

Anthropology Dissertation Defense

Tracing the Moche Spectacles of Death: Performance, Ancestrality, and Political Power in Ancient Peru; A View from Huaca La Capilla-San José de Moro (AD 650-740)



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The Moche culture thrived in the north coast of Peru between the second and ninth centuries AD. While still a point of debate, many consider the Moche one of the first state-level societies in the pre-Columbian Americas. One fascinating aspect of this society is the elaborate burials, with sumptuous displays of wealth. Traditionally, scholars have envisioned Moche death as an inherent and static manifestation of hierarchy, status, and power. My dissertation moves away from such object-centered approaches, studying death and its effects as a historically and culturally situated phenomenon.

My dissertation draws on extensive archaeological excavations conducted in Huaca La Capilla, a monumental adobe structure located within the Late Moche elite cemetery of San José de Moro, Jequetepeque Valley. Based on the striking similarities between the architectural enclosures discovered in this huaca and those represented in the Moche “Burial Theme,” I suggest that Huaca La Capilla was one of the loci where Moche funerary performances systematically occurred. These performances constituted large public spectacles orchestrated around the physical transformation of the corpses of elite individuals and their preparation for their symbolic journey into the afterlife: a process of transformation from a human to a divine entity, of becoming ancestors.

Integrating multidisciplinary methods of analysis, my dissertation presents a comprehensive study of Huaca La Capilla, its architectural layout, and its many (and still enigmatic) transformations. I examine the role of Huaca La Capilla within the dynamic deathscape of San José de Moro, providing new insights on the relationship of huacas with death, the regeneration of life, and the cosmological order in the Moche world. In the context of political balkanization that characterized the Jequetepeque Valley during Late Moche times, I argue that the participation in these ritual spectacles was a key means for the creation of political and religious subjectivities. Ultimately, this case study offers novel anthropological perspectives on how the dramatic nature of the rituals orchestrated around the burial of elite individuals (the-body-as-spectacle, sensu Foucault 1977) constituted a means through which pre-modern states were held and constantly reproduced.

THURSDAY, JUNE 13TH, 10:30AM

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