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The Life from Death Continuum in Nasca Imagery

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THE LIFE FROM DEATH CONTINUUM IN NASCA IMAGERY

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In the Andean tradition the dead are intimately associated with the regenerative forces of life. Death and fertility are related through the ancestors who ". . . make the crops flourish and reproduce the flocks" (Harris 1982:58). The concept of life flowing from death is nowhere more graphically illustrated than in the iconography of the ancient Nasca [south coastal Peru, Early Intermediate Period (hereafter EIP: ca. AD 1-700)]. While the Nasca occupied a coastal region, the heartland of their culture was in the Ica and Río Grande Drainage Basins some 50 kilometers inland from the sea, and marine resources played only a minor role in the agrarian-based economy (Kennedy and Carmichael 1991). The narrow valleys of the drainage basins are drought-prone and even the Río Grande, one of the largest rivers in the region, is considered among the driest and most irregular rivers on the entire Peruvian coast (Perú, ONERN 1971:181,197). In this tenuous environment plant fertility was of utmost concern to the Nasca farmers. This paper takes a contextual approach to the study of death and fertility imagery in Nasca iconography. These themes are first traced through the Harvester motif and then examined within the framework of traditional Andean beliefs.

The contextual approach draws upon all possible sources (i.e. environment, ecology, archaeology, art history, ethnohistory, ethnology, and ethnography) to develop an indigenous context within which to view the subject matter. Research questions and interpretations are therefore framed within a native context, as opposed to a Eurocentric context, and bring us closer to an emic understanding. The method has been outlined in a paper entitled "Interpreting Nasca Iconography" (Carmichael 1992). This work demonstrated the approach with an analysis of Nasca marine symbolism and considered the Killer Whale, Spotted Cat, and Trophy head motifs in relation to water/fertility concepts. The current article proceeds from this earlier study, to which the reader is referred for additional background discussion.

The Nasca Harvester motif is a classic expression of the plant fertility theme. The Harvester is most common in EIP 5 where it appears as an anthropomorphic figure in full frontal position with outstretched arms holding plants, and wearing a conical hat with stitching (Figures 11-16). Plants also spring from the head and other parts of the body. It has been standard practice in Nasca studies to identify EIP 5 Harvesters as farmers or secular figures (Roark 1965:26; Townsend 1985:125; Proulx 1989a:150, 1990:395). This is part of a trend which envisions a sacred/secular dichotomy in the iconography. Elsewhere I have argued that the entire body of Nasca imagery is a sacred, interrelated system laden with symbolic meaning (Carmichael 1992). The Harvester motif provides another example of this position, for a closer examination reveals that the Harvester is not a living, mundane farmer, but rather, a supernatural being embodying death and fertility symbolism.

The recognition that Harvesters are not living beings is based on the identification of Nasca death symbolism. The most obvious examples are provided by the disembodied trophy head motifs (Figures 1-10). Figures 1 and 2 each combine the five basic features indicative of trophy heads: (1) a carrying cord (attached through the forehead on archaeological specimens); (2) pinned lips (effected with cactus spines on archaeological examples) (3) bodiless presentation of the motif; and (4) rolled eyes (representing eyeballs rolled upward in death [Figure 1]) or closed eyes (Figure 2); (5) locks of hair extending from the head. The first two features, carrying cord and pinned lips, are highly diagnostic of trophy heads (and death) while the latter three are characteristic secondary features. These secondary features may occur individually on seemingly live beings in the later phases of the style (EIP 5-7). However, when two of

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them appear together on the same motif, an association with death is likely indicated.

Theoretically, the reference of a given symbol may change with context, and meaning may operate on several concurrent levels (Carmichael 1992). In the present case, how can we be sure that Trophy Head attributes such as the rolled eye are necessarily indicating death wherever they occur? The straightforward answer is that it is impossible to be certain in such matters. However, a plausible interpretation offered as a working model takes us further than denial prior to investigation. In this article I make no claim of demonstrated proof for my interpretations. I am pursuing a line of reasoning within the broad parameters of the contextual approach. The question to be asked of resulting interpretations is not whether they have been conclusively proven (if such is ever possible), but rather, are they consistent with the native context, and to what extent do they provide a useful perspective on the subject matter. By useful perspective I mean one which is explanatory, which accounts for a range of associations in a manner consistent with the indigenous tradition. The success of this approach may be judged by the reader.

Metonymy is inherent in Nasca art and all motifs have abbreviated forms. While pinned lips are omitted on Figure 3 and the carrying cord is absent on Figure 4 these motifs are still recognizable as trophy heads. In simplified format (Figure 5) the trophy head is sometimes shown with only two diagnostic features (in this instance the rolled eyes and bodiless presentation). Figure 6 shows a variation in which the eye is open but the hair lock and carrying cord clearly identify the motif. Another variation of the rolled eye is shown in Figures 7 and 8 where a vertical line represents the pupil. Figure 9 shows an abbreviated trophy head motif which is typical of EIP 5 (note the rolled eye and hair lock, compare with Figure 8). The trophy head in Figure 10 is identified by closed eyes, hair locks, and bodiless presentation, but this example also exhibits an extended tongue. As Proulx (1990:396) observes, the extended tongue is a standard convention on supernatural beings and also appears on trophy heads (Figures 17, 19 and see Wolfe 1981:54). In the latter case its presence signals supernatural affiliations.

The Harvester motif (Figures 11-16) will now be reviewed in light of the preceding discussion. It will be seen that in addition to plant fertility the Harvester is laden with death and supernatural symbolism. The Harvesters in Figures 11 and 12 exhibit the rolled eye observed on the trophy heads in Figures 7 and 8. In addition, hair locks are prominently displayed and these figures have the extended tongues of supernatural beings (compare with Figure 10). Figure 13 again exhibits the rolled eye. The chevron pattern on this Harvester's chest is also present on some decapitated figures where it appears to represent skeletal ribs indicating death (Carmichael 1988:538; Paul and Turpin 1986:24-26). Pelage markings representing another supernatural being, the Spotted Cat (Wolfe 1981), appear between the legs and along the lower left side of the body. Roark (1965:26) has noted that the thin, black, vertical lines extending from the top center of the plants held by this Harvester are similar to hair locks, but, as he interprets Harvesters as human farmers, he concludes that in this context they must represent twigs. In view of the symbolism already identified on this figure it is probable that these features are in fact hair locks or carrying cords (compare with Figure 2). At first glance the large Harvester in Figure 14 appears to be a living being (although open eyes can occur on trophy heads, see Figure 6), but an association with death is indicated by the trophy head breech cloth and the smaller figure which appears immediately beside him on the same vessel. The Harvesters in Figure 15 exhibit classic features of trophy heads: rolled eyes, pinned lips, and hair locks. They also hold batons analogous to those held by supernatural beings (Figure 17). The small blotches in the panels on these batons represent blood (Roark 1965:20). When held by supernatural beings these batons are referred to as clubs associated with warfare (Proulx 1971:18, 1983:96; Roark 1965:20; Townsend 1985:132-133), but when held by figures interpreted as farmers they are called agricultural implements (Proulx 1983:104; Roark 1965:20; Townsend 1985:125). The latter interpretation seems to follow necessarily

from the assumption that Harvesters are living, secular beings. However, the bloody baton-Harvester association can now be reconciled as congruent motifs through the identification of death symbolism (rolled eye, hair strands, pinned lips, skeletonized ribs) and other supernatural affiliations (extended tongue, pelage markings). The connection between the Harvester and battle is more explicit in Figure 16. This depiction includes the rolled eyes and hair locks shared by the Harvester and Trophy Head, but also features spears in place of plants. In the following discussions it will be seen that blood, combat, and fertility are related themes in Andean ideology.

The numerous plant associations clearly link the Harvester motif with agricultural fertility, but a satisfactory interpretation must also account for the supernatural and trophy head/death affiliations. A symbolic link between trophy heads and fertility has been recognized by a number of researchers (Morgan 1988:338; Proulx 1990:395; Sawyer 1961:289, 1966:122; Townsend 1985:134). The connection is directly expressed in the Sprouting Head motif which shows plants growing from trophy heads (Figures 17-19). The Sprouting Head may also appear on the body of the Spotted Cat, another supernatural being associated with plant fertility (Yácovleff 1932:143e). Allen (1981:54) has poignantly captured the symbolism in stating that the ". . . Trophy Head motif, expresses a dialectical concept, in which life and death imply each other, and bloodshed and death are necessary to the perpetuation of plant and human fertility."

Ethnographic accounts from southern Peru and Bolivia demonstrate that death/fertility concepts are widespread and deeply rooted in Andean ideology (Allen 1988; Bastien 1978; Harris 1982; Rasnake 1988). Details may vary by locale but the general beliefs show remarkable uniformity and by all indications have considerable antiquity (Allen 1988:57). A collective summary must begin with the recognition that for Andean peoples there is no finite separation between the supernatural and secular worlds. The earth itself is animated and the world of the living is but an interface between the realms above and below this earth, both of which are inhabited by supernatural beings who intervene in the affairs of the living (Urton 1981:37-65; Allen 1988:48-56). These forces can be beneficial or destructive. They provide all things necessary for life but must be placated with offerings in return. The earth needs the dead, and human blood and corpses are among the offerings which maintain favor and sustain life (Allen 1988:203,206; Harris 1982:56; Flores-Ochoa 1979:63).

In addition to the great forces of the earth, mountains, and sky, the ancestral dead are also mystically associated with agricultural fertility. The collective ancestors watch over fields and harvests, insuring growth and reproduction (Allen 1988:59-60; Harris 1982:48,56,61; Rasnake 1988:179). In some areas the burial ritual is semantically and conceptually linked with the acts of cultivation and planting (Harris 1982:52). One of the most important festivals in the Andean calendar, known locally as Day of the Dead, Feast with the Dead, or Festival of the Dead, coincides with All Saints' and All Souls', November first and second respectively (Allen 1988:164; Bastien 1978:178; Buechler and Buechler 1971:83-85; Flores-Ochoa 1979:65; Harris 1982:54; Meyerson 1990:59-61; Rasnake 1988:178). At this time the souls of the dead return to be feasted and honored by the living. While the Festival of the Dead coincides with Christian observances and the precise date is undoubtedly dictated by the Christian calendar, the native beliefs and rituals surrounding this event are deeply embedded in indigenous Andean tradition (Valcárcel 1963:473-474). The timing falls in the heart of the planting season when the rains begin, a time when concern with fertility is highest. The dead are literally "fed" with quantities of choice food and drink, either placed over their graves (Harris 1982:55; Rasnake 1988:178) or ingested by a ritual specialist who magically directs the meal to its deceased recipients (Allen 1988:152,172). The living feed the dead who in turn insure crop fertility and thereby feed the living. This is also a time when marriages are arranged (Meyerson 1990:61,69) and ritual battles take place (Harris 1982:56). The bloodshed and death

which traditionally occur during these ritual fights are also linked with fertility and reproduction (Platt 1986:239-240).

Hiroyasu Tomoeda has recorded a tradition in the Ayacucho area which may be conceptually related to the Nasca Sprouting Heads. This is the *Aya Uma Tarpuy* ceremony which is held each year during the Festival of the Dead. Translated from the Quechua, *Aya Uma Tarpuy* means "Dead Head Planting";[1] the words *aya* and *uma* are usually only applied to humans (Luis Millones, personal communication 1990). The ceremony involves cutting the "heads" off potatoes and planting them. The disarticulated potato heads eventually sprout fresh bodies and new life springs forth. Throughout the southern Andes, symbolic and ritualized death (often involving decapitation) and life are intimately bound together in the fertility process. This theme is also implied by the small figures grasped by the supernatural beings in Figures 18 and 19. Plant fertility is clearly the dominant motif in both illustrations. In Figure 18 an anthropomorphic being with inverted head appears to be torn in half (death) by the supernatural being, while in Figure 19 an anthropomorphic body with a plant head (new life) is grasped by the neck. In some compositions the Harvester is also shown being grasped in a similar manner by this supernatural being (Seler 1923:243).

Paleopathology provides additional clues to the significance of Nasca head-taking customs. Baraybar (1987) found evidence of scalp incisions on a number of Nasca trophy heads in archaeological collections. His study revealed that the incisions were inflicted prior to death, which would have caused profuse bleeding, and concluded that the heads represent victims of sacrificial bleeding who were decapitated shortly thereafter. The bleeding and eventual death of these victims fit well within the concepts discussed above. The context in which the actual trophy heads were obtained is a matter of some dispute. Proulx (1989b) argues that they are the result of warfare involving territorial conquest, while others feel that ritual battles similar to those mentioned above should not be discounted (Allen 1981:53; Carmichael 1992).

In the Peruvian Andes, the skulls of "ancestors" are kept to watch over the fields and guard the harvests (personal observations and see Allen 1988:59). The Nasca also retrieved skulls. Some secondary burials lack skulls, while in one well-documented case it was found that an adult female had been decapitated after her body had naturally mummified (Carmichael 1988:290-291, 346). In the context of fertility there may have been little distinction between ancestral heads and trophy heads. Mortuary studies suggest that 5 to 10 percent of the Nasca population ended up as trophy heads or headless bodies (Carmichael 1988:183). Most people were likely related to someone who contributed a head, and the blood of these ancestors soaked the earth as much as that of other victims. Ethnographic accounts indicate that during ritual battles the focus of group concern was not so much on whose blood was shed, but rather, that blood be shed, and animosities were not maintained beyond the ritual encounter (Allen 1988:205-206; Zuidema 1964:211). From this perspective the trophy head motif can be seen as a generic reference to the collective ancestors and their life-giving powers of rejuvenation.

The Festival of First Fruits (Carnival) is held at the end of the rainy season (February/March). This is also a time for fertility celebrations and paying homage to the dead (Allen 1988:165,182; Harris 1982:57-58; Rasnake 1988:242).[2] Harris (1982:58) recounts that at this time the spirits of the dead are ". . . celebrated as the abundance of natural increase, and are festooned with the wild

[1] Literally "corpse head planting" (editor).

[2] In a similar statement Browne *et al.* (1993:277) also refer to ". . . the conjunction of fertility celebrations and homages to the dead in traditional Andean society (see Allen 1988:165, 182; Harris 1982:57-58; Rasnake 1988:242)." This passage is repeated in Silverman's Cahuachi volume (1993:222). The current study was received by *Andean Past* on May 29, 1991 and accepted for publication on July 22, 1992. The Browne et al. report was submitted to *Latin American Antiquity* on October 19, 1992. I saw no part of this work prior to its publication. Parallel phrasing with identical references and page numbers must, therefore, be a remarkable coincidence.

and domesticated plant life they have helped to grow." This passage cannot help but invoke the image of the Nasca Harvester. The trophy head (death), abundant plants (fertility/life), and supernatural elements (extended tongue, pelage markings, bloody baton) harmonize in a pattern consistent with recorded Andean traditions. In this context trophy heads refer to the concept of "trophy head", which is the life from death continuum, rather than the actual heads themselves. This in turn suggests that isolated depictions of trophy heads may be a general reference to death (and life), including ancestral spirits.

The ethnographic material cited in this paper is not meant to imply a direct historical connection between the ancient Nasca and modern highland peoples. The Nasca are too far removed from historic times to assume such continuity. The purpose of introducing this material has been to create an explicitly Andean context within which to view the subject matter. This approach reveals strong conceptual parallels between ancient and contemporary traditions. Viewed within an Andean context, the Nasca Harvester is much more than a charming little fellow bringing in the harvest: the Harvester and Trophy Head are the quintessential symbols of the life from death continuum.

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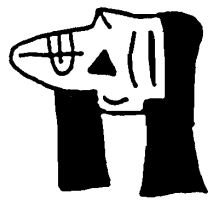

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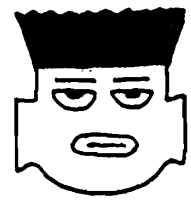

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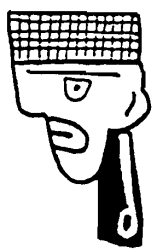

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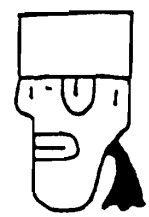

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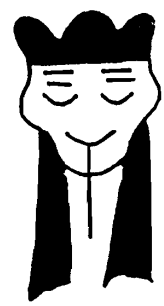

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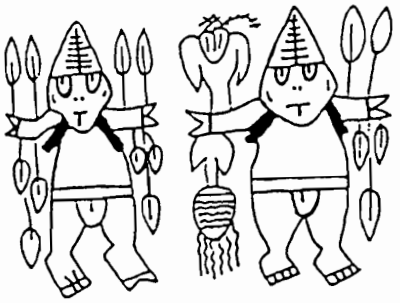

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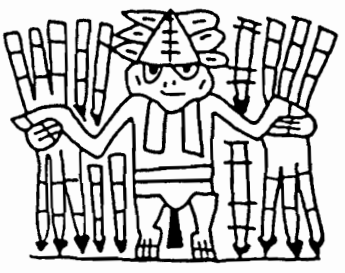

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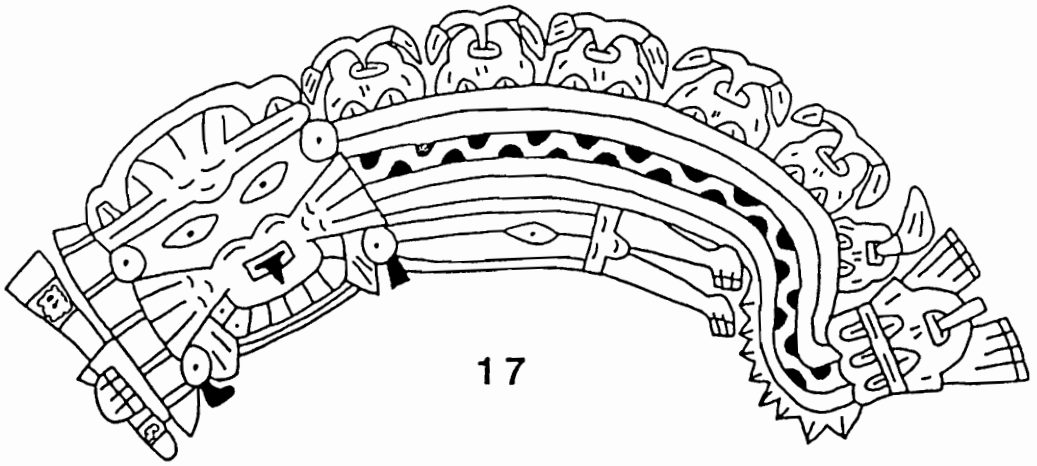

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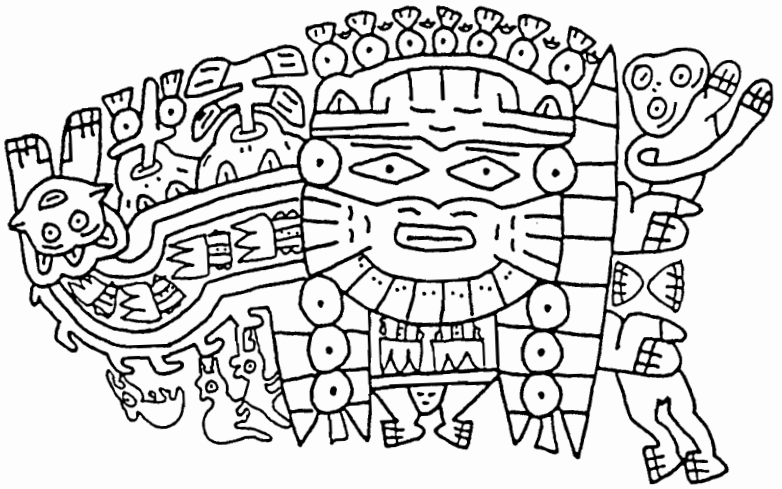

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