

The Moche Moon

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There is obvious astronomical information in the ceramic depictions of the Moche people on the north coast of Peru in the early centuries of the Christian era, and some figures must be sky gods, but, in the small amount of work that has been published on this subject, there is controversy and contradiction; no one seems to have a firm grip on any identification. I have no positive conclusions or even strong hypotheses; I am simply trying to gather helpful material and to air some ideas in an effort to get feedback. The moon seems a good place to start, for more has been written about possible moon gods than about any other deity.

The so-called moon animal, moon-eater, moon monster, or crested animal often appears in Moche art in a crescent that looks very moonlike; there are sometimes starry shapes around it (Figure 1). Kutscher (1950: 57) identified this creature as the "animal in the moon." Karen Bruhns (1976), in a paper dedicated to the moon animal, notes that it is not one of the major Moche motifs, but that it had remarkable longevity, that the animal persists from Moche I into Chimú art, and that it is first clearly associated with lunar or astral symbols in Moche III. Positing the possibility that the moon association may have been introduced later than the motif itself, Bruhns notes that depictions of the creature with and without the crescent overlap temporally, once the crescent appears.

The style of drawing of the animal is usually not characteristic of Moche art, but it is consonant with the Recuay style of the adjacent highlands, and the figure does appear most frequently in Recuay art, where it is seen, virtually always, as a filler, border, or garment design, usually a repeated pattern. Bruhns states:



Figure 1. Two drawings of moon animals from Moche III-IV vases (after Bruhns [1976: figs. 1, 2]).

There is no denying the association of the Moon Animal with the moon from Moche III on. Arguments for the same interpretation of this figure in Recuay art are not so convincing...[although] we can probably assume...that there was an association with the moon in the Recuay culture, too [Bruhns 1976: 34].

The crescent does not appear in Recuay art, however, and Raphael Reichert (1979 and personal communication),, does not find evidence for a moon association for the animal in Recuay occurrences. Reichert, noting that Moche art tends to isolate the creature more than Recuay does, points out that Moche depictions are closest to those of Recuay during the early Moche phases; the animal changes in Moche III (when, as Bruhns notes, it becomes associated with crescent and astral symbols). Reichert observes that the motif also appears on Salinar, Gallinazo, and northern Huari ceramics.

Whereas Bruhns sees the Moche depictions of the creature as very similar to each other, Anne-Louise Schaffer (1981) has pointed out the considerable variation. Schaffer, however, focuses on examples from Loma Negra, which Bruhns does not include. Schaffer notes that a primary distinguishing feature of the Loma Negra metal moon animals is that they have bird talons in place of the clawed feline or fox paws usually found on pottery examples (including those from Vicús, near Loma Negra). She also finds that the main imagery associated with the moon animal is lunar or astral; at Loma Negra, the animal shows up most frequently on crescent ornaments. If the Moche I and II dating for the Loma Negra metalwork is correct, then the moon association is earlier in the northern area than in the central Moche area. Schaffer observes in the north a strong association of the moon animal with a sacrificial trophy-head cult, noting that the animal is never seen as the sacrificer, but does hold a trophy head.

There are a few examples of the animal with a trophy head in the central Moche region, but the proportion at Loma Negra is much higher. This sacrificial aspect does not seem to be present at Recuay.

The sickle moon and the relation to sacrifice suggest that this may be the moon of a specific time, phase, and/or ritual. There is also the possibility of interpreting the animal as eating the moon during an eclipse (Valcárcel 1958: 577); this is a prevalent mythic concept in Latin America. It might also be that this creature was a parallel to the Mesoamerican concept of a rabbit in the moon; Kutscher (1950: 57) suggested something like this. Mesoamerican peoples did not--and still do not--see a man in the moon; they see a rabbit. The animal may, of course, depict a constellation seen with the moon at a certain time.

I believe that no one calls this a "moon god"; the animal is not elevated to godly status. Is there a moon god at all, and, if so, who is it? Only figures from late Moche art (phases IV and V) have been referred to as "moon gods," and there are two very different so-called moon gods, both depicted with radiances.

One is a Moche V figure traveling through water on a supernatural, double-headed raft, with a fish-monster head or heads (sometimes they are snake heads) at either end (Figure 2). Kutscher (1950: 85) titled his illustration of an example "The Moon God in the Heavenly Raft." He wrote further: "The celestial god uses the large reed raft like a litter to traverse the night sky, which seems to be changed into the dark depths of the sea" (author's translation). Noting the row of thick-bellied jugs on the raft, Kutscher interpreted the scene as showing the moon god as the lord of fertility and moisture, with the jugs containing the night dew that the plant growth demands. Sometimes there are prisoners or sacrificial victims in the raft, along with the jugs.



Figure 2. Moche V vessel showing a figure in a supernatural raft. The figure has snake-headed rays and leans over an open bag (courtesy of the Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich).

The raft figure is also seen in a radiant crescent that resembles a boat, but does not have the attributes of the raft (Cordy-Collins 1977); it is, infact, very like the crescent in which the moon animal appears, and Daniëlle Lavallée (1970: pl. 82) publishes one of these figures as an example of "the feline in the moon," equating it with the moon animal. The two kinds of depiction--the figure in the raft and in the crescent--are contemporary (Cordy-Collins 1977: 433). The figures in both kinds of vehicles have a supernatural mouth. There is usually a small, open bag in front of the radiant figure, and the attention of the figure seems to be directed to opening or tying up the bag. (Bags appear in many of the most highly charged ritual or mythic scenes [see Benson 1978, 1982].) Kutscher (1950: 89) equates the raft with the moon.

Alana Cordy-Collins, however, takes Lavallée to task for reading the crescent as the moon and interprets this theme the other way around:

Certainly the crescent shape does remind us of a crescent moon, but there is no cultural basis whatsoever for believing that the Moche artist intended nor that the Moche citizen perceived the shape as a crescent moon. In fact, the Moche artist intended the crescent shape to represent something quite different [Cordy-Collins 1977: 422].

She goes on to say that "the crescent represents the boat" (Cordy-Collins 1977: 430), arguing that motifs in Moche V tend to be simplified, and that, therefore, the crescent is a simplified boat.

It would seem that she could equally well--or better--say that the boat represents the crescent. Double entendre, I believe, is as likely as simplification. The interchangeability with the raft even enhances the argument for the crescent as a moon. This sort of punning goes with transformation themes, one of the primary aspects of Indian thought.

Moreover, the radiance of the figure and of the crescent certainly seems to define them as celestial objects or beings, and the raft is double-headed like the motif that is commonly considered to be a "skyband" (see Carlson 1982). Precolumbian deities usually have some sky association, and the moon in South American myth is generally associated with water and with fishing. As for the specific cultural basis, the crescent is seen with astral motifs in earlier Moche art, as noted above in the discussion of the moon animal; no one has questioned the "moonness" of that crescent. The moon does travel across the sea on the north coast of Peru, and north-coast fishermen still go out at night, as, we are told, they did at least as far back as the 16th century (Gillin 1947: 33-34), so a moon-raft would not be mythically unlikely. There seem to be many more reasons to say that the raft is a moon than there are to say that the crescent is a raft--at least, the moon and the boat are the same thing, a "heavenly raft," as Kutscher called it.

The motif becomes so simplified that, in the later stages, both raft and crescent are omitted, and the vessel itself becomes the vessel, so to speak. A projecting angle in the chamber wall provides a three-dimensional seat for the painted, radiant figure (Cordy-Collins 1977: figs. 16-18).

On the side of the pot opposite the radiant figure in the raft, there is another kind--or kinds--of raft figure; sometimes there are two figures, one of which can be bird-headed, with a curving beak or a duck bill (Hocquenghem and Lyon 1980: fig. 6). These figures are usually accompanied by "weapons bundles" or war clubs. Other supernatural figures appear in double-headed rafts in earlier Moche art (Kutscher 1950: fig. 17); sometimes the raft is a giant fish (Hocquenghem 1979: fig. 4). Non-supernatural figures are also seen in natural rafts (Kutscher 1950:

pl. 44, upper). All of these figures are nonradiant; they do not appear in a crescent, only in a raft; and they do not have a bag. They paddle and are usually fishing or have fishing gear aboard, whereas the radiant figure rarely paddles or fishes, although there are fish in the scenes. The figure in the crescent is repeated on the other side of the vessel; as far as I know, no examples show an alternative figure, which may give the crescent figure a temporal or ritual meaning different from that of the raft scenes with a radiant figure on one side and another type of figure or figures on the other side.

Anne Marie Hocquenghem (1979) has written on raft figures as participating in ceremonies making offerings and sacrifices to ancestors. She uses an Inca parallel to interpret the Moche raft scenes, citing Cristóbal de Molina: On the day of the new moon after the summer solstice, in January, the Inca fought the ritual combat of Camay, and on the 20th day of that month began to celebrate Mayocati, when they gathered the remains of everything that had been offered in the past year, together with new offerings, and constructed dams to hold the waters that flowed past Cuzco; just before sunset, they threw all the offerings and sacrifices into the river, breaking the first dam. The strong, rainy-season current of the river, augmented by the bursting dam, carried the offerings toward the sea, where they were destined for the Creator.

Of the raft representations, Hocquenghem writes that the captives, together with offerings of the products of the earth, are transported to the guano islands and offered to the sea, which carries them toward mythical ancestors. In exchange, the ancestors give the offerers the fertilizers and the products of the sea. I do not see the products of the earth in these scenes, unless they are the contents of the jugs.

Hocquenghem brings in the offering and sacrificial rituals on the

guano islands; but the iconography associated with those islands is not that of the raft-crescent figure. I believe that there are at least two --and probably three--occasions or clusters associated with rafts.

Kutscher (1950), Lavallée (1970), and Cordy-Collins (1977) describe the figure in the raft or the crescent as a man. However, Hocquenghem and Patricia Lyon (1980) have, more accurately, I think, described it as a woman. Although noncommittal about the "moonness" of this female figure, these authors refer to it as the occupant of a "Moon/Boat." In most raft depictions, the figure wears a net garment or dress, usually belted--a belted "dress" is typical Moche female clothing. Sometimes there is a mantle, an optional garment for Moche women, and some figures clearly have long braids that end in snakeheads. There is a distinctive headdress with vertical elements that tend to flop or curve over at the sides; this is specific to this character, not a general female trait.

One unusual version of the net-garment figure has dragonfly wings instead of radiances--another pun?--and this figure holds up a goblet (Donnan and McClelland 1979: fig. 28). She has a snake-headed braid, a belt, the distinctive headdress, and a bag. Hocquenghem and Lyon (1980) propose that the supernatural woman in the raft and one of the figures in Christopher Donnan's Presentation Theme (1975) belong to the same "class," but are not necessarily the same character. The woman in the Presentation Theme depictions usually holds a goblet, as this raft figure does, and wears a similar floppy-element headdress; but she does not wear a net garment. Moreover, the raft figure holds the goblet toward her mouth, whereas the Presentation Theme figure holds the goblet, indeed in presentation.

The Presentation Theme--and related scenes (I think that the complex is larger than that described by Donnan)--is the other cluster that has

been said, by Kutscher (1950: 72-73), to include the moon god. Kutscher's moon god in this scene, however, is not the woman, whose equivalent he referred to elsewhere as the moon, but the radiant figure, a male warrior (Figure 3). (The woman, whom Kutscher took to be a vegetation deity, is never radiant in the Presentation Theme scenes, but is a fairly regular participant there.)

Kutscher cites Calancha as saying that "the Chimu of the late period had as their highest god, not the sun, but the moon....The moon was not held to be more powerful than the burning day star, but they saw him as the sender of moisture and fertility" (Kutscher 1950: 88; author's translation). Kutscher seems to have identified the warrior figure as the moon on the basis of prominence, as the Chimú god; on the basis of the radiances; and as the receiver of offerings.

The basic problem here is that the two figures identified as moon gods are wearing totally different clothing and accessories--important diagnostic elements in Moche iconography--and are of different sexes. The moon does change sex in some South American myths, but this is a total change of character. Moreover, the raft figure--or a very similar figure--appears in the Presentation Theme with the warrior figure.

I feel that the two types of radiant figure are two different celestial beings and that the scene clusters depict different moments in the calendar (different rites or myths). But who are the radiant figures; is either of them the moon?

The raft and the crescent certainly suggest the shape of the new moon, which is thought, on the north coast, to be good for fishing (Gillin 1947: 34). The figure accompanying this motif, however, need not necessarily be the moon; possibly two celestial bodies are depicted. The fact that a similar raft can be occupied by figures other than the one dis-

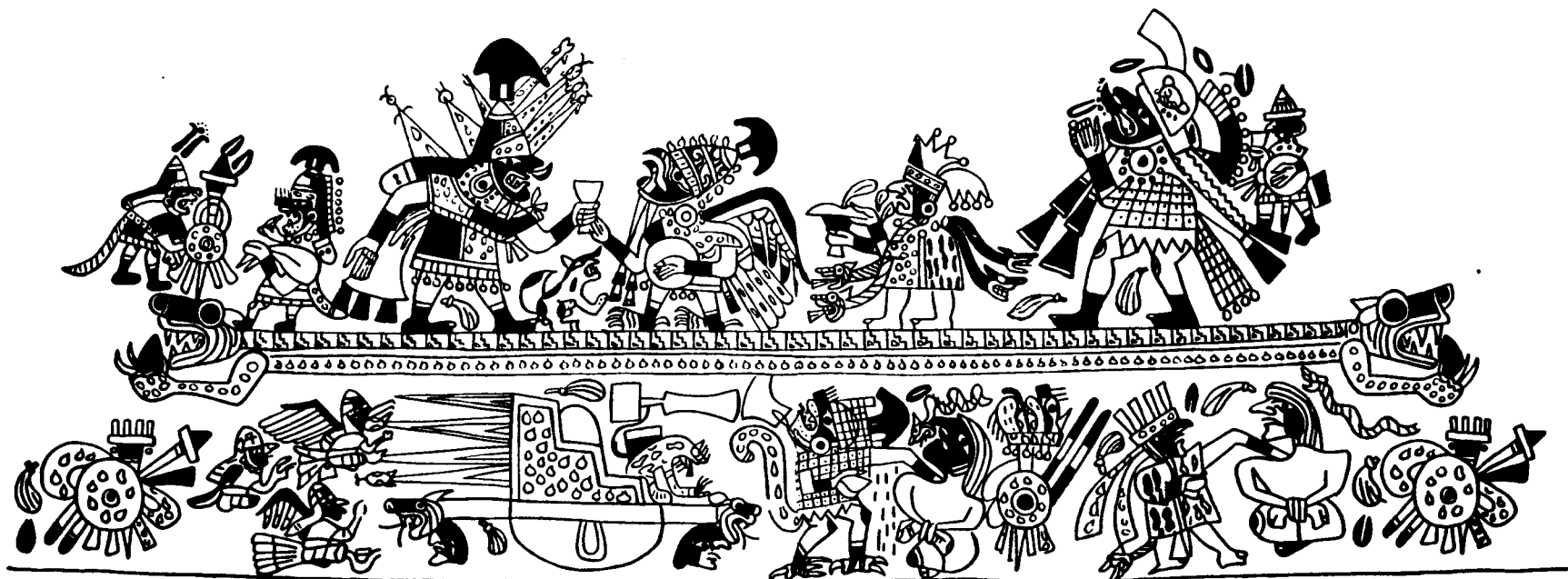


Figure 3. A Presentation Theme scene with the radiant warrior figure at the upper left. The female figure appears, second from the right, on the upper and lower registers (after Kutscher [1950: fig. 62]; Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich).

cussed here argues the likelihood of the occupant's being separate from the raft. We are told of the importance of the Southern Cross to coastal fishermen. Gary Urton (1982), who has investigated these problems, has proposed that the "mother of fishes" in the Avila legend (1975) is not the moon, but the Southern Cross. This is one possible interpretation.

A perhaps stronger possibility is the Pleiades constellation, generally an important season-marker in the Tropics. Urton (1982) has noted that the dusk rise of the Pleiades marks the beginning of the good fishing season on the north coast. Various 16th-century sources mention the heliacal rise of the Pleiades as marking the beginning of the year (Calancha, in Means 1931: 62; Zuidema 1982: 215). R. T. Zuidema (1982: 216-217, 225), citing Cobo and Pérez Bocanegra, finds evidence that, in Inca times, the Pleiades were female and associated with water. María Rostworowski (1981: 134), on the other hand, sees the Pleiades and the sun as related to agriculture, whereas fishermen venerated the moon for its influence on the tides. I find no obvious agricultural symbolism--that is, vegetation--in the Moche raft scenes; but plant life is depicted in the Presentation Theme scenes. I would say that one Moche ceramic cluster probably related to the fishing calendar and the other to the agricultural calendar, but the problem of astronomical identification remains.

With the slender evidence available, the raft-crescent figure would seem to be the likelier candidate for the moon or the Pleiades. The radiant warrior has fewer qualifications for these roles. (I find some evidence for a sun identification for this figure.) As in a good detective story, however, a case can be built on various sorts of evidence for any case one wishes to make (everyone is a suspect with some motivation and opportunity), but which one is really the murderer--or, rather, which one is the sacrificer or the one to whom sacrifice is made?

As for interpretation on the basis of 16th-century evidence, yes, we need all the help we can get; but it is evident that there are shifts in important subject matter even during the Moche period. Both of these radiant figures come in late; the radiant warrior arrives in Moche IV, the radiant raft figure in Moche V. This argues against precise continuity even within the Moche period; interpretations on the basis of later material should be made with the greatest caution. There are widespread customs and long-lasting substrata for beliefs, but deities tend to get manipulated for political purposes, and, while their basic associations may remain the same, prominence, specific attributes, activities, powers, and style of depiction can change fairly drastically, according to the source of power and how that power is to be manifested.

Of basic importance is the consideration of what ancient peoples chose for iconographic depiction: the most important calendar-markers or the showiest, most symbolic bodies in the sky? It seems possible to rely on one astral body or constellation for a vital time count and yet put another one on funerary or ritual pottery.¹

Footnote

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