Little did we realize that as our excavation proceeded at Sipán we would find the answers to our questions. Ultimately, these art objects and artifacts, which seemed so strange and puzzling out of context, were to become known and familiar to us. Moreover, they were to provide valuable information not only about the Moche people, but also about the specific individuals whose royal tomb had been so ruthlessly torn apart by the looters.

Royal Tombs of Sipán
Walter Alva, Christopher Donnan

On a dark night in February 1987, a group of tomb robbers called *huaqueros*, dug feverishly into an eroded Moche pyramid near the village of Sipán. Lookouts were posted nearby to warn them if police or government officials appeared. All of a sudden, one of the diggers broke into a burial chamber with the platform. As he scanned the chamber with his kerosene lantern, he saw gold beads, and gold and silver ornaments glistening in the moonlight.

Quickly, the men grabbed the beads from gold and silver necklaces and parts of other ornaments, breaking some as they stuffed the artifacts in a bag. The next day, they sold some of the treasures to middlemen, who paid them more money than the *huaqueros* could make by harvesting sugarcane for a year.

Before a month had passed, these gold and silver artifacts were sold to collectors throughout the world, at much higher prices than the robbers were paid. When the rest of the villagers learned about how much money the *huaqueros* had been paid for the treasures unearthed at the Sipán pyramid, they wanted to enjoy some of the same success. Soon men, women, and children flocked to the adobe mound. Using shovels and their bare hands, they poked and pried in frenzy for scraps of metal, ceramic vessels, and beads; anything the *huaqueros* had not discovered or had overlooked.

When Peruvian archaeologist Walter Alva realized what had happened at Sipán, he persuaded the police to help him stop the pillaging of what he knew was a burial of unprecedented magnificence. With funds from the National Geographic Society and some local agencies, he hired local workmen to construct a fence around the site and he began a scientific excavation of the tomb.
A Dynasty of the Moche Culture: The Royal Tombs of Sipán

In 1987 Walter Alva discovered the richly equipped royal tombs at the site of Sipán, an important Moche center 1,500 years ago. By 2001, Walter Alva had excavated ten unlooted burials of the Moche elite, which are outstanding due to their richness of grave goods, and for the information they provide about Moche culture and beliefs.

Burial III of Sipán

In approximately 50 CE, a splendid burial ceremony took place atop a platform in the center of Sipán for the dynasty’s founder, 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. 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. He wears the regalia of the sea god, which includes a tall headdress decorated with flamingo feathers imported from what is now Chile. Gold earplugs with dangling plaques that reflect the sun’s brilliance adorn his head, while a gold and silver pectoral, depicting the curved tentacles of an octopus covers his chest. His belt is decorated with a representation of the crab god, and the gold rattles attached to it jingle with every movement. His bracelets consist of tiny beads of gold, turquoise, and lapis lazuli from present-day 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.

Burial III of Sipán, Peru, Present Status
Walter Alva and Christopher Donnan 1993
Royal Tombs of Sipán

Burial III of Sipán
100 cm x 80.5 cm
Oil and acrylic on paper
Painting by Christiane Clados
The "Lord of Sipán," one of the successors to Sipán’s founder, the "Old Lord of Sipán," was buried in another sumptuous grave in 260 CE. As in the dynasty founder’s burial site, this grave contained finely crafted gold jewelry, ceramics, and shell. Eight people accompanied the lord in death, including three women, a warrior, and a child, as well as two llamas and the lord’s hunting dog. Headdress offers this valuable gift to the lord, while the man wearing the bird headdress holds the bridle of the llama. Two high-ranking guards bearing standards of gold watch on either side of the throne house, while a warrior carrying a gold shield guards a seated captive who will soon be ceremonially sacrificed.

Exotic shells such as Spondylus, Conus, and Strombus were some of the most valuable goods of pre-Hispanic societies on the Peruvian North Coast.

Paintings on vases show that the Moche offered materials made from these shells as gifts to their most esteemed gods. The lord of Sipán receives two men bringing Conus and Strombus shell on the back of a llama. The man with the feline headdress offers this valuable gift to the lord, while the man wearing the bird headdress holds the bridle of the llama. Two high-ranking guards bearing standards of gold watch on either side of the throne house, while a warrior carrying a gold shield guards a seated captive who will soon be ceremonially sacrificed.

The reconstruction shows the lord sitting on a small throne, dressed as the god of the night sky. Two of his wives sit beside him, dressed as moon goddesses; his hunting dog lies near his feet. The lord’s clothing is covered with hundreds of gold plaques, and his pectoral is made of tiny Spondylus shell beads. The shell is imported from the distant Ecuadorian coast.
One of the most impressive is this gold and turquoise ornament that depicts a central warrior in gold with two turquoise warriors on either side of him. The central warrior has a removable war club and a crescent-shaped nose ornament that can swing freely in the septum of the nose. He also wears a necklace of tiny owl head beads.
**ACTIVITIES**

**Social Studies • Science • Language Arts • Technology**

Read *Lords of Sipán*, the high-adventure story of grave robbers, black-market dealers, and intrepid archaeologists. Contrast the discovery of this Moche tomb to that of Tutankhamen in Egypt. Compare the Internet sites on each of the excavations. Present a virtual art exhibit of items found at the excavation site of Sipán.

**Art • Language Arts**

Ask the students to read “Fit for a Lord: Moche Textiles and Clothing” by Vuka Roussakis in *Faces* magazine. Write a story about the Warrior Priest and his life. They should look carefully to identify the images woven in the textiles and design another rendition of that artifact. These may be painted or drawn on paper or cloth.

**Research • Science • Technology • Language Arts**

Have students pair up to form a research team. Each research team should collect information on how the Moche people of Sipán buried their rulers. Draw the Warrior Priest wearing his gold jewelry and surrounding objects. Look at the exploded view on the Internet site and create, using cut paper, a model of an exploded view.

**TEXTBOOKS**

*Unwrapping Ancient Mysteries*

Invitations to Literacy

Level 6  Theme 3

Houghton Mifflin 2001

*Discover Our Heritage*

The Ancient Americas

Level 7  Chapter 6

Houghton Mifflin 2001

**RESOURCES**


**INTERNET LINKS**

*Tumbas Reales De Sipan*

http://www.telefonia.com.pe/sipan/

*Moche Burials Uncovered National Geographic*


*Moche Revealed: The Digger*

http://www.magazine.ucla.edu/year2001/summer01_03.html

*Moche Portraits From Ancient Peru*

http://www.oid.ucla.edu/Webcast/FRL/Donnan_body.html
GLOSSARY

**Archaeology**
The systematic study of past human life and culture by the recovery and examination of remaining material evidence, such as graves, buildings, tools, and pottery.

**Archaeologist**
A person who studies the lives and cultures of ancient peoples through the excavation and interpretation of material evidence of past human activity.

Context-When Peruvian archaeologist Walter Alva realized what had happened at Sipán, he persuaded the police to help him stop the pillaging of what he knew was a burial of unprecedented magnificence.

**Burial Chamber or Tomb**
A grave or other place of burial. A vault or chamber for burial of the dead. A monument commemorating the dead.

Context- All of a sudden, one of the diggers broke into a burial chamber with a platform.

**Artifact** also *artefact*
An object produced or shaped by human craft, especially a tool, weapon, or ornament of archaeological or historical interest.

Context-Quickly, the men grabbed the beads from gold and silver necklaces and parts of other ornaments, breaking some as they stuffed the artifacts in a bag.

**Dig**
To break up, turn over, or remove (earth or sand, for example). To learn or discover by careful research or investigation.

Context-Tension ran high during the first few weeks of the dig as angry villagers shouted curses and death threats.

**Huaquero**
Spanish name for a grave robber.

Context-On a dark night in February, 1987, a group of tomb robbers called *huaqueros* in Spanish, dug feverishly into an eroded Moche pyramid near the village of Sipán.