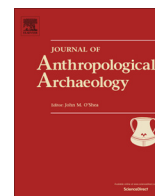


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Figuring identity in everyday life



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ABSTRACT

This article explores how everyday material culture participates in processes of identity negotiation. It focuses more specifically on the role of figurines in embodying, constructing, and transforming Moche identities, in particular gender and collective identities, among communities of the north coast of Peru during the first millennium CE. The mobilization of figurines in social relations is studied through an approach which takes into consideration how stylistic and iconographic choices, the materiality of objects, and practices of production and consumption intersect in specific contexts. Results demonstrate that figurines materialized ideas about religion and gender which differed from those materialized by other media, were ubiquitous in the daily life of all Moche people, and contributed to constructing a cohesive and culturally Moche colonial identity among colonists settling in the Santa Valley. Moche figurines, and everyday material culture in general, therefore played a pivotal role in mediating personal experiences, social identities, and wider sociopolitical phenomena such as colonization.

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1. Introduction

How is material culture, in particular everyday objects, involved in processes of identity negotiation? In recent years, studies of materiality (Boivin, 2008; DeMarrais et al., 2004; Meskell, 2005a; Miller, 2005) and explorations of the agency of objects (Gell, 1998; Latour, 2005) have greatly contributed to our understanding of the way material culture participates in the construction, transformation, and reproduction of identities in specific contexts of practice. However, the potential of everyday objects to embody personal and social identities is still often underestimated. In Moche archeology especially, a lingering dichotomy between “ritual” or “symbolic” artifacts and “domestic” artifacts tends to reduce objects used in daily life to their material or economic functions to the detriment of their role in social and political relations. I argue here for the need to move beyond this dichotomy by exploring the role of figurines found in domestic contexts in negotiating cultural and gender identities among the Moche.

The Moche were people living in the lower and middle valleys of the north coast of Peru who, between the third and the ninth century CE, came to share a common religious and political ideology materialized in shared practices and material culture (Castillo Butters and Uceda, 2008, Fig. 1). The Moche however do not seem to have been unified under a centralized political power and the

rising number of archaeological excavations in the past twenty years has showed that Moche realities varied through time and space (Chapdelaine, 2011; Quilter and Castillo Butters, 2010). Furthermore, distinct elements of material culture probably played different roles in social relations and may have embodied different aspects of the identities of Moche people. By studying figurines, I address ideas about religion, cultural identity, gender, and community which differed from those embodied in elite-controlled material culture. I more specifically compare figurines used by Moche colonists in the Santa Valley to figurines used by Moche people living in the ideological center of Huacas de Moche in the Moche Valley.

This research is both the first inter-site analysis of scientifically excavated Moche figurines and the first to explicitly look at their mobilization in social relations. Previous analyses of Moche figurines often focused on museum collections (Lilien, 1956; Morgan, 2009) or on objects coming from a single site (Limoges, 1999; Prieto Burmester, 2008; Ringberg, 2008). Conclusions regarding the way figurines were embedded in changing experiences of Moche identity were therefore limited. Here, I put forward an approach to material culture which takes into consideration how stylistic and iconographic choices, the materiality of objects, and practices of production and consumption intersect in specific contexts. I first address alternative discourses about religion and women through an analysis of the images depicted on figurines. I then explore how these images acted in social relations by studying the materiality and use of figurines. Finally, I discuss how figurines participated in mediating the impacts of large-scale

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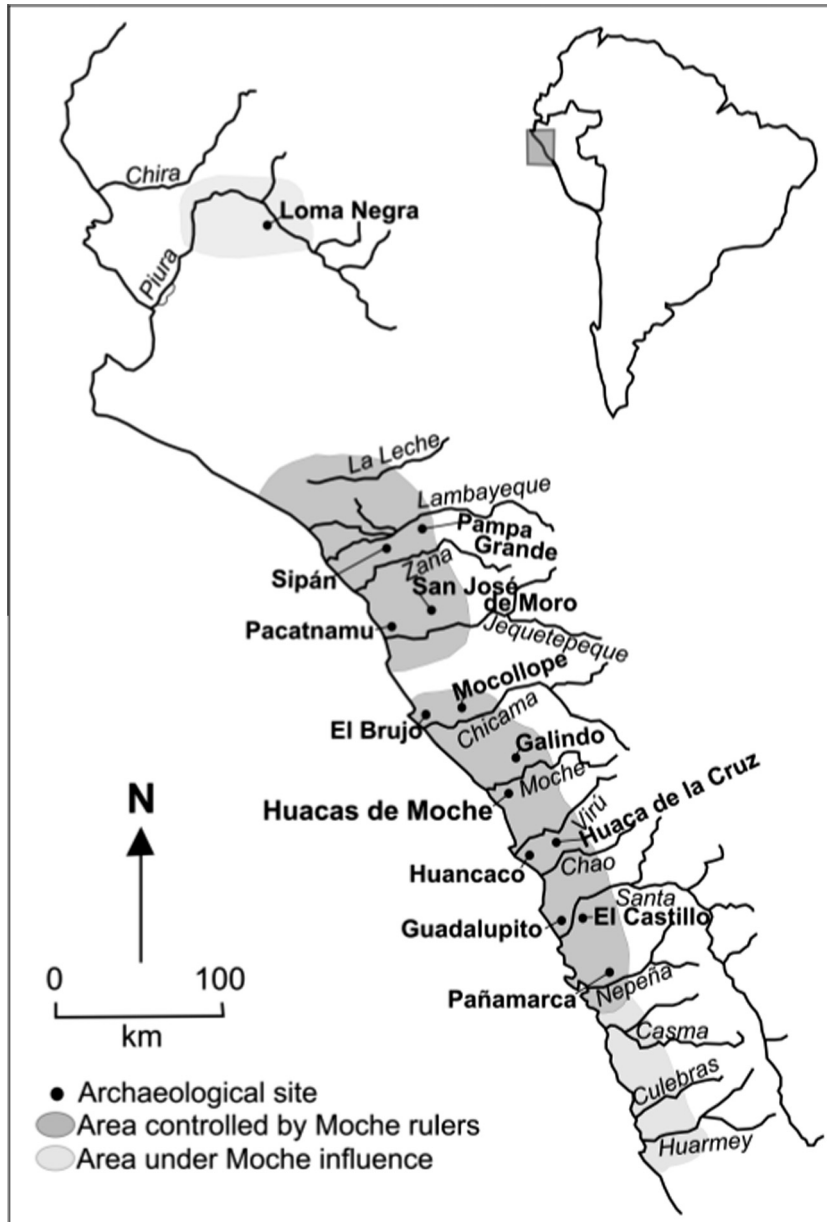


Fig. 1. Moche presence on the north coast of Peru (adapted from Chapdelaine (2011)).

sociopolitical phenomena by highlighting their role in strengthening social cohesion and in negotiating the cultural identity of Moche colonists in the Santa Valley.

2. Material culture, daily life, and identity

This research draws on recent advances regarding the engagement of people with the material world. Studies of materiality in particular have stressed the importance of moving beyond purely symbolic or economic interpretations of material culture to explore the way human experiences and the material world are mutually produced through interactions between people and things (Boivin, 2008; DeMarrais et al., 2004; Meskell, 2005a; Miller, 2005). Material culture is therefore seen as fully embedded in social practices. Moreover, this focus on the interaction between people and things implies a reciprocal influence which opens the door to studies of the agency of objects. Both Gell (1998) and

Latour (2005) have argued that objects have agency, though Latour goes further by questioning the very distinction between human and non-human actors. Still, they both distinguish agency, the ability to act shared by objects and humans, from intentionality, the intention behind actions characteristic of humans. Latour (2005, 39) uses the term “mediator” to stress that objects do not passively transport human agency but also transform it. In this research, figurines are therefore not considered to simply reflect identity but rather to participate in constructing identities through their use by people.

Daily practices play a crucial role in articulating the self with society. In agreement with Robin (2013), I believe that people construct the world, their relation to it, and themselves in large part through their daily life. In archaeology, daily life has mostly been studied through households but an artificial division between the domestic and public spheres has sometimes led to overly passive and static interpretations (Allison, 1999; Brumfiel and Robin, 2008; Buchli, 2010; Hendon, 1996; Nash, 2009; Tringham, 2012).

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