

The Sacrifice Ceremony Battles and Death in Mochica Art

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The Mochica culture flourished in the valleys of the North Coast of Peru, approximately since 150 AC. The various nuclei that constituted the Mochica society were the first in South America to group together vast territories in regional states, and consequently, large towns organized according to a highly hierarchical structure. They developed an elaborate ideology to legitimize their growing political and social complexity. Their ideology materialized in large temples and places of worship where ritual and funerary ceremonies were put on stage requiring the use of elaborate paraphernalia and symbols. Likewise, the Mochicas developed irrigation, agriculture and fishing technologies for food production and they perfected techniques for the production of artifacts of ritual and domestic use. In its seven hundred years of history, an elite that combined secular power with an important ritual function governed the Mochica culture. Indeed, they were living gods.

To study the life, customs and traditions that were practiced in this society, archaeology resorts to material remains that have resisted the passage of time. They are particularly explicit in their reference, for example, to technology, diet, and funerary practices and to all aspects of life that can be depicted in objects. The ideas, stories and myths, religious practices, the names and prowesses of the gods are, generally, not preserved. They exist without any material support, as do their stories and ceremonies. The stories of the community, the myths of origin and the feats of heroes and gods are oral, disappearing after being expressed. The feasts and ceremonies are generally staged in temples that are then scrupulously cleaned up, removing all traces of the event. In some cases, however, ancient societies developed elaborate systems of artistic representations in pottery, metal, textiles or mural painting, through which they illustrated the rites and ceremonies, myths and legends, ideas and values of what was regarded as most sacred. These figures comprise a civilization's iconography, and among the Andean societies, Mochica iconography is, undoubtedly, the most outstanding due to its richness and detail that illustrates with great realism a vast range of ceremonies and religious narration.

The interpretation of these figures is not a simple task and it has been a matter of study by a long tradition of scholars who, starting with Uhle, Tello and Larco, have tried to interpret the stories hidden in the pottery. We now know that Mochica iconography reflects this society's ceremonial and not its daily life (Hocquenghem 1987). We know, besides, that it covers a limited range of themes (Donnan 1975) that possibly corresponds to mythical narrations and rituals (Castillo 1991). Finally, we know that it was the work of highly specialized artisans, particularly competent in depicting narration and rites. The research work has made it possible to recognize their gods and identify their functions, to define the represented themes and to study their evolution through time (Donnan & Mc Clelland 1999) and along the evolution of the Mochica State. Moreover, recent excavations at significant Mochica sites such as La Huaca de la Luna and El Brujo, or in the cemeteries of Sipán, Dos Cabezas and San José de Moro have made it possible to verify that many decorations on the pottery can be matched to parallel narrations in archaeological contexts (Alva & Donnan 1993, Franco et.al. 1994, Uceda et.al. 1994). Finally, the careful study of these images has made the unimaginable possible: to reconstruct step by step and in great detail stories that were told in the northern coast more than a thousand years ago. The following paragraphs are an attempt at reconstructing the most important stories and ritual cycles of the Mochica religion. Although originally unnamed, the story may be called the "Warrior's Geste" ending in the "Sacrifice Ceremony".

The Warrior's Geste

Using painted and sculpted pottery as a source of information, the paintings and high-reliefs that appear on Mochica temple walls and other material evidence discovered by archaeologists, it has been possible to determine that the center of Mochica religious liturgy was a complex ceremony that ended in the sacrifice of warriors defeated in the battlefield. The ceremony has been alternatively called "The Sacrifice" (Hocquenghem 1987), since it culminates with the prisoners' ritual death, and the "Presentation" (Donnan 1975), since the warrior's blood is presented to a divinity in ceremonial goblets. Reconstructing this important ceremony has been possible, based on the studies of images of diverse Mochica ceramic artifacts distributed around the world. Although now we understand it more clearly, more than fifty years ago Rafael Larco Hoyle, a pioneer of Mochica studies, had already mentioned the ceremonial practice of human sacrifices among the Mochica (Larco 1945). The Larco Museum, which owns the

largest Mochica pottery collection in the world, is probably the only place where we can find representations of every moment of the geste.

The first part of the ceremony was the ritual combat where warriors, strongly armed with spear throwers and spears, wooden or metal maces, pectorals and slings, fight against each other (see images 4, 5, 6). The combatants were richly adorned with headdresses and plumes (27, 28), ear disks, facial painting, pectorals and bracelets, shirts decorated with figures of waves or stairways, kilts and loincloths, backflaps (21, 22) and bells. Their elaborate garments (56, 57) point to their presumably high status in Mochica society. Frequently, warriors from the same faction wore the same elements; for example, the same headdress, the same shirts or even similar face decorations, reflecting their possible similar origin, birth place or kinship. Although these scenes have been frequently used to illustrate war in ancient Peru, there is some controversy regarding why wars were fought and the origin of combatants. In most cases, warriors from both factions are adorned in the Mochica fashion, and only in some cases could they have been outsiders. These last ones carry stone-head maces, headdresses decorated with hands and disk earrings.

If indeed all warriors are Mochica, these confrontations would not be actual wars, but ritual combats (Hocquenghem 1987) as the Chiaraje battles still dramatized in the Cuzco area. In some cases, the warriors are not human beings but anthropomorphous animals marching to combat dressed and armed as warriors. It is not clear whether these animal warriors really fight or if they are on their way to confront animated objects. The latter appear in the so-called Ceremony of the Revolt of the Objects (51).

The ritual combat itself, described in detail in hundreds of ceramic vessels, was a confrontation between warriors, one of each faction, until one of them was defeated and captured. It is very likely that the combat, as all ritual activity, may have been regulated. For example, in very few cases do we see two warriors from a group attack one of the opposite faction. It was rather a body-to-body confrontation of an individual against another (7). It would seem that each warrior attacked his opponent with a mace (23, 24, 25) until one of them lost the headdress and his hair showed (8, 9, 10). We know that this was of enormous transcendence because in Mochica art a man's hair is only seen when he has been defeated and is close to his death. We can presume that the warriors used all their ability and care to avoid being defeated. However, in the process some of them were hurt and appear bleeding from the nose or head. While

we frequently see that the warriors carry spear throwers and spears, we never see individuals pierced by darts in combat scenes, which does occur in deer hunting scenes. As it happens, the combat's final objective was not the warriors' death in the battlefield but their capture. We rarely find representations of dead warriors reinforcing the combats' ritual character and its separation from a real battle, where we would expect to kill the greatest number of opponents.

The defeated warrior quickly becomes a prisoner, he is stripped of his clothes, his hands are tied behind his back and a rope put around his neck (11, 13, 16, 27, 18, 71). Many warriors', naked bodies were covered with tattoos, as we can see in the rare cases of mummies whose skin has been preserved (Ubbelohde Doering 1983). Some very high-ranking individuals were able to keep their shirts after their defeat (Benson 1982). These prisoners are represented without the kilt and loincloth, and exhibit disproportionately big genitals. It would seem that the representations attempted at emphasizing the prisoners' strength and manliness. We are not in front of individuals weakened in battle, but young warriors that still possessed all their reproductive potency. Then, the naked and tied up prisoners were presented to high ranking warriors, who appear waiting for the combat's outcome in places away from the battlefield. The prisoners were neither locked in nor guarded by force. It would seem, on the contrary, that they were willing victims for the sacrifice that awaited them.

Both the ritual combats and the prisoners' preparation apparently took place in open spaces, maybe in the desert in the outskirts of Mochica towns. This first part of the ceremony does not take place in constrained spaces, nor in ceremonial yards, but in areas favorable to the growth of cactaceae native to the coastal desert, such as aloe (*tillandacia*). After the combat, the ritual again takes place in a constructed space.

The Sacrifice Ceremony

Naked and tied up, the prisoners were taken in procession to the place of their sacrifice. In some cases, the prisoners' processions became real parades, with some prisoners carried on litters by their companions in misfortune (12). Other prisoners were thrown from the top of mountains peaks (40). It is important to note that these parades converged toward roofed structures that were, frequently, on the upper part of monticules. A series of examples shows that the victorious warriors no longer transport or take care of the prisoners. Instead, the task is entrusted to officiants who

can be recognized because they wear simple cloth headdresses worn on the forehead. But not all the prisoners had the same end. Mochica representations illustrate different kinds of sacrifices; some took place in ceremonial structures, as the Huacas de La Luna or El Brujo, and others in guano islands, where the prisoners were lead in cattail rafts (41, 42, 43). The prisoners are, however, the same ones. It is as if their capture were a unique process, but their fates diverse.

In some cases the prisoners were beheaded or dismembered, but basically, they were bled to death. The sacrifice seems to have had as its main function to extract the prisoners' blood, submitting them to a slow and weakening death. The blood was let out through a perforation in the neck, and a bone or metal drain. It was carefully received in ceremonial goblets and drank by the god-men. The sacrifice itself was generally carried out on a stage by anthropomorphous animals, particularly felines and bats. At this point takes place the passage from a merely human to world another where the actors are usually supernatural beings. Our reconstruction of this complex ceremony comes to its end with the sacrifice and the offering of the prisoners' blood.

Fortunately, some ceramic vessels provide additional links. There, the artists detail all the stages of the ceremony. One of the most important surviving Mochica pieces kept by the Larco Museum (1, 2), and an almost twin one kept in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Munich, represent the ceremony in all its details. The prisoners' sacrifice is illustrated in the lower part of the design of the "Larco Piece" (3). To the right; two naked prisoners with their hands tied up while two persons next to them slit their necks open. The one on the right is a character with female features and the one of the left has a feline head and paws. Next to the prisoner on the left we can see small points representing the blood flowing from the slit in the neck. The blood was collected in very simple bowls (36), and then the liquid was poured into high pedestal goblets, like the one the main character carries in the upper part of the drawing (54, 55).

The blood extracted from the prisoners, young warriors of the same origin as their conquerors, was undoubtedly regarded as a source of vitality and fecundity. In the upper part of the representation of the "Larco Piece" we see four richly adorned characters that can be recognized as divinities of the Mochica pantheon and priests of their cults. The character on the left end is the highest-ranking (45) and as such receives the goblet with the prisoners' blood. The two central characters, one with a

bird's head, wings, tail and claws (47, 48, 49), and the other one, a woman adorned with an elaborate headdress, skirt and braided hair (50), are charged with offering the blood-filled goblet to the principal character. The woman appears covering the goblet with a pumpkin plate, maybe trying to prevent the blood from clotting. The last character in the sequence is also high ranking. Elsewhere he appears receiving the goblet from the anthropomorphic bird's hands. (52, 53). The blood offering seems to have been the ceremony's climax and although the priest is not yet drinking the blood he is expected to do so. The prisoners must have died at this point. Their corpses were sent to special places, one of which was located in an area adjacent to the Huaca de la Luna.

For a long time it was thought that the representation of human sacrifices did not necessarily reflect reality, that is to say that the Mochicas did not sacrifice people. In recent years, however, excavations of Mochica cemeteries and temples have confirmed many of the rituals shown in their art. The individuals buried at Sipán (The Lord of Sipán) and San José de Moro (the Priestess) in splendid tombs are similar to two of the characters that appear in the Goblet Presentation Scene (Alva & Donnan 1993, Donnan & Castillo 1994). The Priestess in particular is a rich source of information because her headdress is identical to the art depictions, and because she was buried with the same kind of high pedestal goblet used to drink the blood. Nevertheless, this kind of goblet is very unusual. Similar ones have been identified in only three cases all involving women (Donnan & Castillo 1994, Strong & Evans 1952). The evidence seems to indicate that in real life the Mochica rulers played the role of sacrificial priests. But the coincidences do not stop with the officiants. Excavations at the temple of Huaca de la Luna and El Brujo have made it possible to identify the places where the prisoners' parades, the sacrifices and the drinking of blood were very probably dramatized (Uceda et.al. 1994, Franco et. al. 1994). On the frescoes at the Huaca El Brujo, archaeologists have found life-size representations of naked prisoners tied with ropes around their necks, as well as detailed figures of fighting prisoners. Because the Huaca de la Luna is similar in structure to El Brujo, similar images are likely to be found there in future excavations. More clear proof of human sacrifices has been found in Huaca de la Luna. In a plain next to Huaca de la Luna, dozens of youths appeared with evident signs of having been hit and let to bleed. These youths, very probably sacrificed at the time of catastrophic rains caused by the El Niño weather anomaly, would be the prisoners that appear in Mochica art.

The ceremony of ritual combat and later human sacrifice practiced by the Mochicas is not unique in America. In Middle America, the "Flower Wars" practiced by the Mexican Aztecs culminated with the ritual sacrifice of the defeated warriors. Among the Maya, the "Ball Game" ritual seems to have culminated when some of the players were sacrificed. The sacrifice of warriors seems to have had as its objective to choose candidates for the sacrifice among the most productive members of society. From the viewpoint of society, the sacrifice is the offering of one of its most valuable goods, while it shows unmistakably to all the state's right to exert violence and govern human life. The Mochica drawings seemingly tell us that the gods, represented by the warrior priests in the ceremonies, give life and therefore can take it away.

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