A Moche “Spatula”

ELIZABETH P. BENSON
Institute of Andean Studies

A Precolumbian “spatula” from the Moche culture, on the north coast of Peru, shows a standing male figure on the top, intricately carved from a six-centimeter-long animal tooth (Figures 1–3). The figure is partially hollow, because of the natural cavity of the tooth; this cavity holds the top of the copper implement. A narrow circular base grips the implement, and two bone ferrules, with a wooden one between, strengthen the join. The function of the object is unknown.

The figure wears a headdress (part of which is missing) consisting of a band around the head with a semicircular element over the brow. A schematized owl head—two big eyes in a heart-shaped face—appears in the center of the semicircle. Incised lines below suggest spread wings. The owl eyes were originally inlaid: the proper right inlay is missing; the left inlay is of metal, perhaps copper. Two kinds of shell provide the inlay for the man’s eyes. The round ear ornaments also are inlaid, one with shell, the other with mica. The figure wears a crescent-shaped, mouth-covering nose ornament and a choker necklace that is ropelike but probably depicts large beads. The elbows are bent, and the hands are slightly raised against the chest. Below the waist is a belt or skirt edging with a dentate design and circular holes for inlay, probably of shell; most of the inlay is now missing. At the sides are downward extensions of the belt, which appear to end in snakeheads. The belt or skirt edging continues around the rear of the figure, where, above it, there are short, capelike wings. Two unidentified forms, shown below the waist, seem to hang from the belt. The figure stands on a narrow base with a repeated incised design. The knees are slightly bent, and the feet do not seem to be firmly placed on the ground.

The Moche people lived in the Peruvian coastal desert from about the time of Christ until the eighth century A.D. The dates are not yet firm; Moche ceramics have been given a relative chronology of Moche I through Moche V, and other artifacts are also dated within these phases.

The Moche fished in the rich waters of the Humboldt Current offshore and farmed in the irrigated valleys, where the rivers come down from the Andes, which rise quite close to the coast. The Moche controlled the river waters high up in the valleys, and they fought to protect their land and to gain new land. Moche ceremonial centers contained huge structures made of adobe bricks. The Moche lacked the large stone sculpture common in the highlands; on the coast, monumental themes were treated either in wall paintings or in small objects. Burial sites have produced quantities of artifacts, and many of the finest of these may have been made expressly for burial; their subject matter depicts the myths, rites, and creatures that were important to be recorded for the journey to the underworld. Relatively few small carved objects—of stone, bone, or tooth—remain, but those that exist exhibit the lapidary skill of the Moche. Moche textiles are also rare, because of salts in the north-coast desert sands, but enough textile remains have been found to show that the Moche were fine weavers who made elaborately decorated cloth.

1. I am grateful to Julie Jones for permitting me to see the 1980 technical report on the spatula by Catherine Sease, Objects Conservation, MMA, and for her general helpfulness in the preparation of this article. She originally published the spatula in “Ornamented Spatula,” Notable Acquisitions 1980–1981 (MMA, New York, 1981) p. 72. I am also grateful to Christopher B. Donnan for allowing me to use the Archive of Moche Art at the University of California, Los Angeles, while I was working on this article, and to Anne-Louise Schaffer for her helpful comments on it.

2. For similar headdresses with these motifs see Figure 6; Max Schmidt, Kunst und Kultur von Peru (Berlin, 1949) p. 210; Alan Lapiner, Pre-Columbian Art of South America (New York, 1976) fig. 395.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art 1984
Metropolitan Museum Journal 18
Moche were especially talented and innovative metalurgists, producing ear, nose, and headdress ornaments; masks; figures; vessels; implements; and other objects from copper, gold, silver, and various combinations of these metals. Like lapidary objects, these often had shell or stone inlay. It is as potters, however, that the Moche are best known, for a great quantity of decorated vessels exists, made either by a coil method or in a mold. The forms may be modeled effigies or globular vessels with painted scenes, or some variation or combination of modeled and painted forms.

Little is known of these ancient people. They lacked writing to explain their depictions, and there are no written sources dealing directly with them. Their customs and beliefs must be reconstructed from the details of their representations. Objects often depict gods, individual or generic human beings, animals, and compound monsters of various kinds, individually or in scenes. Many vessels show creatures that combine human traits with those of birds, felines, foxes, and other animals, and with vegetables; there are even anthropomorphized warriors' garments and weapons (Figure 4). Dress, accessories, and the contexts in which figures are found indicate various events—the enactment of a ritual or the narration of a myth—and the status of the person and the moment within a sequence of related events.5

One of the creatures most frequently encountered
in Moche art is the owl, sometimes shown naturalistically and sometimes as an anthropomorph. Anthropomorphic owls assume a wide range of roles, among them a warrior (Figure 4)—he rarely appears in battle scenes, but seems to be garbed ritually as a warrior, often holding a war club—and a sacrificer, who is sometimes seen decapitating a small human figure and sometimes shown with a knife in one hand and, in the other, a “trophy” head held by the hair (Figure 5). (Evidence of ritual decapitation is widespread in Precolumbian art. The sacrifice of the head—the most important part of the human body—was probably offered to nourish the sun or some other heavenly body, to placate the forces of nature, to insure agricultural fertility, or to give sustenance to ancestors who were associated with these aspects of nature.) In some instances, it is clear that the owl sacrificer is a human being wearing an owl mask and a winglike cape. These figures are the only explicit examples in Moche art of human beings imitating supernatural creatures.


Moche IV ceramic vessel in the form of a prisoner, front and rear views. Trujillo, Peru, Guillermo Ganoza Collection (photos: courtesy Christopher B. Donnan and Archive of Moche Art)

hold only the trophy head, not the knife, for the sacrifice was apparently thought of as being performed by supernatural anthropomorphs, not by human agents. The anthropomorphic owl was probably the supreme Moche military spirit, the supernatural leader in real or ritual warfare that led to the capture of prisoners for ritual sacrifice; the owl, therefore, also had the role of sacrificer. A human figure dressed in garments similar to those of the supernatural owl warrior may be shown as a captive or victim with tied hands (Figures 6, 7). Such figures were probably sacrificed to or by the owl.6


The costume associated with most of these figures is a shirt that appears to be made of metal plates, probably sewn on cloth, and has a jagged or dentate lower edge; a nose ornament; and a headdress with a semicircle over the brow that may have an owl head in the center and/or upward projections at the sides. The owl sacrificer often wears garments different from those of the warrior—if it is the same creature, he may have changed garments—but he sometimes shares the plate-shirt costume with the warrior (Figure 5). An anthropomorphic owl in this costume also appears in a number of scenes depicting sacrifice near him, although he is not then shown as the active sacrificer, but as a sort of superintendent of sacrifice. (In Figure 4, standing on a stepped platform, he faces a sacrificial victim.) Human figures other than prisoners also wear these garments; they may play musical instruments or be shown with plants. Such figures presumably indicate different moments or roles in the sacrificial ritual. There are two supernatural versions of the figure in plate-shirt dress. One is the owl; the
8. Figure with fanged mouth and radiances, from a Moche IV ceramic fragment. Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Völkerkunde (after Gerdt Kutscher, *Nordperuanische Keramik*, Berlin, 1954, pl. 54A)

other has a human face with a fanged mouth (a sign of supernaturalness or sacredness, seen sometimes on the owl) and, often but not always, a pattern of irregular rays projecting from the body (Figure 8).

The figure on the Metropolitan Museum spatula is related to this sequence of sacrificial events involving figures in plate-shirt garments. The pose is that of the owl sacrificer or imitator, as seen on pottery. Metal objects show the sacrificer holding knife and/or trophy head out to the sides (Figure 9); ceramic representations, however, normally show the sacrificial symbols held in front of the chest (Figure 5). The difference in pose is undoubtedly a function of the medium. The tooth would impose the same formal restrictions found in pottery. Whereas ceramic figures normally hold the trophy head in one hand and perhaps the knife in the other, the Metropolitan Museum figure is empty-handed; but this is also true of some supernatural-owl vessels (Figure 10) which are otherwise similar to the sacrificers (Figure 5). This pose is rare in other contexts.

The attributes also place the Metropolitan Museum figure in this cluster, notably the headdress with semicircle and owl head, the jagged shirt bottom, and the wings at the back. Nose ornaments that fit over the septum are frequently depicted in Moche art. The crescent nose ornament is closely related in shape to an Andean knife with curved blade, which can be


10. Moche IV ceramic vessel in the form of an anthropomorphic owl. Vienna, Museum für Völkerkunde (photo: Fritz Mandl)
seen in the hands of some supernatural warriors or sacrificers or, more frequently, on the helmets of warriors, human and supernatural (Figure 4). The crescent nose ornament, although it also appears elsewhere, has some specific associations with this cluster. Beaded versions appear on at least one example of a supernatural plate-shirt figure, and one plate-shirt captive wears an unbeaded version. Plain examples may be seen on various human figures. In a scene of zoomorphs capturing anthropomorphized warriors’ accoutrements, a similar nose ornament is held by an anthropomorphic fox (Figure 4); on a nearby platform an owl stands with plate-shirt garment, semicircular headdress, and a large war club. Actual metal nose ornaments of a similar shape exist (Figure 11), and they are sometimes found on masks. Necklaces made of large beads, such as that on the spatula, are frequently seen on supernatural plate-shirt figures (Figures 8, 12, 13). On some examples, the beads are owl heads, and it is likely that the beads on the Metropolitan Museum figure were intended to depict owl heads.

A somewhat unusual aspect of the piece is the apparent snakehead belt extension at either side. Pairs of snakehead appendages are usually an attribute of a deity with a fanged mouth, snakehead ear ornaments, and a jaguar head on the headdress. The plate-shirt deity sometimes shares attributes with this god (the snakehead ear ornaments are seen on the owl sacrificer in Figure 5), but the snake belt appendages do not normally appear on plate-shirt figures. A drawing in the files of the Hamburgisches Museum für Völkerkunde und Vorgeschichte, however, shows a vessel in the form of a seated, fanged-mouth figure in plate-shirt garments with dentate kilt-edge, large-bead necklace, and semicircular headdress (Figure 12). From the rear of the belt comes an extension that seems to end in a snakehead, just at the beginning of the dentate pattern. At the shoulder of the figure is an ear of maize. Snakehead belt appendages also appear on supernatural figures wearing the semicircular headdress with owl head on the only example of pottery on which such figures are shown doing battle.

The repeated incised design on the base on which the Metropolitan Museum figure stands resembles a frequently depicted and clearly important fruit known today as ulluchu, as yet botanically unidentified. It is often seen in sacrificial scenes and with goblets of sacrificial blood. In a painted scene on a stirrup-spout vessel, a plate-shirt anthropomorphic owl flies or floats with ulluchu fruits in the air in front of him; he grasps one fruit with his hand (Figure 13). Although the plate-shirt complex is not the only one in which this fruit appears, it is often seen there.

The round, inlaid ear ornaments worn by the fig-

7. Christopher B. Donnan, Moche Art of Peru (Los Angeles, 1978) fig. 69.
8. Ibid., fig. 29b.
11. Donnan, Moche Art of Peru, fig. 136.
12. Kutscher, Chimú, fig. 64; Benson, The Mochica, fig. 2-9, pl. vii.
13. Rafael Larco Hoyle, Los mochicas (Pre-Chimú, de Uhle y Early Chimú, de Kroebel) (Buenos Aires, 1945) p. 11.
15. For a ritual cluster related to coca chewing, in which this fruit appears prominently but in somewhat different usage, see Figure 24, where it is used as a headdress element. See also Benson, "Garments as Symbolic Language"; Immina von Schuler-Schönig, "Die 'Fremdkrieger' in Darstellungen der Moche-Keramik," Baessler-Archiv n.s. 27 (1979) pp. 135–213.
12. Drawing of a Moche IV ceramic vessel in the form of a seated figure. Formerly Hamburg, Museum für Völkerkunde und Vorgeschichte (photo: E. Benson)

13. Moche V ceramic vessel with anthropomorphic owl. H. 26 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Nathan Cummings, 64.228.2

ure are seen frequently on high-status figures, supernatural and human (Figures 4, 8, 12, 13, 21); they seem to carry no particular ritual connotation. The bent knees are characteristic of Moche figures in action (Figures 4, 13). The jawline is very straight and sharp, and suggests the possibility of a mask. Such faces are found as early as 10000 B.C. in Peru, in the Chavin style, and they are particularly characteristic of post-Moche, north-coast funerary masks of the Lambayeque-Chimu style.16 Although this type of face is not characteristic of the Moche style, the long time span in which it occurs covers the Moche period.

A curious feature of the Metropolitan Museum figure is the area at the lower back, where there are two forms with vertical incisions. Something is missing here; there are holes, presumably to hold lost inlay. The forms are in the position of a tail or wing tips, but do not resemble these, although they do look rather like bunches of feathers. Certain figures in this complex have bunches of feathers on the headdress,17 but it seems unlikely that they would be depicted in this position. There is some resemblance to the tied hands at the back of captive figures in this complex, hands that hang down at an odd angle, as if the wrists were broken (Figure 7), but this figure has hands placed in front. Moreover, these forms have a peculiar number of “fingers.” The forms may represent an unusual type of back-flap or ornament.

It is not always easy to differentiate between human and supernatural figures in Moche art, and this piece presents particular problems. Because the crescent nose ornament covers the mouth, one cannot

16. For Chavin examples see Anton, Art of Ancient Peru, figs. 1, 2; for Chimú examples see A. D. Tushingham, Gold for the Gods (Toronto, 1976) pls. 135, 223, fig. 143.
17. A. L. Kroeber, “Peruvian Archaeology in 1942,” Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology (New York, 1944) no. 4, pl. 48E.
14. Moche bone spatula with finial in the shape of a forearm and fist, carved and inlaid. Date unknown. H. 16.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Nathan Cummings, 64.228.82

know if the mouth has the feline canines that usually appear on a supernatural being. In ceramic depictions, fanged-mouth beings with nose ornaments are shown in profile, so that the mouth and the ornament can be depicted, with the ornament usually seen en face (Figure 8). One indication of supernaturality, then, is not evident, but cannot be ruled out completely. The unnatural, masklike face suggests either that the Metropolitan Museum figure is a deity or that it is a human being wearing a mask; but it is not the kind of mask that is normally worn. The wings might also be “real” or a costume element. The snakehead belt appendages, however, are probably seen only on major deities. On the whole, the evidence is not overwhelming, but it leans toward supernaturality.19 The conclusion that the figure is likely to be a supernatural creature is reinforced by the subject matter on other objects of this kind.

These implements have variously been called spatulas, chisels, or knives; their function is unknown. A number of examples have been found; some are plain, and some have decorated handles or finials. Some are of copper, some are carved from bone, and several plain examples of a similar implement are of gold.19 I know of no other that is made of a tooth or of more than one material, although some were made in more than one piece; most of the bone ones are inlaid.

The ornamented bone examples are in the shape of a forearm with the finial a fist with raised thumb (Figure 14).20 Not only heads were cut off in ritual sacrifice; forearms and lower legs might also be offerings. Vessels were sometimes made in these shapes, with hands or forearms more common than nether limbs. The bone spatula forearms are incised with various designs, frequently including war clubs, anthropomorphic birds with weapons, and sacrificial victims.

One copper example also depicts the fist motif.21

18. There are faint suggestions that this might be a prisoner figure, but the possibility seems highly unlikely. Even if the “necklace” is interpreted as a rope, it should have an end hanging in front, as in Figure 6. Moreover, the hands should be tied behind, not placed on the chest.


21. Donnan, Moche Art of Peru, fig. 250.
While some copper examples are plain, most have cast "scenes" of considerable variety. Two show apparent sacrificial victims; one an undressed figure squats before a richly garbed standing figure (Figure 15). On another spatula, a deity wearing a belt with snake extensions faces a feline standing against a rack with trophy heads (Figure 16); such a rack appears in scenes of ritual sacrifice or punishment. Another example shows a single figure wearing a hinged mask with fanged mouth, which can be raised to reveal the face (Figure 17); this is possible evidence for the interpretation of the Metropolitan Museum tooth figure as masked, although the masks are very different. Yet another spatula has a standing figure with fanged mouth, semicircular headdress, snake belt appendages, and an ear of maize on either hip (Figure 18); the deity is presumably the same one depicted in Figure 12. One example shows a figure wearing a crescent nose ornament, an owl-head necklace, and a semicircular headdress with an owl head (Figure 19). He holds a goblet of sacrificial blood in one hand and an ulluchu fruit in the other. He has wings and tail feathers at the back, and above him is a human-headed club with four faces; such clubs appear in many of the sacrifice scenes with plate-shirt figures. This is closely related iconographically to the Metropolitan Museum tooth spatula. Another spatula (Figure 20) shows a large standing anthropomorphic owl or imitator leaning over a seated figure in plate shirt and semicircular headdress; another figure in a similar headdress stands at the side.

The most unusual spatulas are in a group that was found in a cache of metal objects, including goblets like those seen in sacrificial scenes. These spatulas have box rattles on the top, with a figure incised on each side. The figures include an anthropomorphic bird holding a war club toward a snake-rayed figure on the top. Many Moche objects are sound-making, perhaps especially those associated with sacrifice, so it should not be surprising that the spatula form is combined with a rattle.

The geographical sources of these objects are widespread: the gold-plated object comes from the Virú Valley, in the southern part of the Moche domain; one decorated and two plain spatulas were found in excavations at Moche, the heartland of these people; others are said to have come from the north, from the Department of Lambayeque. It is difficult to guess where the Metropolitan Museum spatula might have been made. Its iconography suggests that it dates from the middle or later period of Moche art, possibly Moche IV in the ceramic sequence.

Many Moche ceramic vessels are portrait heads of an individual; a number of individuals are shown, some of them in many different representations. These personages, who must have been rulers, are sometimes depicted in effigy vessels as full-length, seated figures. Two such individuals, in nonwarrior garments, may hold a spatula tied to a bag that rests in the lap (Figure 21). These two figures have quite distinctive garments: one wears a necklace, a three-tiered chin tie, and a double scarf (Figure 21); the other wears a cape tied over the chest, a cluster of feathers on his headdress, and blade-shaped ear ornaments (Figure 22). Both figures sometimes wear a crescent nose ornament.

Bags may be held by figures in a number of contexts, but spatulas are seen only with bags, usually tied to the bag. Many copper spatulas have a loop near the finial through which a cord could have been passed. There is archaeological evidence for the tying. On the Metropolitan Museum spatula, "on both sides of the blade there are textile remains." The gold-plated spatula found in a burial in the Virú Valley is

22. Kroeber, "Peruvian Archaeology," pl. 48a, b (two examples: "chisels"; from Moche; Berkeley, Lowie Museum, University of California).
23. The other example, a figure on a rack, was found at the site of Moche. Kroeber, "Peruvian Archaeology," pl. 48c, d ("cast copper chisel"; Berkeley, Lowie Museum, University of California); Jones, "Mochica Works," fig. 27.
24. This was published in detail by G. Baer, "Die Figurengruppe eines altperuanischen Kupferspatels," Bassler-Archiv n.s. 13 (1965) pp. 339–357, figs. 1–6, pls. 1–3 (Basel, Museum für Völkerkunde). This spatula was made in three parts: the spatula, the finial, and a connecting piece of metal.
25. This example was published in detail in Bankmann, "Clubs, Cups and Birds."
26. This is particularly notable in the scenes of what Donnan (Moche Art of Peru, pp. 158–175) has called the "Presentation Theme."
28. See note 19 above.
15. Moche copper spatula with two figures, one richly dressed. Date unknown. H. 15.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, lent by Jane Costello Goldberg from the collection of Arnold I. Goldberg, L.1978.25.14

16. Moche copper spatula with two facing figures. Department of Lambayeque, date unknown. H. 27 cm. New York, Mrs. Sue Tishman Collection (photo: Thomas A. Brown)

17. Moche copper spatula with masked figure. Date unknown. H. 19 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, lent by Jane Costello Goldberg from the collection of Arnold I. Goldberg, L.1978.25.15

18. Moche copper spatula, with two figures, one blowing a conch shell, detail. Date unknown. H. (spatula) 27.6 cm. Basel, Museum für Völkerkunde (photo: Moeschlin + Disch)


20. Moche copper spatula with two figures, one an anthropomorphic owl, detail. Date unknown. H. (spatula) 21.5 cm. Formerly Santiago, Chile, Norbert Mayrock Collection (photo: Nickolas Muray)

Described as “a long . . . spatula-shaped object with threads around the butt end.”31 This gold spatula was found with a body known as the “Warrior-Priest” in one of the richest known Moche burials, arguing for the association of spatulas with rulers.

The spatulas depicted on ceramics do not show scenes on the finial, but they often emphasize the bipartite character of the implement. Similar implements, held in similar contexts in ceramic representations, may be in the form of miniature war clubs. The personage seen in Figure 22, for example, can be found holding a club-spatula.32 I know of no actual examples of this spatula form, but depicted war
clubs occasionally have at the top the fist found on bone spatulas, indicating a further relationship between war clubs and spatulas.\textsuperscript{33}

The portrait figures are rarely seen in large painted scenes, but in one scene two figures hold bags (Figure 23). The larger figure has in his left hand a raised spatula tied to a bag. This figure, wearing ear ornaments similar to those seen on spatula-holding effigy figures (see Figure 22), sits with his companion at the top of a scene of warriors, priests, captives, and vegetation; on the spout above them are supernatural figures, including a plate-shirt figure, and a scene of sacrifice. A human-headed club is stuck in the sand behind the larger figure.

The spatula, then, is associated with sacrifice—in the one large painted scene in which it is shown, as well as in some of the iconography that appears on the finials of many of the spatulas themselves, iconography that tends to depict either supernatural beings or sacrificial victims. It is held by figures who must be rulers involved in a ritual, and it is held along with a bag. The contents of the bags are not known, although the few bags that have been found in archaeological excavations contained various materials, including quartz crystals, white powder, stones, plant remains, and/or red pigment. Red pigment was found

\textsuperscript{33} Donnan, \textit{Moche Art of Peru}, pp. 46–47.
in an early bag from the south coast; of the other substances found in Moche bags, the first two were used in agricultural rituals by the later Inca. The depiction of the bags with vegetation suggests the possibility that they might have held seeds. If the sacrifice had to do with agricultural fertility—and it can probably be assumed that most sacrifices had to do, directly or indirectly, with agriculture—then the bags may have held seeds for token planting by the ruler or substances for shamanic use or for offerings to supernatural spirits. The spatulas, which would have been in use with the bags only at a certain moment, may have been employed to dip the powdery substance from the bag, or for the token offering or planting of seeds. In later centuries, the Inca ruler put his foot on a ceremonial digging stick to begin the planting. If a Moche ruler were performing a token or ritual seed planting, he might possibly have used such a tool as a miniature digging stick. The spatula may have been thought of as a sort of miniature staff, for similar subject matter appears on staffs and like implements.

The association of the spatulas and bags with vegetation, as well as their supernatural aspect, is enhanced by their appearance in the hands of anthropomorphized beans and of fanged-mouth bird warriors who are surrounded by beans and tillandsia (here the spatula is, again, a miniature club). The association of the spatulas with agriculture was made by Baer, who associated them also with the ritual centered around the chewing of coca leaves; he thought it likely that the spatulas were the “stick” with which a small amount of lime was removed from a gourd to be put into the mouth with the coca leaves. The coca stick, however, is depicted as a simpler, rounder shape, and it is used with a different set of costumes and accessories (Figure 24).

Like many Moche objects and accessories, the spatula is shaped like a blade. Scenes similar to those on spatulas appear on the finials of knife blades. Common throughout Pre-Columbian art are objects that combine some sort of blade form with a figure or head, usually of some mythical creature. Olmec “axes” from Mexico, Veracruz hachas, and Costa Rican ax-gods are examples. A tradition of this kind was particularly strong on the north coast of Peru. In the later Chimú culture, in the same region, splendid gold knives are usually surmounted by elaborate inlaid gold figures with danglers. I have noted a blade shape

---

34. The red pigment was found in a Paracas bag by Anne Paul. Moche bags were found on the Hacienda Santa Clara in the Eata Valley by Larco Hoyle (Los mochicas (1938–39) II, p. 131, fig. 187); he described the bags as having a long cord, and stated that “todas ellas contenian un polvo blanco y un pedazo agudo de cuarzo.” Another Moche bag was found in a burial at the Pyramid of the Sun at Moche (Christopher B. Donnan and Carol J. Mackey, Ancient Burial Patterns of the Moche Valley, Peru [Austin, Tex./London, 1978] p. 68; this contained quartz crystals, stones, beads, an animal-bone fragment, and plant remains. Terence Grieder (The Art and Archaeology of Pashash [Austin, Tex./London, 1978] pp. 184, 261) found fragments of rock crystal in a burial offering in the mountains to the east of the Moche region. For Inca ritual see John Howland Rowe, “Inca Culture at the Time of the Spanish Conquest,” in Julian H. Steward, ed., Handbook of South American Indians, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 143 (Washington, D.C., 1946–50) II, pp. 183–350. See also Benson, “Bag with the Ruffled Top” and “Well-Dressed Captives.”


36. An example is in the Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología, Lima; photographs exist in the Archive of Moche Art, University of California, Los Angeles.

37. Larco Hoyle, Los mochicas (1938–39) II, fig. 177.

38. Baer, “Figuren gruppe.”


40. See Ignacio Bernal, The Olmec World (Berkeley, 1969) pls. 98, 49; Lothrop et al., Pre-Columbian Art, pls. xiv–xvii, lxxxix, xcI, xcv.


warriors on the lower level of Figure 23), is shaped like the knife most commonly depicted in confrontations and beheadings of mythical creatures.42 One of the figures who holds the spatula wears ear ornaments of this shape. What is perhaps most important in all of these objects is the inclusion of the knife shape for iconographic reasons. Knives refer to human sacrifice by decapitation, which was believed by most Precolombian peoples to keep the forces of nature in order, to ensure the rising of the sun and the continuation of the movements of heavenly bodies, and to maintain the fertility of the earth. The spatula has sometimes been called a knife.43 It is also related to agricultural-implement shapes, which have a spiritual relation to the knife, agriculture and sacrifice being closely associated.

Whatever its specific purpose, the Metropolitan Museum spatula is a finely made object, rich with symbolic meaning. The fact that it is made from a six-centimeter-long tooth is, in itself, significant. Although the source of the tooth has not been identified, few animals have teeth of this size. Possibly it is a tooth from a whale,44 a creature whose associations with water would make it particularly appropriate for agricultural ritual. The spatula is carved with care and skill to portray highly charged symbolic attributes, relating to the ritual acts that the Moche believed gave them the power to conquer new territory, protect their water sources, produce good crops, revere their ancestors, and continue their heritage.

24. Moche IV ceramic vessel showing a man with lime stick and gourd. Lima, Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología (photo: E. Benson)

43. Ubbelohde-Doering, Kunst, p. 229; Rafael Larco Hoyle, Peru (New York, 1966) figs. 135, 138; Lapiner, Pre-Columbian Art, fig. 346; Jones, “Mochica Works,” figs. 32, 33. The spatula form shades into a knife form; see Lapiner, Pre-Columbian Art, fig. 348.
44. I am grateful to Anne-Louise Schaffer for this suggestion.