

HUMAN SACRIFICE BY THE CHIMÚ STATE: EVIDENCE AND INTERPRETATION

SACRIFICIO HUMANO EN EL ESTADO CHIMÚ: EVIDENCIA E INTERPRETACIÓN

John W. Verano

Abstract

Archaeological evidence exists for multiple forms of human sacrifice practiced by the Chimú. At the Chimú capital of Chan Chan these include dedicatory burials under architecture and massive sacrifices in royal burial platforms. At provincial sites, sanctioned killing of captives are also known. Since 2011 these data have been joined by evidence of both small and large-scale sacrifices of children at multiple sites surrounding the bay of Huanchaco, near Chan Chan. How are these new discoveries of child sacrifices to be explained and compared to those of adolescents and adults at Chan Chan? While the ritual offerings of children and camelids must have been directed by the rulers of Chan Chan, there may be multiple motives for such sacrifices, as is suggested by their varied chronology, location, and contexts. These new discoveries have the potential to shed light on Chimú rulership, ritual practices, and the identities and possible geographic origins of the sacrificed children. While this paper will focus on the bioarchaeology of Chimú sacrifice, it will draw upon comparative and theoretical approaches to interpreting the function and meaning of ritual killing and human sacrifice in ancient Perú.

Keywords: Ritual killing, child sacrifice, bioarchaeology, paleopathology, Chimú.

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Resumen

Actualmente, existe evidencia arqueológica de múltiples formas de sacrificio humano practicados por los chimú. En su capital Chan Chan, estas evidencias incluyen entierros dedicatorios bajo estructuras arquitectónicas y sacrificios masivos en plataformas funerarias de sus élites. Por otro lado, en los sitios provinciales también se sabe que se realizó el asesinato de cautivos. Desde 2011, a estos datos se les ha unido evidencia de sacrificios de niños tanto a pequeña como a gran escala en varios sitios que rodean la bahía de Huanchaco, cerca de Chan Chan. ¿Cómo se explican estos nuevos descubrimientos de sacrificios de niños y cómo se los compara con los de adolescentes y adultos en Chan Chan? Si bien las ofrendas rituales de niños y camélidos deben haber sido dirigidas por los gobernantes de Chan Chan, puede haber múltiples motivos para tales sacrificios, como lo sugiere su variada cronología, ubicación y contextos. Estos nuevos descubrimientos tienen el potencial de arrojar luz sobre el gobierno Chimú, sus prácticas rituales y las identidades y posibles orígenes geográficos de los niños sacrificados. La evidencia de diversas formas de sacrificio ritual deja claro que los gobernantes Chimú ejercían una poderosa coerción y control sobre sus súbditos: en contextos funerarios (plataformas funerarias), en ofrendas dedicatorias, en sacrificios masivos de niños y camélidos jóvenes, en ejecuciones brutales de enemigos y en la ejecución de quienes se resistían a la expansión territorial Chimú. Si bien estos sacrificios sin duda tenían un importante significado ritual para los chimú, también servían como duros recordatorios del poder que ejercían sus gobernantes.

Palabras clave: Matanza ritual, sacrificio infantil, bioarqueología, paleopatología, Chimú.

Ethnohistoric, Iconographic and Archaeological Evidence of Human Sacrifice and Sanctioned Killing by the Chimú State

Ethnohistoric accounts of human sacrificial practices before Inca times are limited to a few sources, such as Fray Antonio de la Calancha's description of a temple in the Jequetepeque Valley on the north coast of Perú where child sacrifices reportedly were made (Rowe 1948:50). While ethnohistoric accounts are scarce, depictions of severed human heads, bound captives, mutilated bodies, and scenes showing the capture and sacrifice of captives can be found in the iconography of various northern coastal societies (Alva and Donnan 1993; Bourget 2016; Verano and Phillips 2016), including the Chimú (**Figures 1a, 1b**) (Cordy-Collins 1992; Jackson 2004; Lapiner 1976:279-282; Uceda 1997).

The Killing of Captives

The discovery in 1984 of a mass burial of mutilated individuals at the site of Pacatnamú in the Jequetepeque River valley confirms that depictions of the killing of captives, mutilation, and exposure of the body to scavengers are not merely depictions of mythical events. The Pacatnamú mass burial included the remains of fourteen adolescent and young adult males

found in the bottom of a trench outside the entrance to the principal ceremonial complex (Verano 1986). The deposit dates to the Late Intermediate period (c. AD 1150-1250) and consists of three superimposed groups of skeletons. Victims were killed by a variety of methods, including spear wounds, opening of the chest (with presumed extraction of the heart), blows to the head and decapitation. Rope fragments were found around the ankles of some of the victims, indicating that they had been physically restrained. Stratigraphic evidence indicates that on at least three distinct occasions individuals were killed, mutilated, and deposited in the trench, where their bodies were left exposed to scavengers rather than being promptly buried (Faulkner 1986). Given that Pacatnamú is named for a Chimú general who was said to have conquered the Jequetepeque Valley, it is possible that the mass burial may contain victims of this conquest (see also Cutright, this volume , issue 2).



Figure 1. A) Chimú wooden figure of a captive with preserved cords around the neck, wrists, and ankles. Huaca Tacaynamo (PV 246/40). Height: 50.7 cm. Photo by author; B) Detail of one of the panels of the "Prisoner Textile" showing bound captives, disembodied heads, and condors. Reportedly found in the Virú valley. Modified image after Lapiner 1976.

In 1999 the skeletons of more than 138 boys and men of various ages was discovered buried at a shallow depth on a coastal hillside at Punta Lobos in the Huarney valley (Verano and Toyne 2011). In contrast to the Pacatnamú mass burial, at Punta Lobos the method of killing was more consistent and methodical: all individuals were killed by slitting of the throat, as indicated by cuts on their neck vertebrae, clavicles, and first ribs (**Figure 2a**). Rope and cloth fragments were found around the wrists and ankles of the victims, indicating that

they had been physically restrained and blindfolded (**Figure 2b**). Punta Lobos is unique as it is the only known case from Prehispanic Perú of the systematic killing of blindfolded victims, something better known from executions and extrajudicial killings in modern times (Joyce and Stover 1991). The evidence of bound limbs and blindfolds, the isolated location and perfunctory burial of the Punta Lobos victims, as well as their demographic profile (boys and adult males, including older adults) suggests that this may represent a reprisal killing of civilians following the conquest of the Huarmey valley by the Chimú Empire. Accelerator Mass Spectrometry radiocarbon determinations from rope bindings around the ankles of two victims yielded dates of cal. AD 1250-1300, which correlate with a period of southward expansion of the Chimú Empire (Mackey and Klymyshyn 1990) and is thus supports our hypothesis of a reprisal killing.



Figure 2. A) Cuts on the first thoracic vertebra of one of the Punta Lobos victims; B) Blindfold found in situ on one of the Punta Lobos executed captives.

Dedicatory Offerings

In addition to the killing of captives at a ceremonial center like Pacatnamú or in an isolated location like Punta Lobos, Chimú human sacrifices identified as dedicatory or foundational offerings have been found under ramps and doorways in the royal palaces of Chan Chan. These individuals were adolescent or young adult females buried with fine textiles, ceramics, and other elite items and appear to have been placed as offerings at the time of construction of audiencias, plazas and compounds (Andrews 1974; Day 1982). Similar burials of adolescent and young adult females under ramps and doorways of public architecture

have been found at other Late Intermediate period sites in the nearby Jequetepeque valley (Keatinge and Conrad 1983:271; Bruce 1986) indicating that the practice was not limited to the Chimú capital. These dedicatory offerings are distinct from those of executed male captives in their demographic profile, their lack of evidence of violent death or mutilation and by their careful burial with fine grave goods.

Retainer Burials

Tombs of high-status individuals accompanied by sacrificed retainers have been reported from multiple north coast sites (Alva and Donnan 1993; Bentley and Klaus 2016; Donnan and Castillo 1994; Klaus and Shimada 2016; Mujica Barreda and Hirose Maio 2007). Retainers are normally identified by contextual clues such as unusual body position or by the absence of associated grave goods. Rarely can cause of death be determined, but several examples of rope or cloth ligatures have been found around the necks of retainers at the site of El Brujo in the Chicama valley (Verano 2001) (**Figure 3**). On the north coast of Perú elite tombs at Sipán, San José de Moro and El Brujo generally contain only one or several retainers. In the burial platforms of the royal palaces of Chan Chan, however, there is evidence of retainer burial on a massive scale. Most of these platforms presumably held the tombs of Chimú kings and were heavily looted in the early Colonial period and have not been the subject of intensive archaeological excavation. An exception is the small burial platform of Las Avispas which was partially excavated in the early 1970s (Moseley and Day 1982). It was found to contain a central tomb chamber surrounded by twenty-four smaller rectangular cells (Conrad 1982). Like the principal chamber, the surrounding cells had been looted. A sample of approximately 25% of the disturbed fill from the cells was examined and found to contain the skeletal remains of at least 93 individuals, along with fragments of textiles, ceramics and wooden objects. An initial study of the skeletal remains found in the cells by Thomas Pozorski concluded that they were primarily adolescent females (Pozorski 1980). A recent re-examination of the skeletal material by Andrew Nelson found general agreement with the original age and sex estimates, although he reported wider age ranges and the presence of males as well as females (Nelson and Mackey n.d.). Conrad estimated that the Las Avispas platform's cells originally may have held 200-300 retainer burials, although this is just an estimate extrapolated from Pozorski's limited excavation (Conrad 1982:100).

For many years the royal burial platforms of Chan Chan stood out in the Andean archaeological record for the scale of retainer burials in elite tombs. However, results of more recent excavations by Izumi Shimada and colleagues at the Sicán Precinct of Batán Grande in the Lambayeque Valley appear to dwarf the Las Avispas numbers. Klaus and Shimada estimate that at least 1,500 dedicatory and retainer burials are associated with six monumental platform mounds in the Sicán Precinct, which date to the early part of the Late Intermediate period, c. AD 1000 (Klaus and Shimada 2016:141).

Child Sacrifice

High altitude Inca sacrifices of children are known from both early Colonial period accounts and from a number of archaeological discoveries (Besom 2009; 2013). These sacrifices, known as *Capacocha* or *Capac Hucha*, demonstrate a close correspondence between oral accounts from the 16th century and archaeological discoveries made in the 20th and 21st centuries (Reinhard and Ceruti 2000; Andrushko et al. 2011). Unfortunately, only one written account of child sacrifice is known for the late prehispanic north coast of Perú, that of the Augustinian Fray Antonio de la Calancha (mentioned above), and Calancha's account does not describe how the children were killed or the number of children sacrificed.



Figure 3. A child with a cotton ligature around the throat. A probable retainer or an isolated sacrifice found at the Huaca Cao, El Brujo Archaeological Complex, Chicama valley. Photo by the author, courtesy of the Proyecto Arqueológico Complejo El Brujo.

Recent archaeological excavations at multiple Late Intermediate period (c. AD 1100-1470) and Inca (c. AD 1470-1530) contexts at the north coast sites of Túcume, Cerro Cerrillos, and Chotuna-Chornancap have revealed sacrifices that include children as well as adult males and females (Klaus 2010, Klaus et al. 2016; Toyne 2011). More recently, excavations at multiple Chimú sites in the Moche valley (**Figure 4**) have encountered sacrifices limited exclusively to children and camelids. The first evidence of these sacrifices was discovered in the seaside town

of Huanchaco in 1968 by archaeologist Christopher Donnan (Donnan and Foote 1978), who found seventeen children and twenty camelids buried in simple pits without grave offerings on a hillside above the town. Based on the archaeological context, a single radiocarbon date, unusual burial positions and demographic profile, Donnan concluded that this was a Chimú sacrificial offering, although no osteological analysis was done to determine how the children died. This first discovery was provocative, but it was an isolated find. It was not until forty-two years later (2011) when a second and much larger concentration of children and camelids was found in the nearby community of Huanchaquito by archaeologist Gabriel Prieto (Prieto et al. 2015). This second site, given the name Huanchaquito-Las Llamas (HLL), became the focus of four field seasons of excavations, directed by Prieto, Verano, and Nicolas Goepfert (Prieto et al. 2019). Located 3.5 kilometers from the central core of the Chimú capital of Chan Chan, HLL consists of a cluster of sacrificial burials at the base of a marine terrace about 350 meters from the Pacific shoreline. Sacrificed children and camelids were found in a deposit of windblown sand without any evidence of architecture or occupational debris. After several expansions of the original 2011 excavation, the final excavated area comprised approximately 700 square meters, with a final count of 137 children, three adults, and 205 camelids that were buried alongside or on top of the children (Prieto et al. 2019). The camelids will not be discussed here, as they have been the focus of recent publications by Goepfert and colleagues (Cagnato et al. 2021; Dufour et al. 2020; Goepfert et al. 2020; Le Bailly et al. 2019).

Dating the Huanchaquito-Las Llamas Sacrifice. Twenty-one samples of organic materials were submitted by Prieto to two independent laboratories for AMS radiocarbon dating. The samples were drawn from different sectors of the excavations, and all are based on short-lived plant remains (sedge ropes associated with the camelids and cotton threads from childrens' burial shrouds). The dates cluster tightly around cal AD 1400-1450 (Prieto et al. 2019). Using one or two sigma calibrations, the results indicate that the sacrificial event can be dated relatively precisely to this range of dates, placing it in the late Chimú period. Stratigraphic evidence suggests that the sacrifice was made following a heavy rain/flood event that deposited a layer of mud on top of the clean sand. The mud appears to have been deposited as sheetwash during a major rainfall event (or series of events) associated with the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) phenomenon or a similar climate alteration such as the "El Niño Costero" that periodically brings coastal flooding and elevated sea temperatures to northern and central Perú (Prieto et al. 2017). It is possible that the sacrifices were made in response to the heavy rains, as burial pits were dug through the wet mud into the windblown sand deposit. Almost all bodies were found at the same depth and in close proximity to one another, and no examples were found of burial pits that cut into others. The discovery of human and camelid footprints made in wet mud suggests that the victims circulated near the area where they were finally buried (Prieto et al. 2019).

Demographic Profile. Based on dental development the children buried at Huanchaquito-Las Llamas ranged in age from about five to fourteen years. The camelids were all estimated to be less than one and a half years of age, indicating that both groups were selected intentionally for their young ages. While children of this age cannot be sexed based on skeletal measurements or morphology, preliminary aDNA analysis indicates that both boys and girls are present in

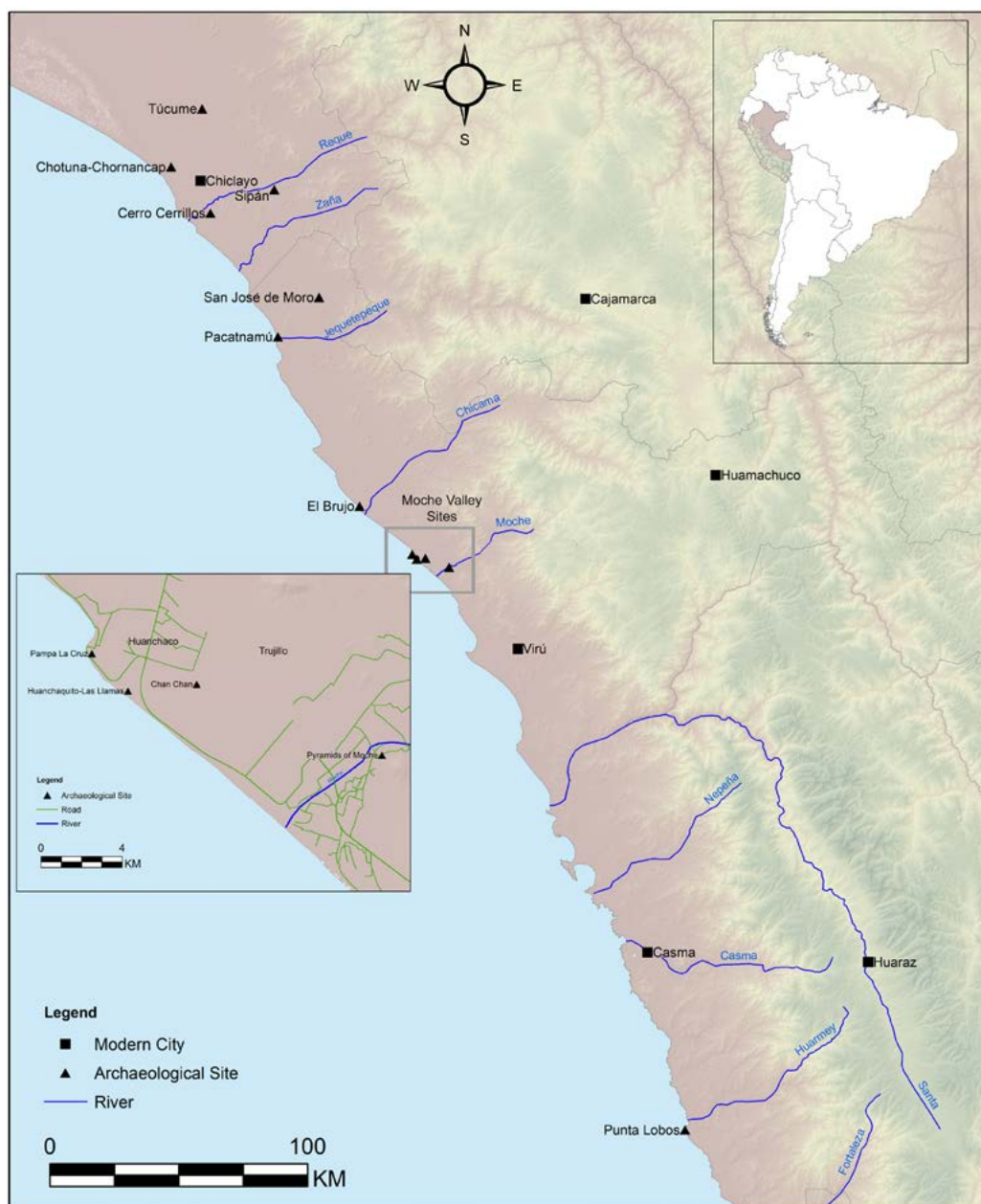


Figure 4. Map of the north coast of Perú, indicating the location of archaeological sites described in the text. Map by Bebel Ibarra Ascencios.

the Huanchaquito-Las Llamas sacrifice (Prieto et al. *ibid*). Osteological analysis revealed that the children and the camelids were sacrificed in a very consistent manner: by cutting open the chest, presumably to remove the heart, although other objectives, such as the collection of blood have also been proposed (Witt 2023). In both children and camelids, the chest was opened by a transverse cut through the sternum and passing between the ribs, as evidenced by bisected sternebrae and cuts on the shafts of some of the third and fourth ribs (**Figures 5a, 5b**)

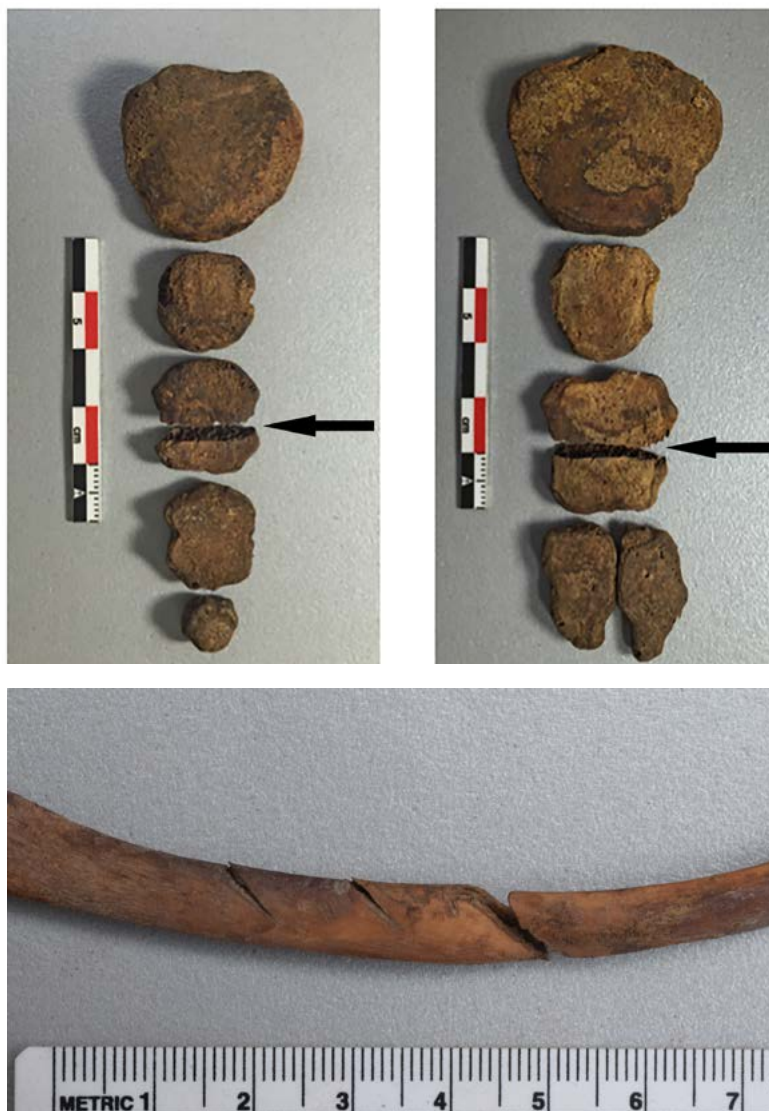


Figure 5. A) Sternal elements of two children from Huanchaquito-Las Llamas showing a single transverse cut through one of the sternebrae; B) Cuts on the left third rib of a child from Huanchaquito-Las Llamas.

Diverse Origins of the Sacrificed Children. Variation in the frequency and style of cranial modification suggests that the children buried at Huanchaquito-Las Llamas are a heterogeneous sample drawn from distinct ethnic groups and geographic regions controlled by the Chimú Empire. Of 130 crania sufficiently complete to be evaluated, 85.4% (111/130) show no cranial modification. Surprisingly, only 8.5% (11/130) show the form of occipital flattening typical of prehistoric populations of the north coast of Perú: tabular erect or fronto-occipital deformation (Anton 1989; Verano 1997), which was produced by cradle boarding in infancy. Eight crania (6.2%) show a distinct form of cranial modification known as annular (Imbelloni 1933), circumferential (Anton 1989) or “por llautu” (Weiss 1961), which was not practiced in northern coastal Perú (**Figure 6**). This suggests that some of the children—particularly those with annular deformation—are of highland rather than coastal origin. It is hoped that future genetic studies of the sacrificial victims will provide further data on their genetic variability and geographic origins.



Figure 6. Child from Pampa la Cruz with annular cranial modification typical of the northern highlands of Perú. Similarly modified crania were found at Huanchaquito-Las Llamas.

The Significance of Huanchaquito-Las Llamas

The archaeological context and results of the osteological analysis of the human and camelid remains at Huanchaquito-Las Llamas document a mass sacrifice of children and camelids on a scale unlike any seen previously in Andean South America. In number, it greatly exceeds the known sample of Inca child sacrifices from high altitude sites in the Andes and is substantially larger than child sacrifices found in other parts of the Americas (López Luján and Guillem 2010). Although human sacrifice by opening the thoracic cavity

has been documented previously at north coast Peruvian sites (Verano 1986; Klaus 2010, Klaus et al. 2016; Toyne 2011), the specific technique (transverse thoracotomy) employed at Huanchaquito is unlike that of any other documented cases in Perú.

Pampa La Cruz

In 2016 Gabriel Prieto began excavations on a hilltop overlooking the town of Huanchaco, approximately two kilometers northwest of Huanchaquito-Las Llamas. The site, known as Pampa La Cruz, is dominated by a platform mound overlooking the Pacific Ocean initially built by the Moche and later remodeled by the Chimú (Prieto et al. 2024a; Prieto et al. 2024b). Test excavations on the west side of the mound in 2016 encountered child and llama sacrifices like those found previously at Huanchaquito-Las Llamas. Continuing excavations during the 2018-2019 field seasons revealed that the platform was surrounded by child and llama sacrifices in numbers exceeding what was found at Huanchaquito-Las Llamas (**Figure 7**). In contrast to HLL, which is interpreted as a single event, child and camelid sacrifices at Pampa la Cruz have been found in multiple contexts and at variable depths, suggesting that sacrifices were conducted at PLC over multiple centuries. Based on further excavations at PLC, Prieto and colleagues now have identified six distinct sacrificial events dating from the beginning of the Late Intermediate period to the beginning of the Late Horizon based on stratigraphic level and burial position and supported by eighty AMS radiocarbon dates (Prieto et al. 2024b:52-154, Appendix 2). As of 2024, the total number of sacrificed children and adults at PLC excavated by the Programa Arqueológico Huanchaco –combining counts of children and adults buried in the two principal mounds (Montículo 1 and Montículo 2)— totals 435, making it the largest known sacrificial site on the north coast of Perú. Although there is evidence of chronological differences between the HLL and PLC sites (although Event 5 at PLC is contemporaneous with the HLL event), the manner of sacrifice (chest opening) and the way in which children and camelids were buried is similar, demonstrating a highly consistent sacrificial program at the two sites. Although not discussed here, more examples of sacrificed children and camelids have been found at several other sites in the Huanchaco area, including José Olaya – Iglesia Colonial de Huanchaco (JO-IG), and the “El Pollo” site (EP) (Chachapoyas and Witt 2019; Witt 2023; Prieto et al. 2024), all showing similarities to HLL and PLC.

New Discoveries, New Complexities

This brief review of the archaeological evidence of Chimú ritual violence highlights the quantity and diversity of data recovered by archaeological projects over the past century, and especially in recent decades, due to increasing interest in ritual practices of complex societies of this region (Klaus and Toyne 2016; Prieto et al. 2019; Prieto and Verano 2023; Witt 2023). This growing corpus is revealing increasing variability in the demographic profile of victims, the ways in which they were killed, the location and way their bodies were buried, and the scale of these sacrifices/offerings. Dividing lines between traditional categories such



Figure 7. Excavations around the platform mound at Pampa la Cruz (visible on the left side of the photo) during the 2018 field season, showing sacrificed children wrapped in cotton shrouds.

as executed captives, retainer and dedicatory burials, and ritual offerings (Verano 1995) are becoming less clear as new discoveries are made. For example, some sacrificial contexts such as the Pacatnamú mass burial and Moche skeletal remains excavated from Plazas 3A and 3C at the Huaca de la Luna can be identified as killings of war captives, given the demographic profile of the victims (males of fighting age), the presence of ropes binding wrists and ankles, evidence of violent death and mutilation of bodies, and the lack of respectful burial of the victims' remains. This is in distinct contrast to the careful burial of dedicatory and retainer burials of young females at Chan Chan as well as Inca sacrifices of children on mountaintop shrines, where fine textiles and other high-value offerings accompanied the bodies. Although there is generally no skeletal evidence of violent death in retainers and dedicatory burials, sacrifices at Túcume, Cerro Cerrillos, and Chotuna-Chornancap show a mix of features that makes them more difficult to classify. At Túcume's Temple of the Sacred Stone the victims are adult males and children with clear evidence of violent death, including slitting of the throat, decapitation, opening of the chest and combinations of the above. Yet their bodies were wrapped in cotton shrouds and buried in individual pits in front of the temple, indicating that attention was devoted to respectful mortuary treatment. At Cerro Cerrillos victims (both

children and adults) were killed in similarly violent ways and their bodies wrapped in cotton shrouds and carefully buried. At Chotuna-Chornancap both adult males and females, as well as children, were also killed in violently but were buried in shrouds, some with simple grave offerings (Klaus et al. 2016). At Huanchaquito-Las Llamas and Pampa la Cruz the great majority of those sacrificed were children between about 5 and 14 years of age, although three adults were found at HLL and at least 23 at PLC. At both sites the children were wrapped in cotton shrouds and carefully buried, although without associated offerings other than the young camelids placed on or next to them. Both the children and llamas were killed by opening of the chest and presumably extraction of the heart. Adults at HLL and PLC were killed in various ways, but not by opening of the chest.

These variations in manner of sacrifice and treatment of the bodies of Chimú sacrifices do not allow for easy classification into discrete categories. In some cases, sacrificed victims were intentionally mutilated, dismembered and desecrated by denial of proper burial. In others, their death was extremely violent, but their bodies were carefully prepared and ceremoniously buried. In the absence of historical records for these events, it is difficult to fully understand the context and meaning of these acts of ritual violence. No doubt there were both religious and political motivations for conducting these rituals, and these varied across space and time. Given such variability in sacrificial method and body treatment, the line between what William Duncan has characterized as “veneration” vs. “violation” (Duncan 2005) continues to be blurred as new and previously undocumented forms of ritual violence are discovered in prehispanic northern coastal Perú.

Conclusion

It is clear from the evidence of various forms of ritual killing that the Chimú rulers exercised powerful coercion and control over their subjects: in funerary contexts (burial platforms), in dedicatory/foundational offerings, in mass sacrifices of children and young camelids, and in brutal executions of enemies and those who resisted Chimú territorial expansion. While these sacrifices certainly had important ritual significance to the Chimú, they also served as stark reminders of the power wielded by their rulers. Unlike the Moche, who publicly displayed and killed captives at ceremonial centers like the Pyramids at Moche, Chimú sacrifices of children (as far as currently known from archaeological evidence) were conducted preferentially at remote locations beyond the walls of Chan Chan. And it now is clear that except for Huanchaquito Las Llamas (Prieto et al. 2015, 2017, 2019) sacrifices of children and camelids should no longer be interpreted only as a response to natural disasters, but instead (as is the case as well for Moche captive killing) they may reflect a desire to consolidate and perpetuate political power and social control. Whatever the motivations for human sacrifice, the archaeological record now documents that this was a long-lived practice in Chimú society (Prieto and Verano 2023).

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