



## Crucibles of power: Forging copper and forging subjects at the Moche Ceremonial Center of Huaca Colorada, Peru

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### ABSTRACT

An analysis of copper production, architectural construction, and feasting rites as interrelated ritual activities at the Late Moche site of Huaca Colorada suggests that power asymmetries were embedded in a distinctive relational ontology and sacrificial worldview. Power was exercised not by alienating communities from their means of production or excluding the majority lower class from the diacritical symbols of power. Rather, the manufacture of copper items enabled subjects to directly contribute to Moche rites of regeneration and social reproduction; the skilled metamorphosis of copper into finished objects paralleled and symbolically reinforced the ritual re-formation of bodies and political subjectivities at Huaca Colorada. Ultimately, an examination of copper production at Huaca Colorada as a ritual of bodily transformation sheds light on the culturally specific structures of power characterizing the greater Jequetepeque region during the Late Moche Period.

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### Introduction

The elongated pyramidal construction of Huaca Colorada constitutes the largest Late Moche settlement on the south bank of the Jequetepeque River (AD 600–800). Our recent excavations suggest that it was the seat of a possibly independent political community headed by specialized religious and economic elites. The discovery of copper artifacts, ceramic molds, slag, ore fragments, and metallurgical tools indicates that the site also served as an important center of craft production—a significant revelation given that evidence of artisanal manufacturing is mostly lacking in the Jequetepeque Valley. The cross-cultural association of metallurgical production with ritual practice offers a basis of interpretation to analyze the evident ceremonial and political context of copper manufacture at Huaca Colorada.

Material remains of metal production found in close association with ritual architecture and residential constructions of differing quality suggest that artisans at Huaca Colorada were not simply subjugated and attached to an administrative elite. Rather, peripatetic and possibly diverse communities, originating from smaller sites in the southern Jequetepeque region, appear to have been

instilled with Moche political and religious values by directly participating in copper artisanry at the settlement. The melting of refined copper ore and finishing of metal implements were conducted in conjunction with feasting events, architectural renovation, and propitiatory rites, and the skilled metamorphosis of ore into finished copper objects paralleled and symbolically reinforced the ritual re-formation of bodies and political subjectivities at Huaca Colorada. Evidence of metallurgical production in ephemeral households within the principal domestic component of the settlement tends to support this argument (as opposed to industrial workshops documented elsewhere on the North Coast). The relatively high concentration of fineline vessels and other artifacts suffused with Moche religious symbolism recovered within these same domestic contexts suggests that copper metallurgy was intimately associated with ritual transformation complicit in the forging of political identities and dependencies.

Although pronounced social inequalities are reflected in the archaeological record of Huaca Colorada, they depart notably from the static and ahistorical hierarchies common in mainstream archaeological interpretations of complexity (Swenson, 2011a). An analysis of architectural practices, feasting rites, and copper production as interrelated ritual activities suggests that power asymmetries were embedded in a historically particular relational ontology and reciprocal ethos. Power was exercised not by alienating communities from their means of production or excluding the

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majority lower class from the diacritical symbols of power. Rather, the manufacture of copper items enabled subjects to directly contribute to Moche rites of regeneration and social reproduction; agency was thus amplified and “distributed” through their labor contributions and finished products (Brück, 2006a,b; Gell, 1992, 1998; Latour, 1993). Although, the elite appropriation of resources and labor cannot be discounted, the peculiar contextual and architectural setting of metallurgical production suggest that participation in the metallurgical artisanry was not one of coercive or top-down subjugation. Instead, metallurgy, feasting, sacrifice, and the exchange of finished products promoted inclusive participation in Moche religious events which contributed to a sense of community integration and interdependency. Ultimately, an examination of copper production at Huaca Colorada as a ritual of bodily transformation sheds light on the culturally specific structures of power characterizing the greater Jequetepeque region during the Late Moche Period.

### Metallurgy and ritual power in sacrificial ontologies

An important objective of the paper is to situate copper production at Huaca Colorada in its proper ritual and cultural context; archaeological traces of smelting, casting, refining, and finishing are analyzed as expressive of a particular relational and sacrificial ontology specific to the Moche and other historically documented indigenous communities of the Andes (Alberti and Bray, 2009; Bray, 2009; Haber, 2009; Sillar, 2009). In fact, anthropologists are becoming increasingly aware that the dominance of Cartesian ontologies in Western social theory, based on rigid dualist divides of culture/nature, mind/matter, and subject/object, has hindered understandings of the belief systems and practices of different cultural traditions (Astor-Aguilera, 2010; Brück, 2006a; Henare et al., 2007; Hill, 2008; Holbraad, 2009; Ingold, 2006; Latour, 1993; Viveiros de Castro, 2004).

Relational ontologies appear to have underwritten the conceptual schemas and structures of practice of pre-Columbian Andean cultures, as seems also to have been the case for the Moche as reflected in their rich iconographic tradition (Hill, 2008; Quilter, 1990 see below). In such worldviews, conceptions of time, personhood, self, and agency were not predicated on finite, inviolable individuals or in absolute distinctions between inert matter and rationally privileged, human subjects. Rather, a continuum of relations and interdependencies inextricably linked the human, animal, ancestral, and material realms. For instance, in the framework of indigenous *camay* theology and huaca veneration of the native Andean region, boulders, mummy bundles, architecture, pots or metal artifacts were perceived as agents in their own right and were animated with a life-essence in an equivalent manner to living people (Bray, 2009; Grouleau, 2009; Taylor, 1974–1976). Indeed, the construal of objects as animated persons reciprocally and energetically connected to social actors reveals that Andean cosmology differed markedly from social philosophies celebrating human exceptionalism and dominance over a disenchanting and objectified nature. In relational worldviews, theories of agency are far removed from western philosophies of methodological individualism, and personhood is often conceived as partible, distributed, and mutually constituted by other people, places, and things (Strathern, 2004). As Brück argues (2006a, p. 78): “It is no surprise that in societies where gift exchange is the main mechanism by which objects circulate [prevalent in societies defined by relational ontologies], the self is constructed as a fractal, relational entity, an aggregate of substances constituted through a network of links with persons and things outside of the physical boundaries of the body” (see also Descola, 1994; Bird-David, 1999). Such a perspective resonates with Latour and Gell’s theories of distributed agency, wherein the essence and power of an

individual is projected through multiple artifacts associated with the particular person in question. Human agency is thus variably distributed in the manufacture, trade, changing ownership, or emotional and physical effects of objects, all implicating the interpenetration of people and things.

Of course, declaring Andean “(meta)physics of being” as relational as opposed to substantivist or representational (Cartesian) leaves many questions unanswered and poses the threat of reductively obscuring considerable diversity in Andean social and religious philosophies. Certainly, Moche iconographic themes, including the famous “revolt of the objects,” points to the generally relational ontological basis of Moche culture and religious thought (Hill, 2008; Quilter, 1990). However, Moche cosmology was grounded in a particular sacrificial construction of the world [or space-time dynamics] (Bawden, 1996; Bourget, 2006; Donnan, 1978, 2001; Alva and Donnan, 1993; Swenson, 2003, in press), a realization worthy of consideration in the interpretation of copper metallurgy. As has been well documented, Moche political theology was defined by cycles of warfare, prisoner capture, and human sacrifice that likely conformed to poorly understood cosmogonic myths and ideologies of legitimate religious authority and social reproduction. Moche elites both directed spectacles of human sacrifice and appear to have been the desired victims (Donnan, 2001). At its fundament, adherents of Moche religious ideology perceived death as a prerequisite of life and regeneration (if not to the overall movement of time). Ritually encapsulated destruction was conceived as the reciprocal enabler of creation and was thus generative of life, cosmos, time and ultimately political power. This sacrificial ontology was grounded in a dialectical understanding of life (process) propelled by consumptive-reproductive acts analogous to alimentary consumption as integral to nourishment and growth (see Sillar, 2004, 2009; Swenson, 2003, in press). This reciprocal and sacrificial dialectic cemented ritual interdependencies between persons and animated places and things among many traditional Andean people (Hill, 2008; Sillar, 2004, 2009). Death was not understood as an end but as the ultimate nexus of transformation and mode of becoming (for a similar worldview in the British Bronze age, see Brück, 2006a); the sacrificial control of death constituted a means to intervene in and become part of the fluid continuum of “being” that subsumed Western categories of human, animal, landscape, artefact, society, and the divine. In truth, the distinction between “natural” and “supernatural” would have been largely meaningless to Andean peoples (see Allen, 1988; Astor-Aguilera, 2010, pp. 6–7; Hill, 2008).

In this light, it is of particular relevance that a symbolic connection is commonly made between technological transformation of objects and the liminal metamorphosis of people engineered in rites of passage as interpreted by Van Gennep (1960), Turner (1967), and others (and usually based on violent ritual alterations—see also Hill, 1998, 2000). The smelting of copper, the crushing of prills (droplets of metal lodged in vitrified slag), the re-melting of the finer metal, and its final annealing is directly analogous if not homologous to the ritual re-formation of initiates, celebrants, and even sacrificial victims. In many cultures, metallurgy is closely associated with magic, fertility, sexual reproduction, and political power given its association with destructive re-creation. In Africa, both copper and especially iron production was considered a potent ritual activity; specialized artisans were either held in high esteem and exercised considerable authority or were viewed with suspicion and ambivalence, feared and distrusted as dangerous sorcerers (Blakely, 2006; Herbert, 1993; Trevelyan, 2004). A direct correspondence was also made between sexual reproduction and the transubstantiation of ore into metal; the melting of processed ore with the addition of charge, flux, and fire, followed by the admixture of fluid metals to create solid copper objects, were analogized to the procreative process and

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