

A glimpse at Moche Phase III occupation at the Huacas of Moche site, northern Peru

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The emergence of the Moche Civilization into an expansionist state is still a matter of debate. Burial data and stratigraphic and radiometric data are used to shed light on the Moche III phase at the Huacas of Moche site. The implications of this new set of data will enhance our understanding of the early history of the site.

Key-words: Andean archaeology, Moche culture, Huacas of Moche site, chronology, burial or mortuary practice

Introduction

The history of the Mochica civilization has been divided in different ways. Larco (1948) constructed the first chronological framework comprising five phases within a cultural continuum. This was based on variations in the forms and dimensions of the spout on stirrup spout vessels and the style of their decoration. While the basic five phases are still used today (Uceda & Mujica 1994; Shimada 1994), they are however challenged by new data, both chronological and stylistic. The idea of a single culture also needs reconsideration and a three-division type has been put forward to replace the old Larco scheme (Castillo & Donnan 1995). These new divisions have been labelled Early, Middle and Late Moche (Bawden 1996). It is, however, possible to make a correspondence between the two propositions. Early Moche is equivalent to phases I and II, Middle Moche to phases III and IV and finally Late Moche to phase V. In this paper, the Larco typology will be used, in particular to assign ceramic vessels to a specific phase.

If the early Moche phases are not well known from the archaeological record, the middle Moche phases are better known, especially phase IV which is considered to represent the climax of this civilization. This is not true of phase III, even if in the reconstructed history of the Moche culture many scholars assign great developmental importance to this phase (Topic 1982; Castillo & Donnan 1995; Bawden 1996). The expansion of the Moche III style over a

broader geographic range was used to support the idea of the emergence of the first expansionist state on the north coast of Peru (Moseley 1992). On this basis Moche III would represent the first step towards the expansion of the Moche polity. Unfortunately, the emphasis put on this phase is not supported by a rich set of data. The possibility that most phase III components are buried below phase IV levels of occupation might explain our difficulty in documenting this key phase in the development of this complex society. The Huacas of Moche site is no exception.

Five field seasons (1995–99) were carried out in the zone between the two monumental buildings that characterized the Huacas of Moche Site (FIGURES 1–2). Our first goal was to obtain data on domestic architecture in order to understand the functioning of the site, to characterize its urban nature, economy and social organization and to study the evolution of urbanism and its relationship to state emergence on the North Coast of Peru. The first three seasons were dedicated to horizontal excavation, exposing contemporaneous clay-plastered floors of different compounds to understand the spatial organization of the latest occupations of the site without destroying architectural remains. Only during the 1998 and 1999 field seasons did we start to excavate vertically to get an idea of the superposition of occupational layers. These excavated units were limited in scale and did not allow any detailed understanding of earlier spatial organisation.

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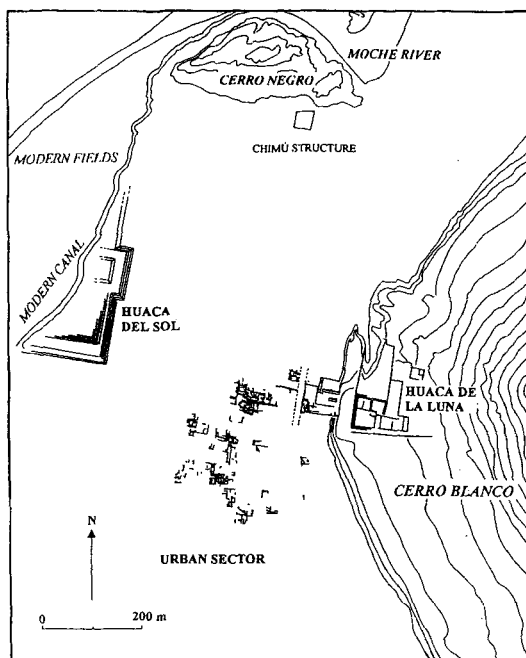
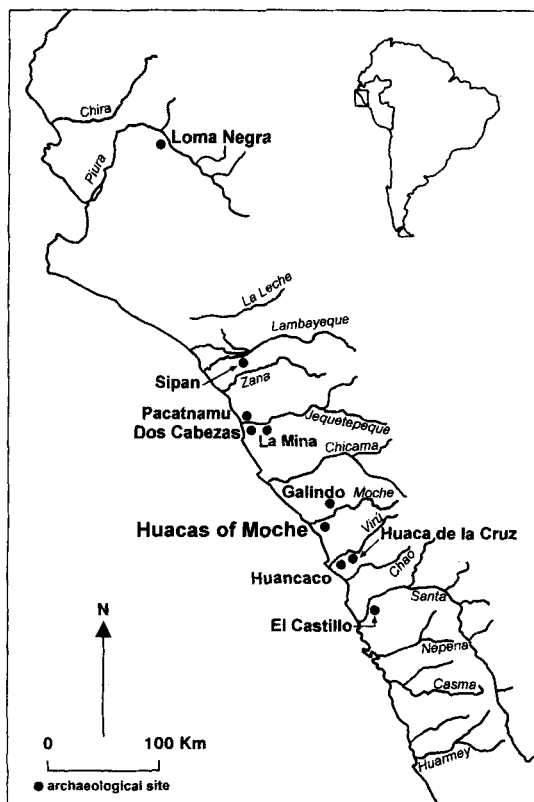


FIGURE 1. Major Moche Sites on the North Coast of Peru (left) and localization of the urban sector at Huacas of Moche Site (above).

However, in four distinct areas, evidence of Moche III occupation was found with the discovery of burials and their associated offerings.

In this paper, our goal is to present new data on the Moche III occupation from the Huacas of Moche Site and to discuss some cultural and chronological aspects. First, we will discuss Moche III mortuary practices, since the vast majority of our data comes from five burials. Second, radiocarbon dates for this phase combined with stratigraphic evidence will be used to enhance our understanding of the early history of this settlement.

Mortuary evidence

Burials from architectural compound #5

Architectural compound #5 was selected in 1998 to explore earlier occupation of this area because a looter's pit showed there had been successive occupation below the actual surface (FIGURE 2). This compound provided us with strong stratigraphic evidence for the occupational sequence and particularly Moche phase III. In room #2, on an intact plaster clay floor,

around 3 m below the present surface, we found a stirrup spout bottle in the shape of a duck. This bottle with its typical Moche III spout was placed within the fill of a burial pit and may have served as a marker for a tomb. In fact, 20 cm below on the next floor, we found a child buried in an extended position with no offering.

The discovery of this child burial led us in 1999 to excavate a 3x3 m test pit in the adjacent room #24 to verify the existence of an ancient burial. After excavating a series of plastered clay floors, we discovered a cut floor whose limits suggested the presence of a tomb below. The people responsible for this burial had cut through four floors to bury the deceased with seven ceramic vessels, a figurine, pieces of copper, and numerous beads. Looking at the stratigraphy (FIGURE 3), it can be said that the event took place when floor #5 was used and floors #6, #7 and #10 were already abandoned (floor #6 is not visible on FIGURE 3). The burial chamber is deep, about 1-40 m below floor #5, which was the level occupied by the mourners.

The skeleton is thought to be of a male adult

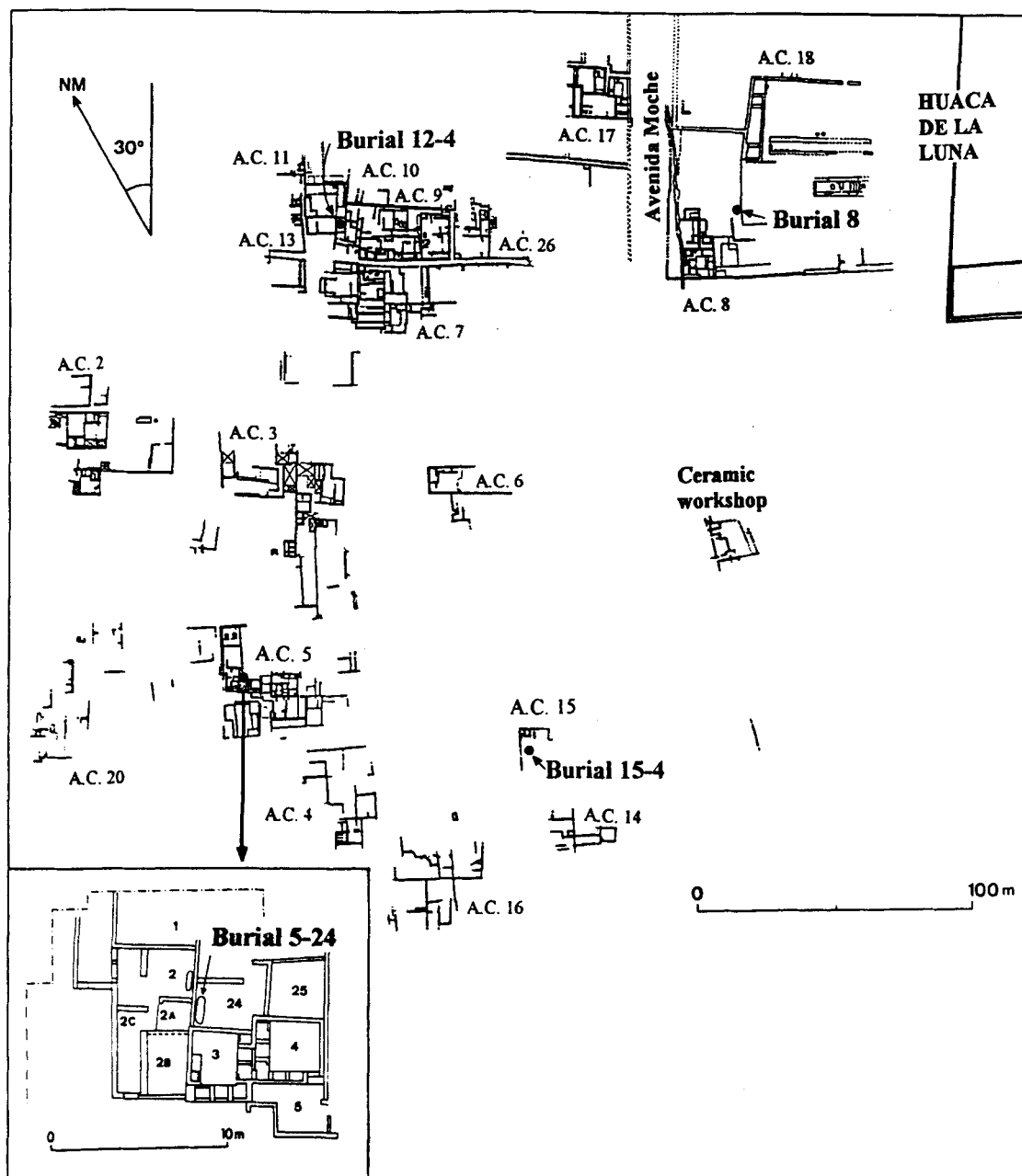
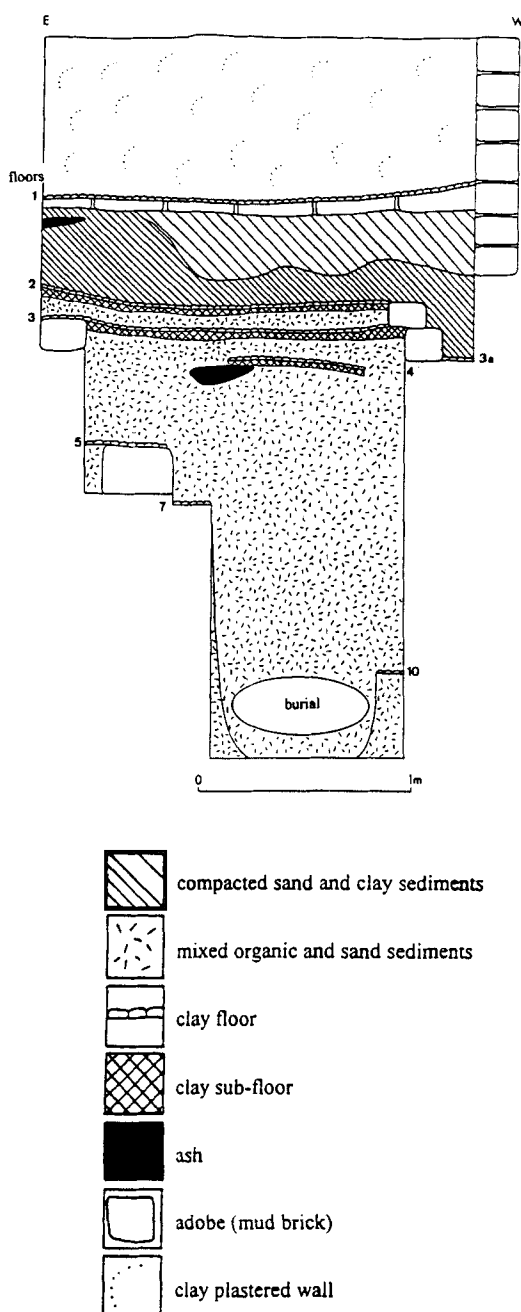


FIGURE 2. Plan of the urban sector at Huacas of Moche site.

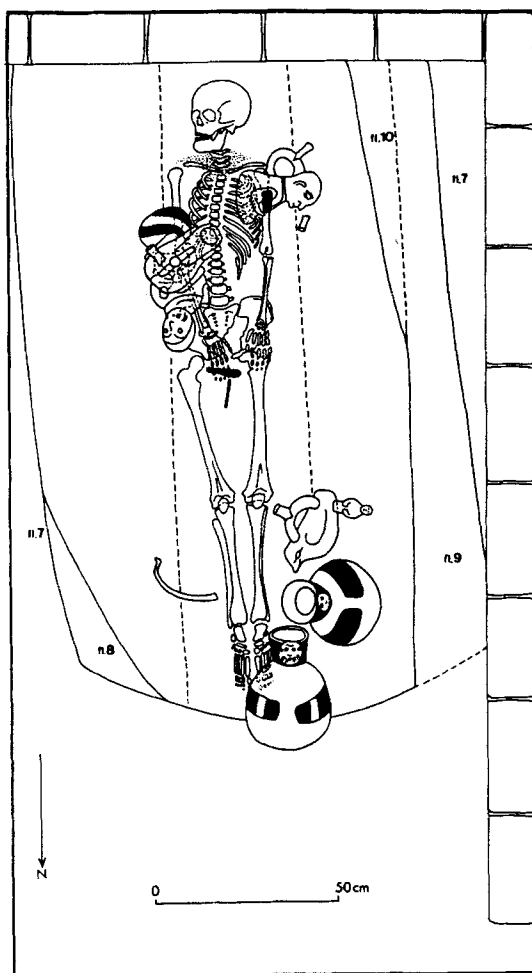
based on the shape of the pelvis (Flores Bracamonte pers. comm. July 1999). Bone preservation was very poor and its age is still undetermined. The individual suffered from osteofitosis and a pathology known as 'Knot of Schmorl's'. The body, oriented with its head to the south, was placed in a fully extended

position with offerings situated around the upper and lower parts of the body (FIGURE 4). Traces of red pigment were visible on cranial bones.

The ceramic vessels are all diagnostic examples of Moche phase III style (FIGURE 5). Five stirrup spout bottles and two large jars with an anthropomorphic face on the neck have been

FIGURE 3. *Stratigraphy of room 5-24.*

recovered. The two jars and the anthropomorphic figure with a child in his arms all suggest the action of whistling. The vessel in the form of a figure with a ceremonial tunic and that in the form of a naked prisoner are also common

FIGURE 4. *Plan of the burial in room 5-24.*

in Moche iconography as well as the spiral design and the sculpted vessel of a bird, probably of the *falconidae* family. The presence of a female clay figurine, three copper objects and a necklace made of 128 turquoise beads and a single but large ceramic bead completed the list of offerings. Thus, the quality and quantity of grave goods such as the fine wares, the copper objects and the turquoise necklace seem to indicate that this individual was of high status at the time of his death. The offerings compared well stylistically with other assemblages known from this period (Donnan & Mackey 1978: 65–86).

Considering the stratigraphical and burial data, we can thus conclude that compound #5 was an area of intensive occupation over a long period of time. The earlier levels below the two



FIGURE 5. Ceramic vessels from burial of room 5-24.

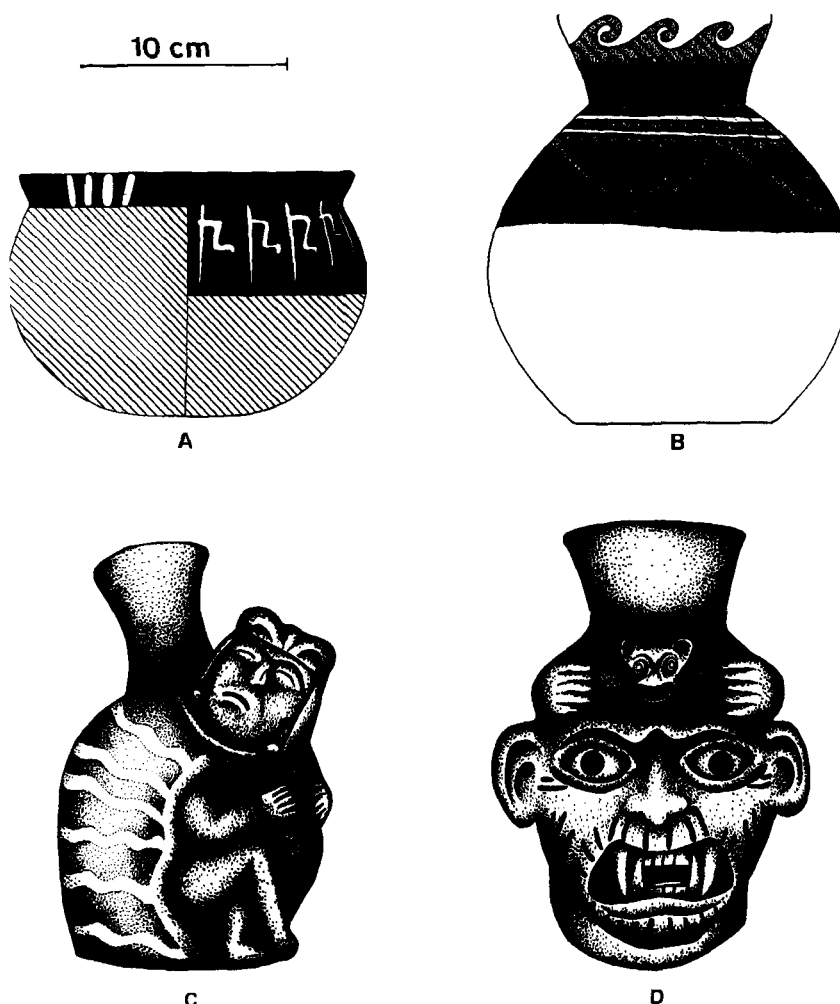


FIGURE 6. *Ceramic vessels from burial of compound #8.*

known graves of the Moche III phase remain to be checked. These two graves have been radiocarbon dated and the results will be presented and discussed in another section.

Burial of an adult male in architectural compound #8

Located at the foot of a funerary platform known as Uhle's site F (1913), this burial is evidently placed in a prestigious location at the north-eastern corner of architectural compound #8 (FIGURE 2). This elite compound may have been the residence of priests on the basis of the trophy heads found in small niches (Verano *et al.* 1999). Seven other burials have been found in this particular compound and some of them, after further analysis, may date from the Moche III phase.

The discovery of a Moche III burial in this sector was not a surprise because Max Uhle has reported the presence of several burials on the platform that could be associated to this phase (Donnan 1995; Kroeber 1944; 1925). The burial discussed in this paper was placed in a pit adjacent to the west wall of the Uhle platform. The burial pit, cut 1.65 m below the present surface, measured 2.20 m x 80 cm with a depth of about 30 cm. The burial chamber was covered with large adobes (66–72 x 40 x 12–14 cm) that may have served to roof the burial chamber. Bone preservation was poor, but physical anthropologists John Verano, Laurel Anderson and Florencia Bracamonte made initial observations in the field. On the basis of several attributes, they concluded that the deceased was a male adult of about 45–55 years old. The skel-

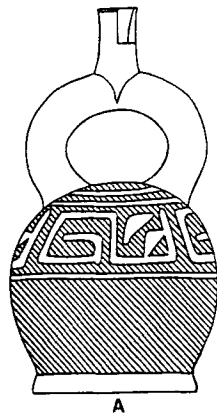
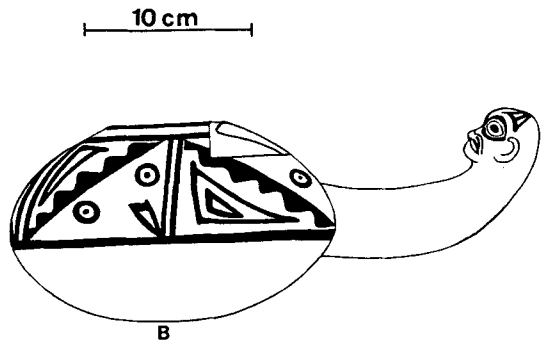


FIGURE 7. *Ceramic vessels from burial of room 12-4.*



eton, its head to the south, was placed in a fully extended position on its back, holding a ceramic vessel in its right hand. A small trace of a red pigment on the right zygomatic arcade was noted and the left foot was missing. A circular piece of copper covered with faint traces of textile was placed in the mouth of the deceased.

The adult male, probably wrapped in a splint-reinforced shroud made of reeds or canes, was provided with offerings in the form of five ceramic vessels consisting of four stirrup spout bottles and one dipper. The stirrup spout bottles have a similar white geometric motif painted over a red slip (FIGURE 6A). The dipper has a handle terminated by a zooanthropomorphic figure of a monkey or a human with monkey ears (FIGURE 6B). The painted design on the dipper and on the stirrup spout bottles is a common feature of phase III.

Burial of an adult female in architectural compound #12

This burial was found in June 1999 below seven plastered clay floors in room #4 of architectural compound #12. We have only the upper part of the body, which corresponds to the southern section of the burial, because safety precautions prevented us from opening the whole tomb which was found at a depth of more than 5 m below present surface. The body was placed on its back, in a fully extended position, with the head to the south and the face turned to the east. The left and right hands were placed above and below the pelvis respectively. The adult, probably a young female, was not well preserved and the sex and age identification have not been determined with absolute pre-

cision, even after a careful examination, both in the field and in the laboratory by physical anthropologist Florencia Bracamonte. The body and the offerings were placed in a simple pit intrusive to floor #7, 80 cm below this floor and a few centimetres above floor #8 which corresponds to the preceding occupation phase. As with the individual from burial #5-24, the woman was placed in a funerary *petate* or textile shroud wrap probably made of a local type of reed.

The location of this tomb and the diversity and quality of the offerings suggest a moderate status for this individual. Three ceramic vessels were associated with the body: a jar or *cantaro* and two stirrup spout bottles. The jar, simply decorated, has an ovoid shape with four small feet (FIGURE 7A). The first bottle is painted half white and half red, evoking the symbolic duality frequent in Moche iconography (FIGURE 7B). In the burial context, the white side was oriented to the west and the red side faced east. The second bottle is the only vessel reduced-fired. The body is painted in white with vertical red lines joining at one point (FIGURE 7C). This kind of decoration seems to illustrate an edible fruit of the *cucurbitaceae* family (Vargas 1962: 110).

The head and the four legs of a camelid in their articulated position were placed at the north of the body. Other camelid bones were dispersed around the skeleton. The woman had a piece of copper in each hand. The piece in the left hand was thin and folded at least three times, and the one in the right hand was thicker, solid and not folded. A very thin sheet of gilded copper, folded several times, had been placed in the mouth. A perforated gastropod shell was

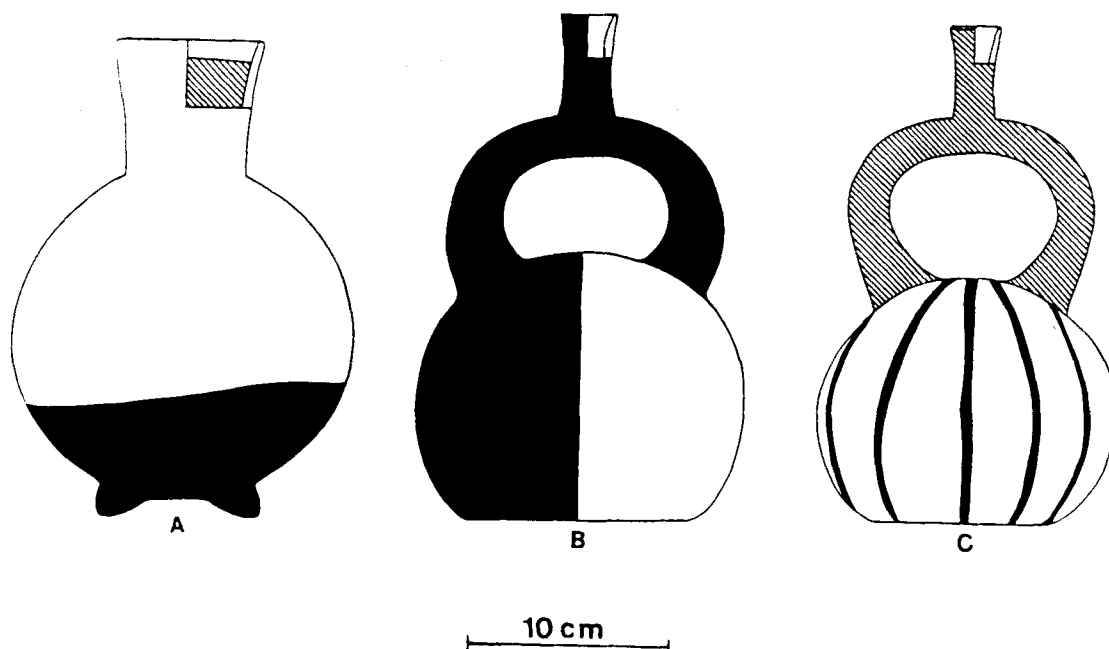


FIGURE 8. *Ceramic vessels from burial of room 15-4.*

found near the left hand. This object was the size of a Moche spindle whorl, but except for the perforation, the shell had not been modified. A total of 268 ellipsoidal white shell beads were found around the skeleton's neck. Since they were in a very bad state of preservation, their original number was probably larger. The complete beads have an average length of 6.09 mm. Finally, the bones of her face and her incisors were covered with traces of red pigment.

Burials in architectural compound #15

Limited work was carried out in the superficial levels of this compound before undertaking a major test pit in order to go really deep to find earlier phases of occupation. This work, carried out in room #4 (FIGURE 2), provided us with a complex stratigraphy extending over 7 m and we were not yet on sterile sand.

While recording the succession of layers on the south wall of our large trench, we found human bones. We have therefore enlarged the excavation area to the south and confirmed the presence of two burials. The principal individual was lying fully extended on its back, its head to the south. Bone preservation was one of the worst cases so far registered in the urban sector. Nevertheless, based on the robustness of

the long bones and the development of the mastoid process, the individual is thought to be an adult male (Mario Millones pers. comm. July 1998). The second individual, a child with its head missing, was placed perpendicular to and south of the male adult head.

Four vessels were associated with the adult as well as a tubular bead, three pendants and five copper objects. These vessels may be associated with the Moche III phase even though there is not a typical stirrup spout bottle (FIGURE 8). The portrait vase presents features of the 'fanged god'. The carinated bowl is decorated with wider lines than those of Moche IV style. The sculpted vase of a person resting on the side is also decorated with a large paintbrush. As for the jar placed at the side of the head, it bears the design of a wave around the rim common to the Moche style in general but, as well as the large paintbrush strokes, this vase is decorated with geometric designs using a fugitive black paint. This technique, not widely used by the Moche, is virtually unknown during phase IV and seems to be popular during Moche III phase. One thick piece of copper covered with traces of textile had been placed inside the mouth and two pieces were found on the chest: one might be a rattle with the face

of an owl, and the other is a pack of thin rolled copper pieces wrapped in textile with one circular disk visible. The child had two pieces of copper, a fishhook and tweezers. All these stylistic clues, combined with stratigraphic evidence, suggest that it is a Moche III tomb.

To support the relative dating of this tomb to the Moche III phase, we collected a charcoal sample at the same depth as the skeleton. This sample, taken from immediately south of the child's skeleton, comes from the same layer of sediments used to cover the burial. The result confirms our chronological attribution and will be discussed with the other radiocarbon dates.

Conclusions from mortuary evidence

Mortuary practices at the Huacas of Moche site during phase III are not well understood and our five relatively intact burials should contribute in a limited but positive way (TABLE 1). Of the previously known Moche III burials at the Huacas of Moche site most of them were excavated by Max Uhle (Kroeber 1925). Regarding Moche III burial practices, Donnan & Mackey (1978: 86) stressed the following points:

- variation in burial location: mud-brick platform, habitation refuse, in loose earth;
- burial position with the body lying extended on its back with arms by its sides;
- north-south orientation of the body with the head to the south;
- copper objects absent, except at the Caballo Muerto burial where pieces were found in both hands and a third piece was placed in the mouth.

We would emphasize the general use of copper objects in our sample, as well as the use of

red pigment visible on some bones. Beads are also common offerings and they seem to form a necklace. The body orientation conforms pretty well to the north-south axis with the head to the south. The limited number of ceramic vessels in the graves is also a shared behaviour. Stirrup spout bottles are common, while the flaring bowl or '*florero*' is absent, although our sample is very small. The use of black fugitive paint is also worth mentioning. Finally, some of the painted designs are similar to known ceramic vessels from this particular phase.

It is not the object of this paper to give a detailed comparative analysis, but it is worth mentioning the very strong stylistic resemblance between several of the ceramic vessels found in the new tombs and vessels coming from 16 Moche III burials located in Uhle's Platform. These earlier burials have been assigned to this particular phase (Donnan 1995: table 1, 116-17). Of the available information (see plates in Kroeber 1925), it can be said that:

- 1 several jars painted with the 'wave' motif around the rim (Kroeber 1925: plates 53a, 59j, 59k), sometimes with black fugitive painting, resemble a specimen from tomb 15-4 (FIGURE 8B);
- 2 the fanged god (Kroeber 1925: plates 54j, 54l) is similar to the vessel from tomb 15-4 (FIGURE 8D);
- 3 the stirrup spout bottle with a spiral motif (Kroeber 1925: plate 58h) is almost identical to the ceramic found in tomb 5-24 (FIGURE 5A);
- 4 the stirrup spout bottle with simple lines motif (Kroeber 1925: plate 58k, 58l) or dividing the vessel's body in two sections (Kroeber

com-pound	room	chamber	sex	age	body orientation	body position	ceramic vessels	copper items	copper position*	other items	animal bones
#5	2	pit	?	<5-6	N-S	EB**	0	0	-	-	-
#5	24	pit	M	adult	N-S	EB	7	3	T, H, F	figurine, beads	-
#8	1	pit	M	45-55	N-S	EB	5	1	M	-	-
#12	4	pit	F?	adult	N-S	EB	3	3	M, H(2)	beads, worked shell	camelid
#15	4	pit	M	adult	N-S	EB	4	5	M, T(2)***	beads	-

* F= face, M= mouth, T= trunk, H= hand

** EB= extended body lying on its back

*** a fishhook and tweezers were found with the child burial

TABLE 1. *Data on Moche III phase burials from the urban sector.*

1925: plate 58g), seems identical to the ones in tomb 12-4 (FIGURE 7A–B);

5 the ceramic vessel showing an old man presenting a baby (Kroeber 1925: plate 53k) resembles the specimen from tomb 5-24 (FIGURE 5E).

Thus we conclude that the ceramic vessels found in the new tombs are culturally related to other burials at the Huacas of Moche site. The cultural position of these Moche III data being established, the chronological position of this phase will now be discussed.

Radiometric and architectural evidence

Since the Moche III phase in other valleys, such as Jequetepeque, is probably contemporaneous to the Moche IV phase at the Huacas of Moche site, on the basis of radiocarbon dates (Donnan & Cock 1997), a clear stratigraphic position becomes an important issue before going into further discussion. Stratigraphic evidence presented earlier for compounds 5, 12 and 15, supports the position of the Moche III burials consistently below the Moche IV phase levels. We could add additional stratigraphic profiles to support the same general succession of occupations. In each case, the Moche III level of occupation is well below a series of Moche IV floors. It is thus evident that according to the stratigraphy, Moche phase III is earlier than phase IV at the Huacas of Moche site.

Five dates were obtained specifically to confirm the anteriority of the Moche III phase over phase IV. We were also concerned by the time span of the Moche III phase. The dated samples were associated with burial 5-2, burial 5-24, burial 15-4, and rooms 12-4 and 12-5

respectively. All the samples were charcoal taken in a precise context with a cleaned metal tool and stored directly into foil paper. Each sample was cleaned in the laboratory to get rid of small roots, rocks and other intrusive materials. The results and the calibration provided by Beta Analytic are presented in TABLE 2.

Discussion

The dates fall into two groups. The earliest corresponds to dates 1680 ± 60 BP from room 12-4 and 1630 ± 70 BP from burial 15-4. These two dates are significantly older than the other three Moche III dates. They are also much older than the earliest dates stratigraphically and culturally associated to the Moche IV phase, which range between 1280 and 1500 BP (Chapdelaine in press; 1998; 1997).

It cannot be said that the two early dates belong to the early beginning of phase III but they support the general chronological position of this particular phase in much of the proposed scenarios. The beginning date for Moche III phase is often placed at around AD 300. Judging from the time interval with a 2s probability, an occupation during the 4th century AD and possibly as early as the 3rd century can be proposed. These two dates can thus be used to support the existence of phase III between AD 300 and 400.

The second, later group comprises the other three dates. They strongly indicate a phase III occupation between AD 400 and 500, which is problematical because it means that phases III and IV were contemporaneous. Indeed, a series of Moche IV dates are concentrated around

lab. no.	field catalogue	material	date BP	calibrated 2σ	calibrated 1σ	context	depth from present surface (metres)
BETA-121763	PE98-5-2	charcoal	1500±70	AD 420–665	AD 530–640	ash layer below child burial	±3.5
BETA-134086	PE99-5-24	charcoal	1520±60	AD 415–650	AD 445–615	burial fill (10 cm above body)	±3.10
BETA-121762	PE98-12-4	charcoal	1680±60	AD 240–535	AD 330–430	ash layer below floor #7	>4.60
BETA-121764	PE98-12-5	charcoal	1490±60	AD 435–665	AD 540–640	ash layer between floors #8–9	4.32–4.46
BETA-121761	PE98-15-4	charcoal	1630±70	AD 250–600	AD 380–535	burial fill south of the child	±3.20

TABLE 2. Radiocarbon dates from Moche III contexts at the Huacas of Moche site.

1500 BP and overlap with the three dates seemingly too late for Moche III. Of course, the two phases are not contemporaneous on the basis of straightforward stratigraphical evidence. The occupation layers of Moche IV clearly lie above the latest Moche III occupation. There is no indication of a blending of the two traditions, but stratigraphic evidence clearly show continuity in the succession of clay floors. This indicates firstly that the stylistic change happened very rapidly, perhaps within a few generations, and secondly that the real time difference between the two phases is too small to be differentiated by radiocarbon dating. The interpretation of these radiometric results is worse when we rely on calibrated dates, which correspond to large time intervals stretching over two centuries.

Since there is a concentration of Moche III dates around 1500 BP, and there is no indication of contamination to reject these results, we must accept that this particular phase was still operating during the first half of the 5th century AD, implying a later development for the Moche IV. This change is consistent with a longer time span for this phase according to a series of very late dates from good stratigraphic contexts (Chapdelaine in press).

While accepting the results of the five radiocarbon dates pertaining to Moche III phase stratigraphic contexts, two options might help clarify the resulting implications. First, more dates should be obtained from Moche III layers located at a deeper location. Second, obtaining more dates from earlier Moche I and II will be necessary for a better understanding of the rhythm of stylistic change according to the superposition of the cultural layers.

On a very general basis, our small sample of five radiocarbon dates suggests that the Moche III phase was well established by 1680 BP, and that it lasted until around 1500 BP, more or less contemporaneous with the Moche IV phase. The time interval for Phase III might have spanned over two centuries from around AD 250 to AD 450 while phase IV developed very rapidly around AD 450 to end before AD 800.

Conclusion

The Huacas of Moche site is a settlement with a long and complex history. The earliest occupation probably started with Salinar occupa-

tion on the northwestern flank of Cerro Blanco (Bourget 1997; Bourget & Chapdelaine 1998), followed by a Gallinazo presence of unknown scale and by a limited Moche phase I occupation around Huaca del Sol (Donnan & Mackey 1978: 60–61; Topic 1977: 398–402). The Huacas of Moche site is also regarded as the centre of a very large polity which at some point changed a valley-scale organization into a multi-valley State. This transformation has been tentatively placed during phase III. The timing of this expansion has been established over a wide geographic distribution of apparently similar ceramic style. However, little stratigraphic evidence and radiocarbon dating can be used to support this statement. The actual sequence of construction of the two monumental buildings indicates that they were in existence during Moche III phase (Uceda & Canziani 1998), which is indicative of an early development of centralized power at the Huacas of Moche site.

The discovery of five intact burials at the Huacas of Moche site, located in a precise stratigraphic sequence, reaffirms Larco's stylistic seriation with a clear transition from phase III to phase IV. Burial contents support the known mortuary practices for this phase and the importance of offerings such as copper items and beads is more evident, as well as the use of a red pigment on the body. The chronological position of this Moche III phase is not a simple matter that can be resolved only by radiocarbon dating. It is, however, possible to suggest an early date for its beginning, probably between AD 250–350, and a short and rapid transition to phase IV. This shift probably dated to the first half of the 5th century AD. During phase III, the Huacas of Moche site was thus an extensively occupied urban sector and it is possible that it was the seat of a strong polity controlling the Moche Valley and influencing the population of other valleys.

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