Life and Death in the Moche culture: The Sacrifice Ceremony

The culture of Moche flourished in the valleys of the North Coast of present Peru, approximately since 150 CE. In the centres and cities build of unbaked bricks lived ten thousands of people: Artisans, warriors, priests, nobles and the sovereigns. As living gods the Moche sovereigns resided in palaces on high platforms, out of the crowd’s view. In richly decorated courts and temples were stages for feasts and ceremonies including human sacrifice. The people killed were mostly warriors captured in battle On other occasions, Moche worshipers honored their gods with dancing, waterlily games, and the presentation of valuable offerings. One of the most important ritual was the Sacrifice Ceremony which the Moche often depicted in their vase paintings (Fig. 5.1 a, Fig. 5.1 b).
Fig. 5.2 “Sacrifice Ceremony” 120 cm x 150 cm Oil and acrylic on paper
After a successful battle the sovereign, priests, warriors and a priestess meet at a ritual court on the top of a platform (Fig. 5.2). All the participants wear the dress of important Moche gods. The lord representing the god of light and the sun has just stepped off his litter of gold. The figure in the middle of the picture with a blue-painted face and accompanied by a spotted dog receives a goblet filled with human blood from a priest in a humbling posture. Goblets used in the Sacrifice Ceremony have been found in archaeological excavations (Fig. 5.3). A priestess representing the moon wears a long skirt covered with black feathers. Her legs are painted yellow. She offers a second goblet. She wears a tall crown of gold. In contrast to the Inca culture where the gold was exclusively the symbol of the sun god in the Moche society the gold is also symbol of the moon and sea gods as well as silver. Two undressed and captured warriors sit on the ground. A priest wearing a long skirt and a tall crown of gold cuts the prisoner’s throat with one hand using a ceremonial knife. With the other he holds a gourd bowl in which the prisoner’s blood is carefully captured and poured into goblets to be drunk by the lord. Ceremonial knives like this have been discovered through archaeological research and many show evidence of use on their blades (Fig. 5.4).

Many vase paintings depict dance rituals (Fig. 5.5 a, Fig. 5.5 b). Dance played an important role in Moche society. To the rhythmic sound of
panpipes, flutes, rattles and drums warriors and members of the Moche elite are dancing (Fig. 5.6). The richly dressed sovereign is standing over them atop a two-stepped platform. He has just come out of the small throne house behind him, and is presenting a war captive with a rope around his neck. The dancers form two rows. Their dance performance is choreographed to suggest the winding movement of a snake. Two dance formations approach the sovereign. One starts at the bottom of the platform, finding its way up the ramp and onto the top of the platform, finally stopping in front of the lord. A second smaller one, in the left upper corner of the picture, has already arrived on top of the platform and is simultaneously approaching the lord. Large vessels in the foreground of the picture are filled with corn beer and decorated with the branches of algarrobo trees. (Algarrobo is the tree carob comes from.) The beer pots stand ready for the dancers, as do fruits and fish which were fetched by servants. Musicians wearing elaborate
dress can be seen behind the small dance group on the top of the platform. Two other musicians with hand drums form part of the large dancer’s group. Some dancers wear leggings covered with gold bells, and belt-attached backflaps with rattles to produce a metallic sound. Backflaps like this have been discovered in a lot of Moche burials (Fig. 5.7). The lord wears the ornate regalia of the god of the night sky. This includes a helmet decorated with feathers and a shirt, both covered with gold plaques. His pectoral consists of hundreds of gold and shell beads. Under a short woven kilt, leggings with bells are visible. The other participants wear the insignia of lower-ranking deities. The shirts and skirts of many dancers are covered with gold discs reflecting the sun’s brilliance. In the background of the picture another platform rises, crowned by the palace complex of the lord.

The Water Lily Game of the Moche was one of the most spectacular Prehispanic rituals. The ceremony was associated with both the abundance of water and fertility and is often depicted in paintings on vases (Fig. 5.8 a, Fig. 5.8 b). Artifacts used in the ritual also have been found in burials excavated in Moche centers (Fig. 5.10).

The reconstruction (Fig. 5.9) shows participants dressed as gods associated with the night and the sea standing around a two-stepped platform on which the sovereign stands. Wearing large ear plugs depicting a muscovy duck – the symbol of water abundance – he receives a goblet filled with corn beer from a man in a feline headdress. Meanwhile, other participants throw spears covered with tiny pieces of gold sheet and feathers that represent water lilies. The wind carries the gold objects for a moment before they fall to the ground like small propellers, sparkling in the sunlight. While some servants collect the precious fallen objects, others distribute more spears and cups of corn beer. In the foreground, three men with amputations – a common audience at such ceremonies – watch with fascination.
Combat is a common theme in Moche vase paintings, described in detail on hundreds of ceramic vessels (Fig. 5.11). This reconstruction shows the climax of a battle (Fig. 5.12). After the conch shell sounds the call to arms, warriors of both factions collide in the middle of a battlefield situated outside of the city. Each warrior attacks his opponent with a mace, the main weapon of the Moche culture. Many of the wooden maces found in excavations were originally covered with copper or gold sheets (Fig. 5.13). While one warrior pulls his vanquished enemy to
the ground by his hair, another lies defeated nearby, naked and stripped of his armor. The warrior in the left corner leaves the battlefield with his opponent’s armor as a trophy. The main objective of the combat appears to have been the capture of high ranking prisoners for sacrifice on ceremonial occasions. Some ceremonies took place atop the high temple platforms in the cities, while others took place on the Guano Islands, from which the Moche harvested bird excrement or guano to use as fertilizer. The captives were decapitated to ensure a rich guano harvest.

Fig. 5.12 “Combat” (102 cm x 73 cm, oil and acrylic)
The Moche offered elaborate gifts to their gods and lords. Paintings on ceramic vessels show that jewelry, richly adorned costumes, food, and shell were some of the most important offerings (Fig. 5.14).

This reconstruction (Fig. 5.15) shows a sovereign and a priestess. The sovereign wears the costume of the god of the night sky as he sits on a bench in his palace holding a gold mace. His gold earplugs, inlaid with turquoise, lapis lazuli, and shell, depict a running hawk god who carries a bag filled with beans. One half of the lord’s garment is covered with yellow parrot feathers that symbolize the day, while the other half is decorated with round motifs that represent the stars in the night sky. The tall “Snake Crown” worn by the priestess makes her recognizable as the personification of the moon goddess. She holds a Strombus shell in her left hand and offers the sovereign a beaker filled with corn beer. Her braids are wrapped with long and colorful bands. In the foreground of the picture, offerings of two elaborate headdresses of gold, jaguar pelt, and parrot feathers are accompanied by pepper pods (aji) in a vase on the lord’s left side. Headdresses such as these were worn in combat as well as during deer and fox hunts.
A Dynasty of the Moche culture: 
The royal tombs of Sipán

In 1987 Walter Alva discovered royal tombs at the site of Sipán, an important Moche center 1,500 years ago. As of 2001, Alva had excavated ten unlooted burials of the Moche elite, outstanding both for the rich grave goods they contained and for the information they provided about Moche culture and beliefs. 

In approximately 50 CE, a splendid burial ceremony took place at the top of a platform in the center of Sipán for the founder of the Sipán dynasty, the “Old Lord of Sipán.” A young woman and a llama accompanied the lord in death, along with hundreds of grave goods of gold, silver, precious stones, and textiles (Fig. 5.16). In life, the lord’s duties included participating in ceremonies honoring Moche gods, hunting deer in the mountains, and waging war against other Moche lords to maintain political control. 

The reconstruction shows the lord seated on a bench in a throne house wearing the regalia of the sea god (Fig. 5.17), which includes a tall headdress decorated with heron feathers imported from Chile. Gold earplugs with dangling plaques that reflect the sun’s brilliance adorn his head, while a gold and silver pectoral with the curved tentacles of an octopus covers his chest. Gold rattles attached to his belt jingle with every movement, and the belt is decorated with a representation of the crab god. His bracelets consist of tiny beads of gold, turquoise, and lapis lazuli from Chile in the south, and Spondylus shell from the Ecuadorian Coast in the north. The lord wears gold sandals and his legs are painted. A scepter-knife of gold topped with a fruit-shaped decoration lies under the lord’s left hand. 

The successor to the Sipán’s founder, the “Lord of Sipán,” was buried in another sumptuous grave in 260 CE (Fig. 5.18). As in the dynasty founder’s burial, this grave contained finely-crafted gold jewelry, ceramics, and shell. Eight people accompanied the lord in death, including...