, from the lofty volcanic peaks of the Andes mountains in the east, to tropical forests leading down to the western coast. Over its long history, many different cultures have come and gone, each with its own artistic style. In the ancient past, a group of people called the Chorrera occupied a large part of western Ecuador, and their artistic style would have a strong influence over the cultures that would follow, especially their representations of human figures.

Yet the Chorrera, a group of cultures united by in part by a common artistic style who once held influence, flourished in the verdant western coastal lowlands, extending from Esmeraldas south to the Guayas Basin, and their influence reached into the Andean

highlands, probably via trading routes that exchanged coastal products like *Spondylus* shell for highland obsidian. From about 1300–300 B.C.E., they dominated the coast. Their dominance, at least in some areas, may have come to an end due to the major eruption of the Pululahua volcano in 467 B.C.E. Many of the Chorrera ceramics featured in museums probably date from c. 900–500 B.C.E., a time frame associated with particularly fine ceramic production. However, extensive looting of many Chorrera ceramics means that these pieces do not have the contextual information needed to securely date them.

Crafting culture in clay

Chorrera ceramic artists were specialists who developed a sophisticated ceramic technology that allowed them to create elaborate vessels and highly expressive sculptural works, and they would have an influence on the later **Jama-Coaque culture** in the same region, who are known for their elaborately costumed figural sculptures. While it is difficult to know precisely what these ceramics meant, they were probably used for ritual purposes, whether to represent supernatural forces or to accompany the dead. Without written records (the Chorrera did not use a writing system), and with the loss of context that comes from **looting**, it is difficult to develop more specific ideas about the use and cultural significance of sculptures like these.



Figure **4.3.1.3**: Female figure, Valdivia culture, late 3rd millennium B.C.E., ceramic, Ecuador, 9.2. x 2.5 x 2.5 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Unlike earlier ceramic representations of human figures from the area (such as a female figure from the Valdivia culture), which were small and solid, Chorrera figures are hollow, either as self-contained sculptures or as vessels, and can be rather large (the Chorrera standing female figure is 14 inches tall). The sculptural figurines were made using molds to create the more detailed front of the figure, while the less-detailed backs were hand-finished. The molds appear to have been held as important objects in their own right, as at least two repaired molds (most likely from funerary contexts, as that is the source of most looted material) are known, implying that they were treasured objects.

Both women and men are depicted, which was also a change from earlier cultures, which mostly depicted female figures (scholars speculate that this is because the figurines were associated with fertility, but there is no conclusive evidence of this). The standing female figure at The Metropolitan Museum of Art is typical of these kinds of Chorrera sculptures, standing in an upright, frontal, and static pose, with the arms down at the sides. Rather than indicating elbows, her arms are shown as a single, tapering form, ending in tiny hands. Her hands are turned so that the palms face us, and her body is meticulously symmetrical, with the exception of her abstracted hair formed into swirling shapes. However, the sculpture still has a fluid, organic quality that comes from an almost pillow-like treatment of the figure, emphasizing the curves of her body. The highly polished slip paint adds to the sleekness of her form.

Her face is highly simplified, with the eyes and mouth shown closed and depicted by simple lines. Her nose is a streamlined, geometric shape, and her earlobes have basic depictions of earspool ornaments in them. She is otherwise naked and unadorned, although it is possible that she was originally meant to be dressed and bedecked with other materials.



Figure **4.3.1.4**: Human Effigy Vessel, Chorrera culture, Ecuador, 1200–300 B.C.E. ceramic and slip, 10.8 x 19 x 13.3 cm (Michael C. Carlos Museum, Atlanta, GA)



Figure **4.3.1.5**: Bowl, Chorrera culture, Ecuador, 1200-300 BCE ceramic and slip, 16.5 cm diameter (Brooklyn Museum)

In contrast, the genderless figure shown in another vessel (from the Michael C. Carlos Museum) has incised lines and textures surrounding the vessel opening, which may depict a textile pattern or body paint. The mouth and eyes are more sculptural than in the figure above, although still closed: they project from the surface of the face in simplified forms. We can see that the earlobes also have earspool ornaments, like the figure at the beginning of the essay. What may be hair has been depicted here as a smooth, almost helmet-like form (and so perhaps may be a hat), without the designs seen on the standing figure.

Possibly to accommodate the function of the vessel, the limbs are small and compact; this figure does not have the swelling forms of the sculpture of the standing woman. The opening of the vessel is a simple circle located where the belly of the figure would be. A bowl in the Brooklyn Museum is an abstracted version of the same idea, with only the human head recognizable. Some versions of this vessel type have a flared lip for the opening, as in the Brooklyn example, while others, like the one in the Michael C. Carlos Museum, have a plain opening. It would seem that these forms equate the vessel with the body and vice versa, but until more scientifically-excavated examples are studied, it is not possible to know for sure.



Figure **4.3.1.6**: Spouted Bottle, Chorrera culture, Ecuador, 12th–4th century B.C.E., ceramic, 15.2 × 15.2 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Making the world around us



Figure **4.3.1.7**: Zoomorphic vessel, Chorrera culture, 950–350 B.C.E., north coast of Ecuador, 25.5 x 24.2 cm (Museo Casa del Alabado, Quito)

While humans are a common theme in Chorrera ceramics, they were not the exclusive subject matter. Animals and plants were also represented, and the sleek, idealized depiction of a squash in another vessel is typical of these artworks. The ridges of the form make the squash visible without adding extra details, presenting the viewer with a minimal, perfected plant form. The clay of this vessel would have been polished while semi-dry (a state referred to as "leather hard") with a smooth stone, resulting in the shiny surface finish seen on the squash and the standing female figure. Like the human figures, these may have had a spiritual purpose, used in rituals meant to ensure future harvests.

The eruption of the Pululahua volcano of 467 B.C.E., and the blanket of ash it laid over a significant portion of Ecuador, appears to have brought about the end of the Chorrera cultural system. It may have seemed to many that the world was ending as the ground shook and the sky turned black; the effect the ash would have had on agriculture would have lasted for years, if not decades. When the world did return to normal, new cultures arose, but many still remembered the Chorrera past and were influenced by their art—perhaps through heirloom ceramic molds, carefully kept ceramic pieces, or cultural memory of the time before the world ended.

Additional resources:

Tom Cummins, "Tradition in Ecuadorian Pre-Hispanic Art: The Ceramics of Chorrera and Jama-Coaque," in *Amerindian Signs: 5,000 Years of Precolumbian Art in Ecuador*, edited by Francisco Valdez and Diego Veintimilla (Quito: Ediciones Colibrí, 1992),

63–81.

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4.3.2: Jama-Coaque culture Jama-Coaque ceramics

by DR. SARAHH SCHER

Page ID
181671



Figure **4.3.2.1**: Standing Figure, 1st–5th century, Jama-Coaque culture, Ecuador, ceramic and post-fire paint, 33 × 17.1 × 8.9 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

The figure stands with her hands facing forward as if to say, “how could you have overlooked me for nearly two millennia?” She is a prime example of the many thousands of brightly-painted and beautifully detailed sculptures produced by the Jama-Coaque culture, which flourished in what is now the Manabí province of modern-day Ecuador’s lush western coast. The name comes from the Jama and Coaque rivers (the majority of habitations found in this area) ; we do not know what these people called themselves. The culture lasted from approximately 350 B.C.E. to 1531 C.E., the year Europeans first arrived in the area.



Figure **4.3.2.2**: Map of the Jama-Coaque cultural region (in red), with the Northern Moche cultural region also indicated (underlying map © Google)

Most of the intact ceramics that are currently known to scholars were looted, depriving archaeologists and other researchers of the contextual information that comes with a scientifically rigorous archaeological dig.

Luckily, archaeologists have been able to excavate at a few ritual centers, including the important site of San Isidro, located approximately 25 kilometers inland from the coast. Archaeologists found multiple mounds topped with platforms at the site, with the largest almost nearly 17 meters tall and 100 meters in diameter. This indicates that San Isidro was an important cultural center and the seat of a principal ruler. It is probable that some of the figurines in museum collections today were looted from this site.

Using molds

Influence from the earlier Chorrera culture can be seen in the manufacture of their ceramic sculptures of people, using molds to create the figures' detail-rich front portions and hand-crafting the simpler backs, creating intricate representations of highly adorned, idealized figures.

Details like jewelry were often also mold-made and applied while the clay was still damp; up to nine separate molds could be used to create a single Jama-Coaque figure. The slight webbing of excess clay connecting the thumbs and index fingers of the figure in the Michael C. Carlos Museum allows us to see an artifact of the mold process. The importance of molds can be seen in the continuity of style across the centuries, a continuity so strong that without an archaeological context it is almost impossible to date Jama-Coaque ceramics. Molds may have been passed down as heirlooms, or even been used to make new molds, so that the imagery they formed would persist. The technique of using molds appears to have been transmitted south, and was adopted by the Moche culture of northern coastal Peru.



Figure 4.3.2.3: Female Figure with Elaborate Headdress, Jama-Coaque culture, Ecuador, 300 B.C.E.–800 C.E., ceramic and post-fire paint, 40 x 21.9 x 10.2 cm (Michael C. Carlos Museum, Atlanta)

The body adorned

The female figures seen here strike the same pose: they standing frontally with their weight evenly balanced, and their arms held slightly away from the body. The palms of the hands facing forward (a pose also seen in earlier Chorrera figures). The figures are characterized by a bilateral symmetry and lack of movement. While somewhat abstracted, the figures are fairly naturalistic. The eyes are rendered as slightly flattened half-circles and the mouths are simple recessed lines, but the noses are sculpted into realistic projections from the face. The example from the Michael C. Carlos Museum has a clay nose ornament, while the flaring nostrils of the one at The Metropolitan Museum of Art may indicate an ornament in clay or another material was once inserted in them. Both

wear ear ornaments, elaborate wrapped head cloths, and necklaces, along with long skirts that extend nearly to the ankles. The figure from the Michael C. Carlos Museum also wears arm ornaments.

Stamps and paint



Figure **4.3.2.4**: Flat stamp, 0–400 C.E., Jama-Coaque culture, Ecuador, ceramic, 5.8 cm x 8.5 cm x 5.9 cm (Princeton University Art Museum)

Another way the people of Jama-Coaque decorated their bodies was with stamps, either flat ones or cylindrical ones that could be rolled along the skin. They could be dipped in paint and used to press intricate designs on the body, further adorning a person.

Paint was applied after the clay was fired and has been used to decorate the figurines, but because it was applied after firing, it is delicate and easily damaged, so much of it has worn off. We can see a bright orange-yellow and black on the figure from the Michael C. Carlos Museum, and the same yellow and a soft green-blue on the figure from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The green-blue color may represent greenstone or turquoise, material that was held in high esteem further north in Mesoamerica, and was a widely-used stone throughout the Andes, although not as highly valued. The use of post-fire paint, which is much more delicate than slip but able to provide more brilliant color, points towards the importance of personal display and adornment in Jama-Coaque culture.

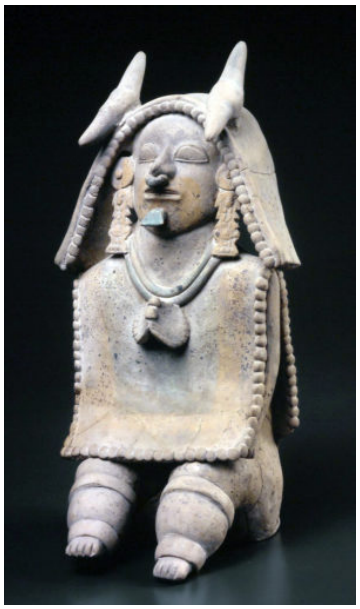


Figure **4.3.2.5**: Seated Figure, Jama-Coaque culture, Ecuador, 500 B.C.E.–500 C.E., clay with post-fire paint, 33 x 17.1 cm (Brooklyn Museum)

Status and power

Jama-Coaque culture was organized into hierarchical chiefdoms, and the headdresses and jewelry worn by these women may indicate their place in the social order. So too would the regalia worn by a male figure from the Brooklyn Museum, who sits with his hands on his thighs, his arms mostly hidden beneath his poncho. The cloth draped over his head has the same textured hem as his poncho, with two oblong shapes projecting from it. Large, dangling ear ornaments emerge from under the head cloth, and he wears a nose ornament and a labret (lower lip) piercing, which has been painted blue. His face has been sculpted similar to that of the women, with simplified eyes, a rudimentary mouth, and a more realistically sculpted nose. A shell is suspended from a double necklace and sits prominently upon his chest; shells were objects of wealth and prestige, and some were used to make musical instruments used in ritual. His lower legs are encircled below the knee and above the feet by bands.

Art historian Tom Cummins has theorized that the emphasis on the material aspects of Jama-Coaque ritual shows a culture vested in the materiality of beliefs, filled with texture, color, and sound (as perhaps evidenced by the shell strung on the necklace in the figure above; some types of shell were used to make trumpets and whistles), and the control that such displays of materiality could give.

What meaning might these figures hold aside from statements of power? Perhaps they are showing the role of the elites in communicating with the spirit world. The eyes of these figures, when found with their surface paint intact, are rolled upward, perhaps looking to the world of the supernatural or experiencing it directly through the use of hallucinogenic substances. In many Andean cultures, specific plants (and sometimes animals) that contain vision-producing (often referred to as psychedelic) substances are seen as guardians of or gateways to the spirit world. By ingesting these plants (eating them, drinking beverages made from them, or even taking them as snuff) during rituals, participants could meet and speak with the supernatural beings and ancestors who lived in the spirit world. Their ability to speak with these beings was often a major source of their social and political power, and the knowledge they brought back from their vision journeys was implemented into the culture.

As archaeologists make more discoveries, they hope to be able to place these figures more firmly in context, and to understand their relationship to Jama-Coaque elites and their social roles.

Additional resources:

Maria A. Masucci, “Early Regional Polities of Coastal Ecuador,” in *The Handbook of South American Archaeology*, edited by Helaine Silverman and Willam H. Isbell (New York: Springer, 2008), pp. 494–6.

Tom Cummins, “The Jama-Coaque mold-made figurines from coastal Ecuador,” *Res* 71–72 (2019), pp. 64–77.

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SECTION OVERVIEW

4.4: Ancient Colombia chiefdoms

4.4.1: Ancient Colombian goldmaking

4.4.2: Muisca Raft

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4.4.1: Ancient Colombian goldmaking

by **THE BRITISH MUSEUM**

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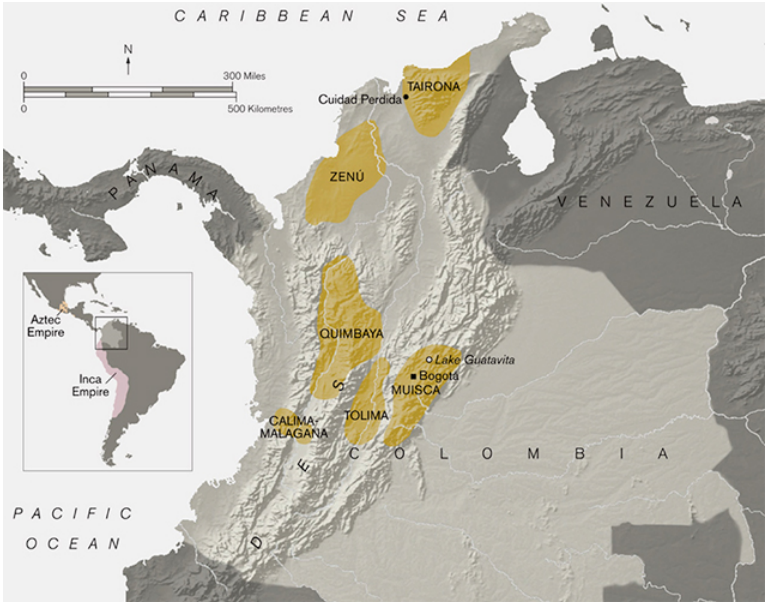


Figure **4.4.1.1**: Archaeological regions of Colombia © Trustees of the British Museum

El Dorado



Figure **4.4.1.2**: *Mask with Nose Ornament*, c. 500 B.C.E.–1600 C.E., gold alloy, 15.5 x 18 cm, Quimbaya © The Trustees of the British Museum. This spectacular hammered mask with a dangling nose ornament would probably have been placed on top of the face of a funerary bundle – the wrapped body of the deceased—transforming him into an ancestor and semi-divine figure.

For centuries Europeans were dazzled by the legend of a lost city of gold in South America. The truth behind this myth is fascinating. El Dorado–literally “the golden one”–actually refers to the ritual that took place at Lake Guatavita, near modern Bogotá. The newly elected leader, covered in powdered gold, dived into the lake and emerged as the new chief of the Muisca people who lived in the central highlands of present-day Colombia’s Eastern Range.

The Muisca, Quimbaya, Calima, Tairona, Tolima and Zenú chiefdoms in ancient Colombia used gold to fashion some of the most visually dramatic and sophisticated works of art found anywhere in the Americas before European contact. Although gold was not valued as currency in pre-Hispanic Colombia, it had great symbolic meaning. It was one way the elite could publicly assert their rank and semi-divine status, both in life and in death.

More than just gold

Objects that seem at first glance made of gold are more complex and are in fact made of metal alloys. In most instances they combine, in different degrees, gold, some natural occurring silver, and copper, a combination known as tumbaga. These metals were symbolically charged in pre-Hispanic times, being associated with the sun and the moon respectively. Their combination produced a microcosm, a balance between opposites in the rendering of each object.



Figure **4.4.1.3**: Anthropomorphic Bat Pectoral, 900–1600 C.E., gold alloy, Tairona © Museo del Oro—Banco de la República, Colombia

The creation of alloys also allowed for differences in color, ranging from reddish to golden tones. Each object had its own particular color, shine and finish thanks to the mastery and skills of the artists that produced them. Some even show contrasting colors in the same object, producing beautiful patterns and details.

Hammering and casting

Small ingots of tumbaga, in the shape of round buttons, were crafted into unique objects either by hammering or casting them (or by a combination of both techniques). Ancient Colombian artists mastered both techniques to an unprecedented degree, creating exceptional works of art.

Hammering metal was a delicate process. Metal becomes easily brittle when hammered and they have to be repeatedly cooled and dipped in water before the final form is achieved. The thin sheets of gold were then cut, decorated (for example by repoussé) or joined by clipping or folding several sheets together.



Figure **4.4.1.4**: Hands up close (detail), *Seated Female Poporo*, c. 500 B.C.E. – 700 C.E. Early Quimbaya, tumbaga (gold alloy), Colombia © The Trustees of the British Museum. This lime-flask was cast by the lost-wax method. The head, lower legs and stool were cast separately and then soldered to the body. Flasks held lime obtained from burning and grinding seashells. The alkaline lime was chewed with coca leaves to release their active stimulant and enhance clear, contemplative thinking.

However, it was the casting of metals that was developed most in ancient Colombia. Using the lost wax technique, artist modeled the final piece they wanted to achieve in beeswax (from stingless bees). Once the wax figure was finished it was covered in fine clay and charcoal, leaving pouring channels. The whole mould was fired and the melted wax poured out. Its place would be taken by molten metal, which cooled slowly as it solidified inside the mould. The mould was then broken and the final metal piece polished and finished.

Ancient Colombian artists even created hollow objects following this technique, for example flasks and containers. Great skill was needed to produce them. The figure was modeled in clay and charcoal, and a thin layer of wax was applied to cover the final result. Over this another layer of clay would be added, and wooden pegs were inserted to fix the inner mould to the outer one to keep them in place when the wax melted. Controlling the flow of the metal to every single detail of the piece, its slow solidification, and then freeing the figure without damaging it was challenge that could only be achieved by the most experienced hands.

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4.4.2: Muisca Raft

by DR. MAYA JIMÉNEZ

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Figure 4.4.2.1: Muisca Raft, 600–1600, cast gold alloy, Museo del Oro (Gold Museum), Bogotá, Colombia (photo: Reg Natarajan, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The Muisca

Who were the people behind the myth of “El Dorado” and their supposed lost city of gold? It was the Muisca, an advanced civilization from the Eastern Cordillera of the Colombian Andes, dating from 600 C.E. to 1600 C.E. However, “el dorado” was not a city, but rather a ruler, who adorned himself with gold and was called “el dorado” (a term coined later by the Spanish meaning “the golden one”). In 1636, under the leadership of Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, the Spanish began the conquest of Colombia, and in their quest to exploit its material riches, crafted this myth.

The Muisca were the most advanced of the Chibcha-speaking people and controlled an expanse of land that stretched from Bogotá to Tunja. Their confederation of states consisted of various tribes, each ruled by a separate ruler. While leaders were primarily male, inheritances were passed down from the maternal side, a possible reason for the large number of female figurines discovered among the Muisca. Through an established trade network, the Muisca traded salt for gold, becoming highly advanced metallurgists, and developing sophisticated casting techniques and special metal alloys.



Figure **4.4.2.2**: Map showing the Muisca territory in modern-day Colombia (map: Nwbeeson, CC BY-SA 4.0)



Figure **4.4.2.3**: Muisca artist, *Male Figure (tunjo)*, 10th–16th century, gold, Colombia, Guatavita Lake region (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

While Spanish conquerors spoke of a lost "City of Gold" located at the bottom of Lake Guatavita, they also described the initiation ritual through which the Muisca would honor a new leader by covering his body in gold dust and then submerging him, his raft, and other offerings into the sacred lake.

The ritual consisted of making offerings to the deity Chibchachun, who was the god of merchants and goldsmiths. The types of offerings placed on the raft consisted of emeralds, a natural resource in Colombia, and gold, typically in the form of *tunjos*, or votive pieces that depict either human or animal figures.

The Male Figure is an example of the symmetry and complexity with which these *tunjos* were made. Made of flattened and simple geometric shapes, the figure's face consists of spiral, almond, rectangular, and triangular shapes. In one hand, he carries what is most likely a staff. Figurative tunjos—like the Male Figure—usually depicted warriors, mothers, and chiefs, and offer important insights into the daily life of the Muisca. Made through the lost wax casting process, *tunjos* also feature thin gold threads that delineate the face, arms, and legs, adding another sculptural and textural dimension to an otherwise flattened surface.



Figure 4.4.2.4: Muisca artist, *Double Eagle Pendant*, 10th–16th century, gold (cast alloy), Colombia, Guatavita Lake region (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The Double Eagle Pendant, perhaps used as a protective emblem, displays another style of Muisca goldwork, with two rounded, three-dimensional eagles perched atop a flat, flaring shape that is suggestive of wings. While somewhat more organic in form than the Male Figure, they are also rendered with a high level of abstraction and a horizontal band of decorative pattern. In contrast with *tunjos* and the Muisca Raft, pendants typically featured a high polish and smooth surface.



Figure 4.4.2.5: Muisca Raft, 600–1600, cast gold alloy, 7.6 x 4 x 4 inches (photo: Pedro Szekely, CC BY-SA 2.0, Museo del Oro, Bogotá, Colombia)

Muisca Raft

One of the most famous Muisca artworks is known as the Muisca Raft. It was discovered in Pasca, to the south of Lake Guatavita, but it is believed to depict the initiation ceremony of a new ruler. Perhaps the most impressive of Muisca tunjos, it is made of *tumbaga*, a metallic alloy that is more than eighty percent gold. This type of alloy, which consists of gold mixed with small portions of silver and copper, gives off a unique pinkish-yellow glow, a quality that the Muisca admired for its association with the sun deity.



Figure **4.4.2.6**: Muisca Raft (detail), 600–1600, cast gold alloy (photo: Reg Natarajan, CC BY 2.0, Museo del Oro, Bogotá, Colombia)

While the physical characteristics of the Muisca Raft are impressive, its symbolic associations are also of great importance. Despite being made entirely of metal, the raft has the texture and shape of wood. This is in keeping with the descriptions of the ritual, which placed the leader on a wooden raft. We can easily identify the ruler through the example of hieratic scale (when size is relative to importance and not physical appearance) that depicts the ruler larger than any other figure on the raft.

The heavily adorned figure stands prominently at center, flanked by twelve smaller figures wearing masks, carrying canes, and rowing. All figures follow the Muisca standard with an enlarged upper body offset by disproportionately small limbs. Another characteristic of the Muisca is the unpolished gold surface and refined openwork design, a testament to the advanced artistry of Muisca metalworking.

From the moment it was discovered in 1969, the people of Pasca have struggled to preserve the Muisca Raft in Colombia. Another raft discovered in 1856 was lost at sea while traveling to an exhibition in Germany. This unfortunate incident, combined with the looting and destruction that took place in colonial Colombia, explains why the Muisca Raft has never left the Museo del Oro in Bogotá, Colombia.

Additional resources:

Watch "How the Golden Raft of El Dorado Was Crafted," from the Smithsonian Channel

The legend of El Dorado at National Geographic

Exhibition objects from *Golden Kingdoms*, including Isthmo-Colombian works

Golden Kingdoms: Luxury Arts in the Ancient Americas, ed. Joanne Pillsbury, Kim Richter, and Timothy Potts (J. Paul Getty Museum, 2017).

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