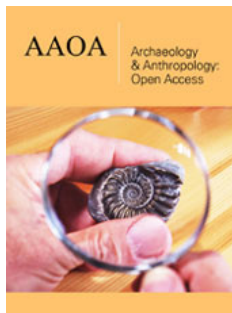


Nazca Trophy Heads: Body, Object, Representation?

María Alba Bovisio and María Paula Costas*

Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina

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***Corresponding author:** María Paula Costas, Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina

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Introduction

In this short text we want to outline a line of work that we have been developing for several years in relation to the theoretical-methodological approach that we use to study the practices linked to Nazca archaeological “trophy heads” in relation to images of anthropomorphic heads on objects that also come from the archaeological record [1-3]. In our research papers we propose the need to promote transdisciplinary approaches to study these kinds of objects placed on the “margins” of the field of the canonical study of Art History. This is because their interpretation raises problems that cross the strict limits of the discipline. To do so we gather archaeological and ethnohistorical information and do an iconographic analysis trying to investigate the role images play in ritual and cosmological terms. Here, we will particularly concentrate on briefly rescuing the contributions from Archeology and Art Theory and History.

Practices

The Nazca mummified trophy heads (Southern Peruvian coast, c. 400 BC-600 AD) were the result of a careful process that could be reconstructed through careful observation of the approximately 150 examples sampled. The outcome was a complete head with a hole on the forehead for a carrying rope that allowed to transport it. This hole together with another one at the base of the skull are the two diagnostic features that appear even in poorly preserved specimens [4-6]. About 90% of the heads correspond to young adult males. This predominance, associated with evidence of an increase in war during the early intermediate period, suggests that one of the main contexts for obtaining heads would have been battles in which warriors were captured [4,7]. But what conception of the body and death can be read behind this sacrificial practice? The practice from which the trophy head resulted involved not only decapitation but also its constitution as such. This included the stripping of all perishable human things (brain mass, soft tissues) and the keeping of durable matter (dissected skin, bones, teeth, hair) that would be directly associated with the need to preserve the body as a way of maintaining its vital capacity.

The offering of a part of the body implies the offering of the being itself since in Andean thought body and spirit are indivisible [8]. This question conveys considering the body as a living entity beyond biological death. The body participates of an ontological continuum in which everything that exists is animated by a vital principal that, unlike the Christian soul, cannot exist detached from its material condition. If true death occurs with the disappearance of the body, in the case of ritual decapitation a complex process arises. On the one hand, the body of the enemy is dismantled, causing death or soon after it. On the other hand, blood is obtained as vital fluid. The sacrificial rite identified with the trophy head involves not only

the decapitation but also the constitution of the trophy head as a sacred offering to the wakas. These are sacred entities comparable to deities capable of granting life force (camay) allowing everything that exists to be realized in accordance with its own nature [9,10].

Images

Added to the abundantly documented archaeological findings on the Southern Peruvian coast is the recurring presence in the iconography of various objects of the motif that has been identified as a "trophy head". It appears mainly on modeled and painted ceramic pieces that also come from the archaeological record. By contrasting the archaeological trophy heads with their corresponding motif, we proposed that this representation condenses the meaning of that sacrificial object. Therefore, we hypothesized that the meaning of the trophy head lies in: 1) the act of decapitation that involves separating the head from the rest of the body; 2) the vital power of the human head, especially the hair; 3) the power as authority that resides in the male head; 4) the flow of blood as a vital fluid par excellence. Referring specifically to the cosmological discourses materialized in these images, we confirmed that the male face, the absence of a neck and the presence of hair are the only features that remain constant throughout the entire Nazca history.

Thus, we suggested that these features allude to the core meaning about the sacrificial act from which the head becomes an entity that possesses and gives camay, that is, a sacred entity (waka). In this sense we wondered about the status of the head as an offering or a waka. The absence of a neck would express the act of decapitation that involves separating the head from the body, that is, appropriating the power that lies in it. The male face would be in line with the importance of capturing the lineage/ancestor head. Finally, the hair would allude to the vital force of enduring matter. Moreover, when the heads are alone, they would be expressing their value as "objects" of sacrifice. In other words, human heads that have been transformed into sacred life-giving entities through the sacrificial act in which a new head is built. When the heads are carried by mythical beings the emphasis would be placed on the idea of the trophy heads as offerings to the deities to guarantee the social, natural and cosmic order.

Conclusion

The confrontation of both records, archaeological and iconographic, shows that their relation is not crystal clear. The association between archaeological discovery and iconographic motif is not literal. The information provided by archeology allows us to confirm the existence of ritual practices around human heads linked to sacrifice and subsequent offering. It also shows the long duration of the anthropomorphic head motif on the pieces from

the archaeological record. But it is through iconographic analysis together with the material and function of the objects that we can investigate the meanings of these practices. There is a logic inherent to the images, very possibly linked to their specific agency in the materialization of a cosmological discourse. In no case are images mere factual descriptions, but rather the medium in which concepts materialize. The features that belong to the core meaning of the trophy head remain fixed as an expression of the sacrificial ritual through which the head of the beheaded becomes waka. The images embodied in ceramics, possibly used in rituals before being deposited as offerings, are representation or "presentification" of the waka? [11].

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