The social meaning of animal sacrifice in the Wari Empire: a case study of camelid sacrifices in Castillo de Huarmey palace, north coast of Peru

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Animal sacrifices were a major component of the ritual sphere in the Andes, occurring continuously from at least the Initial Period (ca. 1800-800 BC) until colonial times. However, deciphering their meaning has been troublesome, exacerbated by the lack of written sources from the prehistoric Andes. In this talk, I investigate the social meaning of camelid sacrifices in the provincial capital of the Wari Empire (ca. 600-1100 AD) on the north Pacific coast, Castillo de Huarmey. By juxtaposing the camelid sacrifice in the palatial complex against the multispecies sacrifice in the adjacent mausoleum, I argue that the palatial one had more of an ‘administrative’ purpose than a religious one. The palace is the earliest structure built by Wari people in Castillo de Huarmey and events held there likely played a crucial role in establishing their political power at the coast. Although the possible religious significance of the sacrifice cannot be completely eliminated due to lack of solid evidence, I suggest that the Castillo de Huarmey palace animal sacrifice had a twofold meaning. It had a connection with marking the end of one event and the start of another (e.g. the completion of the palace renovation/construction and the beginning of its use) and this event could have had a religious meaning for the society, but it was not directly related to the widespread cult of the ancestors.

Weronika Tomczyk is a 2nd year Ph.D. student in the Department of Anthropology and the Stanford Archaeology Center. She received both her BA (2013) and MA (2016) from the University of Warsaw, Poland. Her Ph.D. project concerns the Wari Empire’s ecological imperialism and animal management, investigated through standard zooarchaeological and stable isotope analyses, as well as geometric morphometrics.

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