

THE DEITY OF SKY: ONE WAY TO INTERPRET THE MOCHE ICONOGRAPHY

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The Moche culture is one of the oldest and most problematic one in pre-Columbian Peruvian civilisations. Its central region was located in the valley of the Moche river on the northern coast not far from the today's city of Trujillo. As was characteristic to the more civilised cultures of the Peruvian coast the Mochicans lived in a few oases formed in the valleys of the coastal rivers. The oases were separated by a lifeless belt of desert, tens of kilometres wide. At the same time the valleys which are repeatedly flooded by rivers yield good harvest for their inhabitants, also, the sea is one of the most generous givers in the world.

The first monuments of the Moche culture were discovered in 1900 by one of the founders of Peruvian national archaeology, the German archaeologist Max Uhle. At the time when Chavín, the oldest Peruvian civilisation was not yet discovered, Uhle postulated his sc. "immigrationalistic theory", according to which the Peruvian civilisations (including the Moche culture) originate from Central America. After the discoveries of Julio Tello in 1919, the autothonistic theory of origin of the Peruvian civilisation was adopted. Even the Moche culture developed in the area which had previously belonged under the Chavín rule. Even later people have been searching for foreign influences on the Mochicans, because the rich human-shaped pottery shows that the human typology of the Mochicans includes Mongoloid as well as Negroid features. Horkheimer, for example, supports the theory of the migration wave which supposedly started in eastern Asia and spread via Melanesia. Nevertheless, the prevailing anthropological type arouses suspicion in that question Busto s.a.:143) The Moche people spoke the language of Yunga-Indians, the grammar of which was written down already by Fernando de la Carrex in 1644.

According to the archaeological periodisation which is prevalent in today's Peru, the Moche culture belongs to the sc. Early Middle

Period, or the Period of Classical High Civilisations (200–700 A.D.). According to the recent archaeological reports, the beginning of the Moche culture is considered to have taken place somewhat earlier – at the 2nd century B.C.; also, the end of the culture has been moved approximately to the year 800.

Observing the beginning of the Moche culture we cannot underestimate the influence of the oldest civilisation of Peru, the Chavín civilisation. Chavín was a well-developed class society, which was divided into nobility, farmers and slaves. The Moche people were developed in agriculture, fishing, handicraft, trade, sea-faring and metallurgy. The golden age of the culture starting from the middle of the first millennium could be associated with military expansion. The anthropomorphic pottery of the Mochicans is particularly well known – the mythological and social themes which it expresses might be considered as the peak of this art genre in the whole civilisation of Peru.

The basic source for studying the society, history and religion of the Moche people is first and foremost the archaeological material of findings, it has also been used by the author of the current article. In addition to studying the collection of the museums of Peru

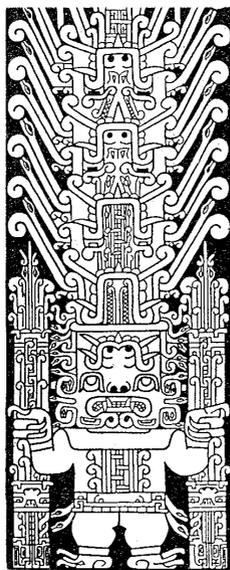


Photo A.

and the author's own photographic material, a lot of illustrations of the works of Berezkin have been used in the following study (Berezkin 1983).

4 major complexes of phenomena can be distinguished in the Moche religion:

1. the cult of the warrior-priest as an official religion
2. the shaman practice as one with the individual, magical character
3. mythological motifs
4. the cult of the dead (Berezkin 1983: 143–145).

Discussing the topic we are going to observe first and foremost the official religion with its developed pantheon. The comparison of the

mythological world pictures might rise some difficulties as we still lack substantial information about the Chavín culture. We can only assert on the assumption of Krickeberg that the Chavín and Mochican world pictures could have borne some resemblance (Trimborn 1961: 132–133).

In Peru the deity with staves emerges first at the period of Chavín (900 B.C.–200 A.D.). Its classical figure is mostly known by the sc. Raymond stele (see photo B) which depicts a godlike creature holding staves or sticks in both of



Photo B.

its hands. Other external features might vary in different cultures. A common conception is that the deity with staves served as a celestial supreme being, a god of the heavens, who in the course of time was attributed the characteristic features of a thunder-god. The worship of the deity with staves spread from Chavín all over Peru. At times, however, its characteristic features were relatively unknown or the knowledge of them was totally lacking among the coastal civilisations at the Early Middle Period. At the end of the 1st millennium A.D. the concept of the deity with staves emerges again. The deity prevails mostly in the religions of the middle horizon (800–1100 A.D.), more particularly so in the Tiahuanaco culture (100–1100) on the Altiplano Plateau in South-Peru where it is called Wiracocha (see photo B). In the religion of the later horizon or the empire of the Incas (1438–1532) where the celestial supreme being Pachacamak has become the *deus otiosus* and the religion is focused on the worship of Sun, the existence of the deity with staves is merely suspected and it occurs mostly in the mythological strata. As the Moche culture belongs to the Early Middle Period, the existence of the deity with staves is somewhat problematic as well. In fact, there are no concepts which authors would be convinced in the existence of the deity with staves among the Mochicans.

Still, the occurrence of the deity with staves might be suspected as:

1. the first culture where the deity emerged was that of Chavín;
2. the centre of the Chavín culture was located at the highlands of North-Peru;
3. the centre of the Moche civilisation was located at North-Peru, although not in the highlands but in the coastal region;
4. the areas where the Moche civilisation emerged belonged under the domain of the Chavín culture;
5. in material culture consistency might be observed between Chavín and Moche;
6. certain similar cultural elements might be found between the high cultures of North-Peru following the period of Chavín and Moche; the Chimú culture might serve as an example here.

As the Moche culture is one of the most important successors and inheritors, and as the impact of the Chavín culture on the material culture of Mochica is unquestionable, it is in fact surprising that the deity with staves as a mythological character has not yet been discovered in the Mochican religion.

Which areas of belief might be found in the iconography of Mochica in reality? Below I am not going to touch upon the complex mythological plots the interpretation of which is of no consequence here, and which are thoroughly discussed by a Russian researcher Berezkin, one of the most competent experts on the Peruvian culture. I would like to mention only that these plots include often the sc. deity with rays. Kelm argues that the deity with rays possesses the features of a moon-god and, therefore, it is possible to find analogues with the main god of the Chimú religion, *Si* the moon-god (Kelm 1990: 526). Therefore it is not surprising that one of the most important countries of the Late Middle Period (1100–1438) Chimú developed at the area of the earlier Moche culture which is why the consistency of the two cultures is unquestionable.

GROUP 1 OR FIGURES 1–4

depict the sc. four-faced daemon (figure 1), the sc. jaguar-toad (figure 2), the sc. Recuai animal (figure 3) and the sc. deity on a back of a monster (figure 4). Hereby various influences might be observed.



Figure 1. The four-faced daemon.

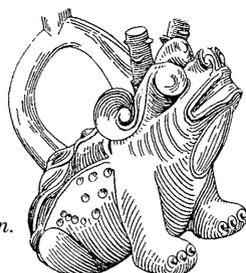


Figure 2. The jaguar-toad.



Figure 3. The Recuai animal.



Figure 4. The deity on back of a monster.

The motifs of the four-faced daemon and the jaguar-toad occur as early as in the Chavín iconography. The creature in the shape of a four-faced daemon can be found on the Chavín pottery. As for the toad-motif we can speculate that the jaguar-toad has been a central figure in Chavín mythology. The toad-deity appears also among the sculptures of the Chavín deities (see photo C). The sc. eye-creature takes us back to the early horizon period, namely to the South-Peruvian culture of Paracas. The culture developed simultaneously with Chavín and the sc. Cavernas period of its religion is characterised by strong influences of Chavín. The deity with large eyes is a mythological creature characteristic to Paracas, its outward figure has altered quite considerably in the course of time (see photo D). At the same time the figure as well as the ornamental shape of the pottery reveal similarities with the monster of Recuai. The culture of Recuai coincides in time with the late period of the Chavín culture and it was located in the coastal as well as the mountainous region of North-Peru. Both the jaguar-toad as well as the eye-creature share a similarity in their ceramic technique,



Photo C.

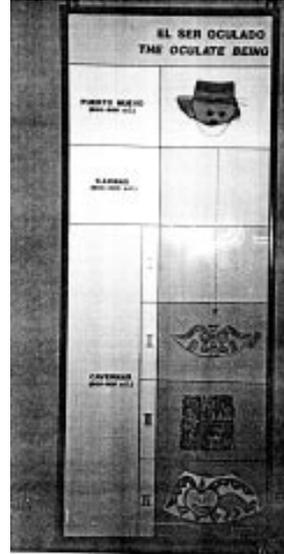


Photo D.

namely a tube-shaped handle, typically characteristic to Chavín. The deity riding a sea-dragon on figure 4, however, appears to be of Mochican origin or of the coastal culture. One of the ancient ceramic relics of the late Mochica period is displayed at the Luis Amano Museum (see photo E). In sum the drawn figures of this group prove the importance of the earlier influences on the Moche religion whereas the Chavín impact is most apparent.



Photo E.

GROUP 2 OR FIGURES 5-9.

Figure 5 features a deity with celestial spheres and a heavenly dragon. In figure 7 the deity is fighting the dragon and a long-haired daemon, in figure 8 the battle is between the deity and the molluscos dragon, figure 9 depicts deities among celestial spheres (stars). Such motifs refer most apparently to the supreme heavenly being of the Moche people. Already in the earlier period the Mochicans believed in the solar heavenly god which possessed most probably the features of a Sun-god (Kelm 1990: 526). The other motifs bear similarity to those of the Old World, such as the heavenly dragon (or a worldly dragon), also the battle between the god of heaven and the monster or dragon of chaos which body is later



Figure 5. The deity with celestial spheres, the heavenly dragon.



Figure 6. The deity holding a heavenly dragon.



Figure 7. The deity fighting a dragon and a daemon.



Figure 8. Fights the dragon.

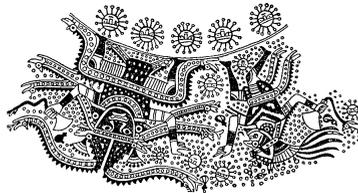


Figure 9. The deity in heaven.

turned into the Earth. Certainly, the plot of the myth has acquired features characteristic to the Mochica culture. The relatively older Recuai monster in the upper part of figure 7 refers to the age of the motif, it again points out the earlier influences that might date back to the Chavín period. The fact that the celestial dragon occurs in the more recent cosmogony of the Incas reveals that the cultural consistency between the Peruvian religion lasted during the 2500 years of the development of the pre-Columbian Peruvian civilisation. In sum, the drawn figures of group 2 clearly prove the existence of the god of heaven in the Moche religion, thereby clarifying the fact that the heavenly deity of the Mochicans lacks of the external features of a deity with staves which were particularly important in Chavín religion as have significance in the more recent Tiahuanaco religion.

We cannot help but assume one of the two facts. Firstly – the deity with staves was altogether unknown in the Moche religion. This statement, however, is proven unlikely due to the strong influences of the Chavín culture. Secondly – the deity with staves was known to the Mochicans but its figure and function differed greatly from that of Chavín.

GROUP 3 OR FIGURES 10–17

depict the deity in various situations associated with vegetation: the deity with a spud and a cornstalk among the stars (figure 10), a deity with a spud and a cornstalk (figure 11), a deity among plants and serpents (figure 12), a deity with corncobs (figure 13) and a deity in front of corncobs (figures 14 and 15), a deity with a cornstalk, a bag of seeds and two serpents (figure 16) and a deity with a spud and a sower-boy (figure 17). We are hereby concerned with the motifs of fertility cult which are directly associated with the cultivation of land. Cultivation was an important source of living in the Moche culture and the valleys of the Moche river and the neighbouring valleys provided good conditions for that. Also, the analysis of the Moche society based solely on the ornaments on pottery reveals that its caste of farmers was quite numerous. Furthermore, it sounds logical that the Moche civilisation as a more recent civilisation applied somewhat more developed and efficient methods of cultivation than in the earlier Chavín; the fertile condi-

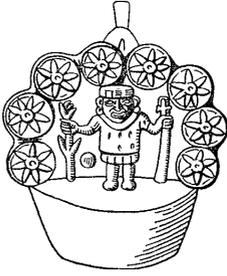


Figure 10.



Figure 11.



Figure 12.



Figure 13.



Figure 14.



Figure 15.



Figure 16.



Figure 17.

The deity with a spud and a cornstalk among the stars (figure 10), the deity with a spud and a cornstalk (figure 11), the deity among plants and serpents (figure 12), the deity with corncobs (figure 13) and the deity in front of corncobs (figures 14 and 15), the deity with a cornstalk, a bag of seeds and two serpents (figure 16) and the deity with a spud and a sower-boy (figure 17).

tions of the valley of the Moche river favoured cultivation definitely more than the hard-soiled slopes of Chavín. It is therefore possible to conclude that the Mochicans must have had an ample agrarian mythology and a considerably better developed pantheon of fertility cult than the Chavín people. Providing that the cults of Chavín were spread on the Moche regions, the new forms of the religion in Moche must have gone under certain mutations. On the basis of the current information it is also possible to speculate the course of the process. Observing figures 10, 11 and 12 in particular, we can see that the corn-god or the fertility god is holding his attributes – a spud, a cornstalk or corn plants. These are only single motifs, but studying the abundant and well-preserved Mochican pottery definitely reveals a larger numbers of such motifs. Thus, it becomes more and more clear that the Chavín deity with staves as a god of heaven has attributed the features of the agrarian god in Moche culture. In figure 10 the corn-god is even standing with all his attributes among the stars. This motif is apparently one of the earliest and refers to the period when the god with staves was associated with solar mythology as well. The serpent on figures 12 and 16 allows with certain reservation the indirect connection with celestial mythology. The other figures express no attributes characteristic to the celestial mythology; the reason might be that they are more recent. Such a modification of a deity's functions is also proved by the fact that the Moche religion already had a god of heaven who clearly had the function of a sun-god, its own mythology, and who did not need additional attributes. However, a corn-god symbolising the developing cultivation needed well such a mutation, being associated with rain and moisture, and thereby also with heaven. In sum the drawn figures of group 3 refer with a considerable likelihood to the fact that the deity of corn-growth of the Mochicans was in the course of time attributed the features and functions of a deity with staves, which in Chavín culture, in their turn had belonged to the supreme heavenly being.

The current survey is certainly only one of the ways of interpreting the Mochican iconography. At the same time, this survey allows to make an assumption that the Chavín deity with staves had altered into an agrarian god in the Moche culture, a function considerably better suited for the different natural and social conditions of the Moche people. On the other hand such an assumption re-

veals the existence of an even stronger cultural consistency between Chavín and Moche cultures than it has been thought until the present time.

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