

Five Sacred Priestesses from San José de Moro: Elite Women Funerary Rituals on Peru's Northern Coast

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Introduction

For many years archaeologists assumed that power in pre-Hispanic societies had been monopolized by male leaders: priests, warriors, and political rulers who controlled and administered their societies and who played the principal roles in ritual reenactments of mythological themes (Castillo and Holmquist 2000). Female gods were not among the most frequently represented deities in ancient iconography and they were generally subordinate to their male counterparts in indigenous pantheons and in ceremonial expression. Until relatively recently, all the complex and rich tombs that had been excavated by archaeologists were associated with men. However, the idea that women played only unimportant roles in the organization of power and in ritual and ceremonial systems was based on an erroneous interpretation of the evidence. This interpretation was shaken suddenly in 1991, when excavations at San José de Moro revealed the first tombs of Moche priestesses (Donnan and Castillo 1992, 1994).

The tombs provided empirical evidence that at least in the Jequetepeque Valley, in the days of the Moche and their descendents in A.D. 400-1000, women were as important in the construction and maintenance of society as their male counterparts. As we will see, the nature of these tombs demonstrates that enormous resources were invested in the burial of certain women, reflecting their high status in life and their salience in ritual systems. As a result of their ritual functions, these women enjoyed power and importance independent of the men in their society. The large burial chambers of Moche priestesses are among the richest and most complex tombs of women excavated by archaeologists in Peru or elsewhere in the Americas. However, tombs of other women have also been excavated at San José de Moro, and they are not all restricted to Moche period. Excavations at or near San José de Moro have continued without interruption for fourteen years, and other tombs of elite women have been found in the area, pertaining to the Late Moche tradition (A.D. 600-850) and to the Transitional period (A.D. 850-950). The Transitional was a period of substantial changes on the northern coast of Peru that followed the collapse of Moche society and preceded the Lambayeque conquest (Rucabado and Castillo 2003).

In this essay, I will present archaeological data on funerary practices with regard to elite women. I will describe the tombs and ceremonial contexts within which the remains of the most notable women have appeared, paying particular attention to the tomb of the Priestess of Moro. I will also discuss the nature of elite female power in the societies of the Jequetepeque Valley during the Moche and Transitional periods. I think it is important to describe these tombs in some detail, given their extraordinary characteristics and because, contrary to what some continue to argue, they reflect an alternative pathway in the construction of power. That being said, it seems from the data that these powerful elite women were exceptional for their place and time.

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The tombs of elite women have received relatively little attention in the archaeological literature, especially in comparison to richer “royal” tombs such as those at Sipán (Alva 2001) and at Dos Cabezas (Donnan 2001). Nevertheless, the elaborate funerary contexts of their tombs and their numerous and valuable grave goods should not distract us from the fact that these women were privileged and prosperous fundamentally because of the important role that they played in their society in maintaining social order and legitimizing a rigidly hierarchical and ritualized political system. The archaeological data tell us that the elite women of San José de Moro were wealthy and important, and that their importance seems to have stemmed from their own social roles and conditions, not from their association with powerful men. They stood out not as the wives, sisters, daughters, or concubines of powerful men, but as priestesses in human sacrifice rituals, as healers, and above all as incarnations of goddesses.

Funerary Excavations of Elite Women’s Tombs in San José de Moro

The archaeological study of elite women in the pre-Hispanic world began long before the excavations at San José de Moro. Since the beginning of the 20th century, various groups of researchers have excavated funerary contexts of women containing extraordinary arrays of grave goods. At the end of the 1940s, researchers Duncan Strong and Clifford Evans of Columbia University reported an extraordinary woman’s tomb at Huaca de la Cruz containing textiles, metals, and ceramics in the form of skulls, mythological figures, and warriors. Two items that received little attention were a simple clay goblet and a ceramic artifact decorated with anthropomorphized weapons of war running with goblets in their hands (1952). As we shall see, these artifacts were very similar to those found in the tomb of the priestess at Moro.

Unlike studies of residential or ceremonial contexts, excavations of tombs and burials provide important data to understand the roles and importance of unique individuals, because tombs are specifically associated with those individuals and reproduce their identities after their physical deaths. Non-funerary contexts such as kitchens or textile production areas are also identified with females, but they may be found within larger contexts that don’t share the same association. The residence of a priestess would not necessarily display signs of her gender identity, and may not differ in appearance from that of a priest of the same or lesser rank. An individual’s tomb however, like the woman’s tomb found at Huaca de la Cruz, was constructed to correspond to the identity and roles of that individual in life. Thus they reflect not only the status (greater or lesser wealth than other people and greater or lesser access to the symbolic objects necessary for liturgical ceremonies), but also the roles pertaining to the social position held in life by that individual.

The pioneering work on women in ancient Peru by Rebeca Carrión Cachot (1923), and the work of Patricia Lyon (1978), Anne Marie Hocquenghem (1980), and Ulla Holmquist (1992) on “supernatural women” directed the attention of archaeologists to the representation of women in Andean iconography. Lyon and Hocquenghem focused on the study of the mythic woman, or priestess, represented in Moche art. Holmquist defined this figure’s scope of activity and range of representation, demonstrating her increasing importance toward the end of the Moche culture, a period in which she came to be represented more frequently than any other divinity. These works discredited the theretofore assumed male monopoly in Andean pantheons and demonstrated that art and ceremonial artifacts provided a space for the portrayal of female identities that transcended the biological roles of reproduction and child rearing. These researchers demonstrated that mythic women had been protagonists of some of the most important Andean rituals and that their prominence fluctuated over time, becoming most pronounced in the Late Moche period. Mythic women were protagonists in burial rituals, in the

ritual sometimes called World Upside Down or Rebellion of the Artifacts, in mythology related to sea journeys, and above all in the sacrifice ceremony, the most widespread ritual practice of the Moche, and possibly central to their liturgical calendar (Castillo and Holmquist 2000). However, until the archaeological record provided empirical evidence to corroborate the basis for these iconographic motifs, the impact of the pioneering works mentioned above was limited to a discussion of the mythology. Researchers speculated on the relationship between cultural reality and mythological motifs. Were the images of goddesses and priestesses, shamans and healers only idealized versions of a mythical world populated by imaginary beings? To answer these questions, and clarify the role of women in pre-Columbian societies, it was necessary to wait for archaeology to provide tangible evidence.

The San José de Moro Archaeological Project was begun in 1991 as a research program of the University of California at Los Angeles and the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP). It was directed by Christopher B. Donnan and the current author, Luis Jaime Castillo. After the project came under the auspices of the PUCP alone, researchers and students from Peruvian, European, and North American universities became affiliated to it. Work was concentrated at the San José de Moro site, which had been used as a cemetery and ceremonial center for more than a thousand years, beginning in A.D. 400. From the project base in San José de Moro, archaeological work was conducted throughout the Jequetepeque Valley in order to determine the relationship between the towns and villages where people lived and the ceremonial center where they went to conduct their most important rituals and to bury their leaders. In addition, modular museum system was constructed in San José de Moro and several programs for sustainable community development have been promoted in cooperation with the local population. Today the artisans of San José de Moro produce the finest replicas available of ceramics in the elegant Moche style.

The Tombs of the Priestesses of San José de Moro

The most important discoveries at San José de Moro are the tombs of two Late Moche period priestesses (ca. A.D. 750-800) who played a dominant role in the sacrifice ceremony, and a complex of elite women's burial chambers from the Transitional period (Castillo 2000, 2004).

The discovery of the first priestess's tomb was unexpected. Toward the end of the 1991 excavation season, the first at San José de Moro, just one end of the excavation area was left to explore. We decided to dig a test pit in order to determine whether the stratigraphy in this part of the site was in keeping with the other areas that had been excavated. After reaching a depth of just over four meters, we found what appeared to be an adobe wall. We had already found two chamber tombs that season, so we knew that at that depth an adobe wall could only be part of a very large tomb. We increased the surface area of the excavation in order to encompass the entire tomb, and at a depth of just under 6 meters we found the remains of what had been wooden beams used to support the chamber's roof. The funerary chamber itself came into view below the remains of the beams: an underground room filled with sediment that had filtered in through its decomposed roof structure.

Human remains and grave goods were found on the floor of the funerary chamber, more than 7 meters below ground. As in previous cases, the chamber had been constructed with four plastered adobe walls. These walls contained fourteen niches. The interior of the chamber was divided into two areas: a northern antechamber containing the skeletons of two young women, perhaps sacrificed shortly before their burial, and the funerary chamber itself to the south, containing the principal personages and most of the offerings. In the center of the funerary chamber was the skeleton of a stout woman no more than 1½ meters tall and a little over forty

years old at the time of her death. This was the woman that we interpret to have been a priestess. She originally lay inside a rectangular coffin made of reeds, to the sides of which metal objects had been sewn in the form of arms and legs, a large funerary mask, and sandals. These objects gave the coffin an almost human appearance. It also resembled the objects with arms and legs that fought against human beings in depictions of the myth known as the Rebellion of the Artifacts (Castillo and Holmquist 2000). The priestess was flanked by the incomplete skeletons of two very old women. These women and the two young women found in the antechamber may have been included in the retinue of women who accompanied the priestess in the funeral ceremonies that are depicted in the "Burial Scene" (Donnan and McClelland 1979).

The artifacts associated with the priestess, which had been deposited in her tomb as funerary offerings, are indicative of the roles that she performed in life. Sewn to the top surface of the coffin, we found two large copper "feathers" adorning a complex ceremonial headdress used only by the priestess. Near her right hand we found a copper goblet with a conical pedestal, very similar to the goblets containing the blood of sacrificial victims in depictions of the sacrifice ceremony. In addition to these very characteristic objects, the coffin was found to contain a funerary assemblage including necklaces and bracelets with beads of metal, bone, shell, and stone, needles and spindle-whorls for textile production, and ear spools decorated with turquoise mosaics.

The seventy-three ceramic items found in this tomb also point to a very important woman. A collection of soot-blackened pots and pitchers for domestic use was lined up at her feet, surely taken from her own kitchen. In the southwest corner of the chamber we found the most important ceramic pieces: cups, platters and bowls of different sizes, and finely painted bottles, one of them decorated with the likeness of a priestess on a reed raft. The most significant artifact found in the tomb is a goblet with a conical base, painted with anthropomorphized figures of war clubs running with goblets in their hands, very similar to the representation found in the woman's tomb at Huaca de la Cruz (Strong and Evans 1952). This goblet and the copper goblet would have been used to present the blood of sacrificial victims to the principal divinity in the sacrifice ceremony (Castillo 2000a).

Three ceramic artifacts stood out due to their origins and because they illustrated the inclusive nature of Late Moche ideology. One of these was a bottle with images of felines in the Nievería style of ceramics from the central coast of Peru, and the second was a white clay plate in the style of Cajamarca, a culture centered in the nearby mountains. While it is common to find imported ceramics in other locations, it is highly unusual to do so in Moche contexts. It seems that throughout their history the Moche expressly restricted contact with outside cultures and traditions, and imported objects are almost never found in their temples or tombs. Although the evidence of outside contact found in the tombs of priestesses was a departure from past experience, the particular circumstances of these contexts may provide an explanation. The non-local objects were related to the Wari culture, a large and expansive state centered in the southern highlands. Their inclusion in such an important tomb would demonstrate that in their terminal period, the Moche sought to associate themselves with the prestige and power represented by the Wari (Castillo 2000c).

All the objects that made up the funerary assemblage of the priestess were carefully chosen and intentionally deposited in her tomb by the officiants at her funeral. Each object represented some meaning, established some connection, or had some relevance to the priestess during her life. So far we have been able to determine the function of only some of the most important objects, those associated with the role of the priestess in the sacrifice ceremony. It remains to be seen if

other objects may help us to determine additional roles played by this important woman during her lifetime.

The discovery of an elite Moche tomb in the Jequetepeque Valley with associated grave goods that lead us to believe that the deceased was associated with a divinity leads to the question of whether this circumstance was unique or whether other individuals of the same or successive periods represented the priestess's identity or played the role that she played in Moche society. In 1992 we returned for a second season of excavations at San José de Moro, concentrating on an area close to the priestess's tomb. Almost immediately we found two burial chambers with the same configuration as that of the year before. Clearly this part of the cemetery was reserved for tombs of high status individuals and, as we will see, most frequently for tombs of priestesses. One of the burial chambers was occupied by just one young man. The tomb was very deep, almost seven meters, but it contained very few and very poor associated objects.

The second chamber tomb to be excavated in 1992 had many of the same characteristics that we had discovered in the tomb of the priestess. Structurally, it had heavy wooden roof beams, it had wall niches, and it was divided into two sections differentiated by an offset in the floor level. More importantly, the principal personage turned out to be a woman something over twenty years old, accompanied by hundreds of ceramics and a rich array of metal pieces that as in the previous case represented the "human" features of an anthropomorphic coffin. The copper goblet, the ceremonial mask, the metal feathers adorning a headdress, and the large metal pieces in the form of arms and legs, all of them corresponded to those that had been found the year before in the tomb of the priestess. *Spondylus* and sodalite necklaces, the tools for the production of textiles, and the large number of ceramics were also analogous. However, the ceramic and metal offerings were smaller or of lower quality. Unlike the first priestess, this woman did not seem to be accompanied by other women but by a young man. A large number of human and camelid bones were also found spread around the principal coffin and at its foot, in such disorder that it seemed they had been thrown there. The second priestess of San José de Moro clearly had not enjoyed the same wealth as the first, perhaps because she died at an earlier age and did not have time to accumulate the same amount of property as the first priestess. The two burials did not appear to be contemporaneous. The second tomb seems to represent a later burial, since the artifacts found in it display styles derived from those in the first. The second tomb also contains objects representing non-local traditions, primarily those of Cajamarca and Wari, as well as Moche artifacts decorated with Wari motifs in polychrome, demonstrating that Wari influences had begun to take root in local traditions.

Funerary rituals constitute a set of practices initiated even before the moment of death. They continue after burial with ceremonies particular to mourning and ancestor cults. In general these are very complex, highly regulated, and socially meaningful activities. Unfortunately, most tombs encountered by archaeologists provide but a faint shadow of what has taken place there, of all the participants and all the social connotations associated with the event. However, elite Moche tombs do provide an idea of the ritual activities that accompanied the burial and who participated in them, because extensive iconography found on associated ceramic goods illustrates elite funerary rituals in great detail (Castillo 2000). Based on these images we know that funerary rituals began with a procession in which the deceased was carried from his or her place of residence, accompanied by many people who had presumably also accompanied that individual in life. The entourage that accompanied the body included priests, women, musicians, warriors, blind people, and other officiants. The body was carried on a litter wrapped in cloth and possibly prepared for the coming journey and final destination. Upon arriving at San José de Moro, the body was deposited in a rigid coffin made of reeds and sheathed with cloth and decorative metal pieces. Three divinities also participated in the actual burial: the priestess, the *Aia Paec*, and the

Anthropomorphic Iguana. It is possible that these gods were represented in rituals by human beings such as the priestess of Moro. In addition to the gods, lesser divinities, women dressed as the priestesses, and other officiants dressed as animals also participated in the ritual. Activities associated with the burial would include shell offerings, animal sacrifices, instrumental music, and the rather peculiar sacrifice of a woman who was mutilated and abandoned nude to be eaten by vultures. These rituals are represented on a series of bottles containing images of the burial ceremony (Donnan and McClelland 1979). One of these bottles was found in the tomb of the second priestess.

The Late Moche period ended abruptly in about A.D. 850, apparently in the midst of an internal crisis of legitimacy and control. The Moche elite of Jequetepeque had been unable to forestall a series of regional climatic catastrophes over the course of several decades, which led to internal strife and social fragmentation. Almost all evidence of the Moche, their temples and ceremonial centers, their gods, and practically their entire material culture suddenly disappeared from the archaeological record. It seems that those who succumbed in the Moche collapse were the leaders, the elite, the priests and warriors, and surely among them the priestesses who participated in ceremonies associated with human sacrifice.

The Priestesses of the Transitional Period

The cultural stratigraphy of San José de Moro has revealed an unexpected phenomenon that we call the Transitional period. After the sudden end of the Late Moche and before the Lambayeque conquest, that is in A.D. 850-1000, a cultural style developed in the Jequetepeque Valley that combined Moche traditions with influences of the Wari and Cajamarca cultures, and anticipated characteristics of the Lambayeque and Chimú. It resulted from an accelerated process of cultural synthesis and hybridization, a key moment in cultural development on the northern coast of Peru, analogous to the kind of sudden change described in the “punctuated equilibrium” model of evolutionary theory.

Previous research had not predicted the discovery of the Transitional period, and as the evidence accumulated it seemed to signal a very complex period that was dramatically different from what had preceded it. Up until that time we had believed that a vacuum of centralized power followed the Moche collapse in the Jequetepeque Valley, leaving local communities free to exercise their own cultural, artistic, socioeconomic, and funerary preferences. This was thought to explain the stylistic diversity of ceramic art and other cultural traditions, as well as the multiplicity of identities that they depicted. One peculiarity of the Transitional period is the strong presence of foreign styles in ceramic production, particularly styles associated with Cajamarca, Wari, and other traditions associated with the latter. Evidence of these long-distance cultural relations had already appeared in Late Moche funerary contexts, including in the tombs of the Moro priestesses, but while imported styles were still very rare in Late Moche tombs, in Transitional period contexts they multiplied to the point of becoming dominant in some specific cases. To our surprise, the largest and most complex tombs of this period that have been excavated pertained to women, and several of them shared characteristics with the tombs of the Late Moche priestesses. Apparently the prestige and power of elite women had survived the fall of the Moche state. Below I will describe three very complex tombs that illustrate the situation of these extraordinarily powerful women of Moro in the Transitional period.

Tomb M-U1045 is one of the most complex funerary contexts excavated by our project. Based on its dating and its location, its shape and dimensions, and its contents and organization, this funeral chamber seems to represent a link between the characteristics of Moche and Transitional chamber tombs. The chamber is rectangular, with lateral benches and an access

opening on the north wall. The walls contain niches that held numerous and highly diverse grave goods, including miniatures of buildings, ceramics of many traditions, camelid bones, objects associated with ritual practices, and the miniature clay vessels known on the northern coast as *crisoles*. As was the case in the Moche chambers, some of the niches were found empty; it is not possible to determine if they originally contained artifacts made of organic materials such as wood or textiles. The chamber contained three principal personages: two women and a juvenile male found in coffins on the floor of the lower section. Additional remains were found in the form of offerings: two adolescents and an unusual quadrangular bundle containing four small children and the legs of three adults. There is much to say about the many unusual characteristics of this tomb, but in this essay I wish to stress just one point: the similarities between M-U1045 and the funerary chambers of the Late Moche priestesses.

Structurally, this tomb is a copy of those Moche chambers. Its dimensions, its division into an antechamber and a main chamber, the fact that four large columns supported a roof of thick logs, the location and orientation of the principal personages, the distribution and organization of some three hundred pieces of pottery: all of these factors demonstrate continuity with the funerary practices associated with the Late Moche elite. However, these similarities contrast with marked differences in terms of form and decoration of ceramics. A great deal of Cajamarca ceramics were found in this tomb, including plates, bowls, spoons, and pitchers. In most cases, these Cajamarca ceramics were grouped in pairs of almost identical pieces. Tomb M-U1045 is not only located temporally in the transition between Moche and Lambayeque, but conceptually it presents characteristics of the two traditions, displays strong external influences, and synthesizes all of them, producing the identity peculiar to the Transitional period. Finally, if it were possible to categorize the identity or role of the occupants, mostly female, it would be on the basis of their association with objects for use in shamanism and healing. This may be the most salient element of continuity between one cultural period and the other. San José de Moro continued to be a ceremonial center and a center for shamanistic practices, independently of what society or cultural group was dominant. The occupants of tomb M-U1045 were certainly not identical to Moche priestesses, but from those priestesses they inherited the cultural influence necessary to accumulate great wealth. On the basis of that wealth, they were able to gather objects for their funerary assemblages, objects that exhibited their prosperity and that could be used after death to continue engaging in the ceremonial practices that they had performed in life.

The Missing Priestess

The second notable funerary context is chamber tomb M-U1242. This chamber is remarkable for its dimensions: a seven-meter by seven-meter square divided into two sections, one beside the other. Its access was from the south and its walls contain niches, with those on the northern and western walls each holding pottery in different styles: Cajamarca, Wari, proto-Lambayeque, and post-Moche. In addition, the chamber contains *crisoles*, some very incomplete miniature buildings, and camelid remains. It also contained a wooden coffin sheathed with copper plates with a stairstep design and an artifact made of copper plates with a punched image of the Priestess holding a goblet. At this time, the contents of the tomb have been only partially excavated; work is continuing. What we have found so far illustrates a very significant continuity of some Moche characteristics, such as the presence of the Priestess, but in the context of a more cosmopolitan environment as reflected in the diverse styles of pottery present. This must be a reflection of the complex cultural and political situation that defined the Transitional period. Five pieces of pottery from the Wari tradition are among the most significant discoveries in the tomb. Surprising and impressive for their high quality, they reflect the Viñaque style and were originally produced somewhere in southern Peru before being brought to San José de Moro. As

a group, they are the most important discovery of Wari pottery in northern Peru. But the characteristic that distinguishes this tomb from all the others is that its principal personage is nowhere to be found; the copper-plated coffin was found in the funeral chamber empty. At some point after her death, someone had removed the remains of the person we assume to have been a priestess. The tomb does not seem to have been plundered, since nothing is missing but the cadaver. A practice of moving cadavers from one tomb to another had previously been reported for Moche tombs (Franco, Gálvez and Vásquez 1998).

The Tomb of the Shamans

Tomb M-U1221 presents an alternative example of complex funerary practices. The remains of seven people were found in this shaft tomb, associated with human crania, ceramics, spindle-whorls, and miniature artifacts made of bone, metal, and stone. The complex sequence of the burials associated with the tomb makes it unusual. Two women were apparently buried first, side by side. Later, two more women and a juvenile male were deposited on top of them, and finally, after a still-undetermined period of time, a young man was placed on top of the second two women and the boy. The last cadaver received eight crania as offerings, possibly removed from other tombs. The associated ceramics are of the same type that appeared in other small funerary chambers. Careful study has revealed that many of them may have had a ritual function associated with healing or shamanistic activities (Rengifo 2005). Some of the objects found in tomb M-U1045 are identical to those found here, strongly suggesting that they had the same function. Tomb M-U1221 seems to have been the tomb of two generations of healers who were buried over a period of time. It is notable not so much for its wealth as for its complexity and certain peculiarities that have not been seen before. For example, some of the long bones of its first occupants were used to build the bed where the adult male lay; a clay flute was found embedded in the pubic area of one of the women of the second group; and there was an unusual number of spindle-whorls and miniature ceramics of a style that even today are used in traditional healing activities.

The tombs of elite women found in San José de Moro, both those in the Moche tradition and those found more recently from the Transitional period, offer empirical evidence of the kind that would be required to confirm previous interpretations, made on the basis of iconographic representations, concerning the role and importance of elite women. The fact that the tradition of burying these powerful women in a highly ceremonial and complex fashion was not restricted to the Moche tradition, and that it survived radical cultural change, seems to indicate that the position of these women was deeply rooted in an overall ideology of social organization and in ideas about the hierarchical positions they held and the roles they played. The evidence available to us and our reading of it tells us that in the cultural environment of the time under consideration, elite women were essential participants in ritual and ceremonial activities and in the practice of shamanism. Their loss of power in later periods reflected not their own decreased status but the weakening of the ritual systems with which they were associated and upon which they depended in order to maintain their power.

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