

# THE MOCHE of ANCIENT PERU

Media and Messages

*Jeffrey Quilter*

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Jeffrey Quilter

Foreword by Luis Jaime Castillo B.

Photographs by Mark Craig

Rubie Watson, Series Editor

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FRONTISPIECE: For seven centuries the people of the north coast of Peru participated in what has come to be called the Moche Archaeological Culture. Moche is best known for remarkable ceramics that depicted gods, heroes, and, apparently, ordinary people—as shown in this group photograph. Top row, left to right: PM 46-77-30/5031, 46-77-30/5088, 46-77-30/5065; middle row, l-r: 09-3-30/75622.5, 46-77-30/4961, 09-3-30/75631, 09-3-30/75614; bottom row, l-r: 09-3-30/75604.2, 46-77-30/4967, 09-3-30/75622. 98060003. J. David Bohl, photographer. Copyright © 2005 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

FRONT AND BACK COVERS: Front and rear views of Moche Phase IV portrait head stirrup-spout vessel from the Virú or Chicama Valley. PM 16-62-30/F729. Front: 98750073; back: 98720052. Mark Craig, photographer. Copyright © by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

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## FOREWORD

# THE CHANGING WORLD OF MOCHE ARCHAEOLOGY

*Luis Jaime Castillo B.*

ARCHAEOLOGISTS HAVE LONG REGARDED the Peabody Museum's collection of Moche artifacts as one of the finest in the world. Beginning with a contribution of materials by Julio C. Tello, one of the founders of Peruvian archaeology and a Harvard alumnus, and enhanced by later additions from various scholars and donors, the collection includes many outstanding pieces, each deserving its own detailed analysis. In the pages of this book, those acquainted with Moche research will immediately recognize emblematic objects such as the portrait head vessels in plates 11 and 12 and on the cover; the curing session presided over by an owl-healer in plate 20; or the congregation of skeletons around a mummy bundle in plate 19. With this publication, an important part of the Peabody's collection becomes available to the general public for the first time—providing an opportunity to enjoy and ponder the meaning of these enigmatic objects.

Although archaeological dogma gives absolute primacy to objects found *in situ*—that is, in original settings and excavated through a rigorous archaeological

procedure—it is also unquestionable that museum collections, often composed primarily of unprovenienced artifacts, contain information that can be essential to understanding ancient societies. Purists would like us to ignore artifacts that were not found and registered by trained excavators, but to do so would exclude some of the most compelling portrayals of Moche society—objects that could have been produced by no one but the Moche. The “unique object,” a piece that has no copies or that portrays aspects of Moche life that can be seen nowhere else, can be admired and studied by scholars even as we condemn the way in which it was obtained. What we cannot do is ignore an artifact, particularly an exceptional one, for the way in which it was found. As archaeologists and museum curators, our responsibility is to preserve it for the future, not only assuring its integrity but also contextualizing it within the grand narratives of its original society. This catalog is a tribute to these types of artifacts: distinctive pieces that deserve detailed explanations, objects that beg to be considered from many angles and that are great creations of the human spirit. By themselves, however, the objects cannot accomplish the purpose of communicating who the Moche were and why their study inspires us.

In *The Moche of Ancient Peru*, Jeffrey Quilter presents the artifacts from the Peabody Museum collection—beautifully photographed and explained in great detail—wrapped in an account of the Moche that enlivens the objects and gives meaning to the society that produced them. Putting together this up-to-date narrative of the Moche, and of what archaeologists have figured out about them, has not been an easy task. An enormous amount of new information has emerged from the excavations on the north coast of Peru in the last twenty years, and readers are fortunate that this study was written by a scholar who has been at the forefront of this research.

During Quilter’s academic lifespan, the Moche of northern Peru have become one of the most thoroughly researched and recognizable archaeological cultures of ancient South America, but they remain among the most complex, mysterious, and difficult societies to summarize in a single volume. Only a few years after the discovery in 1987 of the royal tombs at Sipán—the richest ancient burials yet found in the Western hemisphere—large-scale and long-lasting multidisciplinary research programs began at the Huaca de la Luna, Huaca Cao Viejo, and San José de Moro. These

research programs were followed by many others ranging from research on specific sites to whole regions and from generic, society-level approaches to the examination of specific subjects such as paleoethnobotany, the genetic composition of populations, and the technology used to produce ceramics and metals.

Before 1987, when Walter Alva and his team of archaeologists excavated the first royal tomb at Sipán, Moche research was perceived as a fairly closed subject. It was widely thought that the excellent work led by Rafael Larco and followed by scholars like Christopher Donnan and Michael Moseley had revealed all that could be learned about this ancient people. Larco's chronology, based largely on a detailed study of his collections, now housed in the Rafael Larco Herrera Museum in Lima, was widely confirmed, as were his ideas about Moche religion and ritual life. For much of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, work had focused on the interpretation of Moche's rich iconographic record, revealing its structure and function—including Jeffrey Quilter's original work on the narrative structure of Moche iconography. But events unfolding in Sipán were to demonstrate that the facts of Moche life were far from settled.

No *mochicologo* (a student of the Moche) expected in the mid-1980s that a royal burial would be excavated in his or her lifetime. The largest Moche burial found to that point had been that of the Warrior-Priest of Huaca de la Cruz, excavated by William Duncan Strong and Clifford Evans in the late 1940s as part of the Virú Valley Project led by Harvard's Gordon R. Willey. It was assumed that all other burials must already have been looted, many by early Spanish settlers. But when royal and high-elite burials appeared at Sipán, La Mina, San José de Moro, Huaca de la Luna, Huaca Cao, and Úcupe, we realized that the Moche were much more highly developed than originally thought. The conditions revealed by empirical archaeological data about technological advancement, social organization, political configuration, and artistic tradition proved to be more complex than anything previously imagined by Peruvianist archaeologists.

These research programs have resulted in hundreds of scholarly publications based on the extraordinary material manifestations of Moche achievements, including large research collections of artifacts with numerous museum-quality pieces; royal, elite, and commoner burials; and large temples decorated with polychrome designs.

Rather than making the Moche more comprehensible, this wealth of information and materials—ably described and analyzed in this volume—has ironically created a high level of confusion about this ancient society and reminds us that often in archaeology, the more we know of a phenomenon, the less we understand it.

Jeffrey Quilter's concise and provocative book on the Peabody Museum's Moche collection approaches the Moche through the lens of an anthropological archaeologist interested in understanding the social and cultural processes that shaped this unique society. Luckily for the reader, it also indulges the fascination provoked by the exceptional artistic qualities of Moche material culture. Quilter's intimate relationship with the Moche—an enduring affair that has led him to explore many different manifestations of Moche society—is expressed in this book's passionate and deliberately subjective account of a research subject in constant flux. Even as we write these pages, new excavations and new insights are contributing new information. *The Moche of Ancient Peru* more than fulfills its mission of introducing and illustrating some of the most fascinating archaeological investigations currently being undertaken in the New World.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**MANY PEOPLE HELPED** bring this book into being. I thank William L. Fash, director of the Peabody Museum, for initiating the idea that I curate the exhibit from which the book was developed, and Rebecca Chetham, then deputy director, for helping with the finances to make it happen. Thanks also to the many staff members of the Peabody Museum who helped make the exhibit a reality, particularly Samuel Tager, Nynke Dorhout Jolly, Genevieve Fisher, and Pamela Gerardi.

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Donald McClelland was generous in allowing me to use the fine renderings of Moche art made by his late wife, Donna. A number of other colleagues, friends, and institutions also lent the products of their talents, particularly Santiago Uceda and Ricardo Morales, directors of the Huaca de la Luna Project, Andrés Álvarez Calderón Larco, executive director of the Museo Rafael Larco Herrera, curator Ulla Homquist of the same institution, and photographer Ira Block.

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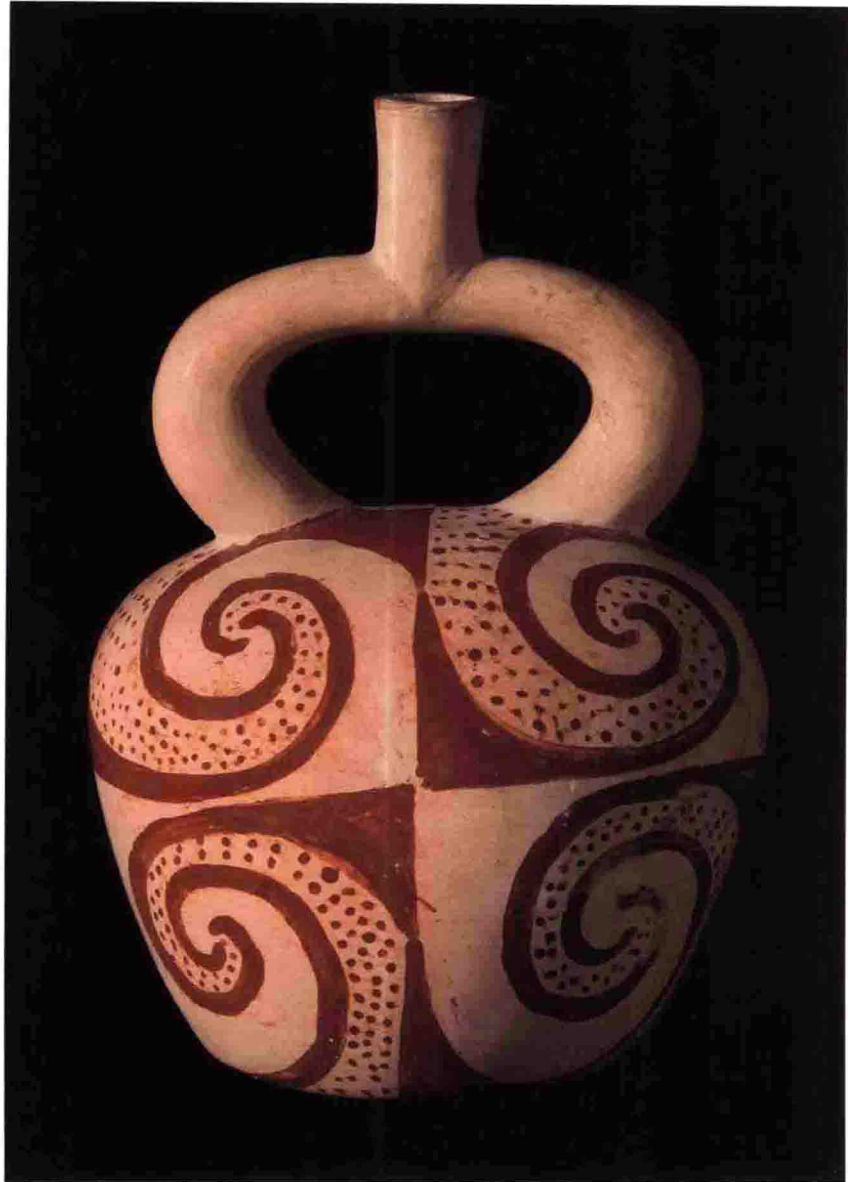
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- The background of the page is a large, faint, light gray illustration of a Moche stirrup-spout bottle. The bottle features a prominent face with large, circular eyes and a wide, open mouth. The body of the bottle is decorated with intricate, swirling patterns. The spout is shaped like a stirrup. The overall style is that of a high-quality reproduction of an ancient artifact.
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The Moche of Ancient Peru



Early Moche stirrup-spout vessel. The volutes in the painted design might refer to ocean waves or the tentacles of an octopus. The design typifies Moche artists' delight in playing with positive and negative spaces that express opposed but complimentary forces or things. PM 09-3-30/75626.9 (W 17 × H 21.5 cm). 98540019. Mark Craig, photographer.



## INTRODUCTION

PERU'S NORTH COAST is a barren strip of desert fronting one of the world's richest maritime habitats, a bountiful fishery created by the cold waters of the Humboldt, or Peru, Current. Inland the desert gives way to mountains and plateaus of the Andes, dissected by rivers running roughly parallel to one another from east to west and debouching onto the coastal strip. From remote antiquity until today, well-engineered irrigation systems drawing on these rivers have nurtured vast green fields of maize, beans, and squash in the valley bottoms. The cornucopia of food provided by the ocean and the valleys supported a sequence of complex human societies beginning in very early times. One of the most spectacular of these ancient cultures, dating from about A.D. 100 to 800—in European terms, from the time of the early Roman Empire to the reign of Charlemagne—is known as Moche.

On the summits of dazzlingly painted, adobe-brick temple complexes, Moche priests and priestesses once stood resplendent in elaborate costumes of gold, precious stones, textiles, and feathers. Presenting themselves as gods to crowds of