

RITUAL USES OF TROPHY HEADS IN ANCIENT NASCA SOCIETY

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Introduction

Centered in the Ica and Nasca valleys of south coastal Peru, the ancient culture known as Nasca dominated a wide area of southern Peru between 100 B.C. and 700 A.D. Here the Nasca people practiced intensive agriculture in one of the driest and most formidable environments in the world. The vast desert that covers the coastal plain of Peru and northern Chile is bisected by over forty river valleys that carry rain from the higher Andes across the landscape, emptying into the Pacific Ocean. It was in these narrow valleys and their tributaries that the ancient populations eked out their precarious existence, exploited the maritime resources of the ocean, and planted their crops in those parts of the valleys where sufficient water and adequate soils could be found. Survival in this harsh environment was of utmost concern, and many activities, both secular and sacred, revolved around providing for adequate food and water as well as appeasing the spiritual powers that controlled the forces of nature.

The Nasca Culture developed directly out of the earlier Paracas Culture from which it derived many of its characteristic attributes. Archaeologists use the introduction of slip-painted pottery to mark the beginning of the Nasca Culture, although many other cultural changes were occurring simultaneously. Elaborately decorated textiles with rich religious iconography are found in both the late Paracas and early Nasca cultures, but within several generations of the beginning of the Nasca Culture, this complex iconography shifts from textiles to ceramics, representing another major difference between the two cultures. However, many Paracas traditions continue well into the Nasca sequence including the ritual use of trophy heads and many of the fundamental religious icons.

Recent evidence suggests that politically the Nasca people did not have a unified central government nor a capital city, which are characteristics of state level societies, but rather were divided into a series of chiefdoms each with its own leader, yet sharing in a common cultural tradition (see Silverman 1993:337 ff). The centers of these chiefdoms have yet to be determined, although the multiple tributaries of the Rio Grande de Nasca system may have formed the natural boundaries for such a division. The huge site of Cahuachi, covering 150 hectares in the Rio Nasca tributary, was once thought to be the capital, but has now been identified as an empty ceremonial center--a place of pilgrimage and burial used only for ritual purposes (Silverman 1993). Habitation sites, most of them small to moderate in size, are situated on the flanks of the rivers close to the primary centers of cultivation. Like those constructed by contemporary farmers in the region, many of these houses were constructed of poles and cane matting or of wattle and daub,

although stone and adobe were used where the resources permitted. Excavation of these settlements is now just beginning, and as of yet we know little of the daily life of the people.

The Nasca buried their dead in shallow graves dug approximately six to eight feet into the sand and roofed over with wooden beams derived from the local huarango tree. Sometimes adobes were used to line the tombs or to cover the roofing beams. Bodies were placed in a seated position in the tomb and were accompanied by ceramic vessels, gourd containers with food, weapons, weaving implements, and ornaments. Although museum and private collections contain examples of golden mouth masks and ornaments along with elaborate textiles that are thought to be Nasca, no elite tomb containing the remains of an individual that could be singled out as a leader has yet been scientifically excavated. Because there are no absolute or exclusive differences among the more than 200 Nasca burials that have been scientifically recorded, but rather a graded continuum from simple to more elaborate graves, the mortuary evidence supports the presence of a ranked rather than a stratified society (Carmichael 1988:399-400). Thus, politically and socially the Nasca were quite different from their Moche contemporaries on the north coast who had a highly stratified society and royal tombs with many elite goods (Alva and Donnan 1993).

The Nasca were skilled craftsmen who wove exquisite textiles from both cotton and wool, fashioned ornaments from imported shell and stone, produced elaborate feather work, decorated gourd containers with pyro-engraved designs, carved objects from wood and stone, and made metal ornaments and tools from gold and copper. The Nasca are best known for their beautiful polychrome painted pottery which displayed an amazing array of naturalistic and religious motifs. While painting was the primary means of decoration, modeled vessels in the form of humans and animals were common. The iconography displayed on these vessels forms the basis for much of what we know about Nasca society and religion. In addition the Nasca possessed medical skills that included primitive skull surgery (trepanation) which probably was undertaken to repair damage to the skull caused by battle wounds. For social and cosmetic reasons, some members of the society also deformed their skulls and practiced tattooing on various body parts.

Also associated with the Nasca are the giant drawings known as geoglyphs, or more popularly as the "Nasca Lines" located on the desert near their settlements (see Aveni 1990a; Silverman 1990; Reiche 1968; inter alia). Produced by removing or sweeping away the small darkened rocks on the desert surface revealing the lighter colored sand beneath, the Nasca Lines have survived the centuries due to the lack of rainfall and blowing winds in this arid region. The geoglyphs exist in two main varieties: lines, trapezoids, triangles and other geometric forms extending for miles across the pampa, as well as giant representations of birds, animals and other naturalistic motifs similar to those portrayed on Nasca pottery and textiles. The function of these lines has been disputed, and several different roles have been proposed, including their use as ritual pathways leading to sacred sites (Silverman 1990:453), ceque lines produced over time as an enactment of sacred social rites (Urton 1990; Aveni 1990), or as a calendrical system (Reiche 1968, 1974; Kosok 1965). Recent evidence suggests that at least some of

the geometric lines point to sources of subterranean water, suggesting that the ancients had developed a profound knowledge of the geology and hydrology of the region (Johnson 1997). Whatever their function, the lines reflect a pattern of cooperative labor directed by the secular or religious leaders of the society.

Trophy Heads and Decapitation

The taking of heads for ritual use has a long history in the central Andes beginning in the Pre-Ceramic Period (prior to 1800 B.C.) and continuing through Inca times (see other chapters in this volume). Almost every major culture in the long sequence for this area, including Chavin, Cupisnique, Moche, Paracas, Nasca, Huari, Chimu and Inca, practiced this tradition, although each of these cultures had its own unique ceremonies and different ritual context in conjunction with head-taking. The Nasca Culture was no exception, deriving its impetus from the earlier Paracas Culture from which it was born. One of the most distinctive features of the Nasca Culture is the frequent depiction of severed human heads in the ceramic and textile art. Referred to in the literature as "trophy heads", these objects can be displayed either as single elements, held in the hands or attached to the belts of warriors or shamans, or associated with a wide range of "mythical creatures" who represent spiritual forces in the society. The most frequently portrayed creature in early Nasca art is the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being which is displayed in a number of variations (Proulx 1968:16 ff.; 1983:95 ff.) In one manifestation, the creature carries a club and trophy head in its hand and is wearing a long cloak, probably derived from the animal skins once worn by religious leaders in the society (Fig. 1).

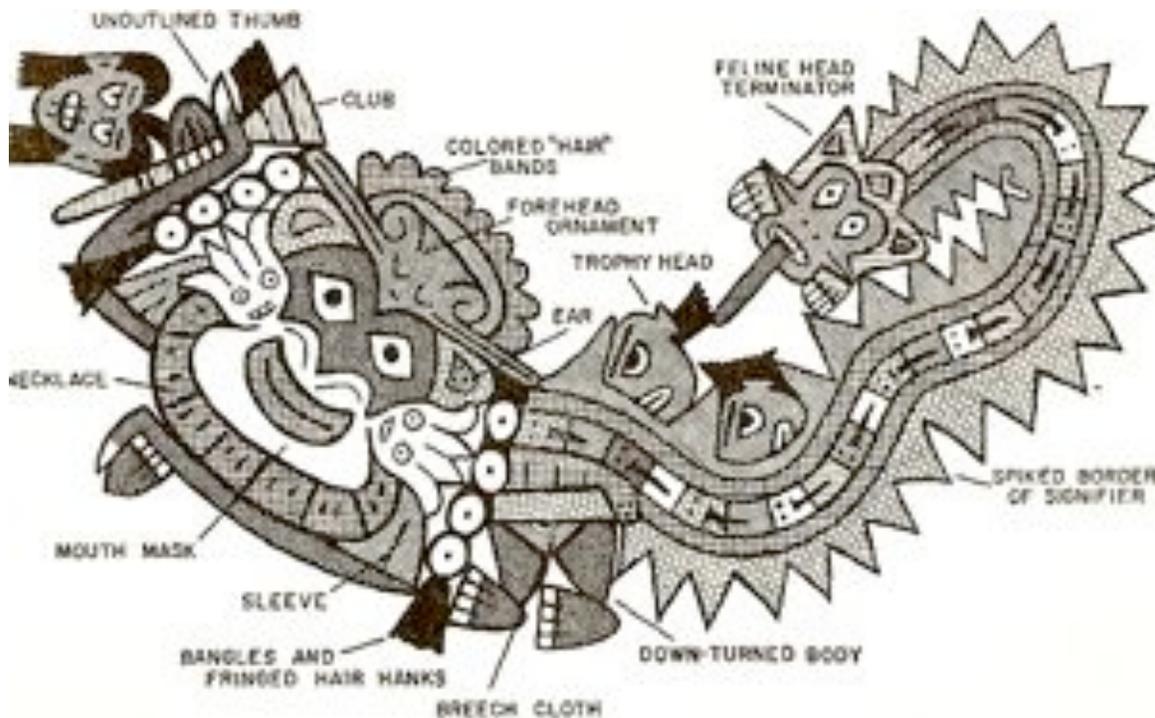


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Trophy heads are often attached to this cloak. Another type is represented by a masked, standing figure, holding trophy heads in his hands and still others attached to his belt (Fig. 2). A third type, the "Trophy Head Taster" (see Wolfe 1981:19), has wings like a falcon, and has his tongue protruding into a severed head (Fig. 3). Other mythical beings with direct trophy head associations are the Mythical Killer Whale, representing the powerful forces of the sea (Proulx 1968:19; 1983:96), and the Horrible Bird, a condor-like creature, representing the forces of the sky (Proulx 1968:19; 1983:97-98).

Of all the cultures that practiced head-taking in ancient Peru, only Nasca and Paracas are known to have meticulously prepared severed heads for ritual use. Over 100 examples of naturally mummified trophy heads have been recorded by archaeologists (Fig. 4). Each was produced in much the same manner. The head was cut from the body with a sharp obsidian knife by slicing through the neck and separating the cervical



Fig.4

vertebrae. Then the base of the skull, including the foramen magnum and portions of the occipital bone were broken away (Fig. 5). The evidence suggests that this was done with a club or similar instrument (see Coelho 1972; Tello 1918; Browne, Silverman and Garcia 1993). The brain and eyes were then removed through this opening. Next a hole



Fig. 5

was punched or drilled through the center of the forehead for insertion of a carrying rope (Fig. 6) which was secured inside the head by a wooden toggle (Fig. 7). Finally, the lips were pinned shut using one or two long thorns from the local huarango tree (Figs. 8a and 8b). The cavity within the skull was stuffed with cloth, which in the case of specimens excavated at Chaviña in the Acarí Valley, contained traces of vegetable matter including maize, maní, pacaé and cactus skins.



Fig. 6

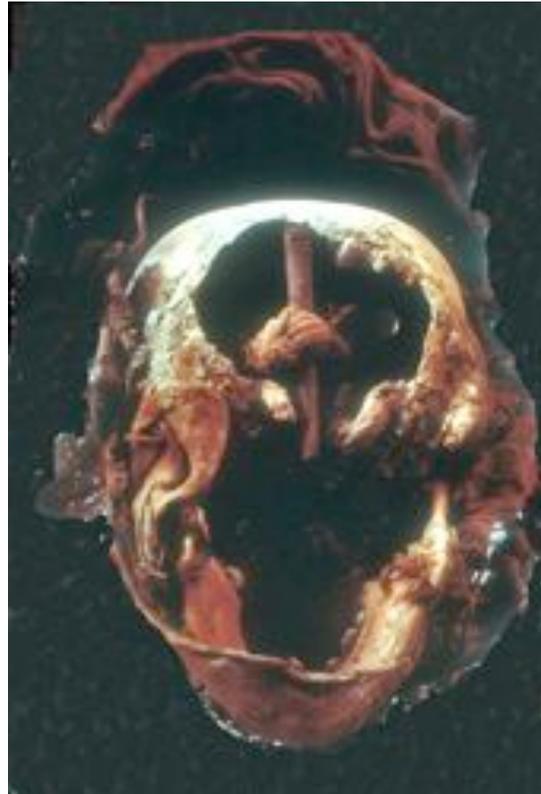


Fig. 7



Fig. 8a



Fig. 8b

Military Aspects of Nasca Society

Before discussing the implications of head-taking and the ritual uses of trophy heads in Nasca society, it would be useful to discuss the general nature of warfare in this group. Some scholars argue that the Nasca were an aggressive society constantly at war over rights to water, land, and access to other resources (Proulx 1989; Verano 1995, Roark 1965; Rydén 1930; Tello 1918; de Tuya 1949; Uhle 1901, 1908; Weiss 1958). Others suggest that the warfare was strictly ritual, carried out simply to obtain heads (Coelho 1972; Neira and Coelho 1972/73) or for ritual sacrifice of victims after capture (Baraybar 1987; Kauffmann Doig 1966). I have addressed this question in detail in a previous work (Proulx 1989), but the main points need to be reiterated in order to understand the nature of warfare as opposed to the ritual uses the trophy heads were put to.

The importance of warfare in Nasca society is clearly seen in both the ceramic iconography and in the artifacts discovered in archaeological sites. Nasca warriors holding clubs, spears, spear-throwers and slings are portrayed on some of the earliest Nasca pottery, often in association with human trophy heads (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9

Although some of these earliest manifestations of armed men might be interpreted as hunting scenes, the presence of trophy heads held in the hands or attached to the belt belie the true meaning. Front facing warriors are most prevalent in the early Nasca phases, but by Middle Nasca times they are depicted in profile. Representations of weapons, especially spears, but also bloody clubs, become more numerous in Middle Nasca (Phase 5) and one could argue for an increase in warfare at this time (which coincidentally correlates with a period of drought and subsequent relocation of people within the tributaries of the Rio Grande dating to A.D. 540 to 560 and 570 to 610) (Schreiber and Lancho 1995:251). The Late Nasca Period (Phases 6 and 7) witnessed a continuation of military themes in Nasca ceramic art including painted warriors holding elaborate feather staffs (Blasco and Ramos 1991: Fig. 385), or dressed in special clothing and headdresses (La Farge 1981: 67), as well as modeled vessels of warriors holding trophy heads in their hands (La Farge 1981:64). Silverman (1993:339-340) suggests that increasing pressure from highland groups in the late Nasca phases may have led to an increase in warfare and head taking.

Supplementing the iconographic evidence are many archaeological examples of weapons which include woven slings, metal and stone mace heads, wooden clubs, obsidian knives, spears and spear throwers. Slings are the most common weapon, being easily made and transported by even the most humble person. Looted Nasca graves often have large numbers of slings left behind by the huaqueros who see little value in them. Pottery often depicts a male with a sling wrapped around his headdress when not in use. Slings could be used equally for hunting, repelling predators and for warfare and appear to have been a normal adjunct to a man's costume. Clubs, on the other hand, were probably used primarily for hand to hand combat. When used in conjunction with a stone or metal star-shaped head, such a weapon could produce severe trauma, including the type of wounds which would require trepanation or skull surgery.

Spears are frequently seen in the art, although archaeological examples are rare. Constructed of huarango wood or perhaps heavy cane, they appear to have been tipped with obsidian points according to William Farabee who found eight to ten spears with such points along with a spear-thrower in his Tomb 61 at Cahuachi in 1922 (cited in Carmichael 1988:484). Spear-throwers, or *atlatls*, have been found in numerous Nasca graves and are also made of huarango wood with bone or metal "hooks" which are often shaped in the form of birds or animals. These spear-throwers are frequently seen in the hands of warriors painted on the late pottery, often with a parrot perched on them for some symbolic reason.

Although the Nasca have few motifs on their pottery depicting events of everyday life, especially those implying movement or action, battle scenes are an exception. There are many examples of men engaged in hand to hand combat where clubs or obsidian knives are the principal weapon. Decapitation scenes are vividly depicted on a few choice vessels, and it is clear that one of the objectives of battle was to obtain the heads of the enemy. One of the best examples of a battle scene can be seen on a unique vessel now in the collections of the Amano Museum in Lima. Elaborately dressed warriors are holding their victims by the hair with one hand while cutting the neck with a knife held in the

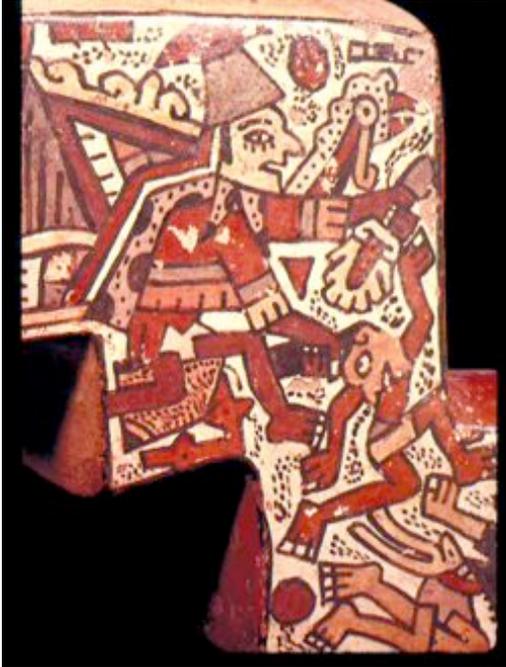


Fig. 10

demonstrated that 85% of these specimens are males between the ages of 20 and 50 while females make up only 6% of the sample (1995:214). Children and adolescents are represented by a similar small percentage (6%). This data suggests a model of combat between groups of adult males rather than rituals whose main purpose would be for the sole purpose of taking heads. If the acquisition of heads was the main objective of such rituals, one would expect to see a more balanced ratio of specimens from both sexes and all age groups.

other (Fig. 10). To insure that the viewer knows exactly what is transpiring, red dots, representing blood, fill the background. The iconography clearly portrays decapitation during battle, not as a separate ritual sacrifice following capture of an enemy. There are no depictions on the pottery of prisoners of war, torture of victims, or decapitation other than on the battlefield--again in contrast to Moche pottery where such scenes are quite common. Battle scenes also include headless corpses lying on the ground, warriors with wounds, and a few rare vessels displaying trophy heads hanging from banners or poles following a battle. The fact that warriors were wounded in battle and that skull surgery was performed to save their lives further supports a secular motivation for warfare with subsequent use of trophy heads for ritual purposes. John Verano's analysis of 84 Nasca trophy heads has

Who were the Nasca fighting? Under the old model which visualized Nasca as a primitive state with a central government emanating from the capital of Cahuachi, it was easy to argue that the Nasca were expanding through military means, thrusting into neighboring valleys and imposing their culture on the inhabitants, much like the current model for the Moche Culture on the north coast. With the re-evaluation of Cahuachi as an empty ceremonial center, and the lack of good archaeological evidence for expansion and centralized control over outposts in Pisco and Acarí (see Carmichael 1992), it seems most likely that the various Nasca chiefdoms were fighting amongst themselves for access to resources, particularly water and additional land for agriculture. In the battle scenes portrayed on the pottery, there is little difference in dress, weaponry and bodily depiction between the combatants, although one or two vessels depict the "enemy" painted in a different color (Carmichael 1988: illustration 19). This theory of inter-valley secular warfare needs to be further tested in the future by examining the settlement patterns revealed by the various, but yet unpublished, surveys which have recently been undertaken in the Nasca drainage (e.g. Schreiber's work in the Taruga, Las Trancas, Tierras Blancas and Aja tributaries, Silverman's work in the Ingenio Valley, Browne's survey of the Palpa region, and Carmichael's work in the lower Río Grande). The

presence of fortifications or strategically positioned sites in critical locations could add to our understanding of the nature of Nasca warfare.

Ritual Uses of Trophy Heads in Nasca Society

The careful preparation of the trophy heads, described above, was only the first step in the ultimate ritual use and disposition of these remains. The main practitioner in such rituals was the shaman who acted as an intermediary between the spirit world and the everyday world. Judging from the archaeological evidence and the ceramic iconography, the major components of many Nasca rituals were (1) music provided by clay panpipes, clay trumpets, drums, and rattles; (2) ritual drinks which may have included chicha (corn beer), but also involved the ingestion of hallucinogenic drugs derived from the San Pedro cactus (Sharon 1972:119; Dobkin del Rios 1980); (3) the use of trophy heads; and (4) processions to sacred places such as Cahuachi. Among the ritual ceremonies depicted in the iconography are many portraying a musician/shaman playing panpipes (Fig. 11) surrounded by images of cacti, large storage containers holding some type of beverage, and participants drinking from small cups (Fig. 12). It seems clear that the cacti are deliberately displayed to indicate their role in providing the connection to the spirit world by means of the mescaline drug they contain.



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

honor of the dead. Several vessels depict a mummy bundle being honored by a figure playing pan pipes and holding a trophy head (Fig. 13). Ceramic jars modeled in the form of a trophy head are common in the collections and may have been used in such ceremonies as well (Fig. 14). In 1926 Alfred Kroeber found the body of a beheaded corpse in a cemetery in the Nasca Valley (Kroeber 1956:357). A ceramic vessel in the shape of a head had been placed in the tomb as if to serve as a substitute.



Fig. 14

Nasca "head jars" come in a wide range of sizes and forms. Some are clearly modeled with the intention of depicting all the salient aspects of a real trophy head: pinned lips, carrying rope, bloody foramen magnum, skin flaps. etc. (de Lavallo 1986:130). Others appear more life-like and may have been fashioned to replace the missing heads of decapitated victims (Blasco and Ramos, 1991: figs. 472-493).



Fig. 15

of 20 and 45, were grouped together in a single offering (Fig. 15). Other caches have been found at Chaviña (Coelho 1972; Lothrop and Mahler 1957) and at Tambo Viejo

Following any individual usage that trophy heads may have had, many were ritually interred in caches in numbers ranging from three or four up to groups of 40 or more. One of the most impressive recent discoveries of a cache of trophy heads was made by Helaine Silverman, David Browne and Rubén Garcia (1993) at the site of Cerro Carapo in the Palpa Valley in the Rio Grande de Nasca drainage. Forty-eight trophy heads, virtually all males between the ages

(Riddell and Belin 1987) in the Acarí Valley, and at Cahuachi (Silverman 1993: chapter 15) and Jumana (Pezzia 1969) in the Rio Nasca Valley (see Verano 1995:210-212 for a complete inventory). The specimens from Tambo Viejo were buried in pottery jars. One of the most interesting vessels I have studied from the



Fig. 16

collections of the Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología in Lima portrays the ritual entombment of a group of trophy heads beneath a pyramid shaped mound (Fig. 16). A masked shaman holding staffs in his hands and surrounded by small drinking cups flanks one side of the mound, while an unmasked individual, also holding staffs, is found on the opposite side. A feline of unknown type floats over the mound having some unspecified symbolic meaning. A number of pottery vessels displaying piles of severed heads may also symbolize ritual entombment.

The Significance of Trophy Heads in Nasca Religion

In order to understand the role of trophy heads in Nasca society, a brief discussion of the nature of Nasca religion is necessary. Unlike the theocratic state religions of cultures like the Egyptians, Sumerians, Aztec or Inca, Nasca religion existed at a more primitive level, incorporating the concept of animism or belief in spirit beings. I agree with Richard Townsend who noted that....

The Nazca, like other Indian Peoples of the Americas, believed that there was an active, sacred relationship between man and nature. According to this mode of thought, the divine order of the universe was reflected in the organization of society and in all important activities of human life. Thus the control of water, planting of fields, harvesting of crops, preparations and celebrations of war, inauguration of rulers, and similar communal events, had symbolic meaning and were bound in a ramifying network of connections to the forces and phenomena of the surrounding land and sky. This connection of cosmological ideas and social processes is the central point of inquiry in approaching the Nazca world (Townsend 1985:122).

The spirit world of the Nasca included the most powerful creatures of the air (condor and falcon), earth (jaguar and puma) and water (killer whale and shark). Although naturalistic representations of each of these animals and birds appear in the art, they are more often represented in symbolic form--killer whale jaws and fins; falcon tails, wings and eye markings; feline whiskers and body markings--in a myriad of combinations which often included human or anthropomorphic combinations. These Mythical Beings, including the Horrible Bird, the Mythical Killer Whale, The Anthropomorphic Mythical Being, the Mythical Spotted Cat, etc., should be viewed as symbolic representations of either the nature spirits themselves or of the spiritual power (huaca) that they emit. Most are combinations of several powerful elements.

The religious practitioners in Nasca society were shamans, not priests. Shamans were the intermediaries between the spirit world and the everyday world. They used various means to contact the spirits, including hallucinogenic drugs to induce visions and to gain control over supernatural forces. Most of the ceremonial scenes in the ceramic iconography, described above, were conducted by these individuals. It is likely that sacred places, such as certain mountains, as well as paraphernalia including panpipes,

mouth masks, animal skin cloaks and Spondylus shell necklaces, were part of this religious complex. Therefore Nasca religion incorporated elements of magic rather than prayer, and took place at sacred sites and locations rather than in formal temples.

The taking of trophy heads and their ritual burial in caches can best be understood in this context. In the environmentally hostile world of the Nasca, many of the rituals carried out by the shamans related to propitiating and controlling the forces of nature, especially those responsible for adequate water, good soils, and a sufficient harvest. The prime purpose for taking heads was magical in nature--to insure the continued abundance of the food crops. The trophy heads were symbolic of, or a metaphor for, regeneration



Fig. 17

and rebirth. This concept can be seen iconographically in various scenes where plants are growing from the mouths of trophy heads (Fig. 17). In the same vein, trophy heads often substitute visually and metaphorically for plants or parts of plants. In their view of the world, the Nasca people must have placed great importance on the human head as a source of power. The burial of caches of trophy heads must have resulted in the concentration of a great amount of ritual power.

Although Carmichael (1994:84) has suggested that in some instances trophy heads may represent revered ancestors, I find this inference unconvincing. There is no evidence that the heads were taken from honored dead relatives, but rather were the trophies of warfare collected for ritual purposes. John Verano agrees, noting that

..it is clear that Nasca trophy heads are not a random sampling of a living population, nor do they fit the profile of revered elders; with few exceptions they are young adult males. Such an age and sex distribution is consistent with the hypothesis that Nasca trophy heads were collected from enemy combatants rather than from revered ancestors (1995:214).

Trophy heads can also be seen as offerings to the spiritual forces represented by the Mythical Beings painted on the pottery. Some scholars argue that these Mythical Beings are actually costumed shamans in the process of carrying out rituals or perhaps transforming themselves into spirit beings. While this may be true for some images of the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being, I believe that the majority of these representations are visualizations of the powerful spirits themselves whom the Nasca believed controlled their destiny. The trophy heads symbolize not only the most precious offerings to these creatures, but also symbolize the relationship between head-taking, blood, regeneration and fertility.

The religion of the Nasca people is complex and their ideology and world view quite foreign to that of today's complex societies. We can only begin to understand it by recognizing the unity the Nasca felt between nature and everyday events, and the role that magic played in this process. Trophy heads, perhaps more than any other symbol, exemplify these attributes and the attempt to control the supernatural forces which affected their lives.

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