

# **Nasca Headhunting and the Ritual Use of Trophy Heads**

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Decapitation and the subsequent ritual use of human heads was a common practice in ancient Peruvian cultures as early as the Preceramic Period (prior to 1800 B.C.). Iconographic representations of head taking can be seen in the art of Chavin, Moche, Huari and the Inca among others, but it was on the south coast of Peru that this tradition was most highly manifested and where excellent preserved examples of these heads are found. The term "trophy head" has been applied to these specimens, implying that the heads were removed during warfare and then displayed as evidence of the warrior's prowess. Although there is evidence for such display, the primary function of the heads was their use in rituals.

Prior to the discovery of a substantial sample of preserved trophy heads, iconographic representations of this motif were commonly seen on Nasca ceramics and textiles. A number of "Mythical Creatures" portrayed on the pottery were typically associated with trophy heads. One of the most common representations in early Nasca art was the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being, a human male dressed in elaborate ritual paraphernalia, holding a severed human head in one hand and a club in the other. Scholars have argued whether this creature represents a shaman or "masked impersonator", or a supernatural figure (Townsend 1985; Paul 1990). Evidence exists for both interpretations. Other early Mythical creatures with trophy head associations include the Horrible Bird, the Mythical Killer Whale, and Harpy Birds. Trophy heads also occur as independent themes throughout the sequence.

In the later Nasca phases (5 through 7), there is a major increase in depictions of warriors associated with trophy heads, battle scenes, and heads being held by elaborately dressed secular leaders. Browne, Silverman and García have suggested that "in contrast to Early Nasca times when only supernaturals and ritualists are shown in association with trophy heads, Late Nasca iconography suggests that the prestige of the leaders of Late Nasca society was enhanced by successful headhunting" (Browne, Silverman and García 1993:278).

Nasca head taking had its roots in the earlier Paracas Culture (900 to 200 B.C.) out of which it evolved. Trophy head representations do not appear on Paracas pottery until Phase 9 of the Ica Valley sequence or on textiles or pyro-engraved gourds until Phase 10, which dates to the very end of the Early Horizon. Trophy heads were first associated with a Paracas motif known as the "Oculate Being", a wide-eyed creature holding a trophy head in one hand and a knife, which was used to remove the head, in the

other (Menzel, Rowe and Dawson 1964: 199 and Fig. 52c). By Phase 10, much of the religious iconography had been transferred from pottery to textiles. The Oculate Being was replaced by the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being. Like the Oculate Being, this creature also displayed severed heads in its hand, attached to the belt, and appended to the cape.

In the last two centuries before Christ, the Paracas Culture was transformed into the Nasca Culture with a shift from post-fired resin painted pottery to slip painted pottery. The transition took a number of generations, lasting perhaps as long as 100 years, culminating in the shift of religious symbolism from textiles back to pottery. During the transition, however, the elaborate embroidered textiles so characteristic of late Paracas burials continued to be made in the earliest Nasca phases, including the portrayal of mythical creatures with associated trophy heads. At the same time, artisans were experimenting with the new slip paints, producing an elaborate new style of polychrome painted pottery which is now so closely associated with Nasca. New mythical creatures appear with trophy head associations along with warriors in the act of collecting heads. Unassociated trophy heads, some quite stylized, appear frequently in the art. The frequency of trophy head depiction increased during Phase 5, along with evidence for more military activism. Peripheral archaeological evidence suggests that this came at a time of environmental stress when drought conditions affected the south coast, causing population movements and the construction of the puquios as an alternative source of water. This militarism continued through Phase 7, which appears to be the time of greatest Nasca contact with the outside world. Trophy heads are one of the most frequent motifs on the pottery of these prolific Nasca phases. Fully dressed warriors, often depicted in battle scenes, abound in the art. Finally, the Nasca Culture went into a decline in Phase 8 as a result of the rise of more powerful polities in the highlands of Ayacucho. Within 100 to 150 years, Nasca Culture was replaced by the Wari.

The nature and identity of the severed heads depicted in the iconography has been substantiated by the discovery of at least 100 preserved archaeological specimens of trophy heads. The earliest recorded Nasca trophy heads were collected by Julio C. Tello in 1915 during a visit to the south coast. At Chaviña in the Acarí Valley, he found a skull with a perforated hole in the center of its forehead. At the time he believed that the hole had been made by a huaquero's (grave robber's) steel probe. Traveling north to the Nasca drainage, Tello found another looted head in a cemetery on the Hacienda Majoro. This specimen not only had a perforated forehead, but the base of the skull had been broken away. In January of 1916 he found in the cemetery of Las Salinas at Coyungo in the same valley a mummified trophy head complete with carrying rope and with the eye sockets filled with cotton (Fig. 1). Three additional specimens were recorded during that trip (see Tello 1918 for additional details).

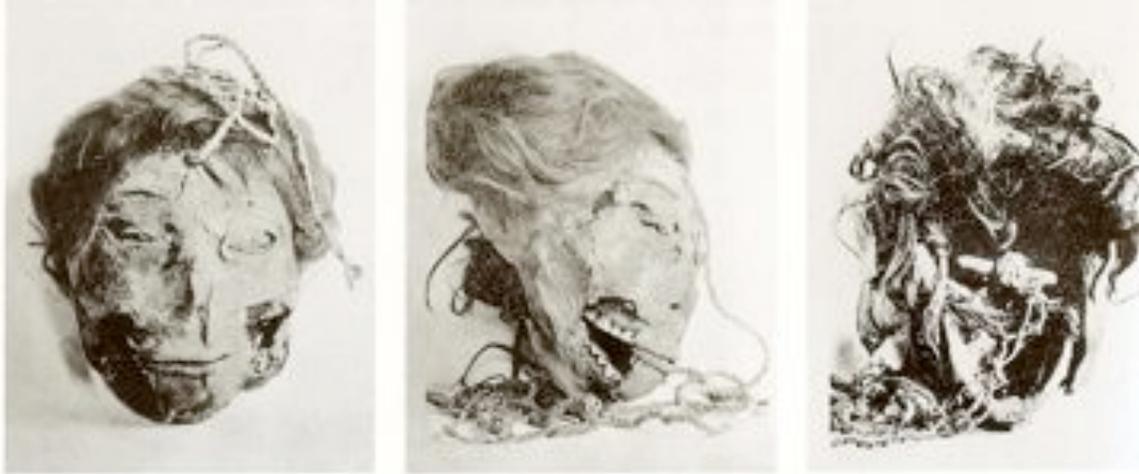


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Since these initial discoveries by Tello, over 100 additional specimens have been recorded including the following. In 1926 Alfred Kroeber excavated a total of ten trophy heads at Cahuachi and one at Majoro Chico in the Nasca Valley (Kroeber 1956; Kroeber and Collier 1998). In 1952 Strong (1957) found two specimens at Cahuachi and Ubbelohde-Doering (1958; 1966) an additional nine. More recently Helaine Silverman (1993) excavated two well-preserved trophy heads at Cahuachi and Orefici (Herran 1985) found at least one more. At Chaviña in the Acarí Valley to the south, Vera Coelho and Máximo Neira (1972-1973) recorded eleven excavated trophy heads and six more found on the surface. Back in the Nasca Valley, Rafael Reichert photographed the discovery of a group of nine trophy heads excavated at Estaqueria in 1979. But the most spectacular discovery made in recent times was a cache of 48 trophy heads made at the site of Cerro Carapo in the Palpa Valley of the Nasca drainage (Fig. 2; Browne, Silverman and García 1993).



Fig. 3

Analyses of the majority of these trophy heads have been undertaken by archaeologists and physical anthropologists resulting in a better understanding of the manner in which they were fashioned. X-ray analysis has provided an important perspective on some of the specimens (Coelho 1972) while an examination of the Cerro Carapo cache by John Verano has added greatly to our knowledge of the preparation of the heads as well as age and gender identification (Verano 1995). A typical Nasca trophy head was prepared in the following manner. The head was removed from the body with a sharp obsidian knife by slicing through the neck and separating the cervical vertebrae.



Fig. 4

Then the base of the skull, including the foramen magnum and portions of the occipital bone were broken away (Fig. 3), and the soft tissue, including the tongue, muscles and throat structure was discarded. Next the brain and supporting membranes were removed through this opening. A small hole was punched or drilled in the center of the forehead for insertion of a carrying rope which was secured inside the head by a wooden toggle or a large knot. Finally the lips were pinned shut using one or two long spines from the local huarango tree. The cavity within the skull was often stuffed with cloth and occasionally with vegetable matter (Fig. 4)

Verano points out that the Nasca were careful to preserve the natural appearance of the head (1995:204). The lower jaw was often secured to the zygomatic arches to maintain the proper articulation and to hold the mouth closed. Small pieces of cloth were stuffed in the cheeks and eye sockets to maintain a life-like appearance of the face (ibid.). Verano examined one trophy head specimen in the collections of the Field Museum in Chicago that had been defleshed. The facial skin and scalp had been removed from the skull, and a plainweave textile placed over the skull with subsequent replacement of the skin over the skull (Verano 1995:209-210). It is unclear how common this practice may have been in Nasca society.



Max Uhle was among the first to compare Nasca trophy heads to the more historic shrunken heads of the Jivaro Indians of eastern Peru and Ecuador (Uhle 1901). Like the earlier Nasca, the Jivaro practiced head taking and their trophies had lips pinned or sewn shut and a carrying cord attached through the forehead (Fig. 5). Unlike the Nasca, the Jivaro reduced the size of the trophy head by removing the skull and shrinking the remaining flesh down to the size of an orange. Several scholars, including myself have used ethnographic analogy to explain the function of the pinned lips on the Nasca specimens by examining the role of sealing the lips in Jivaro society (Proulx 1971).

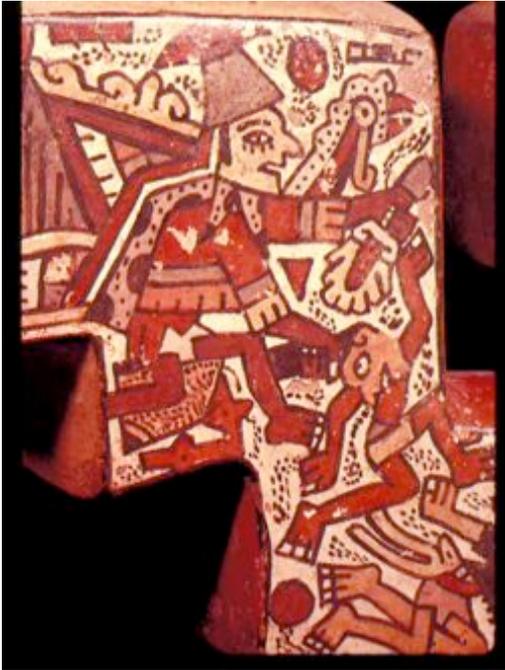
Fig. 5

Until recent times, the Jivaro practiced ritual killing in order to be eligible to acquire an additional soul known as an arutam wakani. The Jivaro believed that these souls protected them against sorcery, disease and death, but that they must be periodically replenished with new, more powerful souls as the power drained from the older ones (Harner 1962; 1972). The ritual killing of another individual was seen as the primary means of gaining access to a new arutam. Jivaro males formed raiding parties and attacked an isolated household in the early morning hours. Emboldened by the taking of hallucinogenic drugs, the Jivaro murdered as many people as possible, removing their heads in the process. The heads were taken and turned into trophies to prevent the muisak, or avenging spirit of the dead person, from harming the killer. The muisak was thought to reside in the head, entering and exiting through the mouth. By pinning the lips, the Jivaro believed the muisak could be trapped in the head and controlled until its power dissipated within a year or two. In the meantime, the head was used for ritualistic purposes.

I have argued elsewhere that the pinning of the lips on Nasca trophy heads served a similar function (Proulx 1971). The Nasca very likely believed that the mouth served as the primary orifice for some type of power or spirit that resided in the head, and that sealing the mouth would prevent its escape. A simpler explanation might be that the Nasca were attempting to prevent the dead person from speaking or perhaps uttering the name of the killer. In either case, the function of the thorns is connected with protection from the spirit of the dead person. Unconvinced by this analogy, John Verano suggests that the thorns through the lips may have the practical function of preventing their retraction during the natural desiccation of the flesh (Verano 1995:204).

The nature of warfare in Nasca society and the method for procuring trophy heads has been the center of a lively debate among scholars. One group of specialists argue that the Nasca engaged in ritual battles whose main function was to capture prisoners to be used for decapitation, not for territorial conquest (Coelho 1972; Neira and Coelho 1972-1973). Coelho and Neira's arguments include the following points. On the basis of the 11 heads found at Chaviña in the Acarí Valley, they claim that women and children's heads were found in addition to males. These were found associated with offerings and lacked weapons, and thus should be considered as evidence for ritual sacrifice, not territorial conquest. In normal warfare for territorial expansion, one would expect adult males to be fighting other adult males; according to these investigators, this was not the case at Chaviña. In addition, other trophy heads found within Nasca cemeteries were treated the same as full-bodied Nasca burials in terms of grave goods and preparation, leading to the conclusion that ritual fighting took place within Nasca society rather than between different ethnic groups. Baraybar discovered the presence of fine cut marks on the scalps of some of the Nasca trophy heads, leading him to conclude that these were part of a ritual bloodletting rite that took place after the capture of prisoners in battle and were not battle wounds (Baraybar 1987). And finally, Guillén has argued that the trophy heads were not obtained in battle, but were the mummified heads of relatives, carefully prepared, and used in ancestor worship (cited in Browne, Silverman and García 1993:276).

Others, including myself (Proulx 1971; 1989) and Verano (1995) suggest that there is ample evidence of traditional warfare in Nasca society, and that head taking took place in battle rather than afterward. Verano's analysis of 84 trophy heads, including the Cerro Carapo cache of 48 specimens, has examined the age and gender distribution of this sample. He discovered that the vast majority (85%) were adult males between the ages of 20 and 45. Females made up only 6% of the sample. Children under 12 years of age constituted less than 3% of the sample while adolescents less than 4%. People over 50 years of age are virtually absent (Verano 1995:214). In other words, the Chaviña cache was atypical, and therefore Neira and Coelho's conclusions were faulty. Verano further notes that "such an age and sex distribution is consistent with the hypothesis that Nasca trophy heads were collected from enemy combatants rather than revered ancestors" as suggested by Guillén (Verano 1995:214). A few rare vessels depict trophy heads hanging from poles or standards as if on display. If these were revered ancestors as Guillén argues, they certainly would not be portrayed in this offensive manner.



Nasca ceramic iconography is replete with images of male warriors, dressed in elaborate costumes, clearly engaged in battle and decapitation on the battlefield. One such example is a Phase 7 double spout vessel depicting several richly costumed warriors holding enemies by the hair and preparing to decapitate them with serrated obsidian knives (Fig. 6). On some Nasca vessels, the "enemy" is painted in a different color than the opposing warrior, suggesting members of a different ethnic group. However, the proposed political structure of the Nasca realm does not preclude intra-ethnic fighting between members of different chiefdoms for prized agricultural lands.

Baraybar's argument that cut marks present on the scalps of some of the trophy heads were made while the victims were still alive during bloodletting rituals prior to death can also be debated. These fine incisions on the skulls may have been produced as part of the preparation process of the skulls rather than reflecting ritual bloodletting rituals.

Although the method of procuring trophy heads has been disputed, all scholars agree that the ultimate reason for taking the heads, and their subsequent use, was ritual in nature. Like the Jivaro, the Nasca also used their trophy heads in a variety of rituals before ceremonial entombment. Trophy heads were raised on poles, hung from banners, carried by warriors, and were collected and displayed in groups judging from pottery depictions. An interesting vessel, dating to Phase 5, displays a burial scene. A mummy bundle is flanked by two individuals, most likely shamans, who are dressed only in loincloths.



Fig. 7

cloths (Fig. 7). Both are playing pan pipes, a common element in Nasca ceremonies. Significantly, one of the shamans is holding in his hand a trophy head suspended on a carrying rope. He also holds a rattle to compliment the pan pipes. This specimen contains the first clear indication that trophy heads were actively used in ceremonies.



Fig. 8

Nasca potters produced a wide range of jars and other vessel forms in the form of trophy heads (Fig. 8). There are documented cases where archaeologists have found, in Nasca cemeteries, bodies which had been decapitated where the missing head was replaced by a ceramic substitute (Kroeber 1956:357). Literally hundreds of "Head Jars" were produced between Nasca Phases 3 and 7, with the majority falling in Phase 5. Only a handful of these seem to have been used as replacements for missing heads on mummies; the remainder were symbolic representations of the most important offering present in their society.



Fig. 9

pyramid-shaped mound covering the cache of heads. This vessel, dating to Phase 7 (late

Once their ceremonial use was completed, the heads were interred either singly or, more commonly, in groups or caches like that discovered at Cerro Carapo. A unique vessel in the collections of the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Arqueología e Historia in Lima portrays the entombment of a cache of trophy heads by two shamans, one wearing a mask and holding batons in his hands, while the other is dressed only in a loincloth (Fig. 9) Small ceramic cups are associated with them and an additional example has been placed with the heads in the tomb. Some type of animal, perhaps a feline, surmounts the

Nasca), is the clearest depiction yet found of a common ceremony practiced in Nasca society.

Trophy heads are commonly associated with Nasca Mythical Beings in the early phases of the sequence. They are depicted in the hands and attached to the clothing of the Anthropomorphic Mythical Beings, clutched in the hand of the Mythical Killer Whale, being ingested by the Horrible Bird who in addition has trophy head representations in its wing panels, and also being eaten by the "Trophy Head Taster", a variation of the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being. Individual trophy heads, complete with carrying ropes and pinned lips, also appear early in the sequence. Evidence for increased militarism appears in Phase 5 along with the increasing frequency of trophy head depictions. The portrayal of blood--in the form of red dots, red blotches, or lace-like red geometric designs--is common on pottery from Phases 5, 6 and 7. Rows of trophy heads, in increasingly variable forms, are used as fillers on these proliferous (late) Nasca pieces. At the same time, warriors become more pervasive. New forms of clothing, including hats, shirts and breech cloths, are seen in Phase 7 along with different ways of depicting the human form. Some of these innovations appear to have been due to contacts made with the Moche Culture from the north coast (Proulx 1994). All in all, the art and iconography demonstrate the great importance of trophy heads in Nasca society. What remains is for us to attempt an interpretation of the reasons for head taking and the role of trophy heads in Nasca religion.

I once believed that the primary function of trophy heads was as offerings to the Mythical Beings. In this scenario war captives were decapitated and their heads used to placate the spirits for various reasons. This model is predicated on an analogy with other cultures where human sacrifice occurs to appease the gods. The Aztecs, who ripped the hearts out of thousands of victims and offered them to their deities to insure that the sun would rise each day, is such an example. I now believe that this picture is too simplistic and needs to be viewed from a distinctly Andean perspective. There is substantial evidence to suggest that Nasca religion centered on agricultural fertility and the associated need for sufficient water, good climate and soils. Most of the mythical Beings as well as the naturalistic animals and birds seen in the iconography can be linked to agriculture, water, or the land.



The strongest evidence linking head taking with agricultural fertility is a number of depictions of trophy heads with plants growing out of their mouths (Fig. 10). There seems to be a direct link between death/decapitation/blood regeneration/rebirth/agricultural fertility. The idea of death and regeneration appears in the mythology of many societies, for example, the Osiris myth in ancient Egypt. According to this myth, Osiris was an early king of Egypt who

Fig. 10

descended from the gods. He did many great things but was envied by his brother Set, who murdered him by dismembering his body and throwing the parts into the Nile River. Osiris' wife, Isis, and their son, Horus, collected the body parts and restored Osiris back to life. Osiris is viewed as a nature god embodied with the spirit of vegetation which dies with the harvest to be reborn when the grain germinates (Ames 1965:54). "As a vegetation spirit that dies and is ceaselessly reborn, Osiris represents the [wheat], the vine and the trees. He is also the Nile, which rises and falls each year; and the light of the sun, which vanishes in the shadows every evening to reappear more brilliantly each dawn" (Ames 1965:54).

I believe that the prime use of trophy heads in Nasca society was magical in nature--to insure the continued abundance of the food crops. In their view of the world, the Nasca people must have placed a great importance on the human head as a source of power. The burial of groups of trophy heads in caches must have resulted in the concentration of a great amount of ritual power. The entombment of the heads seen in Fig. 9 and physically represented by the caches discovered at Cerro Carapo, Estaqueria, Chaviña and Tambo Viejo, among others, belies the importance of grouping the heads together. Other iconographic motifs display spouting beans in the form of a trophy head, or an ear of corn with the face of a trophy head. This suggests a metaphor where various agricultural plants can be transformed into trophy heads, and vice versa.

Archaeologists are slowly beginning to understand the complex meaning of trophy heads in ancient Nasca society. More than mere war trophies, these modified human heads symbolized fertility, regeneration and sacred power to a people obsessed with the need to control the forces of nature, thus insuring sufficient food for their survival. Anatomical studies such as those conducted by John Verano have been a major source of new data allowing for a more precise analysis of the nature and function of these objects. Although we may never be able to completely understand every nuance of the symbolism represented by these trophy heads, great strides have been made in recent years in providing a better understanding of the world view of the Nasca people.

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