The Moche (2nd-8th centuries A.D.) were one of the most powerful kingdoms of their time on the North Coast of Peru, as were the Nasca in Ica south of Lima and the Tiahuanaco in the altiplano between Peru and Bolivia. Their achievements in their various cultural manifestations are compared with the grandeur of the Maya in Central America. They extended over a territory of 600 kilometers, from Piura in the north to Huarmey in the south. Moche art and symbolism reflect high development in knowledge of the laws of nature that permitted them to recreate it for magical-religious uses. Moche works of art in temple murals, in goldwork, in textiles, in ceramics, etc. express, without doubt, an extraordinary artistic quality that was enjoyed by the powerful Moche lords and their gods.

1. The Moche Territory

The Moche occupied the deltas and slopes of the valleys that are constantly bathed by the waters that come from the mountains and that provide water for life and agriculture. They constructed complex intervalley water canals to irrigate the desertic fields and dry lands that lacked water to make them fertile. One of the aspects of these valleys is that there is little rain, with some intervalley coastal desert strips that are fed by the seasonal humidity of the winter season, forming lomas with a biodiversity of species.

One of the natural resources for life has been the cold and deep waters of the Pacific Ocean. All these resources served as inspiration for Moche iconography and thought. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the North Coast of Peru was always impacted by the El Niño intercontinental phenomenon, also called the ENSO phenomenon, which always put the north coastal societies at risk from very early times up to the present.

2. Sociopolitical Organization and Economy

Despite the fact that there are still many questions to be resolved, we do not know much about the sociopolitical organization of the Moche civilization. Nevertheless, it is known that in later periods, after the 15th century, there existed in each valley political units called cacicazgos, governed by local kings or Alaeq in the Moche language, who had subordinate lords and specialists under their control, at least within the regions of Trujillo and Lambayeque (Zevallos 1989, 1992). In view of the evidence obtained up to now, we can deduce that the Moche were a very complex and hierarchical society and that each of the valleys was under the aegis of a principal lord who governed and acquired a semidivine image that concentrated all the powers, especially religious power which was an effective means of control of the society so that all proceeded harmoniously. Since then, it has always been thought that the Moche formed a theocratic government with efficient mechanisms of reciprocity among the intervalley ethnic groups of the whole territory, including the Lambayeque, Moche, Virú, Chao, Santa, Nepeña and possibly the Huarmey valleys. The main support for this portrayal is the ceramic iconography and other media of ideological transmission of a ceremonial nature (Figure 1).

The economic aspect was based on the payment of tribute, which served for the construction of great public and religious works, as well as major extensions of efficient intervalley irrigation canals, which can be compared to large modern projects. Other economic aspects were reciprocity and redistribution of subsistence goods and merchandise, which permitted the construction of warehouses in each of the religious headquarters where the productive apparatus of the royal domain and the dependent sites was controlled (Moseley 1982).

Figure 1. Iconographic representation of the sacrifice ceremony. (Taken from Donnan 1999).
The surplus from this redistribution made possible the maintenance of a group of full-time artisans at the service of the elite. Many of the objects they produced were used by the lords in order to demonstrate their power and prestige in a complex and hierarchical society. Because of this, we can now admire great artistic works in the temple murals, ceramics, textiles, metallurgy, etc., which suggest the intervention of very advanced and sophisticated technologies.

The Moche were expert navigators who made diverse crossings to the north and south (Figure 2). These crossings were made for commercial and ceremonial purposes and to supply exotic products from distant lands, such as the Spondylus brought from the coasts of Ecuador for ritual purposes, or the lapis lazuli brought from Chile. At present, we can still observe in the area of Huanchaco in Trujillo, in the north of Peru, totora reed balsas boldly controlled by fishermen who sit or kneel, using cane oars in the same way their pre-Hispanic ancestors did hundreds of years ago.

3. **Art for the Gods and the Lords**

The only culture that can rival the Moche is the Maya culture. According to Elizabeth Benson (2004), the expressions in art between the Maya and the Moche are shared and in a few cases differentiated. For example, the ceramic art is very refined and informative, the use of seashells and Spondylus, and the abstract and symbolic representations, such as the interesting Moche theme of the “rebellion of the artifacts” which can be compared with the rebellion of the objects in the Popol Vuh of the Maya. But one of the principal comparative aspects is that both cultures have constructed imposing pyramidal structures, those of the Maya in stone and those of the Moche in adobe or mud. Shared characteristics are that these sacred buildings were interred, one being built over another, containing tombs, offerings and murals of great religious significance (Figs. 3-5).

Moche production as is currently shown in Peruvian and foreign museums is of great value and realism and expresses a great deal of information in sculpture and iconography about religious life. Together with Nasca ceramics of the south coast of Peru, this is perhaps in one of the richest collections of ceramic production known in pre-Columbian America (Figs. 6-7). The plastic perfection in the diverse representations, especially in the “portrait vessels”, make this culture one of the most advanced in the New World in what Wendell Bennett rightfully baptized as the...
time of the "master craftsmen". Well-known representations in Moche ceramics are scenes of ceremonial life, funerary scenes, important figures being carried in litters, figures playing musical instruments, scenes of navigation and representations of beautiful landscapes with animals and plants typical of coastal ecosystems. However, the best known scenes are those of burial, human sacrifice in mountains and purification.

Moche ceramics were classified into five phases, from I to V, by Rafael Larco Hoyle (1948), which developed during approximately six centuries of occupation. Specialists also now speak of subdivisions into Early Mochica, Middle Mochica and Late Mochica (Castillo 2011). The corpus of Moche ceramics and their iconographic representations has recently been enriched by discoveries made by large projects on the North Coast and, especially, by the contributions of Christopher Donnan (1999), who has dedicated his life to study of the Moche. This investigator, for example, has studied extensively the ceramic effigy vessels of important figures of the elite that were portrayed in different ways and with different characteristics of headdress, facial painting and expressions, especially one elite Moche individual, identified by a wound or cut over the left side of his upper lip, who was depicted repeatedly from childhood to adulthood (Donnan 2004). In addition, Donnan has called attention to the principal religious symbol of the Moche, defined by a shield and a club tied together with other accessories of battle and power. Thanks to the art and symbolism of the ceramics, the religious life of this classic society of the North Coast of Peru can be known.

Metallurgy is another highly valued cultural manifestation. The able specialists worked at the service of the elite. Most of the metalwork was offered for ceremonies and funerary rituals. The Moche applied a very advanced technology expressed in smelting, casting, laminating, cutting out, embossing, twisting, etc., as well as other sophisticated techniques, such as filigree in the later phases [Figs. 8-9]. Gold, silver, copper and four alloys of these were used for many ornaments, including masks, crowns, collars, ear ornaments, needles, depilation tweezers, hooks, small spoons and cups, among other objects (Fraresso 2008). The motifs or designs on the jewelry have much to do with magical-religious elements that formed part of the Moche cosmovision.

Textile production was another of the outstanding achievements, as much for the versatile command of techniques as for esthetic and iconographic beauty. The Moche formed textile workshops for the use of religious leaders and the expenses of the ceremonies. The prime material was produced thanks to a fluid exchange of products, which led to the obtaining of animal fibers, dyes and a massive production of cotton. Male or female weavers made beautiful cloaks, clothes, sashes, headdresses, clothes to cover walls and personal accessories using the techniques of tapestry, gauze, double cloth, embroidery and painted cloth [see Castillo and Ugaz 1999]. Much of this textile production has disappeared due to the effects of humidity because of two factors: the cemeteries are near wetland areas and the rains of the El Niño phenomenon accelerated their destruction.

Featherwork art is also outstanding, but rarely preserved in the excavations, and was used in the clothes of the dead of greatest prestige and social rank. The multicolored feathers were obtained by trade with peoples of the tropical forest.

Art in wood is little known because of the scarcity of collections based on controlled excavations and because of poor preservation. Nevertheless, magnificent artistic works, such as idols, fig-
urines and sculpted ceremonial staffs, have been recovered. For example, there are two extraordinary Moche sculptures which were covered with golden metal and incrustations of semiprecious stones, and which were recovered from archaeological contexts. One is an idol 2.40 meters high that may represent the humanized lunar deity and is accompanied on the upper part by fantastic creatures or lunar animals. It was discovered in the Huaca Cao Viejo of the El Brujo Complex (Franco and Vilela 2006) (Figure 10). Another image is a handsome sculpture that adorned a ceremonial staff discovered in the tomb of a priest in the Virú Valley. It represents a Moche agricultural deity (Strong 1947) (Figure 11).

In the last two decades, there have been two major long-term projects of archaeological investigation: the El Brujo Project carried out by the Wiese Foundation and the Peruvian Ministry of Culture, and the Huacas of Moche Project carried out by a private trust and the National University of Trujillo. They recovered from obscurity two monumental pyramids of adobe, Huaca Cao Viejo and Huaca de la Luna, where there are beautiful polychrome painted images on relief-carved mud which express the sacred and divine art that could be represented in the principal Moche temples. There are images of the supernatural world linked with the propitiation and recreation of the world, some life-size images of ritual battles, a procession of prisoners, human sacrifices, the ceremonial calendar, and supernatural beings of Moche cosmovision (Moraes 2012; Franco and Vilela 2006) (Figs. 12-13).

4. The Lost and Discovered Treasures of the Moche Tombs

At the time of the Spanish conquest, the plundering and destruction of many pre-Columbian relics occurred due to indifference to Andean reality. It is all part of a process of hundreds of years that still has not ended. The pillaging of treasures and important tombs was destined to feed the major collections of the world and some private museums.

There had never been scientific recovery of a fabulous tomb from the pre-Inca past until 1987. In that year, Walter Alva and his team achieved a first for the scientific world when they rescued from the looters and from their very own excavations various royal tombs at the site of Sipán or Huaca Rajada in the Lambayeque Valley. This news went round the world and was published in National Geographic magazine. At the time, the tombs were considered to be the greatest in the New World, comparable to that of Tutankhamon. These tombs pertained to two Moche rulers or high dignitaries, the “Lord of Sipán” and the “Old Lord of Sipán”, united in kinship by the maternal line, as well as important priests that were found with their ornaments of gold, jewels, emblems of power, animals, and sacrificed men and women (Alva and Donnan 1993; Alva 2012) (Figs. 14-17).

Another of the finds that has attracted world attention is the discovery in 2005 of the tomb of the Lady of Cao by the author and his team in a privileged sector of the Huaca Cao Viejo of the El Brujo Complex. It was publicized in 2006 by National Geographic magazine and other international media. For the first time in Peruvian archaeology, a tomb was found of a female Moche sovereign who governed the destinies of the Chicama Valley between 300 and 400 years A.D. She was buried accompanied by
a principal priest, a secondary priest, a guardian, a guide to the underworld and sacrificed maidens. The mausoleum enclosure where she was buried contains beautiful murals on its walls with representations of stylized images of the magical-religious world of the Lady of Cao and of the Moche in general. The presence of tattoos in the form of serpents, spiders, geometric figures and lunar animals on the forearms, hands and feet of this dignitary allow us to recognize that she had supernatural or clairvoyant powers to look at the heavens and perhaps to cure. The emblems of power, personal jewelry and ornaments give her, without a doubt, the investiture of a ruler (Figure 18). This find has changed the notion of power in ancient Peru (Franco 2008, 2010, 2012).

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